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JAMES HOWARD-JOHNSTON, *Byzantium in a Changing World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2025. 280 pp. – ISBN 978-0-19-889789-7

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*Byzantium in a Changing World* surveys the history of the Byzantine Empire, focusing in particular on how it adapted and transformed in response to major political, cultural, and environmental shifts. The book covers a broad timeline, from the empire’s early days to its ultimate decline. It is a brief, yet complete analysis of the role of Byzantium within its geopolitical context since its ‘history was shaped by its geography’.

From the very beginning, HOWARD-JOHNSTON (henceforth H-J) uses the terms ‘Byzantium’ and ‘Byzantine Empire’, adding, when necessary, the terms ‘Roman’ or ‘Roman Empire’. This provides a chronological framework for distinguishing between the late antique and medieval periods. For instance, H-J refers to Justinian and Heraclius as the two dominant political personalities ‘of the final phase of Roman history’ (p. 30) and when introducing readers to the period after Heraclius’ death, describes Byzantium as the ‘rump of the Roman empire’ (p. 39). The book appears at a moment when many scholars are calling for the abolition of the terms ‘Byzantium’ and ‘Byzantine’.<sup>1</sup> Even so, by following the widely accepted conventional terminology, H-J streamlines his narrative of historical events, which is not always presented linearly.

The author develops his analysis of the history and role of the Byzantine state in six chapters. The first one, ‘Late Antiquity’ (pp. 12–38), is mainly focused on the last four centuries of classical history (AD 300–700). H-J discusses the creation of new capital, the shift of the empire’s focus to the east, and the momentous rise of the new adversaries, from the first Sasanians to the Goths. H-J’s work stresses how foreign threats caused internal challenges, which then impacted Byzantium’s foreign policy. Under these

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1. Here is not the place to engage in an argument for or against using the term ‘Byzantium’. See in the first place PANAGIOTIS THEODOROPOULOS’ review of ANTHONY KALDELLIS, *The Case for East Roman Studies*. *The Byzantine Review* 6 (2024) pp. 513–525.

circumstances, the administrative apparatus could not survive, so significant developments had to occur in order to ensure stability. The administration increased, while the spread of Christianity helped the new system to cement its authority.

Throughout his book, H-J supports the historical narrative by mentioning and analysing primary sources contemporary to the events he discusses. This is more obvious in later chapters in which the author dedicates separate subsections to introduce the most significant source material, but it is also present in the earlier chapters. In his analysis of Late Antiquity, H-J presents Justinian, a ‘renowned lawmaker and builder, who strove to recover lost parts of the Western empire’ (p. 30). The emperor is acknowledged for the codification of Roman Law and praised for his innovative designs of the big Constantinopolitan churches and for his focus on the defence and security of the borders. Still, H-J does not hesitate to note that according to Procopius’ *Secret History*, Justinian was a demonic character (p. 33). The first chapter is concluded with the reign of Heraclius, the circumstances under which he became emperor and his successful defence policy at a time when a new power emerged, the Arabs.

Chapter two (pp. 39–73) analyses the events that took place during the first two centuries after Heraclius’ death, characterised by H-J as a Dark Age because ‘it was a grim time, and little light was thrown on it by historical sources’ (p. 39). While the empire did face multiple threats from outside powers and from internal conflicts, it is important to note that other scholars reject the ‘dark age’ theory. JOHN HALDON, for example, notes that we should consider this a period of political and economic transformation and that the limited number of historical sources, especially secular ones, reflects a change in cultural priorities, rather than a collapse: intellectual life continued vigorously in political-theological writings, hagiography and homilies, question-and-answer collections (*erotapokriseis*), and apocalyptic and eschatological texts.<sup>2</sup> It is of course up to the readers to decide which approach they prefer.

H-J discusses at length the establishment of the ‘Islamic Empire’. It is clear that for the first centuries of its existence, the Caliphate managed to succeed, despite its internal challenges. The civil wars (*fitna*) did not prevent its expansion, making it at the same time the most significant rival of Byzantium. In addition, the Avars, Khazars, and Bulgars turned into ma-

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2. JOHN F. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture*. Cambridge – New York 1997, pp. 1–3.

major Byzantine enemies. Under the leadership of Leo III and Constantine V, Byzantium transitioned from a defensive position to an offensive one. This period is also marked by the state-led campaign of Iconoclasm, triggered by a belief that natural disasters signalled divine wrath. Driven by the idea of 'New Israel', the emperors removed recalcitrant clergymen and methodically purged religious images, moving from public spaces to private homes. H-J notes that the conflict was less a social schism and more a psychological struggle which ended in 843 with the definitive restoration of icons.

The following two chapters, 'Age of Revival' (pp. 74–118) and 'Byzantium at its Apogee' (pp. 119–147), focus on developments that, along with some geopolitical coincidences such as the slow dissolution of the Caliphate, allowed the Byzantines to survive. H-J notes that hostile pressures eased and the Byzantine emperors could focus on improving their foreign relations and policies. He views these two centuries as a Byzantine heyday: a series of military successes, territorial expansion which almost doubled the size of the empire, renewed confidence. With a stable state, new reforms were introduced aiming at a more centralised administrative apparatus and economic growth, which despite internal challenges and external threats ensured the longevity of the Macedonian dynasty.

The period is well documented by various sources. Once again, H-J provides an analysis which connects them to a broader historical and geopolitical context. For example, *De Administrando Imperio* and *De Ceremoniis Aulae Byzantinae* offer insights into the way a Byzantine emperor, Constantine VII, viewed the significance of ceremonial and diplomatic protocols and the place of his empire on the international stage. Over the following centuries, more handbooks concerning legal, military, and practical details were produced. H-J also presents for the first time the use of lead seals as sources of great historical and prosopographical value which have transformed our knowledge of Byzantine administrative history. This period also saw the composition of a series of historical works by Theophanes, Symeon, Michael Psellos, Michael Attaleiates, John Skylitzes, and Nikephoros Bryennios. H-J notes, moreover, that gaps in these historians' accounts can be filled by biographies of saints, Arab and Armenian sources, and collections of letters. He also stresses the role of material evidence, encouraging in this way an interdisciplinary approach in our field.

The middle-Byzantine period also saw developments in the evolution of the governing class. H-J refers to the increasing use of surnames and the value

and legitimacy they had for members of the elite. He makes a very interesting observation on the concept of *genos* and the nature of the Byzantine elite system. A plethora of sources, mainly sigillographic ones, support his position. The surnames of members of the elite did play a crucial role in its constantly changing nature and became even more significant in the following centuries, as JEAN-CLAUDE CHEYNET has pointed out.<sup>3</sup> One may add that from the tenth through the twelfth centuries, family names were hereditary, which meant that the achievements, reputation, and wealth of one person could be transferred to the next generation.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike other chapters in the book, this one also emphasises intellectual and art history: Byzantium's apogee is reflected on literary and visual arts, with the classical past influencing both written and artistic developments. Scholars and writers producing texts following the grammar, vocabulary, and rhetorical devices of Attic Greek, while artefacts carried classical artistic motifs.

The next chapter introduces readers to the Komnenian Age (pp. 148–196), a period which is characterised by the drastic changes. This gives H-J an occasion to discuss Byzantine identity. This is not the first time that he does that in the book: in the introduction, we read that 'Byzantium was, in the first instance, a thoroughly Hellenic society' (p. 5). In the Komnenian chapter, H-J writes (p. 128):

The Byzantines were Greek through and through, although it was only from the twelfth century that they began to advertise their descent from the Greeks of classical antiquity and to call themselves Hellenes. The Greek they spoke and wrote, in both its clear, mandarin and ornate, rhetorical forms, was a lineal descendant of the Greek of Homer, Aeschylus, Herodotus, Plato, and the fathers of the church. As in their political heyday in the tenth and early eleventh centuries, they immersed themselves in texts transmitted from classical Greece and the long silver age which extended through the Hellenistic and Roman periods to late antiquity. Their faith derived from the final phase of that silver age, in terms of both doctrine and practice, and was deeply embedded in society, vivified by the regular performance

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3. JEAN-CLAUDE CHEYNET, *Official Power and Non-Official Power*. In: AVERIL CAMERON (ed.), *Fifty Years of Prosopography: The Later Roman Empire, Byzantium and Beyond*. London 2003, pp. 138–140.

4. NATHAN LEIDHOLM, *Elite Byzantine Kinship, ca. 950–1204: Blood, Reputation, and the Genos*. Leeds 2019, pp. 111–112.

of the liturgy and the re-enactment of the Gospel story through the annual cycle of church feasts.

H-J is surely right to emphasise the centrality of the Greek language and the classical tradition in Byzantine education and intellectual life, for which he provides rich evidence in the introduction and previous chapters. However, I believe that a claim that Byzantines were ‘Greek through and through’ and that from the twelfth century they began to advertise themselves as Hellenes, may benefit from further analysis.

JOSEPH SKINNER’s work on Greek Ethnography has emphasised that collective identities are not fixed inheritances but relational and discursive constructs, articulated in specific contexts through processes of differentiation and self-representation rather than a commonly embraced self-definition. Similarly, JOHN HALDON and YANNIS STOURAITIS both argue that identities are invoked instrumentally or situationally depending on audiences or circumstances. They also add that individuals may simultaneously belong to different ‘identity sets’ based on religion, language, region, status, etc.<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, the idea of the Byzantines being ‘Greek through and through’ contradicts several examples of differentiation based in specific contexts.

Take, for instance, Gregory Pakourianos, who as a Roman held the office of *mezas domestikos* of all the west and the honorific title of *sebastos*, fought and defended the Roman territories, risking his own life. However, in the *typicon* (rule) of a monastery he founded, he proudly stated that he was ἐκ τῆς τῶν Ἰβήρων παμφανεστάτης φυλῆς, that he built the convent specially for his Iberian brothers, and that no Roman should be allowed there unless they were *notarioi*.<sup>6</sup> Pakourianos’ case demonstrates

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5. For a theoretical discussion on identities, cf. JOSEPH SKINNER, *The Invention of Greek Ethnography: From Homer to Herodotus*. Oxford 2012, pp. 3–18. Also, for a complete overview of the study of identity, see JOSEPH SKINNER – VICKY MANOLOPOULOU – CHRISTINA TSOUVAROPOULOU (eds.), *Identities in Antiquity*. London 2025, pp. 1–9. For a discussion on Byzantine identities see JOHN HALDON – YANNIS STOURAITIS, Introduction: The Ideology of Identities and the Identity of Ideologies: In: Y. STOURAITIS (ed.), *Identities and Ideologies in the Medieval East Roman World*. Edinburgh 2022, pp. 1–13.

6. PAUL GAUTIER, *Le typikon du sébaste Grégoire Pakourianos*. *Revue des études byzantines* 42 (1984) pp. 5–145, at 21–33 and 105. Pakourianos has been claimed as a co-national by both Armenians and Georgians. Interestingly, Anna Komnene refers to him as an Armenian: DIETER R. REINSCH – ATHANASIOS KAMBYLIS (eds.), *Annae Comnenae Alexias (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 40)*. Berlin – New York 2001, p. 63. See also JOHN THOMAS – ANGELA CONSTANTINIDES HERO (eds.), *Byzantine*

how self-identification in late eleventh-century Byzantine society was layered, situational, and context-dependent. Therefore, the notion of a uniform Byzantine self-identification as Greek is problematic. In fact, the available evidence points to a layered configuration of belonging, in which Roman, Orthodox, and Hellenic elements were variously used according to context. Even so, H-J's decision to include the subject of identities in his newly-published book is a sign that there is still a long way ahead until we reach a commonly accepted approach. Hopefully, H-J's readers, whether they agree with the author or not, will become interested in the topic.

In any case, it was not Byzantine identity but government and administration that formed the main priority for the Komnenean emperors. The administrative system in the late eleventh century remained a continuation of the late Roman one, characterised by strong centralisation under the monarch. Unlike Western Europe's feudal structures, power in Byzantium remained under imperial control and oversight extending deep into local communities.

H-J presents the reign of Alexios I Komnenos and explains how he was viewed by Byzantine scholars and historians, providing at the same time a critical analysis of the available historiographical sources. Constantine Manasses and Anna Komnene wrote in a classicising style that treated history as literature, utilising narratives and speeches, classical references and dramatic scenes. These works drew on personal recollection, official documents and contemporary materials but were shaped by authority bias and self-insertion, requiring corroboration from non-Byzantine accounts. H-J's source analysis is not presented in a separate subsection but embedded in the book's narrative. This makes his work, I think, very suitable for students.

By the 1180s, the Byzantine state had started to decline, due to the long term geopolitical and internal fragmentation. Turkish expansion, Norman aggression and Balkan revolts collectively eroded imperial authority. It was clear that Byzantium had lost control over key Balkan regions and much of its resource base, making its decline visible to the wider world. The chapter ends with five pages dedicated to the Fourth Crusade.

The final chapter, 'Last Centuries' (pp. 198–244), covers the two hundred years from the sack of Constantinople in 1204 and to its Fall in 1453. After the Fourth Crusade, Byzantine identity survived through three successor

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Monastic Foundation Documents: A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders' Typika and Testaments. Washington DC 2000, pp. 507–508, 510, 556–558.

states: Nikaia, Epiros and Trebizond. These struggled to reclaim their heritage on a 'medium-sized arena'. The chapter provides information about other external threats, such as the Mongols and Ottomans. It also mentions the Black Death, a plague epidemic which arrived in the region via trade routes (1346) and further drained the empire's limited sources. The book concludes by framing the fall of Byzantium as a catalyst for the rise of the Ottoman Empire as a new global superpower.

In sum, the book is a brief study of the Byzantine history in its geopolitical context. As the author himself admitted in the preface, this book is focused on 'the agitated surface on Byzantine history'. H-J has served Byzantine studies as a lecturer at the University of Oxford for almost forty years, having taught a great number of students. The book under review reflects some of his primary interests: military history, Byzantine historiography, international relations in Late Antiquity and Middle Ages. H-J's writing is clear and accessible to both scholarly and general readers. His book is rich in visual aids, such as maps and photographs of artefacts and archaeological sites. In most cases, Greek or Arab terms are well explained, while some administrative titles are given only in English (i.e. provincial judge instead of *krites*, p. 121). *Byzantium in a Changing World* certainly makes worthwhile reading, especially for young students.

**Keywords**

surveys of Byzantine history; geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean; East Roman identity