Review


“Why Byzantium could exist for over a millennium?” This question is of course for general interest in history, but seems to have attracted and motivated many scholars studying the structure and system of this polity situated in the geopolitically important area susceptible to foreign invasions. This book addresses this question from a perspective of how the existence of the Byzantine Empire was supported by the modes of interactions and coexistences of various ethnic groups, religions and cultures in its ‘peripheries’ or ‘border areas’.

In Japan, historical study of Byzantium began in the 1950s within, as was the case with other fields of history, the prevailing paradigm derived from the idea of societal materialistic development towards modern one. Not a few published articles and books were mainly relevant to the so-called ‘socio-economic’ structure seen in landholding systems 1 or dynamics of political strife 2 in Byzantium, in which Byzantinists were inclined to detect some ‘feudal’ traits. In parallel, the issue of the longevity of the empire has also been treated. A scholar maintained that its main factor was constitutional consistency of Byzantium in legitimising political power despite its later feudalistic development, 3 while for another it was the flexibility of the empire to change its political and administrative systems in response to many internal and external crises. 4 These studies, due to the difficulty in seeing situation in its peripheral areas through written sources, focused on the government in Constantinople and its policy. However, recent diversification of the Byzantine studies which opened a new approach to the imperial power from the cultural aspect 5

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1 For example, Kinichi Watanabe, Study on Socio-economic History of Byzantium (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1968).
2 For example, Koichi Inoue, Byzantine Empire (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1982).
5 A good example of this trend is: Yukio Nezu, Byzantium: the Universal Empire in illusion (Tokyo: Kodan-sha, 1999).
and developments in study on local cities and countryside with the aid of such disciplines as archaeology and sigillography enabled us to have a clearer vision of the imperial system which, different from that of a modern nation state, could incorporate many heterogeneous regions particularly evident in the border areas.

This book consists of an introduction and eight chapters which eight Japanese Byzantine historians wrote on the following peripheries or ethnic group: I. Isaurians in the late antiquity (written by Hiroaki Adachi); II. North Africa in the seventh century (Isao Kobayashi); III. Cherson in the middle Byzantine period (Koji Nakatani); IV. South Italy under the Byzantine rule (Ryusho Takebe); V. The Doukaton of Antioch around 1000 CE (Akiyoshi Oda); VI. Paristrion in the latter half of the eleventh century (Yukio Nezu); VII. Greece invaded by the Normans in the 1080s (Koichi Inoue); VIII. Crete after 1204 (Ryota Takada). A salient trait of these articles is that they focus on certain groups (local elites or particular ethnic groups, for example) in the respective border areas and investigate their interactions and negotiations with the Byzantine central government or foreign powers. They were the very actors adjusting the degree of their subjection to both Constantinople and ‘barbarians’ in accordance with the political situations in which they were involved (Chapters III, IV, VII). The imperial government, on the other hand, had the flexibility to give up direct or territorial rule of certain border areas (V, VI). In addition, it attempted to keep peripheries integrated into the imperial system by utilising its cultural influence as soft power (V) and even sought to reorganise links with Greeks living in the area which slipped out of the imperial domination to maintain a kind of Greek commonwealth (VIII). The border areas formed in such a manner were, so to speak, neither inside nor outside the empire, and there we can see cultural interactions triggered by inflow of dominant culture stemming from the imperial capital (V) and the tendency of assimilation of an ethnic group to it (I). It should also be added that these areas had functions of collecting and processing information on foreign countries, which was transmitted to the imperial government for decision making of diplomacy (III). Such border areas which enabled flexible interactions and coexistences between various groups, as the abovementioned articles conclude, contributed to stabilisation of the imperial system for more than a thousand years.

This book is well indicative of the present trends and interests which the Byzantine Studies in Japan has and the extent to which it has reacted to the international developments of the Byzantine Studies for decades. Further study would
certainly be desired to obtain a clearer concept of the imperial system in Byzantium. Still, the image of the Byzantine Empire presented by this book is quite intriguing, and seems to have a potential for putting the study on the structure of the Byzantine Empire into a more comparative framework in the studies on empires.

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