

## REVIEW

## SITUATING BYZANTIUM

Averil Cameron, *Byzantine Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. xiv + 164. Hardcover, \$22.95. ISBN 978-0-691-15763-4.

In recent years it cannot be said that Byzantium has suffered from a lack of attention. A glut of guides, histories and translations have been published, and major exhibitions have been organised. For instance, Byzantium was the focus of exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1997 and 2004 and the Royal Academy in London in 2008/9. In 2007 there was published Judith Herrin's *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*. The *Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* (edited by Elizabeth Jeffreys, John Haldon, and Robin Cormack) appeared in 2008. Two major edited volumes both came out in 2010, *A Companion to Byzantium* and *The Byzantine World*, edited by Liz James and Paul Stephenson respectively. Translated Texts for Byzantinists launched in 2012 with *Four Byzantine Novels* (translated by Elizabeth Jeffreys). Also in 2012 a translation of the *Book of Ceremonies* (by Ann Moffatt and Maxeme Tall) was published by the Australian Association of Byzantine Studies, and in 2013 a translation of the treatise of Pseudo-Kodinos appeared (with edition and commentary, by Ruth Macrides, J. A. Munitiz, and Dimiter Angelov). The series Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library featured Michael Attaleiates' *History* (translated by Dimitris Krallis) in 2012, and Niketas Stethatos' *Life of Symeon the New Theologian* (translated by Richard Greenfield) and the *Patria* (translated by Albrecht Berger) in 2013. Dumbarton Oaks Texts published Nicetas David's *Life of the Patriarch Ignatius* (translated by Andrew Smithies) in 2013, and the revised edition of the *Taktika* of Leo VI (translated by George T. Dennis) in 2014. *A Short History of the Byzantine Empire*, by Dionysios Stathakopoulos, was published in 2014 too.

2014 was also the year in which Averil Cameron's *Byzantine Matters* appeared. Cameron, currently Professor Emerita of Late Antique and Byzantine History at the University of Oxford, has established herself as the godmother of British late antique studies. She has also embraced Byzantium more broadly (she was the first Chair of the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies, established in 1983). Appropriately, *Byzantine Matters* (dedicated to the memory of Evelyne Patlagean) is a significant book, despite its dainty size and modest length (the attractively produced book is five and a half inches wide and seven inches tall, stretches to 164 pages, but does feature footnotes, as well as three maps, eleven figures, suggested Further Reading,

and an index). Like Stathakopoulos' short history it is primarily concerned with the image of Byzantium. With great economy and verve Cameron provides a state of the field assessment, aimed at Byzantinists themselves, but which is accessible to a wider audience. The book is a breath of fresh air, and far more engaging and illuminating than many a weighty history of Byzantium. Cameron's book consists of five short essays on various aspects (Absence, Empire, Hellenism, Art, and Orthodoxy), framed by an Introduction and Epilogue. Her essays tend to begin with blunt questions: 'Was Byzantium an empire?' (Chapter 2); 'Who owns Byzantium? Is there a Byzantine identity?' (Chapter 3); 'Was Byzantium an "Orthodox society"?' (Chapter 5). Cameron describes her book as 'a personal view on aspects of Byzantium and Byzantine studies that have particularly exercised me in recent years' (xiii).

A brief Introduction (1–6) reflects on the traditional image of Byzantium as exotic and oriental and the development of more positive views of in modern scholarship, but emphasises that difficulties still affect the subject (e.g. periodisation, and not just lack of study but lack of theorised study). Chapter 1 ('Absence', 7–25) focuses on the absence of Byzantium from 'wider historical discourse', associated as it is with negativity. This leads to reflections on the historiography and reception of Byzantium. The role of Edward Gibbon in forging this image in the eighteenth century is recognised, but conversely so also is the 'discovery of Byzantium' by the likes of Thomas Whittemore, Robert Byron, and David Talbot Rice in the early twentieth century. Continuing problems in the proper perception of Byzantium are highlighted (e.g. Western perspectives which tend to exclude Byzantium from historical narratives, difficulty in understanding its religion, lack of appreciation of its literature). The subsequent chapters seek to explore some of these problems in greater depth.

Chapter 2 ('Empire', 26–45) examines the political identity of Byzantium, emphasising the fact that it did evolve over time and reviewing notions of how Byzantium has been understood. Cameron observes that Ostrogorsky's *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates* (originally published in 1940), despite its flaws, retains its 'central position', and that nothing else has been able to 'offer a comprehensive alternative analysis'. The chapter concludes by noting the longevity of the Byzantine empire, and remarks that 'How this was achieved, and how Byzantium did in fact maintain itself as an empire are questions that still need to be asked'.

Chapter 3 ('Hellenism', 46–67) identifies and tackles a key problem in the understanding of Byzantium: it is often characterised as Greek as well as Orthodox. Cameron is especially exercised to explore how modern Greeks respond to and relate to Byzantium. She also comments on the interesting phenomenon of classicists who study Byzantium while looking down their noses at it. She remarks 'Byzantium has been caught between the hostile, or at least prejudiced, assumptions of some classically trained scholars and the

national and religious agendas of Greek and other Orthodox writers' (49). In addition Cameron explores in particular the views of Anthony Kaldellis and Niketas Siniossoglu about the survival of Hellenism within Byzantium, as apart from Roman identity, though she is not convinced by them it seems. Ultimately Byzantium was never just Greek, and the Roman legacy of the Byzantine empire is a vital aspect of its identity, and as with the Roman empire, hybridity is a key aspect of its nature. Cameron concludes by asserting that 'Byzantine identity was not only Greek: Byzantium is for all. "Hellenism" was important, but it is not enough' (67).

Chapter 4 ('The Realms of Gold', 68–86) turns to Byzantine art: recognising its key place in the continuing appeal of Byzantium, and witnessing the success of the recent exhibitions. However, it is also emphasised that art is not just for art historians but needs to be engaged with by all historians of Byzantium: it 'requires exegesis as well as aesthetic appreciation' (84). This must be achieved by deploying all the surviving evidence, literary and material. Cameron declares 'Byzantine art history cannot be left to its own specialists. It cannot stand alone' (86). Interestingly, in this chapter Cameron once again demonstrates an interest in periodisation, pronouncing the need to see Byzantine art in its wider context with its roots in late antiquity, a term developed within art history by Alois Riegl (82).

The final essay, Chapter 5 ('The Very Model of Orthodoxy?', 87–111), addresses the nature of religious life and experience in Byzantium: tracing a more complex reality than traditionally recognised, and questioning the idea of a single monolithic 'Orthodoxy'. Again Cameron calls for proper study of the subject, as has been conducted in other fields. She highlights the need for the full range of texts to be studied. Investigating the issue of religious authority, Cameron makes use of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos, with regard to the infamous episode of the melting down of church treasures as a 'test case' (97–101). Once again we return to the issue of periodisation, in relation to the literature of codifications, compilations and dialogues, which Cameron shows have a long history in Byzantium and are not just a later product. She also questions the delayed dating of the emergence of an 'Orthodox culture', since this too had a much longer history. Cameron concludes her final essay by observing that 'as long as religious language and theological rhetoric in Byzantine texts remain so understudied and undertheorized, they will continue to be accepted at face value or, conversely, ignored as irrelevant. Byzantium will remain what it has always been—an exotic and unchanging other' (111).

A brief Epilogue (112–15) reflects again on the aims of the book and the questions the field needs to address. The image of Byzantium is the issue, and although some phantoms have been exorcised, there are 'difficulties of interpretation that still seem to stand in the way of understanding Byzantium'. Cameron declares that her 'main preoccupation ... has been with the histo-

riography of the subject, and the ways in which it has been (and still is) seen, both in the secondary literature and more widely' (113). Periodisation is seen as key again. She warns of the danger of accepting the view that Byzantium proper only began c. 600 or later; this obscures 'the fact that what we call Byzantium had a long earlier history; it was not a new state formed only in the medieval period'. Cameron raises the spectre that the growth of late antiquity as a field, which has replaced the descriptor the 'later Roman empire', threatens to 'squeeze out Byzantium' too. She proclaims, 'The danger, I fear, is that Byzantine scholarship may turn in on itself in response'. For Cameron the solution is for Byzantinists to embrace late antiquity and locate Byzantium within it, and look to the methodologies used within it to advance research in Byzantine Studies. Specifically, Byzantine literary culture needs to be situated within a much longer history, stretching back into the classical world. Cameron also memorably avows 'Byzantium belongs to all of us, and it belongs to mainstream history'. So, there are two key strands here. Byzantium needs to be better understood itself, but also its importance in world history needs to be properly recognised. Fundamentally, Byzantium needs to be liberated from its negative niche.

Thus, despite its brevity, this little book provides much to reflect and ponder on. It is an impassioned manifesto aimed at the field (pointing to future research directions) but also beyond, a cry for Byzantium to be better understood and appreciated. Within the manifesto there are also notable recurring concerns. Key topics that Cameron returns to time and again are: periodisation (the need to see Byzantium within a longer span of history, and not just connecting with late antiquity but back into the Roman empire); literature (the need to be familiar with the range of texts, including theological works, and the need to understand these properly); religion (which again needs to be more fully understood); and theory (the need to adopt theoretical methodological approaches to Byzantine culture and history, and look to the more developed methodologies adopted in other fields, especially late antiquity). Cameron clearly articulates the familiar idea that Byzantine Studies is still running to catch up, which is both exciting in setting an agenda for the future and disheartening in revealing how much more still needs to be done. It is evident that these concerns of Cameron owe much to her own academic trajectory (and interests); as she makes clear, she began as a classicist, branched into ancient history, and then came to Byzantium (xiii). No doubt this makes her particularly sensitive to the Roman roots of Byzantium and the need to see it within its origins and context. Byzantinists who come to Byzantium by other routes may have different perspectives, but hers chime with me.

Cameron's book is also directly concerned with historiography, as she makes explicit. It is indeed remarkable that no history of Byzantium has yet emerged to take the place of Ostrogorsky's, and one wonders if Cameron

herself will take on the immense challenge. This book suggests that she could. But Cameron's book is also concerned with the reception of Byzantium. There is great pleasure to be had from her reflections on later responses to Byzantium, such as those of Gibbon, early twentieth-century aesthetes, and Putin's Russia. It is notable that the book begins with two quotations. One is from Robert Byron's *The Station* (1931), and is addressed in the book. However, the second is from a review in the *The Guardian* of Neil Jordan's film *Byzantium* (2013), which features 'a mother-daughter vampire team' (who take refuge in a British seaside hotel by the name of Byzantium, which the mother then turns into a brothel). Perhaps this is included to reflect an unusual modern response to Byzantium, an image that on the face of it has no connection with the reality, but if this is so it is not articulated. Clarification of this would have been welcome, for it might have led on to further reflections on the rich and developing field of the reception of Byzantium, one that is also catching up with the study of the reception of the classical world. Perhaps what Byzantium really needs is to be embraced by Hollywood (Przemyslaw Marciniak has imagined a film about Byzantium starring Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie as Justinian and Theodora: 'And the Oscar goes to ... the Emperor! Byzantium in the Cinema', in Ingela Nilsson and Paul Stephenson, ed., *Wanted: Byzantium. The Desire for a Lost Empire* (Uppsala, 2014) 247–55, at 254). No doubt this would raise the familiar problem of the image of Byzantium and perceptions of it, but could at least have the benefit of bringing Byzantium to the attention of a mass audience (the *Gladiator* effect). Such an audience could be led to the true Byzantium, the Byzantium for all.

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