CHAPTER ONE

Byzantium: a Very, Very Short Introduction

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“The history of the empire is a monotonous story of the intrigues of priests, eunuchs and women.” (Lecky 1869: 13–14). Of course, this is untrue. For a start, the intrigues of women, eunuchs, and priests are perpetually interesting, as any reader of historical fiction will agree; for another thing, there is a great deal more to Byzantium than political history. But Lecky’s comment tells us a great deal about what happened when Victorian morality and love of the Greek and Roman worlds came up against the “otherness” of post-Classical, Christian Byzantium, a world empire lasting over a thousand years and covering more than 1,000,000 square kilometers at its greatest extent, from Italy and North Africa to the Black Sea and the Levant (ODB vol. 1: 345). Byzantium has struggled in Western Europe beneath the burden of Edward Gibbon and the Enlightenment, condemning it for superstition and rampant (Orthodox) Christianity, and the nineteenth-century, pruriently appalled by what it liked to see as Byzantium’s oriental corruption and luxury (Mango 1965). “Byzantine” in English immediately suggests the complicated, inflexible and underhand. The dubious, devious Byzantines themselves are condemned out of hand for their tedious history (all emperors with the same name), lack of literature (where is the Byzantine Iliad or Odyssey? Tragedy, comedy or poetry?), unrealistic art all looking the same (seen one icon, seen them all), overmastering clericalism (what chance does a theocracy have in any “Age of Reason?”), and general lack of fun. W. B. Yeats has a lot to answer for (Sailing to Byzantium 1927; Byzantium 1930). Byzantium is both too big and too complicated. Despite its Christian nature and its inheritance of the classical world, it seems too strange, bizarre, and alien in its use of both.

One of the problems for Western Europeans, educated to believe that the Classics and the Renaissance are the two high points of civilization, is that Byzantium is neither. There has been an eagerness to judge in our terms, measuring Byzantium against what “we” believe to have quality, and an unwillingness to understand Byzantium in its own terms, to consider how it used and developed its Greco-Roman heritage into something different but nevertheless worth our attention. This volume is
pro-Byzantium; implicitly and explicitly, contributors engage with the myths and distortions surrounding the study of the empire, arguing for historical diversity, for literature, for art, for God, even for fun. We have sought to engage with Byzantium on its terms; another theme running through the book is that of the culturally determined nature of the evidence we have left to us and how we can try to interpret that in Byzantine terms, considering their definitions and attempting to see what mattered to them (while accepting that this will also form a commentary on our own twenty-first century preconceptions and concerns).

In a bid to manage the complexities of “Byzantium,” the time frame employed by this book is the conventional one of 330 to 1453. 330 was the year in which the Roman emperor Constantine I, Constantine the Great, inaugurated the city of Byzantium, which he had previously renamed after himself the “city of Constantine,” Constantinople, as the New Rome, the new capital of the Roman Empire. Constantinople remained as capital of the empire until May 29, 1453, when the city fell to the Ottoman Turks and the Byzantine Empire, as a political entity, ceased to exist.

“Byzantine” is the term that we have given to this empire, from the original city, Byzantium. Its inhabitants called themselves “Romans,” “Romaioi” in Greek, throughout their history, and they regarded their empire as the seamless continuation of the Roman Empire (Kaldellis 2007). Certainly the structures of administration and government of the Byzantine Empire came from those of the Roman, from the emperor at the top of the bureaucracy, through the different levels of military, judicial, fiscal and ecclesiastical administration (Kaegi 1987). Latin was the original language of the administration, but Constantinople was a Greek city and Greek was the literary language of the empire. Over time, it became the language of government. Further, from the start, the Byzantine Empire was a Christian empire. Constantine had converted to Christianity, perhaps in 312, and he founded his new city with a mixture of Christian and pagan rites (Pohlsander 1996). So, right from its inception, Byzantium was a state that perceived itself as Roman, while being Christian and increasingly employing Greek as its lingua franca. These three elements almost encapsulate the empire.

To make the history of Byzantium more manageable, Byzantinists tend to break it down into three stages. The time from the third century down to the sixth or seventh or even eighth centuries is known variously, depending on the perspective of the particular scholar, as the Late Antique or Late Roman (these terms suggest continuity from the Roman period), or Early Christian or Early Byzantine (implying something different from the Roman period). The Middle Byzantine period begins wherever one believes the Early one ends: variously, therefore, from 565 (the death of the emperor Justinian); 610 (the accession of the emperor Heraklios); 717 (the start of the Isaurian dynasty); or 848 (the end of Iconoclasm). It ends in either 1071 (the Battle of Mantzikert, when the Byzantine army was defeated by the Seljuqs and the emperor captured. Ostrogorsky 1968: 344–6) or 1204 (the Sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade). Late Byzantium covers 1204 (or 1261: the recovery of Constantinople from the Latins) to the end of the empire in 1453. After this, one is drawn into the post-Byzantine world and the survival of Byzantine beliefs and culture, particularly visible in the survival and spread of Orthodox Christianity.
Within these very broad partitions, smaller divisions are made, generally based on
the ruling imperial dynasty. Hence the early period moves from the family of Con-
stantine to the Theodosian emperors, through the house of Leo I, concluding with
the reign of the sixth-century emperor Justinian (A. M. Cameron 1993; Treadgold
1997; Mitchell 2006). This last has often been seen as a “Golden Age,” a high point
both of imperial political expansion and of culture and civilization (Maas 2005). In
contrast, the seventh century has been seen as a “Dark Age,” in which the empire
was militarily and financially exhausted, ecclesiastical affairs created disaffection,
Roman civic life came to an end, art and literature were in abeyance, and the rise of
Islam changed the world. The picture is more nuanced than this would suggest, but
certainly the seventh century seems to have been a period of conflict and change
(Haldon 1997; Whitby 2000). The eighth century is regarded as the period of Icono-
clasm (“image-breaking”), in which the debate over the role of religious images in
church worship, led by the Isaurian emperors, dictated life in the empire (Bryer and
Herrin 1977; for an alternative view, Haldon 2008 in Jeffreys, Haldon, Cormack
(eds) 2008: 258–61; Brubaker in this volume). The Middle Byzantine period is
dominated by the dynasties of the Amorians (820–67), the Macedonians (867–1056),
the Komnenians (1057–1185, though a break in the early eleventh century) and the
Angeloi (1185–1204). Byzantium shared with Rome a less-than-stable strategy of
succession. Though sons and daughters often did inherit, usurpation, murder, and
intrigue played a major part, especially in the change from one dynasty to another
(neatly summarized by Holmes in Jeffreys, Haldon, Cormack (eds) 2008: 264–790;
also Angold 1997; Magdalino 1993b; Treadgold 1997). This middle period often
appears as “high” Byzantium, that part of the empire most typically “Byzantine,”
especially in cultural terms, and with the most influence on Western Europe. The
Sack of Constantinople in 1204 changed the shape of the Western medieval world
as the Christian forces of the Fourth Crusade effectively destroyed the Christian
empire of Byzantium as a major power (Angold 2003). The Latin Empire of Con-
stantinople lasted until 1261. Three “empires in exile,” in Epiros, Trebizond and
Nicaea, were established by the Byzantines in opposition to the Latins; it was the
emperor in Nicaea who regained Constantinople and re-established a much shrunken
and relatively ineffectual Byzantine empire, ruled for much of the period by the Pal-
eaologan family until 1453 (Laiou in Jeffreys, Haldon, Cormack (eds) 2008: 280–94;
Angold 1975; Barker 1969).

That then is the “monotonous story,” neatly packaged by convenient dates in
order to be manageable. The drawback of this “periodization” is the artificial markers
it establishes, implying that things change with a bang—that Middle Byzantium in
848 was significantly different from Early Byzantium in 847. In any case, the Byz-
antines themselves calculated all dates from the Creation of the world, not from
Christ’s birth, and chroniclers such as Theophanes tended to date their works by
“world years,” Anno Mundi (AM) from the Creation. The Creation was generally
reckoned to have taken place 5,508 years before the Incarnation; and the Second
Coming of Christ, signifying the end of time, was known to be inevitable, and some-
times dated to 7,000 or 8,000 years from Creation. History therefore had its limits
(Grumel 1958).
Map 1.1. Map of the Byzantine Empire, c.AD 400.
Although defining a time frame for the empire is a challenge, mapping Byzantium is even more problematic. The definition of boundaries is tricky to begin with: how and when was an area part, or not, of the empire? Was it “Byzantine” if it paid taxes to the emperor? If it had a Byzantine administration (however that might be defined)? If it was occupied by a Byzantine army? If it employed Byzantine art, culture, and customs? How did the Byzantines themselves define the extent of their empire? Maps depicting the area of the Byzantine empire are almost as varied as the books of Byzantine history that contain them. In this volume, two maps are included (Maps 1.1 and 1.2). The first shows the Roman empire in the fourth century. A line almost down the center marks the division between Western and Eastern empires on the death of Theodosios I in 395. After this, West and East went different ways: the East continued Roman until the fifteenth century; the West gradually crumbled and fragmented into separate realms under the pressure of a series of incursions from “barbarian” tribes to the north and south. The map also marks the major provinces (or dioceses) of the Roman empire at this point and major cities. Map 1.2 shows the empire in 1050 with the provinces (themes, as they were called by this time) marked, as well as areas under nominal Byzantine control. It gives a very clear idea of the porosity of boundaries and a sense of the issues inherent when we try to impose limits on states clearly fluid at their outer edges; the idea of nation-states was not one in common use in the medieval world (Anderson 1983. For issues with maps and the illusions they create, see Eastmond in this volume). Key cities and towns are again marked, and offer an interesting contrast with the important settlements of the earlier period.

One thing that the maps suggest is change both within and outside the empire, in terms of its geography and in terms of the other peoples pushing up against it. In the early period, it was Persians in the east, nomadic tribes from Asia in the north and from Africa to the south who offered the most threat to the empire; in later periods, it was the rise of Islam to the south and the Western European Crusaders who pressed on Byzantium. Byzantium’s interaction with its neighbours was constantly fluid, one of influence, integration and conflict in both directions (Howard-Johnston, Mango in Jeffeys, Haldon and Cormack (eds) 2008: 939–56, 957–61).

The question of continuity and change, continuity versus change, is one that occupied the Byzantines and has long concerned scholars (Kazhdan and Wharton 1985). How much did the empire change and how much did the Byzantines recognize change? To Romans living in the Roman empire, that empire was unchanging, or so they claimed. New Rome was Old Rome reborn; the Roman empire held perpetual primacy among the nations. One of the implicit themes within this volume is of changing yet continuous institutions, beliefs, value-systems, culture. But from the start, there were two major differences between the Roman and Byzantine empires: Byzantium was, for much of its life, a Greek-speaking empire, orientated towards Greek, not Latin culture; and it was a Christian empire.

Greek within the empire was not one language, but one functioning at different levels of society. The version spoken by all classes in informal situations and by the uneducated at all times was one form, a *koinē*, or “common,” language, used for “subliterary” writings ranging from the New Testament to popular saints’ lives and
Map 1.2. Map of the Byzantine Empire, c.1050.
chronicles such as that of Theophanes. At the other end of the scale was a version of Attic Greek, archaic and imitative of Greek from the Classical world, or, rather, the Byzantines’ understanding of such Greek. This was the language of official, public and literary texts; mastery of it was a sign of intellectualism, education, and social standing (Browning 1983).

Christianity was the all-pervasive ideology of the Byzantine empire, its rituals, doctrines, and structures dominating every aspect of life. The empire itself was believed to be God’s chosen empire, ruled by God’s chosen emperor: one empire, one emperor under one God. This empire, in Byzantine belief, was the fourth, and last, of the four kingdoms revealed in the Book of Daniel, divinely preordained as the last empire; its fall would mean the end of the world. In being Byzantine, one was first and foremost Christian, though that Christianity might come in various forms and might lead to one’s exclusion from the Byzantine oikoumene. This important term, meaning the inhabited world, was one with various resonances in Byzantium: it could be used to designate the world as a whole; to describe the inhabited or civilized world; and increasingly it carried a Christian significance as the world as the scene of Christ’s activities and the correct celebration of the sacraments across the world.

This volume opens with a discussion of how Byzantine history has been seen and studied. It is then divided into four sections. Being Byzantine explores aspects of Byzantine life from economics to entertainment. Its unifying thread, though, is discussion around the topic of how we define “the Byzantines” and how they defined themselves: in relation to other people; in relation to different parts of the empire; in terms of age and appearance; emotionally; and in memory. The second section looks at God. As a Christian empire, self-defined as the chosen people of God, ruled by one emperor on the model of the heavenly hierarchy, the Byzantines saw God as permeating everything. This section explores something of the theology that underpinned Byzantine life and how that shaped people’s lives inside and on the edge of the empire, as Orthodox and heretical Christians. The final two sections discuss and problematize the two sources we have for information about the Byzantine world: written texts and material remains. In Reading Byzantine Texts, questions about Byzantine writing strategies are foregrounded: how do we understand Byzantine literature? What did the Byzantines mean when they wrote in particular ways? What is the difference between a Byzantine history and a piece of rhetoric, and how can we read and understand them? And what can books themselves tell us? Material Culture looks at issues concerning some of the ways in which objects from Byzantium have been used to construct particular histories of the Byzantine world, from Iconoclasm to the Macedonian Renaissance.

Within this structure, themes and ideas cross-refer: center and periphery matter for both political history and our interpretation of material culture; the idea of a “renaissance” was born from how we have constructed Byzantine history from Edward Gibbon onward. The same figures from the Byzantine world reappear in different chapters, not emperors and political figures, but writers, the source of so much surviving evidence, put to so many different uses. Among the most recurrent are four authors. Theophanes (c.760–817 or 818) was a monk who wrote a
Chronicle, a history organized by year, from 285 to 813, written in a form of koine. Michael Psellos (1018 to after 1081?), an intellectual, courtier, philosopher, once-time monk and author, produced a variety of works, ranging from the historical (his Chronographia, arranged as lives of emperors) and philosophical to the rhetorical, theological, and personal. Anna Komnene (1083–c.1153–4) was the daughter and eldest child of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos, who longed to become empress herself. Banished to a monastery after scheming to raise her husband to the throne, she wrote a history-panegyric, the Alexiad, in sophisticated Greek, celebrating the reign of her father. Niketas Choniates (1155–7–1217) was a government official, historian and theologian who lost his livelihood in the Sack of Constantinople in 1204. His History covers the period 1118–1206; he also wrote a theological treatise refuting heresy, and speeches of his also survive. Saints’ Lives (vitae) also recur regularly; what many of the papers in this book reveal is how the same evidence can be used in a variety of different ways, from discussing economics and the provinces to the emotions and literary theory.

This is not an “all you ever wanted to know about Byzantium but never dared ask” book. A companion is one who accompanies, and this volume was conceived in that light. Rather than a straightforward guide to Byzantium with a retelling of historical facts, and a detailed coverage of all aspects of life in Byzantium, this book offers the reader an introduction to some new approaches, new areas of research and new questions in Byzantine studies.

FURTHER READING

Byzantine Studies has been fortunate that within the past five years, several major books, all with detailed bibliographies, offering surveys of Byzantium, have been published. An aim of this book has been to try to avoid, as much as possible, duplication of much of this material. The Oxford History of Byzantium (Mango 2002) explores twelve major themes, including the rise of Islam, and Byzantine missionary activity. The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies (Jeffreys, Haldon, Cormack (eds) 2008) is a substantial collection investigating a very broad range of Byzantine topics, from political history through the physical world, the institutions of the Byzantine world, the world around Byzantium, and the discipline of Byzantine Studies itself. The Palgrave Advances in Byzantine History (Harris 2005) provides an introduction to the source material and covers a range of topics from political history to gender studies. The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire (Shepard (ed.) 2009b) is an excellent survey, arranged chronologically. Other volumes offering different takes on Byzantium include one looking specifically at social history (Haldon 2007) and a concise guide to Byzantine economics (Laiou and Morrison 2007). The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium (ODB, 3 vols) is a very useful mini-encyclopedia of short entries on almost every topic imaginable. Cameron 2006a offers a very readable introduction to the Byzantines; also Gregory 2005 and Herrin 2007. Cunningham 2002 explains the importance of Christianity in Byzantium.

For perceptions of Byzantium, Nelson 1996 and Cormack and Jeffreys (eds) 2000 are good places to start.