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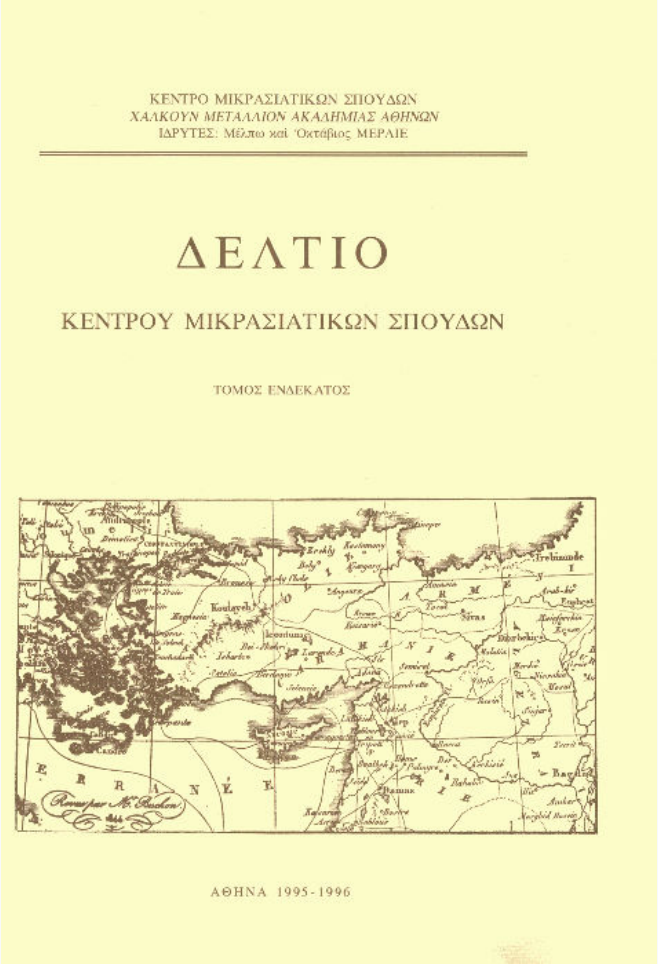

Byzance apres Byzance revisited: Changing perspectives on Europe's Byzantine heritage

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BYZANCE APRÈS BYZANCE REVISITED

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE'S BYZANTINE HERITAGE*

When in 1935 Nicolae Iorga coined the term «Byzance après Byzance» in the title of one of the great classics of Balkan historiography, at one masterful stroke he accomplished two things. First he defined a whole field of research, by supplying a structure of subjects and concepts delineating the political and cultural experience of the Orthodox society of Southeastern Europe roughly in the period 1453-1789. Iorga ascribed scholarly respectability to this field of «post-Byzantine» studies by connecting its defining features to the «permanence of Byzantine forms». He suggested in other words that what was seen hirtherto as a period of enslavement and degradation could in fact be recognized as a lingering survival of the traditions of the great Christian empire, whose rehabilitation in European historiography had just been accomplished by a generation of great scholars at the close of the nineteenth century –Schlumberger, Diehl, Krumbacher, Bury and Kondakov– to mention but the best known.

Secondly, Iorga's conception of the permanence of Byzantine forms, by responding to a deeper preoccupation in the cultural life of Southeastern Europe at the time, helped to articulate a much needed framework of self-definition. The idea of «Byzance-après Byzance», once it percolated from scholarship to a wider literate public, contributed to the self-awareness of the societies of the region, which after the crises of the First World War and its aftermath were still going through the painful process of the elaboration of their collective identity. The idea of «Byzance après Byzance» enabled the collective conscience of the new national societies of the Balkans to incorporate the period of Ottoman rule as an integral part of their heritage, since the basic forms of cultural and spiritual life inherited from their Christian past could now be seen to have had a continuous existence even under the yoke of infidel despotism.

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*Moderator's Introductory Report to Plenary Session IV: «Image and Influence of Byzantium after 1453 in the Scholarly World and in the World at Large», XIX International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Copenhagen 23 August 1996.

Thus the understanding of post-Byzantine culture can be seen to have followed a trajectory parallel to that of the understanding of Byzantium itself: from the rejection associated with the Enlightenment and its legacy through the recognition connected with romanticism to the eventual repossession brought about by scholarship and identity construction in the modern state. The trajectory of Byzantine and post-Byzantine culture from rejection to recognition and reappropriation sets the agenda of our own attempt to recapture the image and influence of Byzantium after 1453 and into the modern world. Iorga's conceptualization is a useful point of departure because it forces us to rethink what exactly is meant by survival and continuity and to juxtapose these concepts with the ideas of revival and reconstruction. To what extent his own Byzantium, which lingers on under Ottoman rule, is the same Byzantium as that of the Eastern Roman Empire? In other words is the Byzantium of New Rome the same as that of Ottoman Istanbul and of the national states of twentieth century Balkans? If we pose the question in these terms we are on the way to a critical self-understanding of our own task as scholars of Byzantine and post-Byzantine culture and of the conditions that define the object of our research.

Once we take the route of reexamining the preconditions of our understanding of Byzantium we will perhaps reach a better sense of the dynamic impact of one major political factor in this whole process of intellectual construction: this is the role of the modern state. The advent of the nation-state in Southeastern Europe marked the end of the lingering survivals of Byzantine ecumenism as it was preserved by the Orthodox Church, the great monastic foundations and the Romanian and Phanariot princes and by a supranational intellectual tradition going back to Hellenistic civilization. Yet it was precisely the secular nation-states that eventually brought about the romantic resurrection of Byzantium, which appropriately reinterpreted was integrated into the new national identities in a way parallel to that of the reincorporation of the Middle Ages into European national identities in the romantic era.

At this point the divergent trajectories of the Western and Eastern parts of Europe, of the Greek East and the Latin West, were somewhat paradoxically set on a road toward cultural convergence. The Orthodox East set itself to remodel its identity on Western standards, but this remodeling, which involved the adoption of distinct national identities, also comprised the repossession of the Byzantine past as an integral component of the national heritage. At the same time the Latin and Protestant West, after repossessing its own Medieval past and thus, rather curiously, overcoming the prejudices of the Enlightenment, set on its own voyage to Byzantium, to remember W. B. Yeats, not only by means of the creative imagination of course, but by means of critical scholarship and artistic appreciation.

In both instances sailing to Byzantium was not free of tempests and disorientations. In the West prejudice dies hard and is often rekindled by power

politics and an inability to understand the Eastern half of a shared continent —to the point that iron curtains are imagined to be replaced by velvet curtains associated with the esthetics of Orthodoxy. In the East the need to elaborate genealogies and to trace lineages often leads to anachronisms, which distort our understanding of the past. Even more seriously, conflicting claims over the same heritage incite passions which obscure the significance of a shared past and break up along modern national lines the common tradition of a vibrant and resilient culture. This is where we are now from the point of view of our understanding of the Byzantine heritage in the era since 1453: the basic issue is, I believe, how the modern state, on the basis of its own political agenda, handles the heritage of Byzantine forms, in the fields of art, ideology and research.

The diverse approaches brought together in this plenary session illustrate how the identity of post-Byzantine culture has evolved over five centuries and evoke the multiple ways in which Byzantium has been constructed and reconstructed after the disappearance of the Christian Empire of New Rome. If the visual efficacy of painting, architecture and town planning provides the most immediate and perceptible evidence of the resilience and vitality involved in this continuous process of adaptation and reconstruction, the reception and constant reinterpretation of Byzantium in the literary and historiographical tradition suggests the subtle needs that had to be met with the recurring redefinition of collective identity. Finally the changing content and ideological function of institutions and forms of symbolic expression surviving from the Byzantine era, like the Church, monasticism and political thought indicate that the «permanence of Byzantine forms» evoked by N. Iorga does not denote ossification and death but dynamism and inner renewal, the vibrancy of life.