

**Judith Herrin, *Byzantium: The Surprising life of a Medieval Empire*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007**

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Judith Herrin's book *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire* offers a thought provoking look at the cultural, social, and political history of Byzantium. The monograph strives to make Byzantine history accessible to the non-specialist by calling into question the previous manner in which the history of Byzantium has been treated. As Herrin relates in the introduction, the work was conceived as the result of her attempts to define and explain the Byzantine Empire to two construction workers who had passed by her office at King's College London and asked, "What is Byzantium?"

In her explanation to the construction workers, Herrin remarks on the difficulties in concisely elucidating Byzantine history to someone who is completely unfamiliar with its intricacies. Byzantine history, in particular, presents difficulties because historians, such as Edward Gibbon, have cast the history of Byzantium in a negative light. Modern historians are not alone to blame for this bias; it is rooted in Byzantine historiography as far back as the crusaders' depictions of Byzantium in the thirteenth century. The work emphasizes the gravity of Byzantium in allowing for "a Europe" to exist; and the blend of Christianity, Greek education and the Roman legal and political institutions that created a unique Late Antique and Medieval empire that withstood numerous foreign invasion and wars.

Broadly speaking, the monograph establishes two major turning points in Byzantine History: the Arab conquests and the Fourth Crusade. Both turning points echo a major theme in Herrin's work, that of continuity and survivability of the Byzantine Empire. In her discussion of the sack of the city in 1204, she writes, "condemnation of its ancient political system went hand in with admiration of the its relics, gold and silver objects, icons, and silk, which deserved better homes than Byzantium" (268). The excessive looting and subsequent occupation does not spell the demise of the city. The cities survival following 1204, in fact, is one of the most surprising insights that she had while writing this book. Despite the extensive devastation to the city, Byzantium recovered where many states would have succumbed to such a fatal blow. Byzantium, despite being occupied for fully a half century, reemerged in a plurality of new forms and different centers (268). Byzantium in effect exemplifies a cultural and political variant of Fernand Braudel's notion of the *Long Durée* (xv).

Herrin is also acutely aware of the impact of the Ottomans on the closing centuries of Byzantine Empire. She notes the adoption of Bursa by

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Orhan as an Ottoman capital as well as the continued growth of the Ottomans throughout Asia Minor during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (282). She points to the use of Byzantine practices in the newly developing Ottoman administration, which incorporated many of the same church officials to record land ownership, property rights, and taxes.

The subject matter of the book is organized around four major headings: *The foundation of Byzantium*, *The Translation from Ancient to Medieval*, *Byzantium becomes a Medieval State*, and *Varieties of Byzantium*. It is on this loose chronological framework that she hangs Byzantium's classical Roman origins as Rome's eastern capital, its survival despite the numerous invasions by Slavs, Bulgars, Persians and Arabs, its transition from the Ancient to the Medieval, and its reinvention in Trabzon and Nicaea following the sack of Constantinople in 1204.

The organizational format for the book is relatively simple. Each chapter focuses on a specific topic relevant to the broader thematic section. The topics that she addresses often cross reference historical events and do not hold to a strict chronological order as the reader progresses through the book. The chapters, in fact, provide different lenses through which the Byzantine history can be viewed. In the first thematic section, for example, she divides the theme of Byzantium's transition from the Eastern Roman Empire into the *City of Constantine*, *Constantinople, the Largest Site in Christendom*, *the East Roman Empire*, *Greek Orthodoxy*, *the Church of Hagia Sophia*, *The Ravenna Mosaics* and *Roman law*. All of the topics underscore Byzantium's strong classical origins in the fourth century that survive into the medieval period. For instance, in her second thematic topic, *Byzantine Becomes a Medieval State*, Herrin deals with the topic of Byzantine book culture and learning. She underscores the significance of the continuity of the Greek language and the school of Athens in Byzantine society.

The preference to open the book with two chapters in the first section on the city of Constantinople is a commendable one. She accurately relates the importance of the city to the survival of the Byzantine Empire despite several sieges by the Slavs, Moslems, and Goths. She draws attention in several places to the importance of the city's material culture to makes connections to the modern city of Istanbul. These connections strengthen the book as they highlight the relevance of Byzantium to the modern-day Republic of Turkey.

While the topical selections present a broad perspective of the one thousand plus years of Byzantine history, they may present difficulty for someone with absolutely no knowledge of Byzantium or the Eastern Roman Empire. For a reader with even some knowledge of the history of the Eastern Mediterranean however, the topical format of the book provides a fresh understanding of Byzantine History. The book familiarizes the reader with

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the essentials of Byzantine History: the establishment of the Eastern capital of Constantinople; the ecumenical councils, the iconoclasm controversy; the incorporation and development of Roman law; the wars with Persia, Bulgaria, and the Arabs; the crusades; and ultimately the fall of the city in 1453. Chapters on topics such as Eunuchs at the Imperial court and Greek fire stand out as issues that establish cultural aspects that clearly defined Byzantium but could be easily glossed over when defining Byzantium at an introductory level.

Herrin devotes a considerable amount of space to discussing Byzantine material culture, and she deals with this topic in a number of skillful ways. Early on in the book she discusses Ravenna, Italy as a key site for Byzantine material culture. The city of Ravenna served as the site for the Byzantine Exarch of Italy from the sixth to the eighth centuries. She focuses on the mosaics of St. Vitale. Herrin also highlights the relevance of Byzantine material culture in later periods. A prime example of this subsequent impact is the architectural impact of Byzantine structures such as the Hagia Sophia on Ottoman mosques. She emphasizes not only the connections between the Byzantine Roman and Persian past, but also the connections and relations between Byzantium, the Russian East, and the Arab empires.

Herrin's work incorporates a broad range of historical source material, and, as a result, provides one who is unfamiliar with Byzantine historiography with a sound knowledge base of key contemporary Byzantine historians and writers such as Eusebius, Procopius, Photios, and Anna Komnene.

The book contains 41 images of various specimens of material culture such as coinage, architecture, metalwork, and mosaics. The images span the geographic region of the empire from Thessaloniki to St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt to the images of Justinian and Theodora in Ravenna.

Appendices to the book include a "Further Reading" chapter, a list of emperors named in the text, a chronology beginning with Constantine's accession to emperor in 306 CE and ending with the capture of Trabzon in 1461. The book also contains a series of six maps, which depict the city of Constantinople; the Roman Empire; the Byzantine Empire around the years of 800, 1025, and in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; and the Byzantine division following 1204. The appended chapter reference materials are adequate for an introductory text and aid in contextualizing the historical material for the reader.

*Byzantium* is a well thought out and well written work that adeptly considers the scope of Byzantine social, cultural, political and military history and contextualizes its importance within the broader historical frameworks of Roman, Persian, Ottoman, European, and Arab history. The monograph approaches the material in a topical manner and attempts to

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demystify and convey the importance of Byzantium as an Eastern Mediterranean Empire. Herrin underscores themes of continuity and survivability, and concludes that Byzantium as a political and cultural entity is exemplary “*long durée*”. The combination of Christianity, Roman organization and administration, and Ancient Greek heritage and education are the factors that make the history of Byzantium so striking (321). Herrin’s choice of topics is useful for the non-specialist and provides a new lens through which Byzantium may be viewed. However, the topical format may present some difficulties for someone completely unfamiliar with the topic, as it does not treat the history of Byzantium in a strictly chronological fashion and often cross-references historical events. In the end, the work still begs the question of whether or not the construction workers who inspired its creation would have walked away with a solid understanding of “What is Byzantium?”

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