

NIKOLAS BAKIRTZIS – LUCA ZAVAGNO (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the Byzantine City. From Justinian to Mehmet II (ca. 500 – ca. 1500)*. London: Routledge 2024. 508 pp., 115 figs. – ISBN: 978-0-367-19679-0

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‘The Byzantine city’ in the title of this new book comes as a bombshell blowing away half a century of archaeological research that questioned just this, whether anything like ‘*the Byzantine city*’ ever existed. Earlier, pre-archaeological scholarship on ‘the Byzantine city’ by historians such as DIETRICH CLAUDE, CLIVE FOSS, and WOLFRAM BRANDES was mostly based on textual sources. Later, archaeologists came to question the earlier, historical scenarios and started to describe various different Byzantine cities: old or new, with or without ancient buildings, fortified or not, with or without bishops, and with very different developments, depending on where in the empire they were located. MICHAEL J. DECKER addresses this issue in his thoughtful contribution on ‘Methodologies for Byzantine Urban Studies’ (pp. 73–90). Differences between regions and time periods seemed so big that most recent studies have limited themselves regionally and chronologically, for example to Asia Minor before the arrival of the Turks or to Greece after that of the Slavs: the former was characterised by ruralisation, the latter by urban prosperity.

The editors of the collected volume intend to break away from such partial approaches. Thanks to their expertise in the settlement archaeology of Byzantine Greece and Asia Minor, they would seem well placed to overcome the regional divide, and they have recruited as contributors specialists for various other aspects of Byzantium and beyond, including Italy and the Near East, history and philology, art and architecture, as well as the Ottoman empire and Italian merchant republics. The book thus aims ‘to avoid a rather traditional taxonomical dissection of the urban phenomenon along clear-cut political, economic, administrative, and military interpretative lines’ (p. 2). It ‘envisage[s] a full incorporation of these within diachronic and interdisciplinary frameworks that address both the imaginary and the perceived, the ideal and the pragmatic, the monumental and the socio-cultural flows of life as they characterised the Byzantine urban experience’ (p. 3).

However, the scope and breadth of all this, which – truth be told – is probably beyond a single volume and certainly beyond a single reviewer, also hinders the inclusion of aspects that have lately become important for the understanding of Byzantine urbanism: the rural hinterland, urban (and rural) density, and the natural environment.¹ The result of such exclusion in conjunction with the focus on a single ‘urban phenomenon’ and ‘experience’ becomes apparent in UFUK SERIN’s otherwise exemplarily meticulous and well-researched contribution on ‘The Byzantine “City” in Asia Minor’ (pp. 139–171): in the context of the volume in hand, Serin cannot but misrepresent as general urban prosperity what appear to be exceptional circumstances at Antalya and Trabzon (pp. 156–159). Serin thus misses out on widespread urban decline and abandonment that becomes apparent most everywhere else in middle Byzantine Asia Minor, if measured against concurrent rural prosperity.²

In contrast, the summary of NIKOLAS BAKIRTZIS’ chapter on ‘Fortifications and the Making of the Byzantine City’ (pp. 272–289) would seem to apply mainly to Greece, where Byzantine civilisation required the bulwark of urban defences in order to survive the Slavic invasion of the rural hinterland: ‘Defensive enclosures secured continuity and served a critical role in the adaptive resilience of Byzantine societies. Separated from the countryside behind defensive enclosures, cities’ organization and layout mirrored their role as administrative centres and hubs of religious, social, and economic life’ (p. 283). In middle Byzantine Asia Minor, cities like Miletus were simply abandoned once their fortifications were no longer needed for defence against the Arabs (see below). However, Asia Minor appears to be less of an issue for BAKIRTZIS in any case, to judge by his take on Ankara (pp. 282–283, fig. 12.8), for which he refers to Foss, ‘Byzantine Ankara’ (n. 61 on p. 289), ignoring copious more recent bibliography that may be found in SERIN’s chapter (pp. 154–155, fig. 7.6 with n. 146–153

1. E.g. ADAM IZDEBSKI, *Ein vormoderner Staat als sozioökologisches System. Das oströmische Reich 300–1300 n. Chr. (Forschungen zur Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Mitteleuropa 59)*. Dresden 2022.

2. HUGH G. JEFFERY, *Middle Byzantine Aphrodisias. The Episcopal Village, AD 700–1200 (Aphrodisias 12)*. Wiesbaden 2022; JESKO FILDHUTH, *Pergamon*. In: *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst*. Vol. VII / fasc. 55. Stuttgart 2023, pp. 1010–1043; PHILIPP NIEWÖHNER, *Not a Consumption Crisis. Diversity in Marble Carving, Ruralisation, and the Collapse of Urban Demand in Middle Byzantine Asia Minor*. In: JOANITA VROOM (ed.), *Feeding the Byzantine City. The Archaeology of Consumption in the Eastern Mediterranean (ca. 500–1500) (Medieval and Post-Medieval Mediterranean Archaeology Series 5)*. Turnhout 2023, pp. 171–194.

on p. 169) and fundamentally changes the understanding of that city and its development.

An additional problem with BAKIRTZIS' reference is finding the key to the bibliographic abbreviation, because none are listed anywhere in the volume, and each chapter applies its own, different rules. In this case, the best match may be found towards the end of BAKIRTZIS' long n. 14 (p. 287): 'Foss, 'Late Antique and Byzantine Ankara' (DOP 31, 1977, pp. 27–87)'; but as FOSS has dealt more often and more recently with Byzantine Ankara, a certain uneasiness remains. The matter gets worse and approaches the point of hopelessness in other chapters that employ different abbreviations and only such, no full bibliographic references at all, e.g. chapter 15. How is the reader to know what Crow, 'Walls' is referring to (n. 1 on p. 349), considering how much JIM (?) CROW has published on various Byzantine walls?

Related issues abound and include the figure captions, for example chapter 15, p. 339, fig. 15.4, where the caption reads: 'A nineteenth-century by Sebah and Joaillier and comes from the author's archive'. Fortunately, the image itself is inscribed 'N. 8. Brousse – Vue panoramique du fauburg de Tchékirgué. Sébah and Joaillier 1894', indicating that the photograph belonged to a series or album, as was fashionable at the time,³ that it was taken in 1894, and that it shows Çekirge, then a suburb, today a quarter of Bursa in western Asia Minor. Such carelessness may be ignored as trivial, where results are uncontroversial, e.g. MARIA CRISTINA CARILE's chapter on 'Monumentality and the Byzantine City' (pp. 290–310) that comes to the conclusion that 'not only did the Byzantines have a sense of monumentality and felt it, but built cities were also indeed monumental and continue to be still today' (p. 304), or ELISABETTA GEORGI's chapter on 'Water and the Byzantine City' (pp. 311–333), which characterises Byzantine water management as relatively more utilitarian in comparison to the preceding Roman period.

Some instances of negligence are potentially more serious, for example chapter 18, p. 393, fig. 18.1 with note 28 on p. 404. The figure illustrates the Trier Ivory, and the caption indicates the 'fourth century', but the bibliographical references are a quarter century out of date, ignoring numerous more recent publications and a likely eighth-century date.⁴ Or chapter 21,

3. Cf. for example MARTINA BALEVA (ed.), *Von Basel nach Bursa und zurück. Die Geschichte eines Fotoalbums von Sébah & Joaillier*. Cologne 2017.

4. Most recently ANTHONY CUTLER – PHILIPP NIEWÖHNER, *Towards a His-*

p. 452, that gives ‘St Benoît built in 1427’ as an example for ‘Genoese Pera’, when that church was in fact built a century or so earlier as a distinctly Byzantine monument for a Greek Orthodox community outside the Genoese possessions.

The case of Bursa is yet more intricate. Much Ottoman building activity has left tantalizingly vague traces of earlier, ancient and Byzantine buildings that SUNA ÇAĞAPTAY evaluates in her contribution on ‘Byzantine Prousa to Ottoman Bursa’ (pp. 334–351), ‘discuss[ing] how the early Ottoman city of Bursa grew out of the late Byzantine Prousa, which had itself grown out of classical Prousa’ (p. 334). ÇAĞAPTAY argues for urban continuity and compares with the better attested case of Miletus/Palatia/Balat further south in western Asia Minor (pp. 346–347 fig. 15.10), but this is misleading. Early Byzantine Miletus was abandoned and completely deserted during the middle Byzantine period, late Byzantine Palatia was a novel foundation under a new name on the Theatre Hill, separate of what used to be early Byzantine Miletus (see SERIN’s chapter, p. 151), and Turkish Balat was yet again newly established outside its late Byzantine predecessor and unrelated to early Byzantine Miletus. If anything, Miletus/Palatia/Balat is a case study of discontinuity and as such poses the question whether Bursa or any other city may have undergone similar disruption.

Other readers will no doubt have queries of their own and should also consult the volume’s digital edition in full colour. The printed book is limited to on-demand quality, with a discoloured cover image and fuzzy black-and-white reproductions throughout. The digital version is available for download only via [Bookshelf](#), an application that must be installed first and serves to prevent file-sharing, restricts printing to no more than two pages at a time, disallows copy-and-paste, and has a limited search option, thus combining the disadvantages of print and digital publishing.

Even so, a steadfast reader will find herself unexpectedly rewarded by contributions that do not concern themselves with handbook-style generalisations as to ‘the Byzantine City’, but present and discuss recent and novel research as well as single sites or monuments. ANDREI GANDILA extrap-

tory of Byzantine Ivory Carving from the Late Sixth to the Late Ninth Century. In: BRIGITTE PITARAKIS et al. (eds), *Mélanges Catherine Jolivet-Lévy* (Travaux et Mémoires 20). Paris 2016, pp. 89–107, at 93–98; PAROMA CHATTERJEE, *Iconoclasm’s Legacy. Interpreting the Trier Ivory*. *Art Bulletin* 100/3 (2018) pp. 28–47; PHILIPP NIEWÖHNER, *The Significance of the Cross before, during, and after Iconoclasm. Early Christian Aniconism in Constantinople and Asia Minor*. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 74 (2020) pp. 185–242, at 224–227.

olates fascinating insights from coin finds in cities all around the Black Sea (pp. 107–138), NIKOLAOS KARYDIS suggests that Sts Sergius and Bacchus at Constantinople may originally not have been domed, but timber-roofed (pp. 247–271), MATTHEW HARPSTER and MICHAEL JONES bring the Amalfi Coast into play (pp. 352–367), ATHANSIOS KOUTOUPAS paints a vivid picture of late antique to Arab Alexandria (pp. 368–383), and JOANITA VROOM provides enlightening information on ‘Commercial Activities and Ceramic Finds at Constantinople (ca. 500–1000)’ (pp. 427–450). These and numerous other chapters, 21 in total, add up to great variety, and if this is accepted as a forte of Byzantine urbanism and scholarship, the volume will make its mark not *despite*, but *because* it fails to describe ‘the Byzantine City’ as a single ‘urban phenomenon’ and ‘experience’.

Keywords

archaeology; settlement history; Asia Minor; Eastern Mediterranean; Italy