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The Mirror of Heaven: Church, State, and Society in the Byzantine Empire

My Byzantinophilia began with the word.

Before I knew the men and women – the Constantines and Justinians and Theodoras – who ruled from Constantinople as God’s shadow on Earth for over a millennium, before I began hungrily consuming every scrap of their history I could come by, the very music of the word “Byzantium” communicated an almost *a priori* sense of brilliant imperial glory, shining in the otherwise dim twilight of the Dark Ages.

Or at least this is how I internally rationalize why I was otherwise irrationally drawn into my first encounter with the Byzantine Empire. At the age of thirteen, I wandered into the visiting “Glory of Byzantium” exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. Through my Latin classes, I heard of Byzantium distantly: the modern shorthand for the Greek-speaking eastern half of the Roman Empire, which survived the fall of Rome by roughly 1,000 years. I was vaguely aware of the opprobrium heaped on Byzantium by Edward Gibbon and his disciples as a sybarite, effete, oriental despotism – a traitor to its heritage of Roman virtue. But confronted unexpectedly by the color, richness, and dynamism of Byzantine artistic expressions, I became instantly fascinated with this civilization that seemed to confound all my youthful prejudices of historical category: it was at once Classical and Medieval, Western and Eastern, Greek and Roman and Christian.

It is after this first encounter, in the museum bookstore, that I acquired my first book on Byzantine politics (which still sits in a place of honor on my shelves): *The Last Centuries of Byzantium*, by Donald Nicol. The cover bears an image of Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (1347 – 1354) from a fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript, dressed in his imperial costume derived from the Roman toga, holding a scroll in his hand, and surrounded by churchmen and state officials. At the top of this illumination is an epigraph in Attic Greek, and the background is gilded in gold leaf, as are John VI’s bejeweled crown and robes. Little did I understand at the time, but this image would prove to be a symbolic road map of sorts for my future collecting of Byzantine political history. It demonstrates the important role of imperial authority across religious and temporal spheres of activity, the legendary wealth of Byzantium, the relatively high degree of literacy within the empire, and the Classical Hellenic and Orthodox Christian threads woven together into the coherent and peculiar tapestry of “Byzantine” civilization. Each of these various elements forms an essential ingredient in the complex interrelation of tradition and

renewal that helped defined the politics of Byzantium, and each in turn animates and educates my book collecting.

After devouring Nicole's *The Last Centuries of Byzantium* I sought out every book on the politics of the Byzantine Empire I could find. I was possessed by all things Byzantine. Throughout my high school career, I was known as "that Byzantium kid" (even though the nickname, almost invariably, was followed by the question "what's Byzantium?") Even my closest friends would roll their eyes when I revisited one of my frequent polemics on how maligned the Byzantines were by the western historical cannon. In the words of Sir Steven Runciman: "ever since our rough Crusading forefathers first saw Constantinople and met, to their contemptuous disgust, a society where everyone read and wrote, ate food with forks, and preferred diplomacy to war, it has been fashionable to pass the Byzantines by with scorn." I was on a crusade of my own, not only to understand the political systems of the empire, but to convince my peers of how much we owe our Byzantine antecedents – and my weapons were my books.

My search for Byzantium and passion for books has taken me abroad, where in the course of excavating at Byzantine archaeological sites in Bulgaria (2006, 2007), Macedonia (2008), and Turkey (2009), I've returned home each time with bags full of new books. In Sofia, Tarnovo, Plovdiv, Skopje, Ohrid, and Ankyra – each a Byzantine city, each with extant traces of a Byzantine past – I fanatically sought out bookstores and bought every English text I could find (and quite a few not in English). And yet, with every successive book I read, my literary conquests become more careful and informed. My initial preoccupations with the character of the emperors themselves lead me into a study of the Byzantine army, which in turn brought me to readings on the Byzantine bureaucracy, ultimately opening me to more involved topics of provincial administration, imperial ideology, and the relationship between state and society. As new intricacies and questions reveal themselves to me, new directions for my collection take shape.

My first visit to Istanbul this past summer has shown me just how inadequate my collection is, and how much remains to be acquired and learned. Walking beneath the monumental dome of the Hagia Sophia, and realizing how little I understand about the Orthodox liturgy so essential to Byzantine civilization, has driven me to pursue future literary acquisitions in Byzantine theology, such as the works of Athanasios the Great, Gregory Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom. Studying maps of Istanbul, and appreciating how its urban fabric is still tailored by the foundations of Constantinople, has directed my gaze towards rare publications on the Byzantine city, such as those of David Winfield and Clive Foss, to buttress my collection.

I continue to grab at every new Byzantine book that comes to my attention, but I crave to expand my collection with interdisciplinary studies such as the *Cambridge History of Byzantium*, as well as primary sources such as John Skylitzes' *Historia* and the writings of the Nicene Church fathers. Works like these, to me, hold a key for understanding Byzantine state and society in all

its thrilling complexity. History cannot simply be a mirror reflecting our own biases; rather, we must strive to engage historical phenomena on their own terms. This principle is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in rich but much-maligned heritage of Byzantium, and I endeavor to represent and convey the varied elements of Byzantine civilization in my book collection. Of course, such a goal is almost untenably lofty. Yet, as the Byzantine theologian Maximos the Confessor tells us, the very act of returning to where we begin can in itself be a form of ascent; so I persist in reading and collecting, happy in the knowledge that I have come no closer to the end of my searching than when I first heard the word.

My Collection

Reference Materials:

A Social History of Byzantium. Ed. John Haldon. Maldon: Blackwell Publishing, 2009.

Advances in Byzantine History. Ed. Johnathan Harris. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.

Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen through Contemporary Eyes. Ed. Deno Jihn Geanakopolis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

The Early Middle Ages: Europe 400-1000. Ed. Rosamond McKitterick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium. 3 vols. Eds. Alexander P. Khazdan, Alice-Mary Talbot, Anthony Cutler, Timothy E. Gregory, Nancy P. Sevcenko. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Three volumes, all in excellent condition. The *ODB* is the “crown jewel”, so to speak, of my collection. Weighing in at 2,332 pages and constructed with the collaboration of every major living Byzantinist, the *ODB* is the definitive go-to guide for all things Byzantine, and its extensive bibliography guides both my research and book collecting. It is likewise the capstone to the career of Alexander P. Khazdan, Director of Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Research Library in Washington D. C., and arguably one of the (if not *the*) most important Byzantine scholars of the twentieth century, who died in 1992, shortly after its publication. My mother gave it to me for my birthday last year, and so my volumes have a special, very personal significance to me – in addition to their great utility and importance.

Macedonia: Documents and Materials. Trans. and Ed. Voin Bozhinov and L. Panayotov. Sofia: 1978.

One volume, in fair to poor condition. Perhaps the most curious piece on my shelves, I found this extremely rare collection of translated primary source material relating to the geographic region of Macedonia during my 2007 stay in Sofia, Bulgaria. There is a great booksellers market in one of Sofia’s main squares in the “old town” (near Alexander Nevsky Cathedral) every Thursday; this book was by far the most rewarding of my finds. It was put into print by the Communist government of Todor Zhivkov for roughly six months in 1978, as part of a propaganda piece highlighting the medieval domination of modern Macedonia by the Bulgarian Empire; to this extent, Bozhinov and Panayotov (both prominent medievalists at the University of Sofia) translated a number of rare Byzantine and early Bulgarian documents into English – many never translated before or since – to woo the hearts and minds of international scholars. The diplomatic row this volume caused between Bulgaria and the Tito regime in Yugoslavia caused the book to be pulled from the presses after only a short period, making it extremely rare.

Radings in Late Antiquity. 2nd ed. Ed. Michael Maas. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Primary Sources:

Comnena, Anna. *The Alexiad*. Trans. E. R. A. Seweter. New York: Penguin, 1969.

Constantine VII. *De Administrando Imperio*. Trans. Romilly Jenkins. Ed. Gyula Moravcsik. Washington D. C.: Dumarton Oaks, 2008.

Excellent condition. My favorite primary text, composed by one of my favorite Byzantine emperors. Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos (913 – 959), commonly referred to as the “Scholar Emperor”, was the most academically prolific of all eighty-nine Roman Emperors to reign from Constantinople, as his moniker suggests. He composed this treatise as an ethnographic survey of the empire’s foes; the text is peppered with anecdotes, as well as practical tips for conducting diplomacy with external forces and playing various foes off against one-another (a key component of Byzantine foreign policy). Absolutely essential for understanding the complex strategies behind Byzantine diplomacy, as well as being a sincerely exciting text to read, this copy is also luckily bi-lingual, with the original Attic Greek juxtaposed on the obverse page with its English translation. I translated Constantine’s introduction to the text from Greek and compared it to the present translation as part of my studying for my Attic Greek final exam in Fall Quarter.

Climacus, John. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Trans. Colm Luibheid. New York: Paulist Press, 1985.

Excellent condition. Beginning as a letter to a fellow monk, Climacus’ work has become the single most popular piece of Orthodox theology produced in the Byzantine period. To this day, the text is normally read in full at the Greek Orthodox Easter service. I sought this text out after first hearing just such a reading.

Choniates, Niketas. *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*. Trans. Harry J. Magoulias. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984.

The Digenis Akritas. Trans. and Ed. By Elizabeth Jeffreys. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Good condition. The *Digenis Akritas* is the most famous Byzantine epic poem, and the only extant example of the otherwise lost Byzantine tradition of oral epics. First recorded in the twelfth-century, it currently survives in five versions, each with unique variations. This edition translates the two most well known versions: the Gottefferatta and Escorial texts. Also bi-lingual, so it includes both the original Demotic (vernacular) Greek of the text, as well as Elizabeth Jeffrey’s superb English translation.

Ibn Battuta. *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*. Trans. and Ed. Samuel Lee. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004.

Very good condition. The travel chronicle from a 14th century Arab from North Africa. He visited Constantinople, and describes the court of Andronikos III Palaiologos (1328 – 1341) in great detail. This text is a direct reprint of the original 1829 translation by the Rev. Samuel Lee, and retains the original cover-page and typescript. A very hard translation to find, but still surprisingly readable despite being nearly 200 years old.

John of Damascus. *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*. Trans. Andrew Louth. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003.

Julian. *The Works of the Emperor Julian, Volume II*. 2nd ed. Trans. Wilmer Cave Wright. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Very good condition. Part of the superb Loeb Classical Library collection; like all books of this species, it contains a bi-lingual text: both the Emperor Julian's original and eloquent Attic Greek, and Wright's somewhat less eloquent but competent English translation.

Kinnamos, John. *The Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus*. Trans. Charles M. Brand. New York: Columbia University Press, 1976.

Leo the Deacon. *The History of Leo the Deacon*. Trans. Alice-Mary Talbot and Denis F. Sullivan. Washington D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2005.

Liudprand of Cremona. *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona*. Trans. Paolo Squatriti. Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007.

Maximus the Confessor. *Selected Writings*. Trans. George C. Berthold. New York: Paulist Press, 1985.

Maurice. *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*. Trans. George T. Dennis. Pennsylvania: University of Philadelphia Press, 1984.

Very Good condition. A key military and ethnographic work, purportedly written by the Emperor Maurice (582 – 602) as a field manual for generals. To this extent, Maurice goes through each enemy on the borders of the empire (Slavs, Avars, Franks, Persians), outlines their equipment and tactics in great detail, and then advises how best to counter their strengths and exploit their weaknesses. It is likewise the first "mixed-arms" military work extant, worldwide – meaning it combines cavalry, infantry, and archery tactics, not simply discusses each separately. Necessary for any understanding of the early Byzantine military, as well as useful when understanding more political-social questions of how soldiers understood their place in the Byzantine world, and issues of numbers, supplies, and infrastructure logistics.

Palamas, Gregory. *The Triads*. Trans. Nicholas Gendle. New York: Paulist Press, 1983.

Procopius. *The Secret History*. Trans. G. A. Williamson. New York: Penguin, 1966.

Psellos, Michael. *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*. Trans. E. R. A. Sewter. New York: Penguin, 1966.

Pseudo-Dionysios. *The Complete Works*. Trans. Colm Luibheid. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

Robert of Clari. *The Conquest of Constantinople*. Trans. Edgar Holmes McNeal. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Symeon the New Theologian. *The Discourses*. Trans. J. C. de Cantazaro. New York: Paulist Press, 1980.

Theodore the Studite. *On the Holy Icons*. Trans. Catherine P. Roth. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981.

Theophanes, *The Cronicle of Theophanes*. Trans. Harry Turtledove. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

Villehardouin, Geoffrey de. *Joinville and Villehardouin: Chronicles of the Crusades*. Trans. R. M. B. Shaw. New York: Penguin, 1963.

The account of the Fourth Crusade and Sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204, related by one of the main Champaignian lords participating on the crusade: Geoffroi de Villehardouin. Oddly, the text was written in Champaignian dialect (later to become the foundation of standard modern French) instead of Latin – scholars such as Walter Kaegi have thus suggested that it was intended as a propaganda piece, to stimulate common Frenchmen to join the Crusader forces occupying Constantinople. Penguin has just released a new translation of Villehardouin's account; however, I much prefer M. B. Shaw's older version, although the lack of a general index in this volume can be frustrating.

Secondary Sources:

Angold, Michael. *The Byzantine Empire, 1025 – 1204*. Longman: New York, 1984.

Angold, Michael. *Church and Society in Byzantium Under the Comneni, 1081 – 1261*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Excellent condition. I bought this relatively rare volume (now out of print) while in Istanbul this past summer, at a small bookstore near the Great Cistern of Justinian; luckily for me, it was the only English book in the store.

Angold, Michael. *The Fourth Crusade: Event and Context*. Harlow: Longman, 2003.

Babinger, Franz. *Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. Ed. William C. Hickman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Baker, G. P. *Justinian: The Last Roman Emperor*. New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002.

Baristus, Mark C. *The Late Byzantine Army: Arms and Society, 1261 – 1453*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

Barker, John W. *Justinian and the Later Roman Empire*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966.

Barker, John W. *Manuel II Palaiologos (1391 – 1425): A Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969.

Good condition. Found in a used bookstore in Tampa, Florida, it contains a number of Manuel II's shorter writings in translation in appendix. Apparently, my text is somewhat unique in this respect; these extra translations of primary material are mysteriously not found in most versions of this text. The copy of Barker's *Manuel II* in the Regenstein Library is mysteriously lacking this useful appendices.

Barnes, Timothy D. *Athanasius and Constantine: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Baynes, N. H. and H. St. L. B. Moss. *Byzantium: An Introduction to East Roman Civilization*. London: Oxford University Press, 1961.

Bowersock, G. W. *Julian the Apostate*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

Brown, Peter. *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150 – 700*. New York: Norton, 1989.

Browning, Robert. *Byzantium & Bulgaria: A Comparative Study Across the Early Medieval Frontier*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975.

Bury, J. B. *A History of the Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene (395 A.D. to 800 A.D.)*. 2 vols. Amsterdam: Macmillan, 1966.

Cormack, Robin. *Byzantine Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Curta, Florin. *The Making of the Slavs*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Dennis, George T. *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2008.

Excellent condition. Given to me as a Hanukkah present in 2006, it contains three critical Byzantine military texts, translated and with commentary by the late George T. Dennis (who died early last month).

El Cheick, Nadia Maria. *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Fine, John V. A. *The Early Medieval Balkans*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991.

Fine, John V. A. *The Late Medieval Balkans*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Gibbon, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 2 vols. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1955.

Two volumes, both in good to fair condition. As the first complete history of the Byzantine Empire ever written in Western Europe – published in six volumes between 1776 and 1788 – Gibbon remains a necessary element of any literary assessment of Byzantium, for better or worse. With the advent of our modern “single-volume” culture of reading (few readers remain patient enough in our Wikipedia age to tolerate a multi-volume work) it is extremely difficult to find Gibbon in an unabridged version. I was lucky enough to find these two volumes, part of the old Great Books Series published by University of Chicago in collaboration with the Encyclopaedia Britannica, at the annual Regenstein book sale last fall. These deceptively slim two volumes contain (in miniscule print) all six volumes of Gibbon’s titanic work.

Goldsworthy, Adrian. *How Rome Fell*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Gregory, Timothy E. *A History of Byzantium*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Heather, Peter. *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Haldon, John. *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Haldon, John. *Warfare, State, and Society in the Byzantine World*. Oxon: Routledge, 2005.

Harl, Kenneth W. *Coinage in the Roman Economy, 300 B.C. to A.D. 700*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Harris, Jonathan. *Constantinople: Capital of Byzantium*. New York: Continuum, 2007.

Herrin, Judith. *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Inalcik, Halil. *The Ottoman Empire in the Classical Age: 1300 – 1600*. London: Phoenix Publishing, 2000.

Inalcik, Halil and Donald Quartet. *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Vol. 1: 1300 – 1600*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Kaegi, Walter E. *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Very good condition. Given to me as a high-school graduation gift by my AP European History teacher, her kind inscription remains on the inside cover – making this one of the most personally meaningful works in my collection.

Kaegi, Walter E. *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Excellent condition. This book has the most sentimental value of any in my collection. It was given to me by Sewanee University in my junior year of high school as an award for “Passion and Excellence in the Study of History.” Written by Walter E. Kaegi, the prominent Byzantinist on the faculty at University of Chicago, it is after reading this book that I first became interested in the University. Thus, a very large part of why I am a UChicago student today is due to this book.

Kennedy, Hugh. *The Great Arab Conquests*. Philadelphia: DaCapo Press, 2007.

Kazdhan, A. P. and Ann Wharton Epstein. *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Laiou, Angeliki E., and Cecile Morrisson. *The Byzantine Economy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Lee, A. D. *War in Late Antiquity: A Social History*. Maldon: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Luttwak, Edward N. *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Magdalino, Paul. *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143 – 1180*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Mahon, Lord. *The Life of Belisarius*. Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2006.

Matthew, Donald. *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

McGreer, Eric. *Sewing the Dragons Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century*. Washington D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2008.

Mitchell, Stephen. *A History of the Later Roman Empire: A.D. 284 – 641*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Moorhead, John. *The Roman Empire Divided, 400 – 700*. New York: Longman, 2001.

Nicole, Donald M. *The Last Centuries of Byzantium*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Good condition. My very first, and in some respects still favorite, book in my Byzantine collection. Please see my essay for more information surrounding this book, and how it came into my possession. Since first buying Nicole's definitive study in 1997, I have endeavored (with modest success) to re-read it annually. More than simply being a collection of ink and paper, Nicole consistently reminds me through his excellence as a historian – and through this book's great personal value and memory – why I love Byzantium, and why I am here at University of Chicago studying to become a Byzantinist (an extremely helpful function, particularly in the dark night of finals week).

Ostrogorsky, George. *History of the Byzantine State*. 2nd ed. Trans. Joan Hussey. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969.

Poor condition. The classic, definitive single-volume history of Byzantium, outdated but still unmatched in its sophistication and academic excellence as an overview. Its poor condition (the front cover is close to falling off entirely) is due to the fact that I take this copy (heavy as it is) with me wherever I travel: thus, it has been my companion during archaeological work in Bulgaria (twice), Macedonia, Turkey, as well as accompanying me on vacation in Italy, Greece, Egypt, Jordan, France, and Israel (and bearing battle-scars of coffee stains and ink blotches from all of the above).

Runciman, Steven. *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and his Reign: A Study of Tenth-Century Byzantium*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1929.

Good condition. Very rare, this version is no longer in print. This was the late Sir Steven Runciman's (1903 – 2001) first book. Second in prominence among English Byzantinists only to Gibbon himself, Runciman is something of a hero to me for his work in combating notions of Byzantine decay in the popular imagination, as well as his remarkable eloquence and poise in both his writing and personal life – in the true gentlemanly form of a British blue-blood.

Treadgold, Warren. *A Concise History of Byzantium*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Whittow, Mark. *The Making of Byzantium, 600 – 1025*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.