
MARK ROOSIEN, *Ritual and Earthquakes in Constantinople: Liturgy, Ecology, and Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2024. 204 pp. – ISBN 978-1-009-42728-9

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An exploration of earthquakes, liturgy, and ecology in Constantinople across seven centuries, which bridges the disciplinary divide between traditional historical or liturgical approaches to Byzantine studies and emerging ecological methods in the humanities, may seem ambitious. However, MARK ROOSIEN’s study of how the Byzantines viewed the natural world and how they responded to cataclysmic events that threatened the very harmony of their cosmology and theology, deftly navigates this multifaceted theme, offering new insights into the notion of Constantinople as an image of creation and nexus of divine activity. Indeed, the ways in which the religious and liturgical imagination of Byzantium rendered local earthquakes as cosmic events that intimated an inversion of the laws of nature and the supremacy of chaos – which had to be counteracted – show that the intersections between theology, empire, and spirituality are replete with meaning. To shed light on this intriguing complexity, ROOSIEN engages closely with a range of sources, especially those that enable him to reconstruct the sacred rituals and hymnody of earthquake commemorations in Constantinople. This liturgiological focus, which is absent from past studies of Byzantine Christianity and the environment, proves to be pivotal, allowing ROOSIEN to present a more comprehensive study and investigate how ordinary Christians encountered the multivalence of nature.

Chapter One traces the symbolic significance of seismicity in Late Antiquity and how the earthquake commemoration rite, as a liturgical prism, ‘transformed events into universalized moments that transcended their temporal limitations’ (p. 21). While earthquakes could be portents of war or the *eschaton*, or signs of God’s wrath against sinfulness, holy rituals could sanctify the temporal world and natural disasters, transposing them into the sacred time of salvation history. ROOSIEN shows how the liturgical commemoration of earthquakes in Constantinople, which began in the fifth century, interpreted their symbolic meaning and grafted it into the collective memory of the faithful. Through careful examination of ninth-century and

tenth-century manuscripts, the author excavates the earliest layers of the rite and reimagines its performative context. Indeed, the notion of performativity and how one might theologise performance is increasingly a topic of exploration for Byzantinists and liturgical scholars. The performance of liturgy and hymnography had the potential to dissolve the limits of history, break the bounds of Scripture, and suspend the divide between the congregation and the poetic universe of the liturgical arts. As ROOSIEN discerns, ritual performance allowed worshippers to ‘become active role players within the drama of God’s action in history’ (p. 50).

The second chapter explores how patristic and historical notions of divine chastisement revealed ‘the multivocality of sin and repentance’ and ‘allowed emperors in Constantinople to acquire and maintain spiritual authority’ (p. 54). Through public responses of humility, piety, and repentance to earthquakes and the divine wrath they disclosed, emperors Arcadius and Theodosius II appropriated spiritual power and restored the harmony of the natural world. Moreover, this inaugurated a ‘new symbolic configuration of imperial rulership’ that cast Byzantine emperors as the typological fulfilment of King David and acclaimed them as ‘both emperor and ‘priest’ (ἱερεύς)’ (p. 71). However, as the author shows in Chapter Three, this theology of chastisement and performance of imperial compunction was not the only way of traversing the symbolic meaning of earthquakes. Political responses to the earthquakes of 438 and 557 reframed Constantinople – which liturgical commemorations had cast as a site of God’s judgment – as a ‘*topos* of theophanic, divine blessing’ (p. 79). Whereas hymnody could portray earthquakes as signs of chastisement and the *eschaton*, even casting the emperor as a kind of Antichrist, which is a nuance in Romanos the Melodist’s hymn *On the Second Coming*, the legend of the Trisagion hymn at the earthquake of 438 and the rededication ceremonies of Hagia Sophia, performed during the Christmas–Theophany period of 562–563, propounded a new vision of symbolic meaning. According to the miraculous origins of the Trisagion hymn, which was revealed to the people of Constantinople during the earthquake of 438, collective prayer could tame the fury of nature and unveil divine blessing hidden in the wrath of God. And in the ekphrastic poetry of Paul the Silentiary, as well as a new *kontakion* composed by an unknown hymnographer for the rededication of Hagia Sophia, emperor Justinian became an imitator of divine Wisdom who triumphed over nature.

Chapter Four brings the symbolic import of earthquakes into dialogue with hagiography and the rising significance of saints as earthly ambassadors

in the court of heaven during the seventh and eighth centuries. Examining the intercessory strength of St Symeon Stylites the Younger and the role of the Theotokos as the guardian of Constantinople, this chapter shows how the apotropaic and defensive power of saints in the face of earthquakes and enemy invasions became a source of solace and a catalyst for shared penitence. Christians welcomed the saints as new protagonists into the ‘human-environment-divine’ drama of salvation and became agents of intercession themselves by calming earthquakes through ‘collective repentance’ (p. 118). Moreover, commemorations of enemy invasions averted by the Mother of God influenced the liturgical remembrance of the earthquakes of 740 and 780–797, highlighting the ‘power of the Theotokos’ (p. 134).

The fifth chapter moves to the ninth and tenth centuries to explore how new responses to seismicity followed the final earthquake to be commemorated in Constantinople (the seism that began on 9 January 869 and lasted for forty days and nights). The composition of innovative hymns and the emergence of an occasional prayer in Byzantine *euchologia*, provided new opportunities for theological reflection that moved beyond the sacralization of earthly history. The formalism of the Macedonian Renaissance infiltrated the liturgical imagination of the Byzantines and engendered a multivalent fusion of history, politics, spirituality, and theology. Of particular interest is the complex portrayal of earthquakes in Joseph the Hymnographer’s *kanon* for 26 October (known as ‘Earthquake Day’), which ROOSIEN shows to be far more subtle than scholars have previously thought. Although the Byzantines continued to use liturgy as an occasion to contemplate the symbolic significance of earthquakes, a new vision of natural disasters emerged. However, as ROOSIEN demonstrates, this vision was ‘not coherent but rather eclectic, drawing from various theologies at play in the history of the city’s liturgical response to quakes’ (p. 137).

The Conclusion recapitulates the main findings of the book, providing a good synthesis of this excellent monograph. It also looks beyond Constantinople, juxtaposing the earthquake commemorations of the imperial capital with Sinai’s earthquake rites, thus ‘highlighting the unique elements of Constantinople’s practice’ (p. 166). As ROOSIEN remarks in his concluding thoughts on the complexity of the Byzantine encounter with seismicity, the ‘three vertices in the triangle that was the human-environment-divine relationship were constantly shifting’ over the course of seven centuries, ‘even in attempts to understand the meaning of a single earthquake’ (p. 168). The monograph also contains two helpful appendices on the texts

and rituals for earthquakes, and on the authenticity of homily ascribed to John Chrysostom (*De Terrae Motu*). This groundbreaking study into how emperors, the church and the laity in Constantinople navigated the beauty and hostility of nature yields fresh insights into liturgy, ecology, and empire. It is an indispensable resource for Byzantinists, liturgists, and theologians, but also scholars who are interested in the environmental humanities, the history of emotions, and ritual performativity.

Keywords

Byzantine ritual; earthquake