

Kevin Lygo, *The Emperors of Byzantium*, with introduction by Bettany Hughes and foreword by Robert Peston. pp. 336, 180 colour ill. London: Thames and Hudson, 2022. ISBN 9780500023297, hardback \$26.38.

In the popularization of archaeology and ancient history through various media, we are familiar with many accounts of the Greek achievements, of the Roman Empire, and intertwined with it, of ancient Egypt. The strange world of Byzantium, by contrast, lacks either a sustained interest in its archaeology by the public, or the adoption of its history in popular culture. Coinciding with the West's dark ages, Byzantium is by contrast too 'Eastern'. Even within academia, Byzantium is often subsumed by 'Christian history'. While it is known to specialists, the fact that Byzantines saw themselves as *Romanoi*, Romans, generally escapes popular consciousness. There have been attempts to remedy this aporia. John Julius Norwich's voluminous trilogy, *Byzantium, the Early Years*, (1988), *Byzantium, the Apogee* (1992) and *Byzantium, The Final Years* appears to follow the narrative structure of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, in which religion was seen to bear a responsibility for the decline of the great Roman empire. The eschatological narrative of inevitable end also underlies Runciman's masterfully-written *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*. More specialist surveys provide perspectives which seek to explore how the world was seen from a Byzantine perspective, perhaps most saliently in Cyril Mango's, *Byzantium, the Empire of the New Rome*, of 1998, and Judith Herrin's more recent *Byzantium: the surprising life of a medieval empire*, of 2008. Both works fit into what Angold (2001) characterized as the "Baynesian" school of Byzantine history, in which the authors seek to bring out a Byzantine mentality, or pattern of thought – Orthodox and backward looking. This nostalgia for a past empire, and desire to retain its perceived legitimacy, was also capable of successive renaissances- revivals of institutions, legal frameworks and cultural practices, under Justinian, but also the Macedonian dynasty, before the 1204 Frankish occupation under Manuel I, who appears to have sought to rejuvenate the capital, and finally in the literary and artistic production during the final Palaeologan dynasty.

To this group of introductions to Byzantium, we now have *The Emperors of Byzantium*, written by the ITV Director of Television, Kevin Lygo, with a vivid preface by Bettany Hughes and a foreword by Robert Peston. Peston emphasizes something that Lygo brings out in many passages, that we owe to

Byzantium the world that we have inherited, that the Byzantines, through long centuries of struggle, were able to blunt, then wear down, the incursions and invasions of wave after wave of barbarian tribes, the attempts to achieve world rulership of the Sasanian Persians, and the Arab invasions from the seventh century. Hughes notes how the West has traditionally denigrated this contribution as bulwark, as well as its cultural contribution, both Byzantine and Eastern, passed onto the West through trade and migration.

As the book's title suggests, Lygo charts the history of the empire through accounts of its long line of monarchs, starting from Constantine I in 324 and ending with Constantine XI Dragases in May 1453, dying in battle at the hands of the troops of Mehmet II Fatih, 'The Conqueror'. Focusing on this line of 'tall poppies' does not, however, reveal much about the often incremental and sometimes sudden changes in the Byzantine society that they ruled. Thus, that remarkable outlier, Julian the Apostate, the last pagan ruler of Rome, is dismissed as "simply out of step with the times". However, as his contemporary chronicler Libanius seems to suggest, his death in battle with the Sasanians interrupted what could have been a remarkable reign. Indeed, one wonders how the times might have been altered by a Julianic victory, not least by a revival of the arts and sciences by the efforts of this highly learned man. However, if after Julian Christianity was replacing the old religions, certainly paganism was to survive the purges of the Theodosians until at least the reign of Justinian I, under whom two scholars trained in Roman sciences and mathematics were able to erect what would remain the largest church in the Christian world for a millennium.

Thus, one should perhaps not construct retrospective narratives of decline or cultural ascent. Returning to Julian's reign, it is apparent that Byzantium was not a self-contained world, but rather was interconnected through trade, conflict and intellectual exchange with both the so-called 'barbarian peoples', but also with empires of equivalent sophistication, such as the Sasanians, with whom there was, as Canepa has demonstrated (2010), a considerable exchange of ideas, motifs and artistic genres, an exchange which dated back as far as the conquests of Alexander the Great, who remained a model for Roman emperors and then those of Constantinople. This historical perspective was not lost to the Byzantine imperium. As late as the tenth century, that scholarly emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, in compiling a treatise of imperial ceremonies, noted that to forget their forms over the long duration of the empire was to descend into chaos. To revive the traditions

of ancestral customs was to set up in the palace “a radiant and newly cleaned mirror” through which power will be exercised “with order and beauty” (*DeCer.* I, Preface).

This is clearly a book emerging from the author’s deep interest in the subject, so it is somewhat unfortunate that we do not read of exactly why he has chosen to construct this long narrative of imperial rule. What are the themes and patterns which can be compared with, or be found to intersect with, the *longue durée*, the evolving historical structures of other periods, mentalities and geographies? – the world of the crusades, the Muslim invasions, as current scholars are exploring through their studies of fluid networks of cultural, trade and political interaction, such as the Mediterranean world, or the intersecting identities of the Persians and Central Asia? However, there is something very familiar in Lygo’s narrative focused upon the reign of emperors, and the major events that take place in their reigns – it is of course the structure of the Byzantine chronicles themselves which, as Roger Scott has noted, were characterized by drawing upon previous accounts, preserving good stories, and by their use as propaganda – only changing the story if they, or their patrons, thought it contained an error, or an unpalatable truth (Scott 2009). Examples he gives range from Malalas to Theophanes and Psellos’ *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*. So, can we understand this book as a chronicle of sorts, rather than a history? It certainly contains some great stories. This book then will bring to life a strange and alien society for both general readers and students. Could it perhaps reappear as a documentary series, narrated by Bettany Hughes?

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Vicky Foskolou and Sophia Kalopissi-Verti (eds) *Intercultural Encounters in Medieval Greece after 1204: The Evidence of Art and Material Culture*. Byzantios: Studies in Byzantine History and Civilization. pp. 572, with 35 colour + 245 b/w ill. Turnhout: Brepols, 2022. ISBN: 978-2-503-59850-5, paperback €95.00.

The origins of this volume can be traced back to a roundtable discussion on the archaeological and

artistic evidence for interrelations between Latins and Greeks in post-1204 Greece and the Aegean, held at the 23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies, in Belgrade in 2016. Despite recent advances in the field, the art and material culture of medieval Greece have been studied in a rather piecemeal fashion, and the roundtable discussion highlighted the need for a more unified approach to the question of cross-cultural interactions, which is what the present volume aims to achieve. Indeed, in bringing together fourteen chapters on various aspects of artistic production, architecture and archaeology, including contributions on understudied areas, such as song and music, and dress and fashion, the volume certainly succeeds in this endeavour.

The chapters are coherently organised into three parts. Part I – ‘Tracing the Latin Identities and the Role of the Mendicants’ – explores the presence of Westerners in Latin Greece, through their artistic activities and patronage, Parts II and III – ‘Social Transformations and Mutual Approaches’ and ‘Cultural Interactions and Byzantine Responses’ – both focus on the impact that coexistence between Latins and local Greeks had on society and everyday life, through the prism of archaeology and material culture in the case of Part II, and architecture, murals and icon painting in the case of Part III.

Part I consists of five chapters, and is kicked off by Michalis Olympios’ study into mendicant churches in Frankish Greece, with particular focus on the balance which the orders had to strike between their commitment to apostolic poverty, and their congregations’ desire for lay burials and commemoration, especially those of wealthy patrons. As the author argues, the pragmatic approach that the mendicants developed very much reflected that which they had adopted in other regions of Europe. The next chapter, by Vicky Foskolou, re-examines three typically-western iconographic subjects found in Orthodox churches on Venetian Crete: the giant figure of St Christopher carrying the infant Christ on his shoulder, the flayed St Bartholomew and the Throne of Grace. Foskolou shows that all three are faithful copies of Western religious works, specifically associated with the Franciscans, thus highlighting the role that the mendicants played in transferring these devotional traditions to Venetian Crete. The contribution by Nickiphoros I. Tsougarakis examines two documents written by a Capuchin friar on Crete in 1653 which describe paintings in the mendicant churches of St Francis and St Peter Martyr in Candia. As Tsougarakis explains, the Capuchin friar was not merely recording Cretan artworks, but instead using them to support the Capuchins’ claims regarding St