

JAMES HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Byzantium: Economy, Society, Institutions 600–1100*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2024. 320 pp. – ISBN 978-0-19-8897-8

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Historians sometimes complain about the grid of periodization in which they have to operate, but they rarely try and never manage to break free of it, for it is the workbench of their trade, which defines the limits and the subdivisions of their writings. The period from the seventh to the eleventh century is particularly compelling for Byzantinists because it encapsulates the mature phase of the state and society they study. The Middle Byzantine period, sometimes extended to include the twelfth century, is necessarily the high point and the centrepiece of all general histories that take the story of Byzantium from the foundation of Constantinople in 324–330 to the fall of the City in 1453. It is the period in which the state ruled from Constantinople came into its own, and held its own, as the undisputed continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire, the most cohesive and durable of the great powers to emerge from the breakdown of the global power that had been the territorial hegemony of ancient Rome. It is the period in which Byzantium evolved a unique political and cultural profile that was coterminous with the Byzantine state – as opposed to the diffuse and fragmented Byzantine world that emerged during the Later Middle Ages and continued to exist under alien occupation.

The remarkable success story of this middle Byzantine state, from its fight for basic survival in the seventh century, through its consolidation and gradually accelerating expansion over the next three hundred years, to the beginnings of a new existential crisis at the end of the eleventh century, has been told in greater detail in two substantial monographs which still deserve to figure on student reading lists. Both books in their titles convey the distinctiveness of Byzantium in the period they cover. *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries*, by ROMILLY JENKINS, captures the essence of the imperial pretensions that this successor state of imperial Rome continued to entertain, despite its reduced, more ‘national’ dimensions. *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium*,¹ by MARK WHITTOW, underlines the importance

1. *Orthodox* was omitted from the title of the American edition.

of this period in forging something like a Byzantine national ideology and identity.

It is characteristic of the work here reviewed, which covers the same period of Byzantine history, that it does not acknowledge any debt to these predecessor books, or refer to them as landmarks in its own itinerary, although they were both tangential, to say the least, to the author's career trajectory. ROMILLY JENKINS' book appeared just as JAMES HOWARD-JOHNSTON (hereafter H-J) was starting out as a Byzantinist. MARK WHITTOW was his student, colleague and successor at Oxford, whose brilliant scholarly output was tragically cut short by a road accident just before Christmas 2017. His book shows the enduring influence of the undergraduate courses he took with H-J and taught in his turn in the Oxford School of Modern History. It is hardly surprising that a Byzantinist writing in the twenty-first century would not wish to align with JENKINS' judgmental narrative of personality politics and racial stereotypes, but it is not immediately self-evident why he does not build more explicitly on, or within, the analytical framework established by WHITTOW, with whom he shares a preoccupation with geography, social and economic structures, comparison with Byzantium's neighbours, and above all, what was happening on the ground in Anatolia, which was both the state's main war zone and its main reservoir of fiscal and human resources. The preface hints at two possible reasons for this dissociation. One can be discerned in the author's explanation of his book as the outcome of a career-long intellectual quest, whose parameters were set before WHITTOW appeared on the scene. The other appears in his stated incentive for his quest:

It seemed to me that any self-respecting Byzantinist should be ready to tackle what the great George Ostrogorsky identified as the central questions of Byzantine history – how the defeated east Roman empire transformed itself into a tight-knit state committed to a long guerrilla war of defence in the seventh and eighth centuries, and, later, whether or not the peasant and military strata at the base of Byzantine society were seriously eroded in the era of relative success which followed (p. vii)

The greatness of OSTROGORSKY's *History of the Byzantine State* was fulsomely acknowledged by ROMILLY JENKINS but was almost completely ignored by MARK WHITTOW, who confined himself to listing it as the second item in his bibliography with the remark that it 'is dated but still helpful for a basic narrative' (p. 424). This remark reflects not only the increasing unfashionability of OSTROGORSKY's work as a textbook of Byzantine history in the 1980s and 1990s, but also WHITTOW's relativization of OS-

TROGORSKY's thesis concerning the military and economic importance of the free peasantry in the Byzantine state's struggle for survival. It is on this point that H-J parts company with WHITTOW, and if he takes a general position with regard to previous scholarship, it is to rehabilitate the OSTROGORSKY thesis by reframing the 'central questions' and updating the answers in the light of the subsequent and substantial new research that has appeared over the last three quarters of a century.

The author confesses that this is not quite the book that he daydreamed of writing in his youth, but rather a combination of the papers that he wrote on related subjects over the years. He modestly likens it to a string of sausages, which 'consists of seven previously published papers, updated and revised to a greater or lesser extent, plus two specially written for the volume'. The sausage metaphor does not quite do justice to the way in which the pieces overlap, like rooftiles, by the repetition of key points, thereby giving an apparently seamless coverage.

To be useful, a book review has either to spare potential readers the trouble of reading the book, or to persuade them that it worth reading from cover to cover. Since there is no question of going for the first option, I will not provide a summary of the contents, but merely tell readers what to expect and assure them that they will not be disappointed. This book is essential reading for all who want to know how and why the medieval Byzantine Empire differed from the Late Roman Empire while remaining the same constitutional entity. The quantitative change is common knowledge to all with a basic notion of world history: the Byzantine Empire left by Heraclius in 641 was only a fraction of the Empire of Justinian, and the limited territorial recovery that it temporarily pursued in the tenth and eleventh centuries did not extend to the greater part of Italy and the former Roman provinces of the Near East and North Africa. The main outlines of the qualitative change have also been well and repeatedly delineated in textbook literature, including the publications mentioned above. One does not have to read HOWARD-JOHNSTON to learn that the Roman Empire in its medieval Byzantine iteration was a far more highly centralized, ruralized and militarized society than it had been in Late Antiquity, with a dominant culture that was more uniformly Greek-speaking and Orthodox Christian according to the norms that prevailed at the centre, in Constantinople. What this book contributes is a fresh attempt to get behind the scenes of this transformation, by taking a new, independent look at the patchy clumps of evidence, and by sketching in the gaps between them with a web of plausible conjecture. H-J makes sensible sense of the grass roots of this 'empire

that would not die', to quote another recent historian of the phenomenon,² and gives a concrete sense of how Byzantine society militarized, ruralized and centralized for survival – how indeed it was the tight interweaving of these three trends throughout the territory of Asia Minor that enabled this heartland of the state to resist the sustained *jihad* of the Arab world for two and a half centuries, in the process gathering enough military momentum to go on the offensive on the western as well as the eastern front.

The contrast between this embattled early medieval society and the social world of the same region in Late Antiquity is illustrated most vividly by the portrait that H-J draws of the local elite that emerged in what was effectively the deep frontier zone of the Anatolian plateau and its surrounding mountains. In the sixth century, the average local aristocrat had been a *rentier* living in a town house in a provincial city; he prided himself on his ancestry. His counterpart of two to four centuries later may also have owned farms and flocks, but his family wealth was based on paid government service, mostly military, and he measured his status in terms of his rank and connections in the official state hierarchy. Above all, he lived in a country house, in close proximity to the village society from which he drew his sustenance and the state recruited its infantry. But this house was not a castle, as it would have been in western Europe at the same time. Fortified settlement was a state monopoly. It was to be found partly in the lean remains of the ancient local towns, whose principal function now was to house the military governor and his staff, including the tax officials, and the local bishop and clergy. Otherwise, the numerous other unnamed Byzantine fortifications that dot the uplands of Anatolia seem to have been 'redoubts', places of refuge, to which the local military would escort the local villagers and their animals in times of Arab invasion. This was a society where social inequalities and the gulf between rulers and ruled were subordinated to a regime of guerilla warfare in which the state deployed the proceeds of rigorous recruitment and taxation in order to preserve its resource base in the world of Anatolian villages. At its simplest, as perfected by the Isaurian emperors in the eighth century, the system worked by the flow of polarized energy between the social units at its opposite ends, the imperial court and the peasant village; the intermediate command and control structures were meant to act as mere transmitters and conductors, without getting in the way.

2. JOHN HALDON, *The Empire that Would not Die: The Paradox of Eastern Roman Survival, 640–740*. Cambridge MA – London 2016.

H-J's sketch of a stripped-down agrarian, military and fiscal system uncluttered by social hierarchy corresponds largely to the modified version of the OSTROGORSKY thesis that has taken shape mainly at the hands of the French Byzantinists PAUL LEMERLE and his successors in Paris. In one important respect, however, H-J reaffirms OSTROGORSKY's original position, in that he sees the Byzantine village as a community of free peasant landowning taxpayers, which the state worked hard to maintain as such out of enlightened self-interest. This concern, he argues, is reflected in the *Farmer's Law*, the set of regulations for the orderly settlement of disputes in an agricultural community, which a growing consensus regards as part of the legislative reform issued by the Isaurian emperors Leo III and Constantine. He takes the *Farmer's Law* to be evidence that the social status of the Byzantine peasantry had been improved by the military emergency of the Arab invasions, even though their tax burden – now calculated by a new system of assessment – and their liability for conscription had probably increased.

More controversially, H-J is inclined to think that the world of the *Farmer's Law*, the village communities of free peasant landowners, sustained by the enlightened self-interest of the state, lasted longer and more effectively than nearly all scholars, including OSTROGORSKY himself, have been ready to believe. The integrity of the village community, as consolidated in the crisis of the seventh and eighth centuries, was undermined by a series of changes in the ninth and tenth centuries which encouraged outsiders of superior income and status to buy into the village territory and bring its cultivators into dependence on them. A diminishing invasion threat from across the frontier, which began to recede eastwards after 900, and a growing demand for food from a growing urban population, made agricultural real estate an increasingly attractive investment for salaried government personnel as well as endowed religious institutions that wanted to maximize their profits and their holdings. The threat to the established distribution of landed wealth led all but two of the six emperors who ruled between 921 and 1025 to issue legislation restricting the ability of the *powerful* to buy up the properties of the peasant smallholders, referred to as the *poor* (H-J's italics). The general consensus is that this legislation was doomed to failure, and finally became redundant, because it depended for its enforcement on the very social class against whom it was aimed; the class to which the

emperors and their dependents belonged, as did the fiscal officials who valued and taxed the properties in question.

H-J expresses his unease with this reasoning, and points to the lack of evidence for flouting of the laws along with clear instances from the casebook of the eleventh-century judge Eustathios Romaïos, which show that the legislation was enforced and the judiciary was demonstrably not predisposed in favour of their fellow-*powerful*. However, he misses some vital evidence which strengthens his case for scepticism: three twelfth-century texts which show that the legal distinction between *powerful* and *poor* landowners continued to operate to the latter's advantage well into the Komnenian period, although the terminology had changed to reflect the fact that they were now identified by the 'lowly entries' (*tapeinoi stichoi*) in which their properties were recorded in the tax register.³

This addition to H-J's dossier is important because it shows that even after the upper echelons of the state had been effectively privatized by the faction of elite families led by the Komnenoi and the Doukai, who violently seized power in 1081, the core of the fiscal and judicial bureaucracy remained committed to long-established constitutional norms, and refused to let the administration of finance and justice become confused and elided with the power structure of the court hierarchy. It was arguably the persistence – and resistance – of this administrative personnel that enabled the Komnenian emperors to lead a military comeback from the late eleventh-century crisis, and to cut a convincingly imperial profile on top and in control of their highly privileged and factious kin group. H-J's signal contribution has been to elucidate the strength and the genesis of the principles that motivated the operators of the Byzantine state system, which survived the nearly terminal crises of the seventh and eleventh centuries precisely because it was both functional and consensual, as close to a model of efficient and equitable government as could be found in the medieval world.

H-J's text has to be read in full to give full value. It is more readable than any summary can be, and it is important not to miss the qualifications with which he mitigates and the many asides with which he enriches his argument. His constant reminders of the inadequacy of the source material, to the analysis of which he has previously devoted much work, are integral

3. PAUL MAGDALINO, Deux précisions sur la terminologie juridique relative aux « pauvres » au X^e–XII^e siècle. *Travaux et mémoires* 21/1 (2016) pp. 343–348. H-J has an article in the same volume (pp. 285–309), which he used as the basis for Chapter 8 of this book.

to his thesis, as are the passages where he frames his narrative of social change with discussion of military and financial innovation (including the creation of the navy), 'national' ideology and the geography of Anatolia. Important too are the longer excursions on law and legislation and the status of the territories reconquered from the Arabs in the tenth century: H-J's argument that the productive land was not simply appropriated by the *powerful* military families who were involved in the conquest, but kept by the imperial government for direct exploitation and, eventually, for compensation of the Armenian royalty whose lands were annexed for purposes of frontier defence, is entirely persuasive and contributes significantly to his thesis of an unwavering state system. Another excursus, which forms the whole of Chapter 5, on the role of trade in Byzantine thought and practice, is an excellent introduction to this subject, both in general terms and in its analysis of the main written source, the *Book of the Eparch*.

H-J is worth reading not only for what he says but also for what he does not say and for the intellectual challenge of second-guessing his omissions, apart from his stated avoidance of political narrative. The great gap is the city of Constantinople. It was the key to the centralization, the survival and the very identity of the state, yet it is constantly off-stage throughout this book, except in one section of the chapter on trade and, by implication, in the passages discussing financial, legal and cultural innovation. The empire's Balkan provinces and the Aegean islands are also largely conspicuous by their very shadowy presence. These absences are surely deliberate, and possibly explicable by the author's intention to deal with the subjects elsewhere. It is less easy to see a pattern in his lack of reference to many issues and arguments that have been raised by other scholars over the past thirty-five years. Oversight, disagreement, the wish to avoid tedious controversy and inconclusive speculation are all no doubt at play, but what is clear is that there is no concern to be comprehensive.

In the final analysis, the book deserves to be read as one historian's partial take among many in a well-tilled field of history, and to get the most out of it one has to treat it as such: as a work of authorship and not just of scholarship. Our discipline has never made up its mind whether it is science or literature; if the scientific mode prevails in history departments, research institutes and academic publications, the literary mode always breaks out in the teaching, writing and reading of history. The benefit of reading history books lies in their documentation and analysis of the true facts of the past; the fun, however, lies in engaging with the skill, the imagination and the evocative clarity with which the facts and the evidence are presented,

and the value of the presentation is enhanced by appreciation of how the presenter got to it. We examine the historians of the ancient and medieval pasts as authors whose writings are functions of their biographies, so why should we not do the same for the historians who are our contemporaries and peers? This might be thought inappropriate for young scholars who are just starting out, but the same cannot be said for a mature and experienced history writer like H-J who is in the final decades and arguably at the peak of his scholarly career.

The problem with studying historians as authors is that they are not supposed to give themselves away; to carry professional credibility, they have to adopt a colourless, self-effacing reporting style and behave as impartial reviewers of evidence. H-J is certainly a master of this style, and he does not let his personal judgements or experiences glaringly obtrude. Nor does he betray the influence of a particular master or school of thought. However, he does, remarkably, start off by recording his debt to a particular academic environment, and specifically the Oxford tutorial system. 'Most of the pieces gathered together in this book have developed out of ideas deployed in tutorial discussion' (p. 1). One should note, additionally, that the university courses within which the undergraduates read out and discussed their weekly essays in college tutorials did not change from year to year, that tutors like H-J also lectured in those courses, and that the pattern of teaching by tutorial discussion might well continue effectively at postgraduate level, if the teacher was so motivated. One eminent Byzantinist once told me how much she appreciated the one-to-one advising she got from H-J.

The way that the ideas presented here were matured by long reflection and exposure to debate can be illustrated by the case of one particularly bold hypothesis. In the early 1970s, just after H-J had been appointed to his lectureship in Byzantine history, he came up with the idea that the technical term *thema*, designating an army unit and, by extension, the administrative circumscription where it was deployed, derived from the Turkic word for a military division of ten-thousand men, *tümän*. The idea was not an immediate hit, and did not, as far as I know, make it into print at the time. Yet it resurfaces in this book, in the context of describing the mobilization of national defence in the face of the Arab threat. Rebranding the imperial armies as *themata*, according to H-J, boosted their morale by encouraging them to emulate the fighting spirit of the steppe warriors whose terminology and technology (in the form of the stirrup) they were adopting.

Oxford alumni who were actually taught or supervised by H-J will surely be able to identify other ideas in this book that he tried out on them or to which they contributed. The present reviewer can only note certain distinctive elements that seem to bear traces of the Oxford academic nursery. One is the author's readiness to cite the work, even unpublished, of young Oxford graduates. Another is his basic positivism and faith in the ultimate transparency of his sources: the assumption that if read critically, they can be made to yield the facts, because their authors were writing to inform, not to divert or distort. Not for him the rhetorical constructs, the hidden agendas, the smokescreens and the illusionist *imaginaires* that other Byzantinists love to discover in their texts and which draw them to the history of culture and mentalities, as being more retrievable than the material causes of historical change. In this, H-J shows a certain unacknowledged affinity with his prolific, slightly younger contemporary WARREN TREADGOLD, the scourge of post-modernism in anglophone Byzantine studies. But whereas TREADGOLD's intellectual roots lay in the American Cold War, those of H-J lay in the genteel, open-minded academia of the waning British Empire. One might be inclined to place him in the tradition of J. B. BURY and Sir STEVEN RUNCIMAN if he himself recognised the influence of these Cambridge historians. It is striking that the only Byzantinists with whom he explicitly, and warmly, claims association are the French successors of PAUL LEMERLE, the scholars to whom he dedicates his book and who did him the singular honour of publishing his *Festschrift* in a volume of *Travaux et mémoires*.

But H-J in this book is, as we have already seen more than once, quite sparing in his acknowledgements and citations. In any case, authors cannot inevitably be taken as infallible or comprehensive guides to their sources of inspiration, especially in the latest of their publications. H-J's intellectual debt to a very different kind of Oxford historian must be inferred from the fact that he co-edited a *Festschrift* for PETER BROWN. One has to turn to another of his publications that is not even listed in this book's bibliography⁴ to appreciate that his sure sense of the geographical dimension of Byzantine military organisation on the eastern front has a lot to do with his travels in Asia Minor, which place him in a long line of distinguished travelling scholars: W. G. RAMSAY, GERTRUDE BELL, LOUIS ROBERT, ANTHONY BRYER, STEPHEN MITCHELL. But it is a remark that he

4. JOHN HOWARD-JOHNSTON – NIGEL RYAN, *The Scholar and the Gypsy*. London 1992.

made to me in conversation some 52 years ago that perhaps provides the best clue as to where he is coming from in this book. He attributed his interest in military history to the fact that his maternal grandfather had been Field Marshal Earl Haig of World War I fame. When we note that his father was an admiral and his stepfather, HUGH TREVOR-ROPER, rose to the rank of major in British military intelligence, we can see that the ideal of duty to king and country must have been axiomatic to the conception of history that he brought to his tutorials and to his research. His family's experience of serving the British Empire cannot but have coloured his perception of the Anatolian officers and gentlemen who mobilised, from their country houses, to enable the diminished Roman Empire to keep going as a land of hope and glory. It may also have fuelled his interest in the workings of the other great Middle Eastern power in Late Antiquity, Sasanian Iran, which he often brings in for comparison.

Thus, if the author's elitist and colonialist background has coloured his view of Byzantium, it has not induced him to regard it as the alien, anachronistic, inferior Other. If anything, it inclines him to take Byzantium on trust, like (though he does not say so) the wartime Britain into which he was born and the post-war – and post-imperial – Britain in which he grew up. The people who run it mean well, the people who write about it mean what they say, and what they do not say can reasonably be inferred from what they do.

There is one recurrent expression which to me most clearly reveals the author's mental location. H-J frequently refers to the Byzantine state 'hoovering up' the resources of rural Asia Minor. The image, which evokes the removal and disposal of domestic dirt, is not especially apt for describing a government's extraction of precious manpower and money for a war effort. But the language speaks volumes about the social milieu in which the image makes most sense. It is not the language of high table, the senior common room or the playing fields of Eton. Still less is it the language of the North American teachers and students who will probably be the majority of this book's readers – for them, a Hoover is a vacuum cleaner and its operation is known as 'vacuuming'. 'Hoovering' evokes the world of household chores in twentieth-century Britain, that other traditional society that successfully fought for survival and came to terms with the loss of empire. It adds a touch of local and period colour to an otherwise remarkably un-tinted lens.

Keywords

historical methodology; didactics of history; Middle-Byzantine Empire