Review


This book serves as a general overview of some of the latest thinking in Byzantine Studies, containing contributions from around thirty current scholars of varying specialities in Byzantium, alongside Paul Stephenson himself, by whom the introduction to each section is penned, along with three of the thirty-five chapters.

The overall tone of *The Byzantine World* is one of comprehensiveness and freshness, aiming to throw the dust off some of the more neglected areas of the discipline whilst drawing attention to a number of recent scholarly discoveries, coupled with an emphasis on exploring and underlining Byzantium’s relevance to the modern age. Particularly Stephenson’s final words on the matter are intended to draw the reader’s attention to just that; the fact that this traditionally maligned and often misunderstood civilisation could serve as something of a ‘common heritage for a unified Europe’ ¹, especially considering the more recent inclusion of eastern Mediterranean nations into the EU.

Whether treated as a whole or else mined for specific chapters or sections, this text is intended for broad consumption by both specialists and non-specialists in the field of Byzantine Studies, and potentially others as well. Stephenson himself humorously notes:

> Our target audience – for one must both have and specify such a thing to those creating a marketing strategy – is diverse, messy indeed, for it embraces advanced undergraduates, postgraduate and postdoctoral scholars in all fields of Byzantine and medieval studies, Barnes and Noble browsers and Amazon searchers, Wikipedians seeking more authoritative updates (or sources of information to plagiarize for their

Joseph Parsonage

Review

updating), and anyone who has bought or read a narrative history of Byzantium and been left wanting a little more.²

Clearly then, he is aiming for some of the most general readership available, alongside students of more specific academic interests. One might say that the only thing that marks this work above the casual popular histories is that it does not need to tempt readers with the same old stories from the narrative histories; instead it asks whether the audience desires more information, and provides this by offering a glimpse into some of the most recent work available.

In structure, the book is divided into four broad sections, each with six to ten chapters in a specific category. Part one, ‘The Byzantines in their World’ tackles a handful of specific historical issues, such as John Haldon’s chapter on Byzantine military logistics, one chapter on coins and the economy from Cécile Morrison, two on methodological problems in relation to the study of gender and family, one by Leonora Neville and another by Anthony Kaldellis, and a chapter by Günter Prinzing on an often neglected group, the slaves of Byzantium, to name just a few examples. Some of these contributors give the impression of just how little knowledge is available to us in some aspects of Byzantine history. The chapter on slavery by Günter Prinzing, and the one by Anthony Kaldellis on ‘The Study of Women and Children’, illustrate how wide a void there remains in this area, with particular focus on the complex methodological issues involved. Kaldellis, for instance, after proposing the point that a comprehensive study of Byzantine women and children has not yet been attempted, outlines the many literary and critical problems that such any such endeavour would have to address and overcome, and concludes that any approach to this area would have to be philological, and recommends that an overhaul of the history of Byzantine literature be made.

Section two, ‘The Written World’, looks at Byzantium through the scope of literature and writing, and features work by Catherine Holmes, Stratis Papaioannou, and Alice-Mary Talbot, to name just a few. Section three is on ‘Byzantine Art and Architecture’, which has a contribution from Bissera V. Pentcheva, in which she re-examines the varying types, uses and changing-nature of icons in Byzantine history, while Henry Maguire makes a study into secular and non-Orthodox visual culture.

Nikolas Bakirtzis shows that very little work has been done specifically on empire-wide fortification, and aims to redress that balance as well as to give a sample of the work so far. This chapter pays particular attention to the walls of Thessaloniki, ignoring the obvious case-study of Constantinople, and attempts to answer questions on how the citizens of the city themselves would have interacted on a day-to-day basis with this grand defensive structure. The last section, ‘The World of Byzantine Studies’, is shorter in comparison with the others and addresses the historiography of this subject, examining some of the most well-known scholarly contributions made in past few centuries, whilst also looking into recent trends in the discipline.

The numerous chapters are varied and wide-ranging, but it does feel as if each contributor is limited to providing little more than a sample of the information currently available; but then, Stephenson outlines this as his intention. “In some cases”, he writes, “the principle findings are summarized...... In each case the author was asked also to present a brief overview of the ‘state of research.’” Each chapter is something almost like a journal article, but which has been edited with a non-specialist in mind.

Particularly, J. M. Featherstone’s chapter on ‘De Cerimoniis and the Great Palace’ is both eye-opening and informative, boiling down the complex and labyrinthine subject of 10th century court ceremonials and the structure of the Great Palace complex to make it clear and accessible to a non-specialist in this area. He focuses his chapter around the Chrysotriklinos, the octagonal Imperial throne-room, placing it as the hub of all activity in the Great Palace and offers a rough floor-plan of the hall, to provide a clear and presentable context as he describes the processions which took place there. Featherstone places particular emphasis on the dilapidated nature of much of the palace, and of its constantly changing character over the course of the Byzantine period – a fact which the Book of Ceremonies has to some extent obscured, presenting a mere snapshot of the Great Palace at one moment in time. Altogether this is a good introduction to this one subject, and will provide the reader with a good gateway through which to comprehend Featherstone’s work as well as the wider scholarly discourse on the subject of the Book of Ceremonies and the Great Palace.

As a second good example, Diether roderich Reinsch’s chapter on ‘The History of Editing Byzantine Historiographical Texts’ is filled with a good collection of background information on the history of Byzantine history – offering both a clear overview of the evolution of the corpus of Byzantine primary material, while also stressing the shortfalls and inadequacy of each attempt to make this material available to the wider scholarly community. He rounds off his chapter with a short critique of the Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae (CFHB), offering a set of very specific editorial suggestions on the preparation of these materials, aimed clearly for the people who are currently, or may eventually, prepare these texts.

In conclusion, The Byzantine World is a concise and varied work dealing with recent historiography in a number of diverse fields. It presents itself as a general aid to a wide range of interested parties, but seems mainly to want to bring everybody and anybody up to speed on the most up-to-date works in Byzantine studies. Each contributor brings their own views and personality to the table, which makes this book more than a mere general history of Byzantium – instead it makes the reader aware of a good selection of the overarching developments in the discipline. Some of this material is undoubtedly old rope to many specialists, but the sheer comprehensiveness of this book will mean that there is something fresh to read, something new to discover, while for a student of the discipline this is an invaluable aid for expanding one’s horizons.

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