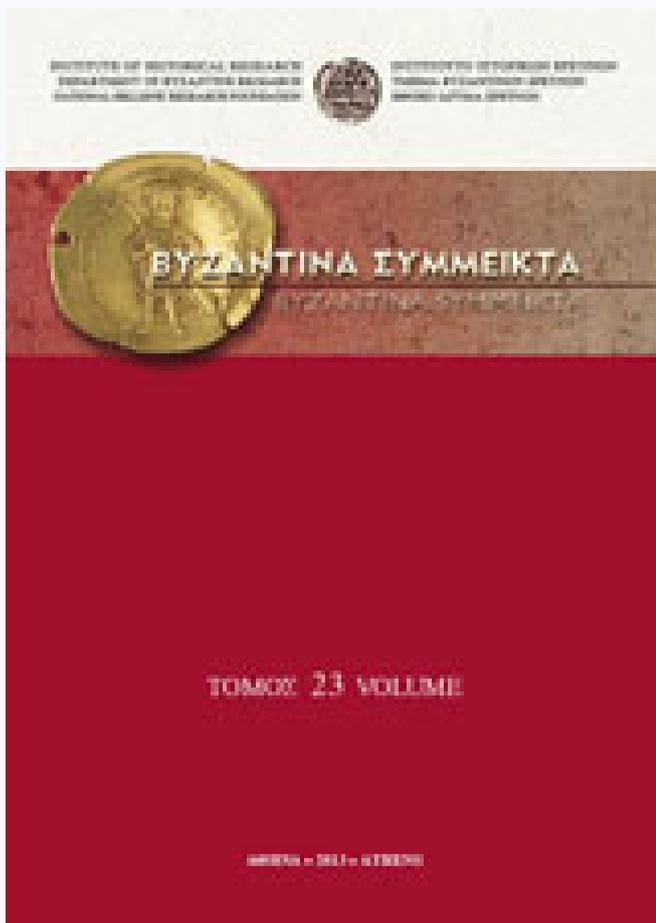


Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 23 (2013)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 23



The Outsider's Gaze: Reflections on recent non-Byzantinist Readings of Byzantine History and on their Implications for our Field

Dimitris KRALLIS

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.1105](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.1105)

Copyright © 2014, Dimitris KRALLIS



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

KRALLIS, D. (2014). The Outsider's Gaze: Reflections on recent non-Byzantinist Readings of Byzantine History and on their Implications for our Field. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 23, 183–199. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.1105>

DIMITRIS KRALLIS

THE OUTSIDER'S GAZE:
REFLECTIONS ON RECENT NON-BYZANTINIST READINGS OF
BYZANTINE HISTORY AND ON THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR FIELD

My first personal academic engagement with modern non-Byzantinist readings of Byzantium came in 2006¹. In the fall of that year I was asked by professor Vassilis Lambropoulos of the University of Michigan to opine on Pope Benedict XVI's discussion of Byzantium in a talk delivered at the University of Regensburg². The Pontiff's selectively quoted academic paper stirred immediate controversy in the world media on account of its perceived anti-Muslim slant. Indirectly, Byzantium entered public discourse, used by a Pope who quoted a Byzantine emperor's words to make a very contemporary point. This was an exhilarating moment that brought a Byzantinist like myself in the world of important modern debates about culture, religion, and politics. In a way, the present essay is a continuation of a process of engagement with modern readings of Byzantium that started back in 2006. It took form as I widened my "narrow" research interests by reading works by scholars in fields outside Byzantine studies that, either tangentially or more directly, touched upon our field and perhaps affected it.

1. Many years earlier, as a schoolboy raised in Greece, I was exposed to a very different lay take on Byzantine history when I read P. Delta's *Στὸν Καιρὸ τοῦ Βουλγαροκτόνου* and K. Kyriazis' *Ρωμανὸς Ἄ Διογένης*. Questions regarding the place of Byzantium in modern Balkan national narratives are not addressed here.

2. For access to that paper http://www.lsa.umich.edu/UMICH/modgreek/Home/WindowtoGreekCulture/History,Bio,Memoir/HBM_Krallis_Greekreasonregensburg.pdf. J. P. ARNASON, Byzantium and Historical Sociology, in: *The Byzantine World*, ed. P. STEPHENSON, New York 2012, 491-504 provides a current assessment of the place of Byzantine studies in the field of historical sociology, noting the lost opportunity for fruitful engagement with our field.

The Pontiff's speech was not to be the last time Byzantium was drawn into debates about Islam and the West. In an elegant piece published three years later, the Berkeley anthropologist Saba Mahmood explored the notion of Muslim injury from western depictions of the prophet and in doing so discussed the iconophilic theory of *schesis* as developed by Theodore the Stoudite³. Once again, a modern critic seeking to construct an argument of distinctly contemporary import selectively appropriated an aspect of Byzantine culture in a manner that directly affects her readers' perspective on Byzantine culture. I have dealt with Mahmood's work in another venue and will not therefore further engage with it here⁴. It is, nevertheless, worth mentioning because Mahmood's is a contribution that operates within most "fashionable" (Postsecularist) intellectual company and will consequently be read in graduate schools and seminars throughout North America and Western Academia in general.

In the present essay I leave post-secularism aside to discuss two other works published in the past four years that engage more extensively with the history and culture of the Byzantine polity. The first one is *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper and the second: *A World Without Islam* by Graham Fuller. Here I consider the image of Byzantium as it appears in these works and ponder on the significance of such perspectives for the reception of Byzantium and by extension of Byzantine studies among non-Byzantinist audiences, both academic and lay⁵. Their focus, *Empires* and *Islam*, is surely compelling and bound to generate interest among readers and reviewers. Byzantinists have every reason to follow such work, as it inevitably becomes part of a process whereby opinions about our object of study and discipline

3. S. MAHMOOD, Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide? in: *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, ed. T. ASAD, W. BROWN, J. BUTLER, S. MAHMOOD, Berkeley 2009, 64-100.

4. D. KRALLIS, The Critic's Byzantine Ploy: Voltairean Confusion: in Postsecularist Narratives, *boundary 2* 40:1 (2013), 223-43.

5. In selecting these two works I am necessarily eschewing engagement with recent uses of Byzantium in the realm of popular culture. Here I have in mind works such as the 2012 Vampire fantasy thriller *Byzantium*, the Turkish epic movie *Fetih 1453* or Julia Kristeva's *Murder in Byzantium: A Novel*. All these works contribute in their distinct ways in shaping opinion about Byzantium in either local or more global contexts, but require distinct treatment that I am not ready to offer here.

are formed in the public realm that affect how readers process our own work. Let us then turn to the matter at hand.

In an interconnected world of increasingly diffuse economic power and shifting political centers, empires have been making a comeback. For more than a decade now scholars have been turning towards these political and cultural behemoths in search of models for a post-national world. At the same time a quest for examples of non-western political agency spurred by the ascent of post-colonial theory and the increasing economic and political clout of the so-called BRICs⁶ – states spanning vast spaces and encompassing diverse populations – have created a new market for studies of the world's imperial pasts.

Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference, a collaborative effort by professors Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, tackles a vast subject through a sweeping, truly global synthetic study⁷. With this well written and, undoubtedly, extensively read scholarly contribution Burbank and Cooper are poised to shape the debate in classrooms (and newsrooms) for years to come. The book has already been widely reviewed and scholars in a range of different fields will have to deal with the consequences, both salubrious and negative of its academic impact.

EiWH is divided in fourteen chapters and develops its theme over 511 pages that take us from the days of Rome and ancient China to our new perhaps once again Chinese century. Here I approach this work from the perspective of Byzantine studies, commenting more generally on the authors' assumptions, propositions, and overall discussion of Roman, Byzantine, Islamic and Ottoman history as covered in chapters 1, 2, 3 and 5 (1. Imperial Trajectories, 2. Imperial Rule in Rome and China, 3. After Rome: Empire, Christianity and Islam, 5. Beyond the Mediterranean: Ottoman and Spanish Empires).

Synthetic works such as *EiWH* inevitably generalize, offering schematic and for that reason sometimes-distorting views of the past. It is thus with an eye on the authors' engagement with Byzantine scholarship that I turn to *EiWH* in order to address what I think are flaws in its conception of Byzantium, the world around it, and the current state of the field. *EiWH*'s

6. BRIC: Brazil, Russia, India and China.

7. J. BURBANK – F. COOPER, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton NJ 2009, henceforth *EiWH* in the body of the text.

weaknesses are not simply a function of its authors' lack of specialization in things Byzantine. They are perhaps, most ominously, a reflection of the way in which scholars outside our field digest our work. In this sense then, my reading is also a reflection on Byzantinists' collective failures in "knowledge translation".

On his personal page on the NYU website Cooper notes: "I wish to get beyond the excessive focus on the nation-state in the scholarship of recent years toward a fuller analysis of the range of ways in which people imagined collective futures and the range of institutional mechanisms which constrained and stimulated the fulfillment of those possibilities". *EiWH* in many ways represents a fulfillment of this ambition. In fact the "collective futures" imagined by imperial subjects and the "institutional mechanisms" devised to achieve the said goals guide Burbank and Cooper's study of empires and shape the historical vocabulary employed in their work. "Imperial intermediaries" deploying "repertoires and technologies of power" to generate and perpetuate "imperial imaginaries" underpin all efforts at maintaining effective regimes of resource exploitation⁸.

The problem with this approach lies in the flattening effects of such elegant vocabulary, as the categories invented by B&C occlude differences between diverse social, political, economic and cultural phenomena. This is more or less inevitable in a synthetic work of rather immense scope, yet combined with B&C's lack of engagement with and, one suspects, lack of exposure to the main directions of current scholarship in Roman and Byzantine studies, it leads to serious misunderstandings, occlusions, and ultimately distortions of the subject matter.

We start with Chapter 2, which focuses on imperial Rome and early China, assessing for the purposes of this essay *EiWH*'s treatment of Roman history. Central to the book's analysis of Roman imperial history is a tension between the underlying assumption that "empires preserve distinction" (p. 14) and the authors' admission that Rome's rule was rendered possible by "a large-scale, differentiated, and productive economy, extensive networks of material and personal connections, and successful ideological outreach" (p. 34) that "attracted and compelled the subjects' loyalty," while remaining

8. Ironically the discussion of "intermediaries," "repertoires," "technologies of power" and "imperial imaginaries" at times occludes the materialist agendas underpinning many an imperial project.

“open to talent” (p. 28) and able to “absorb and inflect” other people (p. 37). Nowhere in *Ei WH* is this tension explicated. What is more, the notion of a system organized around policies that create and perpetuate distinctions is further undermined by the authors’ admission that in the third century the *constitutio antoniniana* took pre-existing impulses to a natural conclusion by granting citizenship to all free inhabitants of the empire.

Ei WH, therefore, stumbles upon the complicated and still contested problem of Romanization. There is in chapter 2 little reflection on the relevant literature from Woolf (who is actually cited in the suggested bibliography), Macmullen, Hingley, and Mattingly, to Swain, Elsner, Ando and others. The lack of understanding of the state of the field on the issue of Romanization is only coupled by a commensurate lack of engagement with the third century crisis, which is only presented as an outcrop of “the openness of the system” and of “multiple legitimizing strategies,” (p. 34) a generic explanation that melds well with the equally generic notion that “Rome did not so much fail as disaggregate itself, as emperors split the realm and barbarian warriors took the lead as military servitors of Rome and as conquerors of Roman spaces” (p. 41). This voluntarist approach to imperial decline has a basis on scholarship as B&C’s reference to Wolfram suggests⁹. It is unclear, however, how very different conclusions in the work of Ward-Perkins (also cited in their suggested readings), inflected, if at all, their understanding of the times¹⁰. One suspects that his interpretation of events as well as others more recent, such as the one developed in Heather’s *Empires and Barbarians*, simply do not fit with *Ei WH*’s general drift, that treats the fall of empires as a failure to effectively manage “repertoires of power”.

At the opening of Chapter 3 (After Rome: Empire, Christianity, and Islam) the authors explain that they “explore a major innovation in the history of empires: the linkage of imperial power and monotheism” (p. 61). One would want to follow the processes that turn a persecuted religion into “a tool of empire,” yet *Ei WH* cannot provide an answer, not having discussed Christianity’s pre-Constantinian history¹¹. A future edition of

9. H. WOLFRAM, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples*, Berkeley 1997.

10. B. WARD PERKINS, *The Fall of the Roman Empire and the End of Civilization*, Oxford 2005.

11. The idea that Christian monotheism’s tendency towards intolerance may have older,

the book would benefit from Stephenson's elegant summation of scholarly consensus on this issue in his recent book on Constantine¹². The problem, however, is more fundamental, as the very idea of monotheism as a tool of empire converts B&C's discussion of Byzantium (and then Islam) into a critique, given that in their minds the turn to Christianity "undermined the empire's capacity for synthetic absorption of different people" (p. 41).

In a schema where monotheism is bound to create fissures it is impossible to explain how a Monophysite Saint's life in Syria can feature the anti-Monophysite emperor Maurice as its hero, or how, overwhelming evidence from across Monophysite (and frequently non-Greek speaking) Syria points towards solid commitment of religiously-persecuted and ethnically distinct populations to the idea of Rome¹³. Sixth century Near East, but also the empire of the Middle Byzantine era, when Paulician armies fought for Orthodox emperors and when iconoclast rulers persecuted populations of iconophiles, who nevertheless maintained their allegiance to Constantinople, put to the test *EiWH's* reading of the effects of Monotheism on the Roman body politic. Here the recent volume on *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era* by Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, with its new reading of the phenomenon of iconoclasm, offers an essential corrective to *EiWH's* thesis.

By arguing, therefore, without proper signposting, that Byzantium slowly became "a commonwealth of peoples linked by history and religious culture, subject to varying degrees of political control from the centre" (p. 66), B&C leave the reader wondering if it is Garth Fowden's *Empire to Commonwealth* or Dimitri Obolensky's influential yet flawed *Byzantine Commonwealth* that one should be reading for further elaboration on this laconic sentence¹⁴. Moreover, the diluted sense of authority implicit in the aforementioned conceptualizations of a Roman or Byzantine "commonwealth" indicates

rather Roman roots is not addressed. For that see P. ATHANASSIADI, *Vers la pensée unique: la montée de l'intolérance dans l'Antiquité tardive*, Paris 2010.

12. P. STEPHENSON, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor*, London 2009, 13-61. Any summation of works on Constantine tends to become dated very fast. Timothy Barnes' *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire* and Ray Van Dam's *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* attest to this fact.

13. M. WHITTOW, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium*, London 1996, 44-45.

14. G. FOWDEN, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Princeton, NJ 1994; D. OBOLENSKY, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453*, London 1974.

that B&C have not looked at Kaldellis' suggestion that the citizens of the middle Byzantine State may have in fact constituted a nation of *Rhomaioi* that more often than not fought against the other members of exactly such commonwealth¹⁵.

Given that B&C see in monotheism an imperfect "technology of power", its nefarious effects have to be detected in other instances of Byzantine history. Here, once again, lack of engagement with current scholarly debates mars their discussion of the "schism" of 1054, which according to them "turned out to be definitive" (p. 66). The work of Tia Kolbaba on this event does not register in their analysis, and neither do they seem to have actually read Herrin's careful treatment of this issue in a book featured in their suggested bibliography¹⁶.

And yet ironically, the same authors who treat "monotheism" as a problematic component of the Byzantine "repertoire of power" herald the reign of Justinian as the "glory days of the empire" (p. 63). They thus offer as a model Byzantine ruler a persecuting emperor, who brought ruin upon thousands if not millions of heterodox Roman subjects, by streamlining under the central control of an increasingly Christian administration civic structures, cultural practices, and even the law¹⁷.

If B&C fail to grasp the significance and place of religion in the eastern Roman state, their understanding of Constantine's other

15. A. KALDELLIS, *From Rome to New Rome, From Empire to Nation State: Reopening the Question of Byzantium's Roman Identity*, in: *Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. GRIG - G. KELLY, Oxford 2012, 387-404; IDEM, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*, Cambridge 2007, 42-119, specifically 74 ff. C. RAFFENSPERGER, *Reimagining Europe: Kievan Rus' in the Medieval World*, Cambridge, MA 2012 for a comprehensive critique of Obolensky's thesis.

16. T. KOLBABA, 1054 Revisited: Response to Ryder, *BMGS* 35 (2011), 38-44; EADEM, *The Legacy of Humbert and Cerularius: The Tradition of 'The Schism of 1054' in Byzantine Texts and Manuscripts of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, in: *Porphyrogenita: Essays in Honour of Julian Chrysostomides*, ed. J. CHRYSOSTOMIDES - Ch. DENDRINOS, Aldershot 2003, 47-61; J. HERRIN, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*, Princeton, NJ 2009, 45-47.

17. P. ATHANASIADI, *Persecution and Response in Late Paganism: The Evidence of Damascius*, *JHS* 113 (1993), 19-21 and A. KALDELLIS, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*, Philadelphia 2004, on Justinian's persecutory politics; S. MITCHELL, *A history of the Later Roman Empire: AD 284-641*, Oxford 2007, 125-27 for an easily digestible summary of problems with Justinian's reign.

monumental decision, of moving the capital to the east is similarly flawed. According to *EiWH*, Constantine perhaps “wanted to assert his autonomy from leading Roman families”, when he poured the empire’s resources to the vast new building site of Byzantium. That Rome’s emperors had for years lived in alternative imperial capitals, from Latin-speaking Trier and Salona to Greek-speaking Thessalonike and Nikomedia, undermines the idea of Rome’s centrality in the fourth century and helps put the emperor’s migration towards the east into perspective.

Another category devised by B&C with an eye to effective generalization is that of the “imperial intermediary”; a member of the subject populations that assumes a privileged position in the imperial body politic as a go-between that spans the distance between the rulers and the conquered. Members of the local elites with knowledge of local conditions were co-opted by the imperial overlords and tasked with the running of the empire’s more distant lands (pp. 13-14). While the category could probably be effectively applied to a reading of the first two centuries of Imperial Rome’s rule over the Mediterranean, things become more complicated by the third century and later in the Byzantine era proper.

The concept of the “imperial intermediary” collapses in the Byzantine era, as it is not clear what role such men had in a state that “was present in the daily practices and imaginations of people” (p. 67). Since B&C have not discussed those developments, that in the course of the third and early fourth centuries led to the foundation of this new intrusive Byzantine state, through Diocletian’s expansion of the empire’s bureaucracy, the reader has every reason to ask what it was that led to the disappearance of regional players. Once again by not countenancing the possibility of a unitary identity binding imperial subjects into something more than comfortable submission to a distant imperial power, the authors remain aloof from fruitful recent debates on identity formation in the Christianized Roman east¹⁸.

If vague and overly formulaic engagement with central questions in Byzantine history mars what should have been an important contribution to the study of empires, a failure to get basic facts of Byzantine social, economic, and cultural history right, leads to further distortion. Thus

18. KALDELLIS, *Hellenism in Byzantium* and IDEM, *From Rome to New Rome on the one hand, and on the other: G. PAGE, *Being Byzantine: Greek Identity Before the Ottomans, 1200-1420*, Cambridge 2008.*

the *Themata* were not “pathway between the tax-funded army inherited from Rome and reliance on aristocrats with their retainers as in most of post-Roman western Europe” (p. 67), the seventh century demise of urban culture did not give rise to stronger “vernacular cultures” (p. 68) within the empire’s boundaries, rather leading to a homogenization of Byzantine identity into a nearly national *Romanitas*, while the Byzantines only reluctantly and late in the empire’s history let others – namely the Venetians – “do much of the work of exchange and transport” (pp. 68-69). Furthermore, the subordination of the *coloni* to Byzantine landlords was not behind the consolidation by the eighth century of a landed aristocracy – two hundred years earlier than normally assumed by Byzantine scholarship, stone houses were not a universal Byzantine phenomenon and certainly not unproblematic evidence of affluence, while prosperous monasteries could be evidence of state malfunction (as argued for example by Attaleiates and Psellos) rather than proof of “the economic advantages of Byzantium’s multiribbed imperial umbrella” (p. 69).

Then, as we enter *EiWH*’s discussion of Islam, we stumble upon an inexcusable act of cultural erasure that may represent a clumsy response to Sylvain Gouguenheim’s *Aristote au Mont Saint-Michel: Les racines grecques de l’Europe Chrétienne*. Here B&C note that “much of what ‘the west’ knows of Greek philosophy and literature came from Arabic translations, later retranslated in Latin” (p. 79). Students of the Italian Renaissance who recognize the names of Bessarion, Chrysoloras, and Giovanni Aurispa will certainly object, while recent work on the imprint of Byzantine classicism on the Greek Canon, offers much needed course adjustment¹⁹.

We should perhaps add a few more pieces to our critique. In discussing Harun al- Rashid’s famous gift-elephant in their account of Charlemagne’s reign B&C argue that “this was as close as Byzantine, Islamic, and Carolingian rulers came to acknowledging that they were part of a world of empires, interacting with and setting limits on each other, despite claims to each represent God’s rule on earth” (p. 86). Nicholas Mystikos’ 10th century correspondence with the Caliph and his reference to the twin authorities of

19. A. KALDELLIS, The Byzantine Role in the Making of the Corpus of Classical Greek Historiography: A Preliminary Investigation, *JHS* 132 (2012), 71-85; IDEM, Classical Scholarship in Twelfth-Century Byzantium, in: *Medieval Greek Commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. C. BARBER and D. JENKINS, Leiden and Boston 2009, 1-43.

the Romans and the Saracens as equivalents of the Sun and the Moon, fails to make it into a book on empires, let alone in the chapter on monotheism. Byzantine court protocol, with its clear ranking of foreign ambassadors according to their place in the international “food chain”, also eludes B&C’s attention even though it attests activity on much travelled imperial horizons. Equally absent is any reference to the fascinating intellectual cold war that was waged during the ninth-century at the margins of violent conflict²⁰.

Furthermore, certain “technologies of power” treated as an almost exclusive attribute of one empire, could just as easily be applied to the other. When B&C note that “Ties of religion and kinship – among Jews, Armenians, Greeks, and others – offered mechanisms for transmitting information and credit, as well as trust, across great distances, over long stretches of time, and where the interface with other groups was uncertain”, (p. 133) one is justified in thinking that they have in mind the Cairo Geniza documents and the lively networks of Jewish exchange active in the Byzantine Empire²¹. That is not, however, the case as Byzantium has already been shown to willingly relinquish its trade to the Venetians. The sentence quoted here instead describes the Ottoman Empire and its “Recombinant Eurasian Pathways” (p. 129). Given the power packed in a good turn of phrase, let alone an elegantly written narrative account, the reader inevitably associates Byzantium with the rigid, divisive politics of monotheism – easily condemned by modern sensitivities – while equating the Ottoman Empire with multiethnic trade networks rendered familiar to modern minds through the vocabulary of genetics and neuroscience.

Given the general tenor of B&C’s argument, the instances when *Ei WH* offers insightful, if by no means original, analysis only reinforce the sense that the parts of the book on Rome, its successors, and the Ottomans were written as the authors sought to leave behind them material with which they were less than comfortable. Thus in discussing the Crusades B&C note that “Crusading allowed this Knightly class (particularly younger sons) the chance to escape obligations, prove themselves, impress superiors, dispense

20. M. McCORMICK, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce AD300-900*, Cambridge 2001, 174-210 on diplomacy between Byzantium, the Carolingians, and the Muslim world; D. GUTAS, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsīd Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th C.)*, London 1998, 83-95 for cultural anti-Byzantinism in diplomatic contexts.

21. J. HOLO, *Byzantine Jewry in the Mediterranean Economy*, Cambridge 2009, 19.

patronage, and find – away from the limitations nearer to home – places to raid, establish new domains, and justify a place of honor within the terms of Medieval Christianity” (pp. 88-89). Here *Ei WH* correctly distinguishes religious from other types of motives and shows that B&C can treat monotheism as a less than all-encompassing phenomenon. Crusaders exist in a Christian society and carve political, social, and personal autonomy within Christian spaces. It is curious, why the courtesy of such a reading is reserved for western holy warriors and is not extended to Byzantium.

Ei WH sums the Byzantine experience with the following lines: “That makes for a run of 1100 years for the empire of Constantinople – not bad for a polity often regarded as an overcomplicated archaism. Byzantium’s diversity, administrative flexibility, and grand ritual presence had transformed earlier traditions into a loose fitting, impressive, sometimes frayed, but long-lasting imperial robe. Without the durability and adaptability of this empire on the eastern Mediterranean, world history would have taken a different course” (p. 70). This is undoubtedly well written and visually allusive, especially since only five pages prior the reader has been regaled with an image of Justinian from the famous San Vitale frescoes. Yet, one cannot but sense discomfort in the authors’ comment. The loose-fitting frayed robe is not unlike Nikephoros Phokas’ worn imperial regalia in Luidprand of Cremona’s caricature of Byzantine court ceremonial. Like everything that has preceded it in *Ei WH*, the concluding remark offers opinion wrapped in visual evocations that perpetuate stereotypical readings of Byzantium.

We must turn then to a rather different, equally stereotypical take on Byzantine history. *A World Without Islam* is no anti Muslim screed²². Author Graham Fuller, former vice chairman of the National Defense Council in the CIA with a career at the RAND corporation, occasional contributor to the New York Times and a man with a good knowledge of the Middle East and Turkey, is not a neo-conservative critic of Islam. His book, already reviewed by the prestigious *Foreign Policy* journal, is in fact an attempt to extract Islam from a new modern bi-polarity that juxtaposes *the West* to a monolithic, undifferentiated *Islam*. He is not a scholar in Islamic, Near Eastern, or even Byzantine Studies, and yet his work is read broadly given his credentials and his peculiar status as an anti-imperialist ex member of the CIA. When he embarks, however, on his task as an author

22. G. FULLER, *A World Without Islam*, New York 2010.

he does terrific injustice to Byzantium by means of a peculiar substitution of the “West versus Islam” binary for an older, more persistent, and deep rooted one: “Orthodoxy versus the West”.

In Fuller’s analysis, the schism of 1054, the sack of Constantinople in 1204, and modern Russian anti-western attitudes are all rooted in “eastern” orthodox suspicions of the west²³. In his work the key that unlocks much of the argument is offered to the reader early on: “Frictions among religions and their followers are rarely based on specific theological differences but rather on their political and social implications”. (p. 30) Furthermore, “all these doctrinal struggles were [linked] to the politics of empire. Power invariably attracts religion, and religion attracts power. Theology is secondary” (p. 23). Even more conclusively the foundation of distinct religious communities may hinge little upon theology and a great deal upon *secular* rivalry” (p. 12).

Byzantinists may argue either side of these positions as they have indeed done so over the years. The problem is that this form of power politics analysis ends up being based on a geo-determinism that appears to seamlessly link ancient and medieval history with the modern world. Furthermore, Fuller does not start with Byzantium to explain the Russian phenomenon but rather imposes existing conditions and what he knows of modern Russia upon his reading of the past. Following a line of analysis that borrows much from Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilizations theory it constructs an immutable East-West divide and places Byzantium firmly on the eastern side of the ledger. Thus, according to Fuller, “without Islam, Eastern Orthodox Christianity would likely have remained the dominant faith of the Middle East down to today” (p. 22). The reader might ask: “which Eastern Orthodox Christianity” are we speaking of? Fuller describes Constantinopolitan rule as incompatible with eastern Monophysite Christianity (p. 82). The implication here is that Constantinople represents a Western Christianity inimical to Near Eastern traditions. Then again, Constantinopolitan primacy in the east, as established by Chalcedon, is described as a strengthening of the east’s resistance towards Western Rome (p. 82). Which is it? Is Constantinople Eastern or Western²⁴?

23. Fuller remains, nevertheless, as confused as Burbank and Cooper when it comes to an interpretation of the schism of 1054.

24. In that sense the Pontiff’s address at Regensburg explored a far more fascinating binary, as he effected a bridging of the Catholic and Orthodox positions in both theological

We see, moreover, that in Fuller's argument the origins of modern divides can be sought in an era before Christianity. In the description of Syria's position in the Byzantine world Fuller will argue: "It had been a shaky outpost for the eastward projection of Greek culture against other powerful Semitic and Persian cultures in the region" (p.79). The reader will ask here: how shaky is an outpost that remains strong for 900 years, from the days of Alexander to the rise of Islam? Furthermore, where does Greek culture fit? What do we make of the aristocrats of Dura Europos and of Lucian of Samosata²⁵? Is Greek culture per se western or do we see Greeks slowly turn oriental as they align themselves with Constantinople and join their Modern heirs in a diachronic orthodox camp predisposed towards hostility for the west²⁶?

In this context of immutable east – west divides, Fuller suggests that "The Orthodox Church has maintained its remove from involvement in political affairs ever since the fall of Constantinople, and of the three faiths is probably the most 'otherworldly' and most subservient to the state. It has avoided becoming heavily involved in political and social agendas. A Middle East still under Orthodoxy today would perhaps have been more conservative on political and social issues than Latin Christianity or Islam" (p.124). There is much that needs unpacking in this statement, which is perhaps emblematic of the greatest misconceptions present in Fuller's work. If the Church remained uninvolved in politics after the fall of Constantinople – a claim that would be challenged by the inhabitants of contemporary Orthodox countries – then one would perhaps argue that before 1453 the Church was in fact involved in politics. The conservative nature of Orthodoxy posited in the final sentence of the excerpt above is predicated on immutability that is not supported by the divide that Fuller accepts when he uses the fall of Constantinople as a historical marker. Furthermore, no Byzantinist would accept without serious qualifications the notion of a church uninvolved and philosophical terms, leaving on the other side of the divide the forces of reform, both Christian and Muslim. For the pope's address see: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html.

25. For attempts at answering this fascinating question see J. ELSNER, *Cultural Resistance and the Visual Image: The Case of Dura Europos*, *Classical Philology* 96.3 (2001), 269-304; N. J. ANDRADE, *Syrian Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, Forthcoming - Cambridge 2013.

26. See note 10.

in politics, or for that matter of a Church subservient to the state. As for ‘otherworldliness’, this may once again come from a projection backwards towards Byzantium of modern readings of a mystical Russian orthodoxy as imagined by Dostoevsky. It may aptly describe aspects of Palamist theology but not much else that one would associate with a Byzantine religious experience²⁷.

What are we to take from the confusion that marks Fuller’s work? An era of 1100 years is presented as an undifferentiated monolith, its culture subsumed by larger geo-cultural exigencies. Byzantium’s Greco-Roman, some would say Western, nature is ignored as an “otherworldly orthodoxy” colours the reader’s view of Byzantium and ties its history not with its Roman past but with Russia’s modern strategic ambitions. As they put these two books down on their desks, Byzantinists may scratch their heads in disbelief and still the question remains: what is it about our field that allows outsiders to so easily Orientalize and fundamentally distort its subject matter? According to Burbank and Cooper, Byzantium’s main contribution is monotheism. Fuller, on his part, posits a dogged Orthodox resistance to the West that is itself never really defined or historically explained. To Saba Mahmood Byzantium is all about an emotive theology and Aristotelian justifications of a modern Muslim sense of injury. Francis Fukuyama, on the other hand, simply ignores Byzantium. He thus omits from his analysis of *The Origins of the Political Order* the one centralized, Roman law-ruled, bureaucratic polity of the European Middle Ages²⁸. On every occasion, when

27. L. NEVILLE, *Heroes and Romans in Twelfth-Century Byzantium: The Material for History of Nikephoros Bryennios*, Cambridge 2012, 112-20; A. KALDELLIS, The Kalends in Byzantium, 400-1200 AD: A New Interpretation, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 13 (2012), 187-203; IDEM, A Byzantine Argument for the Equivalence of All Religions: Michael Attaleiates on Ancient and Modern Romans, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 14 (2007), 1-22 for recent readings of Roman and Greek inflected Byzantine attitudes vis-à-vis religion.

28. F. FUKUYAMA, *The Origins of the Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, New York 2011. Fukuyama’s omission is based on misunderstandings of Greek and Roman social and economic formation that become evident in small segments of his text. See page 68 for complete confusion on the function of private property in ancient Greece and Rome. Fukuyama also appears determined to deal with *longue durée*. Thus China is presented as the inventor of the modern bureaucracy (p.78) ostensibly because it is still around and will be the subject of distinct chapters of the book. Byzantium once again has no place in this analysis, even though the “younger” Mamluk and Ottoman bureaucracies are discussed. It is perhaps easier to understand Fukuyama’s omissions if we see them in the

not erased, a Byzantium is produced in a manner that fits well with modern agendas, and completely sidesteps scholarship produced in our field.

In *Fifty Key Thinkers on History* published in 2008 by Routledge, the list of historians starts with Herodotos, Thucydides, and Polybios only to then jump by way of Livy and Tacitus to Gregory of Tours, Bede, Ibn Khaldoun, Froisart and Christine de Pizan on its way to Braudel, Hobsbawm, Foucault and Hayden White. One may argue that canons of this sort should be ignored in our post-structuralist era. Yet, deplore them as we may, such canons still inform public education and shape the consciousness of even the most deconstructive mind. That not a single Byzantine historian or for that matter Byzantinist (Gibbon of course is there) made the cut, is a reflection on our collective failure to stake a claim for our field's subject matter.

This is no exercise in self-flagellation. Excellent scholarship is produced every year in our field, covering all aspects be they cultural, political, economic, social and artistic of the Byzantine experience. Yet if asked, our colleagues in other fields will be hard pressed to name a monograph, or for that matter an article, from the kaleidoscopic array of sub-disciplines that constitute Byzantine Studies, that contributes in ground-breaking fashion to theoretical debates on identity, state-formation, and the economy while convincingly situating Byzantium at the very center of global intellectual trends. Josiah Ober and Victor Davis Hanson, to name but two scholars with a very different academic pedigrees and positions on the political spectrum, are part of modern debates on politics and war. Martha Nussbaum does pretty much the same from the vantage point of classical philosophy. And yet when Byzantium reaches a broader audience it is usually because an outsider manages the feat, as in the recent case of Kristeva with her novel *Murder in Byzantium* and Luttwak with his flawed but by now widely reviewed and read *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*²⁹.

How, then, will we make our work relevant to outsiders? How will we shape perceptions of Byzantium, its history, and culture from within Byzantine studies? How will we make sure that two eminent historians of the modern world, a well-known critic and a respected theorist will do a much

context of other works of historical sociology. Recent work, for example, has discussed the Weberian snub of Byzantium (ARNASON, *Byzantium and Historical Sociology*, 493-94).

29. E. LUTTWAK, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, Cambridge, MA 2009; A. KALDELLIS, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2010.01.49 for a comprehensive review of this work.

better job the next time they engage with our field of study? A corrective is urgent if Byzantium and Byzantine studies are to maintain a coherent presence in the imaginations of young students, future scholars, and the public at large. B&C's account, even Fuller's misguided effort, is evidence that there is a place for Byzantine studies in important modern debates. It is, however, for us to help our colleagues from different disciplines better navigate our fields of expertise. Much as the weaknesses in their work are not solely theirs, the benefits from such correction would also be collective.

THE OUTSIDER'S GAZE:
REFLECTIONS ON RECENT NON-BYZANTINIST READINGS OF
BYZANTINE HISTORY AND ON THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR FIELD

The present essay reviews recent work on Byzantium, its politics, religion, and culture published outside the world of Byzantine Studies and discusses the significance of such readings for the evolving relationship of our field with audiences both lay and academic.