THE BYZANTINE REVIEW

ByzRev 05.2023.032
doi: 10.17879/byzrev-2023-5233

BENJAMIN ANDERSON – MIRELA IVANOVA, Is Byzantine Studies a Colonialist Discipline?: Toward a Critical Historiography. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 2023. 216 pp.; 18 b/w ills. – ISBN 978-0-271-09526-4 ($24.00)[1]

• MARK MASTERSON, Te Herenga Waka/Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand (mark.masterson@vuw.ac.nz)

For this provocatively entitled volume, the editors, BENJAMIN ANDERSON and MIRELA IVANOVA, encouraged a group of seventeen scholars to think about the relationship between Byzantine Studies and both the colonial past and the decolonizing present. It is always useful to be clear about where one has come from, and the goals of decolonizing the present are praiseworthy, for who could object to the various disciplines recognizing what aspects of their current practice are more about entrenching racial hierarchies (and indeed hierarchies of all kinds) than creating knowledge? These things said, the situation is not so simple, and I will say more about that at the end of this review.

The volume commences with two pieces from the editors: "Preface: The Historical Conjuncture" and the meaty "Introduction: For a Critical Historiography of Byzantine Studies." In the preface, the editors outline two events in 2020 that moved them to think of the on-line conference that was the genesis for the eventual volume: the murder by police of George Floyd, an African American, in Minneapolis, and the making of Hagia Sophia into a mosque again. On the one hand, there was cause for reflection on the basis of the discipline, like all disciplines in any university, in white supremacy, and events in Turkey, on the other hand, showed that Byzantine Studies cannot imagine itself exempt from politics, especially as an International Congress of Byzantine Studies conference to be held in Istanbul was moved to Italy. The editors have this to say:

> The historical conjuncture of (1) the global reassessment of the legacies of colonialism and (2) the controversy around Hagia Sophia requires that we ask what Byzantine studies and Byzantinists have stood for in the past and stand for today. (xiii)

1. See https://www.psupress.org/books/titles/978-0-271-09526-4.html

These two questions about past and present undergird most of the essays that follow, essays that "[reveal]… a field [of study] in motion" (xiv).

In the introduction that follows, the editors pose the question as to whether Byzantine studies should be dynamic mode of study that engages with the world or instead be a redoubt for hermit scholars studying arcane things. There then follows a series of discussions that consider orientalism (Byzantium as *both* colonizer, as it were, "otherer" of those to their East *and* colonized and definitely viewed as oriental [and, frequently, disposable] in Western accounts of the empire); nationalism (the assertion of the colonized for self-determination); the nature of imperial systems. The introduction continues with a capacious discussion of the nature of Byzantine depictions of race (sometimes positive and other times negative). These representations of race in their totality make Byzantium a fruitful place for developing perspectives on pre-modern race. Indeed, the in-between nature of Byzantium makes it a good polity to think with and it should "play a leading role in the production of a new, radical, global history" (27). This is all good, but I will register a concern here. The editors say that the Byzantine empire has no obvious modern successor (27). I would like to see their reasoning as to why they did not speak at least a little of Greece, though perhaps they did not want to borrow trouble (and an answer addressing my concern may be on page three where dangerous current nationalist sentiments are alluded to).

Afterwards comes a collection of fourteen concise essays by both established and emerging scholars. The essays are grouped in four parts. In the first part, "How Is Byzantine Studies (Re)Produced?," are three essays. The first ("Hieronymus Wolf's Silver Tongue: Early Byzantine Scholarship at the Intersection of Slavery, Colonialism, and the Crusades" by NATHANAEL ASCHENBRENNER and JAKE RANSOHOFF) is a discussion of the sixteenth-century scholar, Hieronymus Wolf, who brought out the foundational *Corpus Historiae Byzantinae*. This scholarly labor was supported by the Fugger banking dynasty, whose money was involved in various colonialist projects being undertaken by the European powers at this time. According to the authors, this marks Byzantine studies as having an indelible colonialist origin. This is, I suppose, true (Wolf was supported in his work by tainted money— something that bedevils all [?] disciplines, to be sure), and interesting as a story of how things work and come to be. But what is a Byzantinist now supposed to do with this information? And saying we must "recognize and confront the discipline's colonial pasts" (50) is not sufficient. Indeed, taxing a beleaguered discipline now with sins

over 400 years old seems more performative than cogent, even as it made for interesting reading. The next essay, "Byzantine Archaeology: Teaching the Tenth and the Twentieth Centuries" by HUGH G. JEFFERY, is on archaeology of Byzantine sites and the state of education of future practitioners. The idea is that those who might be digging in modern Greece or, especially, Turkey need to understand the history subsequent to the empire. The essay is about the ethical production of knowledge and ethical training of future archaeologists. The third essay ("Byzantium in Exile" by ŞEBNEM DÖNBEKCI, BAHATTIN BAYRAM, and ZEYNEP OLGUN) is by three Turkish scholars who detail the travails attending being Byzantinists in Turkey: internally they are marginalized, and, as Turkish scholars, they feel they have been abandoned by the scholarly community outside of Turkey. Their discussion is focalized by the back and forth that attended making Hagia Sophia back into a mosque, as the scholarly community tried to stop the government of Erdoğan from doing what it wanted to do (and did).

The second part, "How Is Byzantium (Re)Produced?," features four essays. The first ("Methodological Imperialism" by NICHOLAS S. M. MATHEOU) identifies, persuasively, the way in which the sources make us center the empire's elites over and over again. It is suggested that we look instead at moments when, say, the empire was in trouble, e.g., post 1261, as moments when many in the empire were quite happy to see the ruling elite, with its pretensions to rule, crumble. The next essay ("The Price of Admission" by ANTHONY KALDELLIS) is about how the study of Byzantium has been constrained to shape itself to accommodate Eurocentric narratives and even the ambitions of European powers when the Ottoman Empire was being dismembered. Narratives of the medieval state were to depict it as having little to do with the progress of Europe and with the Greek classics:

> The tacit agreement [between Byzantinists and Eurocentric academia] is that "Byzantium" has little to do with Rome and that the Byzantines had no "real" interest in the [Greek] classics[, which they preserved for Europe's benefit]. (87)

This price that Byzantine Studies pays is too high, causing many deformations large and small. The third essay ("Byzantine Studies: A Field Ripe for Disruption" by AVERIL CAMERON) details the rigidities in Byzantine Studies these days and its resistance to various new methodologies. There are openings to innovation possible. In the fourth essay ("Subaltern Byzantinism" by MARIA MAVROUDI), Byzantine studies is viewed as possibly

in a good place to take advantage of the current rethinking of academia which, yes, is occurring just now. Unlike Classics which is perduringly associated with the Western dominance that is being questioned, Byzantium, as orientalized and neglected, avoids some of this animus, and may be in a position to take advantage. MAVROUDI adduces some interesting examples of contemporary use of Byzantine representational modes in African American churches that are quite suggestive as to routes Byzantine Studies may follow in the future.

"How Are Byzantine Texts (Re)Produced?" is the third part. It commences with "Byzantine and Western Narratives: A Dialogue of Empires" by ARIETTA PAPACONSTANTINOU. In this essay, the use of language as defining of civilization and the construction of hierarchies of languages are put front and center. Putting Greek at the top as most civilized and worthy (as opposed to, say, Coptic) is something we see in the Byzantine empire itself and also in recent understandings of the empire, understandings that are well viewed as the "[projection of western] imperial tropes on… perception and construction of the Byzantine world" (112). The next essay, "The Ethnic Process" by ALEXANDRA VUKOVICH, proposes the "ethnic process," which is the defining of a peripheral people by an imperial center. VUKOVICH takes as her example the ways in which medieval Rus was perceived in the Byzantine sources. The colonial aspects of the middle Byzantine empire are clear to see on this basis, and the ways in which similar tropes remain current where Russia is concerned (124) was a very interesting point. In the final essay of this section, "Publication and Citation Practices: Enclosure, Extractivism, and Gatekeeping in Byzantine Studies" by MATTHEW KINLOCH, manifold challeges facing Byzantine Studies are enumerated. This chapter is a helpful summary of a woeful set of problems. In essence, the leadership and membership in the field are, too often, pale, male, and stale, and this is changing all too slowly. Furthermore, the field is beset by increasing dominance of English and by citation practices that reinforce hierarchies.

The fourth and final part of the book is "How Is Byzantine Art (Re)Produced?" In it, we find, first, "The South Kensington Museum, Byzantine Egyptian Textiles, and Art-Historical Imperialism" by ARIELLE WINNIK. This interesting piece tracks the disembedding of Byzantine-Egyptian embroidery into display cases in late nineteenth century. Devoid of further context, they became examples of ornament, and even inspirations for changes in current fashions in textile making and the decorative arts. Empire takes what it likes, leaves behind the rest (like context), and profits. The next es-

say, "From Ethnographic Illustration to Aphrodisian Magistrate: Changing Perceptions of an Early Byzantine Portrait" by Stephanie R. Caruso, chronicles the changing perceptions of a portrait sculpture of a man found in Aphrodisias. The bust was initially thought in the nineteenth century to be that of an African, but, over-time, that has changed to identifying him as a magistrate. This essay does a good job of delineating how imperial practices of disembedding sculptures from their contexts and racializing logics inform interpretations of material culture. In the next essay, "Expanding and Decentering Byzantium: The Acquisition of an Ethiopian Double-Sided Gospel Leaf" by Andrea Myers Achi, the author muses on the changes happening in the presentation of Byzantine art. Her focus is on a page from a gospel from medieval Ethiopia which now is displayed in the Byzantine section of Metropolitan Museum of Art. This becomes an occasion for thinking through ways to decenter our conceptions of Byzantine art and come to "a fuller, more complete picture of the medieval *oikoumene*" (170). "Equity, Accessibility, and New Narratives for Byzantine Art in the Museum" by Elizabeth Dospěl Williams is the last essay in the volume. In it, thoughts are offered on ways to disrupt dominant narratives in the space of the museum, the moves toward increasing accessibility, and also on the fact that museums themselves have colonial aspects to them that are very nearly intractable. The volume as a whole concludes with nine pages of bibliography meant to push the wide-ranging field of Byzantine Studies in more self-reflective directions.

I will now speak in general terms about my impressions of the volume. I appreciated in particular the emergence of the more nuanced view of Byzantium itself: both colonizer and colonized. I found the bits and pieces of history of the discipline interesting. The strategy of thinking in terms of colonizer/colonized//center/periphery also yields results interesting in a scholarly sense. The volume also hits hard and correctly in the area of the historical acquisition of art and its curation practices until very recently. At the same time, however, these chapters on art and archaeology showcase good work now being done and ways forward. Another thing that came out of this book for me was how the discipline needs to come to grips with hierarchical dysfunction and conservatism in methodology.

But I have mixed feelings. When I read the title of the collection, and I am a scholar who does "left-wing" things in the academy, I was dubious. It seemed naïve, to put it mildly, that the editors did understand that such a framing is dangerous to a discipline that is increasingly marginalized (Byzantine Studies is not prospering now, is it?). In this era of neoliberal

capture of the universities, asserting that Byzantine Studies to some extent should be superseded, is liable to tempt administrators and funding organizations looking for an easy performative win. It also is not fair to many current scholars to characterize the entire discipline in these terms. There has been much work done in recent decades that does not hew to dominant narratives. Lastly, what I would have liked to have seen more of was what we want for Byzantine Studies going forward. Perhaps making sure to make an end to mea culpas before too long, a beleaguered Byzantine Studies should be turning to this question: what does a future Byzantine Studies look like in an increasingly decolonized context? We have some hints of that here and there in the volume and that's good. Could we have more? How might a prosperous Byzantine Studies look?

Keywords

Byzantine studies; methodologies; post-colonial studies