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Review of: Stamatios T. Chondrogiannis, Byzantium in the World. Artistic, Cultural and Ideological Legacy from the 19th to the 21st Century

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Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

Stamatios T. Chondrogiannis,

*BYZANTIUM IN THE WORLD: ARTISTIC, CULTURAL AND
IDEOLOGICAL LEGACY FROM THE 19TH TO THE 21ST CENTURY,*

Thessaloniki: Centre for Byzantine Research, Aristotle University of
Thessaloniki, 2017, 351 pages, 375 illustrations.

The present study by Stamatios Chondrogiannis, one of the most vibrant, creative forces in the Archaeological Service of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports and who has dedicated more than 30 years of his life to the study, management and promotion of Byzantine cultural heritage, is loosely based on his doctoral thesis, presented in 2014 at the Ionian University in Corfu. The book is prefaced by Athanasios Semoglou, Professor of Byzantine Archaeology and Art, and Aristotelis Mentzos, Professor of Byzantine Archaeology, of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and also includes a foreword by the author. It offers, in five richly illustrated chapters, a global and comprehensive scholarly approach of the reception and perception of the memory of the Byzantine Empire (330–1453) and of its tangible and intangible heritage, since the mid-fifteenth century, in Europe and the US. Special emphasis is placed on these issues in modern

Greece, being by virtue of its language and literature “the first among equal heirs to Byzantium” (p. 309). Finally, the volume closes with an afterword, a list of 70 worldwide temporary exhibitions on Byzantium from 1859 to 2016, lists of photographic credits and a bibliography, three indexes (places, terms and names) and a summary in Greek.

In the first introductory chapter, “Byzantium from the Fall of Constantinople to the 19th Century”, the author underlines the continuous interest – be it a positive or negative – of Western Europeans in Byzantium, since the mid-fifteenth century, and Byzantium’s impact on European humanism and the Renaissance. After examining the devaluation of Byzantium in the eighteenth century due to the Enlightenment, Chondrogiannis explores its re-evaluation within the redefinition of the Middle Ages during the nineteenth century under Romanticism. The last section of this chapter is dedicated to the

efforts to systematise the protection and study of antiquities in the modern Greek state, in the age of Governor Ioannis Kapodistrias and of King Otto, stressing the fact that Byzantium remained constantly in the shadow of classical antiquity, with all its negative consequences for Byzantine and post-Byzantine monuments.

In the next chapter, “The Revival of Byzantium in Europe from the Second Half of the 19th Century”, Chondrogiannis discusses the process by which Byzantine history was included as an organic “middle” chapter in Greek history, in the second half of the nineteenth century, to support the national narrative of the uninterrupted continuity of the Greek nation. He then turns to Western Europe to highlight its new vivid interest in medieval art and architectural styles – Romanesque, Gothic and Byzantine – inspired by Romanticism, and their reproduction in new versions, variants and syntheses. The survey of the spread of the neo-Byzantine style and its ideological background by means of numerous characteristic examples of architecture and wall decoration in mosaic and fresco, in the German kingdoms, Austro-Hungary, Britain and Ireland, France, Russia and the Balkan countries (including Greece), masterly documented by photographs, leaves the reader in no doubt as to Byzantium’s revival in nineteenth-century culture at an international level.

This chapter also refers to the key events that marked the beginnings of scholarly recognition and research on Byzantium: the establishment of the first university chairs for Byzantine Studies, one in Munich (1892) and another in Paris (1899), the appearance of *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* (1892), the

first journal of Byzantine studies, and the foundation of the Russian Archaeological Institute of Constantinople (1895). Along with the scientific approach to Byzantium, historical novels presented an imaginary Byzantine world, either full of splendour and intrigue or extremely religious.

In the following sections of this chapter, Chondrogiannis examines new developments and attitudes to Byzantium in Greece in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, linked to its theoretical and ideological redefinition as an organic part of the national history: the founding and activities of two scientific bodies, the Christian Archaeological Society and the Historical and Ethnological Society, engaged in the study and preservation of the Byzantine past, the earliest legislative framework (decrees of 1897 and 1902, the “archaeological” laws of 1834 and 1899) for the protection of Byzantine cultural heritage, the establishment of a state Ephor of Christian and Medieval Antiquities (1908), the foundation of the first chair of Byzantine Archaeology and Art at the University of Athens (1912), and the initial restorations of Byzantine monuments. Special mention is made of the founding of the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens (1914) and its first exhibition (1924), arranged in five galleries on the ground floor of the Athens Academy, the permanent home of this museum – the mansion of the Frenchwoman Sophie de Marbois-Lebrun, Duchess of Plaisance, widely known as Villa Iliissia – and of its permanent exhibition there, inaugurated on 17 December 1930.

The third chapter “Byzantium within the International Context of the 20th Century”, focuses on the reception of Byzantium mainly in the first half of

the twentieth century. Its first section discusses the first few exhibitions of Byzantine art organised from 1859 to 1940. Tsarist Russia was the first country in the world to organise exhibitions on Byzantine art and culture (1859 and 1861) and Chondrogiannis interprets this fact on the basis of the close Russian relationship to Byzantium since the tenth century and claim of succession to this glorious Christian empire after its fall to the Ottomans. These two nineteenth-century Russian shows were followed by three exhibitions in France (1900, 1901 and 1931), given that it dynamically promoted Byzantine studies, and two in Italy (1904 and 1911), a country with a share in Byzantine cultural heritage. The next section is dedicated to the North American encounter with Byzantium in the late nineteenth century. Although the New World had no historical relationship to Byzantium, its “discovery” in the US led to an extensive spread of neo-Byzantine style in architecture and decoration, the organisation of two major exhibitions on Byzantine civilisation (1937 and 1947), an intensive interest in purchasing Byzantine artefacts for museums and private collections, the formal establishment of Byzantine Studies in universities, the foundation of the Byzantine Institute of America, whose most notable activity was the uncovering and restoration of the Byzantine mosaics of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, and a number of archaeological excavations on Byzantine sites. These developments were related, according to Chondrogiannis, with America’s subsequent progression from a “provincial country” to a major international power and its relevant ideology and strategies. After World

War II, American interest in Byzantium declined, confined merely to university and academic circles due to the Byzantine connections with the Slavic nations that formed the Eastern Bloc. The next two sections deal with the institution of the International Congress of Byzantine Studies in 1924 and the attitude of interwar Greece to Byzantium, with an emphasis on the state ideology, legislation and official management of Byzantium, the “return to one’s roots” spiritual and artistic movement and the Generation of the Thirties, as well as Byzantine influences on secular and, notably, religious architecture and art.

In the next chapter, “The Reception of Byzantium after the Second World War”, Chondrogiannis notes that the intensive early twentieth-century interest in Byzantine aesthetics declined in the initial post-war decades as a result of the new social and geopolitical dynamics. Byzantine Studies remained, however, a vibrant scholarly branch of the humanities that brought once again Byzantium to the fore in the last quarter of the century. Since 1985, UNESCO has added numerous Byzantine monuments and sites in many countries to its World Cultural Heritage list. The two following sections present the Greek administrative system for the protection and management of Byzantine monuments and sites as well as the 28 Byzantine museums and collections in Greece.

The last 70 years have seen the organisation, in various European and American cities, of numerous exhibitions on Byzantium, which accentuated its major political role as a multi-national Christian empire in the Greco-Roman East and its crucial cultural contribution

to the formation of European identity. In the last sections of this chapter, Chondrogiannis provides us with a selective detailed catalogue of 70 exhibitions on Byzantium based on the study of their catalogues, especially the introductions, given that they usually refer to an exhibition's purpose, content and intended message. Key shows, inter alia, are the Ninth Exhibition of the Council of Europe in Athens ("Byzantine Art: A European Art", 1964), the exhibition trilogy at the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York ("Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, 3rd-7th Century," 1977; "The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, AD 843-1261," 1997; "Byzantium: Faith and Power, 1261-1557," 2004), and the exhibition triptych "Byzantine Hours" in Athens, Thessaloniki and Mystras (2001-2002). A feature of the majority of exhibitions on Byzantium worth mentioning is their large number of visitors – the exhibition "Byzantium through the Centuries" at the State Hermitage Museum (St Petersburg, 2016) was attended by more than 1.5 million people – testifying to the contemporary growth of interest in Byzantium worldwide, which is closely related with geopolitical changes.

The last chapter, "Byzantium at the Turn of the Millennium in Greece: Corfu as a Representative Case", addresses the cultural management of the Byzantine past in Corfu. This Ionian island, which combines a unique natural beauty with a significant cultural heritage, is an international tourist destination and, therefore, a place of notable economic importance. Corfu, having been under Western rule from the thirteenth to early

nineteenth centuries,¹ has a special cultural identity, with many Western features. Since Corfu is the only Ionian island which did not experience destruction in the earthquakes of 1953, many Byzantine monuments, a number of which have been subject to interventions and alterations in post-Byzantine times, have been preserved. The author argues that the island's Byzantine and post-Byzantine legacy entered the orbit of the Greek state's concern with a considerable delay, in the last two decades of the twentieth century. During this period, given that in 1994, within the framework of the Greek Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the island hosted an EU summit, the Corfu Office of Antiquities of the Ministry of Culture implemented noteworthy policies for the restoration and management of Byzantine and post-Byzantine monuments and museums. It was against this background that the building complex of the fifteenth-century church of Antivouniotissa was exemplarily restored, to serve as a monument-church-museum with permanent exhibitions of post-Byzantine icons,² gospels and

¹ Byzantine Corfu passed to the French House of Anjou in 1267 and was peacefully annexed by the Republic of Venice in 1386. It remained under the Venetians until 1797, when it was ceded to the French (1797-1799). It later became capital of a self-governing federation under Russian-Ottoman control. In 1815 the Ionian Islands became a British protectorate, known as the United States of the Ionian Islands, and were finally united with modern Greece in 1864.

² With the exception of one icon, which dates to the first half of the fifteenth century (p. 265).

liturgical items; the buildings of the Old Fortress were restored and in one of them – the south groin-vaulted hall in the Main Gate complex – the permanent exhibition “Byzantine Collection of Corfu” was organised; the church of St George in the Old Fortress, built in 1940, hosted a number of large-scale temporary exhibitions on Byzantine art; the pilot programme “Archaeological Tour of the Byzantine Monuments of Palaiopolis” – a project for the intervention on and enhancement of Byzantine monuments at a major archaeological site of Corfu – was planned and implemented as part of the EU’s Second Community Support Programme (CSF); finally, also within the framework of the Second CSF, the Byzantine fortress of Angelokastro was restored and a series of Byzantine and post-Byzantine monuments were repaired, restored or conserved. A large-scale map of the city of Corfu and its

outskirts indicating the location of the monuments and museums in question would have been very useful to the reader.

In approaching the reception and perception of Byzantium since Byzantium, and aptly interpreting their relationship with well-known, unknown or even superficially known social, political, ideological and aesthetic trends in the international environment, this must-read book takes us on a trip around the world. Pessimistic readers will measure the many losses in the material remains of the brilliant Byzantine civilisation and the weaknesses in its management. Optimists will appreciate that fortunately, despite so many vicissitudes, the “utopia of Byzantium” is a living one.

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