

## INTRODUCTION



THIS BOOK AND ITS COMPANION VOLUME, *Unrivalled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium*, bring together forty years of research and writing about the Byzantine Empire. Each chapter has been very lightly edited and notes selecting some of the most important, relevant new publications have been added. At my publisher's suggestion I have also introduced each essay with a personal account of how I came to write it and who and what influenced me in doing so.

Each volume traces a historian's journey across the Byzantine Empire. This one maps my research into its political and intellectual power and authority, the other my discoveries of the role and influence of women. The request to situate each chapter throws some personal light on each particular step of my journey, but it also seems to demand this overall introduction about how I decided to pursue these interests and to write the books I have. The double trek began in the 1960s, at Cambridge, when I chose to become a historian. They were radical and innovative times that naturally left their influence. I still feel myself linked to that period, am proud to have contributed to its spirit, and am happy to say that it has marked my work ever since.

At that time there was a very strong tradition in Britain of historians working from primary material, archives, and documentary evidence. Sometimes this led to narrow, empirical parochialism. But it could also be combined with efforts to build up a large picture, seeking to embrace the totality and to understand the underlying explanation for what happened, especially by scholars on the left. These ambitious aims were invigorated by the anti-authoritarian, anti-hierarchy radicalism of the 1960s. E. H. Carr's *What Is History?* (1961) questioned many assumptions and stimulated as many unanswered issues but made us think. For historians, Marx was perhaps the dominant theorist, whose ideas were taken up and applied by Christopher Hill, for example, in his work on the English Civil War. His *Century of Revolution* was a compelling read. I was also deeply

influenced by R. W. Southern, whose book, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, opened at St. Martin du Canigou, a spectacular monastery in the Eastern Pyrenees that I knew from several visits.

At Newnham College, Cambridge, I was taught by inspiring figures like Kathleen Hughes, Margaret Aston, and Betty Behrens, who introduced me to Carr. I read very widely in modern Russian and American history, as well as taking in the Marxists. I wrote a study of Jane Addams and Hull House in Chicago that won a University prize and chose the church in the French Revolution along with the Expansion of Medieval Europe as special subjects. In the latter Philip Grierson introduced me to Byzantine coin finds, scattered across the Mediterranean, western Europe, and as far north as Russia and Scandinavia, which indicated a major force at work. This inspired me to investigate the Eastern Empire, then totally unfamiliar to me—it drew me to Byzantium. At the same time, the nascent student movement, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, and the New Left were major influences. In addition to demonstrations against the American war in Indochina, feminism arrived to gladden many young women (and men).

This heady mixture of political awareness, theoretical writing about history, and practical efforts to change the university's traditional and patronizing attitudes developed when I moved to Birmingham to master Greek and start work on the Byzantine Empire. I found a strong dedication to Marxist analysis among professors like Rodney Hilton, Roy Pascal, and George Thomson. Among the students there was a widespread interest in the events of 1968 as well as the work of Althusser. In the Spring of 1969 we organized a sit-in at Birmingham, one of many university occupations. It was one of the largest in Britain at the time and was run by a Committee of Ten, of which I was a member.

Amidst the rather sterile rivalry of established leftist groups, Trotskyist and Maoist, I was more concerned to test Marxist analysis, by trying to apply it to the medieval empire of Byzantium. We formed a reading group and tackled the first volume of *Das Kapital*. I found Marx's *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* with Eric Hobsbawm's introduction more helpful for the medieval period, and it led me to Barrington Moore and Shmuel Eisenstadt's work on comparative transformations of preindustrial societies and the political systems of empires.

As I began the process of becoming a professional Byzantinist, there was a moment when I understood that a Marxist analysis didn't deliver what I was looking for to explain the development of the empire. Marxism insists that all history is the history of class struggle and that

economic relations determine the growth, development, and decline of societies. All other activities, politics, religion, social relations are “super-structures” with limited influence. In modern capitalist societies the dynamics of forces and relations of production are a massively shaping force, but this didn’t appear to hold up for precapitalist societies, such as Byzantium. The medieval empire I was studying had a written legal code and a centralized administration capable of issuing a gold coinage that remained stable for over 700 years. None of this fitted with the feudal mode of production as conceived by Marxists.

Much later I argued in *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire* (2007) that Byzantium was “born old” out of a unique combination of established traditions; these created a powerful imperial system that directed the economy rather efficiently and maintained both the collection of taxes and the reliability of the coinage until the eleventh century. Strikingly, the devaluation of the gold standard appeared to coincide with developments that could be linked to a more feudal society, analyzed by George Ostrogorsky. But overall, the feudal mode of production as a concept prevented rather than illuminated an understanding of the dynamics of change within imperial Byzantium, where arguments over Christian theology and belief were shaping forces that couldn’t be reduced to a function of class interest, profit, and gain. Others, however, pursued a more theoretical approach to Byzantium, which has always proved a challenge to Marxist historians.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the constant interest in relating Western medieval feudalism to Byzantine society, there is currently a revival of interest in Marxist analysis of Byzantium, for example, the work of Telemachos Lounghis in Greece and Peter Sarris in Cambridge, from rather different perspectives.<sup>2</sup> I wish them good fortune but do not share their starting point, nor do I regard myself as a Marxist historian. Which is not to say that inequality and exploitation didn’t exist in Byzantium, and the clash of interests occasionally made this explicit. Appeals to the high courts in Constantinople by provincial communities often reflected unjust demands for additional taxation, or failures to abide by agreed tax exemptions. When the “Zealots” of Thessalonike rebelled against the city government and established their own council from 1341–50, they presented their case as a justified correction of entrenched aristocratic power. In *Byzantium* I was delighted to give them the attention they are due, for there was always antagonism to the accumulated wealth of large landowners and conflict over economic resources. But it rarely assumed the high profile of “class warfare,” as maintained by the Zealots, who were overthrown after a brief rule.

The other major theoretical influence of the 1960s and 1970s was feminism, which I embraced and continue to do so without regret. Feminism is a different kind of “ism” to Marxism. It does not offer a theory of determination but rather an analysis of an unacceptable state of affairs that arises in the deeply unfair, unequal patriarchal societies in which men exploit women. Feminists campaign to reverse this condition. As a historian, feminism alerted me to the weight of patriarchal power in Byzantine society, which produces deeply embedded prejudices in the male-authored sources. These have to be unpicked if the texts are to be used, a process that sometimes leads to the almost total “deconstruction” of the women who form the supposed subject matter. Learning to read such texts critically, avoiding a naïve acceptance of statements about women, is an essential task for all historians.

The significance of women’s contribution to society informed my effort to understand Byzantium as a whole with its underlying structures of power and authority. The imperial court with its insistent feminine component immediately attracted my attention, which led to a broader study of Byzantine women from all social strata, including their influence even on orthodox Christianity. Byzantium was a thoroughly patriarchal society, but as I worked out in the studies now collected in *Unrivaled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium*, the unique Byzantine combination of Roman law (which gave women property rights), of Christianity (with its insistence on monogamy that underwrote maternal and wifely influence, especially important for the ruling dynasty), and of Greek education (with its commanding literacy) made it possible for them to break through patriarchal constraints. I did not have to look far to identify women in urban and rural settings, from shopkeepers and nuns to peasant heads of household, whose awareness of their potential power and authority could be studied beyond the scorn and dismissal of male authors, and it was thrilling to be a pioneer in this field.

From the first, my interest in Byzantium was that of a Western historian aware of the empire’s larger influence and seeking a comparative perspective. Since the empire shared features with other medieval states, such an approach would help to identify its specific characteristics, such as landholding, social strata, economic control of resources. I decided to try and compare one particular region of Byzantium with an area of western Europe and draw out the differences. Historians often point to the difficulty of exploring how medieval rule was experienced. The aims and intentions of governments as recorded in laws and official regulations assume a uniform administration in all regions. But clearly this was

not always the case. Not only were such written instructions interpreted in a variety of ways, but in addition particular provinces under individual administrators, taking account of their own relations with forces in the capital city, might undermine or reinforce what they read. It is quite inappropriate to assume that imperial government in far-flung regions was the same, and this is as true of the medieval empire of the Han in China as the empire of Charlemagne.

As this thought became clearer in my mind, I decided that the Fourth Crusade of 1204 might be the watershed that would allow me to compare the region of central Greece before and after the arrival of the crusader conquerors. In that way I could compare the two societies, Byzantine and Frankish, and assess the impact of 1204 in the mixed society that resulted. And so I embarked on a doctoral thesis on the provinces of Hellas and Peloponnesos, using the letters and speeches of Michael Choniates, Archbishop of Athens from 1182–1205, as a key source. Ever since I have been struck by the contrasts between his life in the province and his previous training in the metropolis before he was sent, as he saw it, to the margins of empire. His letters provided ample evidence of the administration of the region by civilian and military dignitaries sent from the center and local church officials, many of whom were drawn from notable families. I found some of the same family names in documents relating to the numerous small village churches, with elegant brickwork and marble decoration that dot the region. Toward the end of the twelfth century, pressures exacerbated relations between the margins and the metropolis, leading in some cases to separatist movements. Central Greece thus shared in the general deterioration of imperial control, which is also visible in Cyprus, northwestern Asia Minor, and Trebizond on the far eastern border.

The arrival of the Frankish conquerors was disastrous for Choniates. He was exiled from Athens and moved from place to place until he eventually settled on the barren island of Kea. His account of this period is full of complaints about the Latin clergy who had displaced him, as well as the western knights who took over the region and adapted its monasteries and churches to their Catholic rite. With the help of a loyal team of Orthodox clerics, Choniates tried to look after the needs of the indigenous Greek population, now reduced to servile status. My study of Hellas and Peloponnesos gave me considerable insight into the state of one particular province of the Byzantine Empire at the turn of the thirteenth century as well as the critically important role of the Constantinopolitan-educated bishops. Unlike civil and military officials, who held temporary appointments usually for three years, these ecclesiastics who had been trained in

the patriarchate with the resources of the metropolis were sent to administer the chief sees of the Byzantine church for life. They also maintained their links with Constantinople, returning to attend councils or court cases or to consult the patriarch about problems. In this way men like Michael Choniates of Athens and his teacher, Eustathios of Thessalonike, brought the highest standards of twelfth-century education and clerical training to provincial capitals. They attracted local men who wanted to learn and transmitted their knowledge and wisdom to younger generations, who had not had the same opportunities. The church of Constantinople thus sustained a spider-web of connections between the center and the provinces, which were maintained by letters often exchanged over decades. This provided a much firmer and more deeply embedded clerical culture, a solid support for Byzantine imperial values as well as correct definitions of Orthodoxy, than civilian or military administration could manage.

While it is clearly erroneous to talk or argue about the nature of a city-based empire like Byzantium as if it was uniform, the network of church leadership did provide a common overlay of cultural expression that overcame some of the obvious differences among the provinces. The writings of officials based in the regions provided a vital source of information, although it varied according to region. The archaeology and development over ancient sites through centuries was another. Yet despite the obvious differences between naval and landlocked cities, frontier castles and market centers on main trade routes, their inclusion within the Byzantine Empire clearly created some degree of unity of purpose and activity. When I wrote *Byzantium*, one of the most striking aspects of the empire that came to me as a discovery, even though I had been studying it for many years, was the intensity of its self-belief and the wealth of its traditions and resources at the local city level. These not only gave even its remote provinces direct links to the center that could be adapted to circumstances, particularly by ecclesiastical leaders, they also encouraged local forces to create a miniature Byzantium of their own when the Queen City was occupied by western forces in 1204.

Thus, it was from working on Choniates for my doctorate under the inspiring supervision of Anthony Bryer that I learnt at first hand the immense importance of Christianity not as a belief but as a formative force. Clearly, beliefs mattered, especially for those who believed in them. But the disputes over theological definitions and the way Christianity was organized and practiced influenced, sometimes decisively, the entire direction of empires—and would-be empires—across the entire period of the Middle Ages. At the same time I was taking every opportunity to work

on archaeological excavations in Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey, where the Turkish/American restoration of Kalenderhane Camii brought me closer than ever to my chosen subject. The mosque, situated beside the Aqueduct of Valens, was a converted twelfth-century church, itself built onto the apse of an earlier Byzantine church.<sup>3</sup>

An invitation from Franz-Georg Maier to contribute to the Fischer Weltgeschichte volume devoted to Byzantium broadened my approach to the religious foundations of the empire. Since the tenth to twelfth centuries were already being covered, I was asked to undertake the earlier period of iconoclasm, the battle over icons. Partly as a result of this interest, in 1975 Bryer and I decided to devote the Spring Symposium to the same topic, later published as *Iconoclasm*, and I began to research the much broader Christian development, which eventually became *The Formation of Christendom* (1987).

Iconoclasm, however, led me immediately to the heart of the empire and to imperial policies decided in Constantinople. It was encouraged by the seminar on the *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, a curious text that Professors Alan and Averil Cameron had selected for group study at King's College London. After several years of teaching and archaeological research I had the privilege of becoming a Senior Research Fellow of the Warburg Institute and was able to assist Averil in the publication. We decided that this collection of stories largely about the capital city Constantinople should be dated to the early eighth century, which fitted into my study of the battle over icons.<sup>4</sup> The investigation of methods used by the government to maintain its authority also led to closer analysis of the life of the capital itself.

Taking account of the significance of religion from a secular perspective was essential, as Christian practice and doctrine was clearly a decisive influence in Byzantium. I examined how the Byzantine church took over responsibility for organizing charity, previously the duty of city councils and private benefactors, and made itself an indispensable ally of imperial government. Increasing attention to the care of the poor, who had never been the beneficiaries of official, charitable donations, demanded more efficient measures from patriarchs, bishops, and monastic communities throughout the empire. At the same time it was essential to study the institutional development of the universal church, as the concept of the pentarchy of five great centers was challenged by claims of bishops of Rome, leaders of the expanding Christian regions of the West.

Finding a satisfying explanation of the Byzantine totality remained my goal, using a materialist approach that was open to different forms



of evidence, notably archaeological, and to novel arguments in favor of Byzantine feudalism that developed in the 1970s and were then rebutted. I remained resistant to high theory of the “Linguistic Turn” variety (I’d read enough Althusser), and I’m intolerant of theoretical jargon that fails to deliver understanding of the human experience. The same attitude informed my exploration of the forces that shaped Christianity across its first millennium; I concentrated on the practices of Christian believers rather than the most sophisticated theologians. My research on iconoclasm and the opposition to it, visible in the commitment of ordinary people to iconophile practice, thus became the lynch-pin of a longer study of how Christendom developed, and how the Western half of the universal church created its distinct traditions, independently of the East. Gradually, I realized that the eighth century was the most significant period in relations between East and West during the early Middle Ages.

In the course of reading many decrees of church councils, held in different regions of the Christian world, I realized how bishops had responded to the ideas of their congregations in the course of developing ecclesiastical government. The growth of canon law and books of penance owed much to the input of regular believers, who often found new ways of expressing their faith when left to their own devices. Practices based on erroneous interpretations of scripture or on local traditions that owed more to pre-Christian cults had to be condemned, while scales of penance for personal sins had to be drawn up. Despite the absence of records on the side of regular believers, it was clear that ecclesiastical government in the early medieval period developed through debates between Christians and their leaders. Both reciprocity and mutual influence lay behind the driving forces that molded the Christian universe. As a result, I find it vexing when *The Formation of Christendom* is shelved with Theology rather than Medieval History.

That book turns on an interpretation of iconoclasm but is devoted to the entire early medieval world. It has remained in print for twenty-five years, and I will discuss how it has stood up in an introduction to a new edition that Princeton University Press is planning to publish. Here I should alert readers to some highlights, as they reflect on my general approach. Pirenne argued that without Muhammed, Charlemagne was inconceivable.<sup>5</sup> I argue that without Byzantium, Muhammad’s followers would have conquered the entire Roman world and there would have been no Charlemagne. For the development of western medieval Europe came about thanks both to the rise of Islam, and as important, the frustration of the Arab conquests by Byzantium, which created the three-way



division of the Mediterranean that survives until today. I don't wish to play down the role of the Franks in successfully opposing Muslim forces in the West, but the Arabs' failure to capture Constantinople proved the more important overall: with the resources of the Queen City behind them, they would probably have conquered Rome.

A critical part of the process was the consolidation of the much reduced eastern half of the Roman Empire after the Arab conquests, shorn of its granaries in Egypt and North Africa, and the pilgrim centers of the holy land—in constant contest with its Islamic enemy. In the 730s, after a century of conflict across a vast and fluid frontier area, Leo III launched an official policy of iconoclasm to bolster his military campaigns. For over a century a furious argument raged within Byzantium until icons were restored in 843. Women were a decisive influence in this outcome, as I show in *Unrivalled Influence*: both in homes, where they devoted themselves and their children, boys as well as girls, to domestic shrines, and in the imperial court itself, where two female emperors were responsible for both the initial and then the ultimate victory over the iconoclasts (aided by a significant but ignored go-between, Empress Euphrosyne).<sup>6</sup> In *The Formation of Christendom* I stress that this immense theological-imperial battle over the definition of the legitimacy and place of holy images was part of the formation of Christendom as a whole, shared by all regions around the Mediterranean: the early medieval West, the Byzantine East, and the world of Islam that stretched across the southern shore.

In their recent sweeping and detailed study of the period, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon restate the view that the dispute over icons was a relatively superficial contest in comparison with the challenges to Byzantium's military and economic base.<sup>7</sup> This is repeated in his magnificent survey of the early medieval West by Chris Wickham, who declares: "there is absolutely no sign that the Byzantine Iconoclasts were influenced by the Arabs."<sup>8</sup> I think it is impossible to sustain this claim. The two societies were deeply embroiled, the Byzantines well aware that Muslim opposition to graven images was based on the authority of the tablets of Moses, and that Muslims claimed to be the true followers of the same God as the Christians. Thus even if iconoclasm had emerged spontaneously within Byzantium, it would immediately have been opposed by those saying it was based on the arguments of the infidel and was essentially heretical. But I think it more likely that the first iconoclasts were forced to question the Christian use of icons by the pervasive triumphs of the rival faith. Both the rise of iconoclasm and the beliefs of iconophiles were "influenced" by the challenge of Islam. Here I draw

attention to this contrast of views in order to illustrate more clearly my own approach: that the powers of organized belief and the developments of its institutions are formative. I feel I should alert readers that while I do not hesitate to state my approach firmly, it is contested.

While I constantly try to study Byzantium from a broad comparative approach, I like to respond to current events that connect to public interest. The discovery in the 1990s of a proof of Fermat's last theorem provoked my curiosity about how the theorems of Diophantos were communicated from second-century AD Alexandria to seventeenth-century France. I had been exploring the ways in which the empire displayed its power to the wider world, and now I found a fascinating example in the transmission of ancient mathematics. There were two routes of transmission, the Byzantine and the Arab, which created two distinct manuscript traditions. The Byzantine reached out to puzzles recorded in Armenian to enhance mathematical knowledge in Constantinople (an unusual link between margins and metropolis) and to enrich the Greek tradition. Its conscious effort to remain "the center" of the world—of maintaining a defining tradition—did not, however, depend on the imperial court and official hierarchy of power. It was internalized thanks to the wider traditions of Greek authority and learning, which in due course provided copies of Diophantos's theorems to Bessarion, who took them to the West.

My anger at the burning of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* stimulated another response. It prompted me to consider the determination of religious authorities to burn texts considered heretical, and this led into a wider consideration of such bonfires. Books were expensive to produce, so the instruction to condemn them to the flames sprang from a serious attempt to remove their contents from circulation. Such destruction is not always successful because authors and readers alike remember what they learned from books. "Books don't burn!" Yet the practice was ancient and apparently continued unabated, a paradox I explored in "Book Burning as Purification in Early Byzantium."

On looking back over these contributions to the relations between margins and metropolis, I'm struck by their interdependence. The capital may have been a dominant force in Byzantine life, but relations with the margins of empire were often critical. Isolated frontier zones such as the Crimea, Peloponnesos, islands like Kephallonia, or castles in the Taurus region of eastern Anatolia, were used as areas of imprisonment, and gave those who were banished a sense of extreme distance and isolation from the capital. But the same regions provoked rebellions that might prove

fatal to the ruling emperor. It was essential for Constantinople to be well informed about such potential opposition movements, which might swell into serious military threats. By the same token those living in border regions wanted to know what was happening in the Queen City, where they often had relatives or allies, who could send news. As I've argued elsewhere the idea of a "bride show," to select a wife for the future emperor, was exploited by the imperial court to strengthen provincial loyalty to the ruling family, focusing the attention of provincial families on the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to win the ultimate prize. This was one method that appears to have been quite successful in creating hopes among those who lived in the margins of the possibility of promotion to the very center of empire.

In the era of "World History" Byzantium can claim a significant place as the medieval empire that developed out of the Greek world of Alexander of Macedon and the Roman Republic and Empire of the Caesars, and went on to endow both the Russian and the Ottoman Empires with traditions that survived into the twentieth century. In religious terms Greek Orthodoxy played a critical role in the maintenance of the Byzantine Empire, and links vast territories and time-spans that may be compared with the greatest empires of Asia. This volume aims to contribute to further comparative history, which will place Byzantium within a context of influential medieval societies. Taken together these sixteen chapters offer an overview of Byzantium, from its outlying regions to the hub of the Queen City, and thereby present an insight into the dynamic character of an empire tremendously focused on itself and what it stood for in a way that was at once defining and flexible.<sup>9</sup>

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New bibliography in both volumes is signaled in the notes by **Update**. In preparing these notes, I thank Andreia Carvalho and Rupert Smith for

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## NOTES

1. The enforced Marxist historiography of the Soviet Union and East European bloc until the fall of the Berlin Wall produced many useful studies but no compelling explanation. George Ostrogorsky’s *History of the Byzantine State*, originally published in German (1940) and translated into more than a dozen languages, remains a very useful, basic textbook, but is singularly devoid of Marxist ideology. His *Pour l’histoire de la féodalité byzantine* (Fr. trans. Brussels, 1954) is a more serious, though not convincing, study of the feudal mode. E. Patlagean adopted a very successful comparative perspective in her classic study of poverty, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance 4e–7e siècles* (Paris, 1977), followed by *Un moyen âge grec. Byzance IXe–XVe siècles* (Paris, 2007).

2. T. Lounghis, *E Ideologia tes Vyzantines istoriografias* (Athens, 1993), and P. Sarris, “The Early Byzantine Economy in Context: Aristocratic Property and Economic Growth Reconsidered,” *Early Medieval Europe* 19, no. 3 (2011), 255–84.

3. The final reports of the restoration of the building are now published in two large-format volumes, ed. C. L. Striker and D. Kuban, *Kalenderhane in Istanbul: The Buildings, Their History, Architecture and Decoration . . .* (Mainz, 1997–2007).

4. This date has been modified to the later eighth or early ninth century by many commentators, notably Otto Kresten, “Leon III und die Landmauer von Konstantinopel. Zur Datierung von c. 3 der Παραστάσεις σύντομοι χρονικά,” *Römische Historische Mitteilungen* 36 (1994), 21–52.

5. Henri Pirenne, *Mohammad and Charlemagne* (Eng. trans. London, 1954)

6. She is the central figure in *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (London/Princeton, 2001).

7. Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era ca. 680–850: A History* (Cambridge, 2011), esp. 790–92.

8. Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400–1000* (London, 2009), 278.

9. For a more detailed account of the authorities who influenced my development as a historian, see my introduction to *Authority in Byzantium*, ed. P. Armstrong (Farnham, 2013), 1–11.