BOOK REVIEW


We live in an age of introductions (from Very Short to medium), handbooks and companions. In Byzantine history, at least, the blockbuster textbook in which a single author tries to cover a large part of everything seems to have run its course with Warren Treadgold’s A History of Byzantine State and Society (1997). The trend in the twenty-first century has been towards team ventures led by more or less interventionist editors. The results have been varied, and mixed. The market for anodyne, minimal information on a comprehensive range of predictable subjects has been comfortably supplied by the Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies (2008). The present volume therefore had the good fortune to be commissioned by Routledge at a time when the more obvious approaches had been tried, and the niche for something different was beginning to gape. Although Paul Stephenson was apparently unaware that his project coincided with another consciously innovative publication (A Companion to Byzantium, edited by Liz James, 2010), there is almost no overlap, even in the cases of the three authors who have contributed to both volumes. Comparison is difficult and not called for here, but in so far as one may discern generally distinguishing features, I would hazard the crass generalisation that, while A Companion breaks new ground mainly in terms of themes and methodology, the originality of The Byzantine World lies in the wealth of new insights it provides through the medium of more traditional research.

The editor, who himself contributes three chapters in addition to a general introduction, shepherds his team of thirty-three with short introductions to each of the four main sections—(I) The Byzantines in their World; (II) The Written World; (III) Heaven on Earth: Byzantine Art and Architecture; and (IV) The World of Byzantine Studies. Despite these interventions, there is little uniformity, and each author does his/her own thing in his/her own way, leading to a rich diversity of contributions that range from surveys of large issues (such as Cécile Morrisson on ‘Money, Coins and the Economy’) to studies of single texts (Alice-Mary Talbot on The Miracles of Gregory Palamas by Philotheos Kokkinos). Broad-brush historical generalisation (Michael Angold on ‘The Byzantine Political Process at Crisis Point’) consorts with close argumentation on the use of terminology (Günter Prinzing, ‘On Slaves and Slavery’). While most contributions are based on received wisdom, one (Leonora Neville on ‘Strong Women and their Husbands’) is deliberately partial, and another (Bissera Pentcheva on performative icons) blithely experimental in the close reading of the evidence.

I read every chapter with pleasure, nodding much more frequently than I tutted, and I came away with the sense of having consumed a very full feast for the mind, with very little déjà vu et lu. It was gratifying to find, at last, short authoritative surveys to which one can refer students on such essential Byzantine subjects as palace ceremonial (J.M. Featherstone), military treatises (Denis Sullivan), spiritual literature (Joseph Munitiz), and the layout of
liturgical space (Vassilis Marinis). It was also a delight to find chapters devoted to side issues which had always intrigued me, such as multiculturalism in Byzantine southern Italy (Youval Rotman) and the architectural ‘imitations’ of the church of the Holy Apostles (Tassos Papacostas).

However, I am left wondering whether a volume that satisfies the jaded appetite of a Byzantinist who has spent more than forty years in the trade is necessarily the best introduction to Byzantium for a newcomer. Central themes of Byzantine civilisation are covered very briefly or not at all: there is little on the agricultural and commercial economy, social structures and dynamics, silk manufacture, and book production. In terms of geography, there is some attention to the empire’s periphery and beyond (Rotman, Jonathan Shepard, Thomas Dale), but nothing on its provincial heartlands apart from a discussion of fortifications in the area of Thessaloniki (Nikolas Bakirtzis), and the importance of Armenia and Georgia is nowhere apparent. The church, theology, monasticism and the cult of saints occupy a modest space which does not reflect the place of religion in Byzantium. The issue of change or stagnation in Byzantine civilisation is confronted (Johann P. Arnason), but at a rather abstract level, and the distinctive character of the late period (1204–1453) does not emerge. While the uninitiated may read fascinating essays on performative icons (Pentcheva) and unorthodox art (Henry Maguire), they are given only an oblique introduction to mainstream religious iconography (Warren Woodfin on the representation of hierarchy), and they get almost no idea of Byzantine monumental painting and mosaic. One almost has the sense that the authors went out of their way to avoid the basic and the obvious, to leave aside the subjects that are the focus of other recent general publications, which include the catalogues of a series of exhibitions on Byzantine art. At the same time, one senses that since their brief was to communicate their own research interests, they have managed to convey what makes Byzantium interesting to them, and they do so without preaching. So, although this volume cannot be the first or the only port of call for those who are sailing to Byzantium for the first time, it is an indispensable destination on their itinerary, which will hopefully persuade some to remain, and others to recommend the trip to their friends.

Stephenson does not avoid the usual gripe about Byzantium being marginalised and misunderstood, but he gives it a sophisticated European twist. He and his team perhaps succeed better than previous gripers in showing why readers of the *English Historical Review* should have more time for Byzantine history.

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