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**The Stream of Time Irresistible:
Byzantine Civilization
in the
Modern Popular Imagination**

Anthony T Aftonomos

**A Thesis
in
the Humanities
Program**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

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ABSTRACT

The Stream of Time Irresistible;
Byzantine Civilization in the Modern Popular Imagination

Anthony T Aftonomos, Ph.D.
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Spanning a 1,123 year period between Late Antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, the Byzantine Empire was the legitimate continuation of the *imperium Romanum*. Although the main defender of Christianity against the encroachments of Islam in the 8th- and 9th-centuries and the bulwark of Western Europe until 1204, knowledge of Byzantine civilization among the general educated public remains vague, prompting the historian John Julius Norwich to refer to a “conspiracy of silence” regarding the teaching of Byzantine history in university curricula.

The reasons why the memory of Byzantine civilization has not remained prominent in the popular imagination are complex involving historical, cultural and religious factors. Hellenistic culture, and Roman legal and bureaucratic traditions within the framework of Christianity formed the unique character of Eastern Roman society. One peculiar aspect of the Byzantine religious, mystical world conceptualization which has confounded commentators since the Middle Ages is here termed as non-standard gender practices. Without an understanding of how integral these practices were to the order and functioning of the society, it is impossible to approximate an accurate rendering of Byzantine civilization. In Byzantium, these non-standard gender practices refer specifically to the influence of castrated males or eunuchs, and high-status women in governance and public life. Since Antiquity female presence in society was believed to exert an enervating effect on masculine vigor. With Christianity certain gendered states,

sexual behaviors and practices came to be viewed as vitiated with a female anima, and this anima was cast by non-Byzantine chroniclers onto the whole of Byzantine civilization.

Much of our current understanding of Byzantine civilization comes from works researched since the late 18th-century European Enlightenment. Enlightenment intellectuals carried largely antithetical views of clericalism and held the religiosity of the Byzantines in low regard. With the development of historiography as an academic discipline in the 19th- and 20th-centuries, historians have developed a more thorough understanding of Byzantine religious mysticism. This study finds that while the centrality of religion in Byzantine society is now better understood, the subject of non-standard gender practices remains problematic for scholars and colors the perception of Byzantium in the modern popular imagination.

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In the completion of any human endeavor, we of course, stand upon the shoulders of our predecessors. Predecessors not only in the sense of previously attained intellectual attainments, but predecessors also as human beings who have touched our lives and influenced us to become the people we are or the people we would like one day to be.

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τοῖς ἐμοῖς τεκούσι

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Byzantine Imperial Double-Headed Eagle Emblem*



* Source: *The Web Site of the Church of Greece.*
<[http:// www.ecclesia.gr/](http://www.ecclesia.gr/)>.

**The Vladimir Icon. Icon of the Virgin *Eleousa* (compassionate) and Child.
Constantinople, circa 1131. Now in Moscow.†**



Source: Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art*, Oxford History of Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 182.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

*The stream of Time, irresistible, ever moving, carries off and bears away all things that come to birth and plunges them into utter darkness, both deeds of no account and deeds which are mighty and worthy of commemoration; as the playwright says it 'brings to light that which was unseen and shrouds from us that which was manifest'. Nevertheless, the science of History is a great bulwark against this stream of Time; in a way it checks this irresistible flood, it holds in a tight grasp whatever it can seize floating on the surface and will not allow it to slip away into the depths of Oblivion.*¹

The fear of Anna Comnena (*circa*1083-1153 CE) that the deeds of her father, the Emperor Alexius I Comnenus (*circa*1057-1118 CE), would be consigned by the “stream of time” into oblivion did in some aspects come to pass. Although known to scholars in the intervening centuries since its demise, Byzantine civilization (330-1453 CE) has not been widely appreciated in the West and for many years the history of Byzantium was dismissively viewed by western scholars. (The West, here defined as the non-Orthodox nations of Western Europe and North America.) Norwich cites the 19th-century historian W.E.H. Lecky’s remark: “Of that Byzantine Empire the universal verdict of history is that it constitutes, without a single exception, the most thoroughly base and despicable form that civilisation has yet assumed.”² Imprecated with obloquy and so “jaundiced”³ were the attitudes of major 18th-and 19th-century historians, such as Gibbon and Lecky, toward the Byzantines that Byzantine history was nearly consigned out of the popular historical imagination.

For the educated reader the current understanding of Byzantium comes largely from historical works written since the European Enlightenment of the late 18th century. In the intervening two centuries scholars have examined in depth the rivalry and tensions which existed between Byzantium and the West since Late Antiquity. These tensions and rivalries were largely based upon religious and cultural issues. Prominent historians writing in the 18th-and 19th-centuries, such as Gibbon and Lecky, maintained low opinions of Byzantine civilization largely because of their negative attitudes about the religious orientation and character of Byzantine society. These views authoritatively voiced by respected historians became the generally received perception of Byzantium for the next several generations.

This study has found another-and little discussed--reason which has incited scholars, from the 18th-century until the present day, to form negative appraisals of Byzantine civilization: disdain for what was perceived to be the insidious influence of a female anima or energy produced by non-majority or non-standard gender practices in Byzantium in the form of eunuchism and the prominence of high-profile women in public life. Each culture and generation defines the parameters of what gender and sexual behaviors are acceptable or standard. Since Antiquity the female principle has been associated with eviration. Under the rubric of the female principle the presence of women in governmental and public life, eunuchism, and homosexuality were all seen to be non-standard gender practices and manifestations of female energy. And female energy was believed to exert the deleterious effect of enervating the assertive, active, self-restrained qualities ascribed to masculine vigor. This concept was maintained by scholars of the Enlightenment in their assessment of

Byzantine society and is, indeed, still held by many until the present day. Yet without an understanding of the centrality of non-standard gender practices incorporated into a religious mysticism crucial to the functioning of Byzantine society, scholars would have no hope of presenting an accurate critique on the unique nature of that civilization.

Changing Perceptions of the Eastern Roman Empire

Relations between Byzantium and the West varied from fraternal to outright war. Concomitantly, western sentiment with regard to Byzantine civilization followed the vagaries of political and ecclesiastical interests. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 CE, the living “Eastern Roman” or Byzantine Empire passed into the realm of myth and legend. The defunct Byzantine Empire was remembered as of little consequence and mainly as a storehouse of the literary treasures of the classical world. However, in the 16th-century concerns about Ottoman advances into Europe, Protestant anti-papal sentiment and appeals for union amongst Catholics stimulated interest in Byzantium, not merely as the repository of classical texts but in the unique character of Byzantine civilization itself.⁴

In the modern era Hieronymus Wolf (1516-1580), in Augsburg, was the first modern scholar to appreciate the distinctive quality of Byzantine history.⁵ In the 17th-century in France, under the auspices of Louis XIII and Louis XIV, interest in Byzantine studies intensified and the history of Byzantium became increasingly studied in its own right--not merely as a conduit of classical Greek learning. Ostrogorsky believed the French historian of the pre-Enlightenment era Charles Du Fresne, Sieur Du Cange (1610-88), to be the founder of modern Byzantine historical studies and “the most learned scholar in the history of Byzantine research.”⁶

Unfortunately, the 18th-century Enlightenment proved to be a setback for the serious study of Byzantine civilization. Enlightenment philosophy extolled reason--and not religion--to rule the civil state. The mystically-minded Byzantines were viewed as “a worthless collection of orations and miracles’ (Voltaire), ‘a tissue of rebellions, insurrections and treachery’ (Montesquieu), or at best only a tragic epilogue to the glory of Rome.”⁷ The most damaging and widely-read critique, which relegated Byzantine civilization into longstanding disrepute, was offered by Edward Gibbon in the classic *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London 1776-88). Gibbon dismissed 1,123 years of Byzantine civilization as “The triumph of barbarism and religion.”⁸ The negative stigma impugned the memory of Byzantium for many years. In the 1860’s Lecky went so far as to assert that the history of Byzantium was “a monotonous story of the intrigues of priests, eunuchs and women.”⁹ Yet it is largely because of this “thoroughly base” and “despicable civilization” that the classical heritage of western civilization has been preserved and Christianity has remained the dominant religion of Europe.¹⁰ It was not until well into the 19th-century, after the upheavals of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic eras, that Byzantine civilization came to be once more seriously studied.¹¹

Even during its existence Byzantium was periodically viewed in a negative light by Western Europeans. As early as the 5th-century of the common era, deep fissures had formed between the geographical eastern (Hellenized) center and the western (Latinized) regions of the Empire. By the time of the Fourth Crusade in 1204 CE, the cultures of the Byzantines and the Western Europeans had become so vastly different that covetous Western European Crusaders considered Byzantium to be an alien society. The differing psychologies of East

and West, affected by geographical and economic realities, were reflected in both political and ecclesiastical organization: in the East, church and state were indissolubly wed whereas increasing separation developed between the church and state in Western Europe. In the mid-10th century, Byzantine cultural peculiarities such as elaborate robes and long hair, the presence of imperial eunuchs, and power accorded to high-status females, struck Western Europeans as effete and incited commentators such as Liudprand of Cremona in the 10th-century to associate the Byzantines with effeminacy.¹² Traditional historical explanations for the friction and alternately small and large rifts between parts of the Eastern and Western Empire over the centuries are myriad. For example:

1) By the 6th-century a growing linguistic dissonance was developing between the Greek-speaking eastern sections of the Empire and the western Latin-speaking regions.¹³

2) Competition and conflict between the patriarchate and the papacy over claims of supremacy resulting in major religious doctrinal “schisms” in 484¹⁴ and 857.¹⁵

3) Increasingly impaired communications between eastern and western geographical regions of the Empire due to incessant incursions by foreign marauders.¹⁶

4) Native resentment of imposed Hellenistic culture and the attempted enforcement of Constantinopolitan religious doctrines in non-ethnically Greek areas of North Africa and the Near East.¹⁷

5) The geographical and phenomenological position of Byzantium as a transitional buffer culture between Islam and Western Europe, “more akin to either than the West was to Islam or Islam to the West.”¹⁸

The evolution of eastern and western identities formed and coalesced in communion

with or in opposition to other cultures and traditions. Shared history, culture, ethnicity, language, religious and gender expectations all contribute to the notoriously difficult-to-define concept of “identity.” Identity is defined here as “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual: individuality: the relation established by psychological identification,”¹⁹ which is reinforced by differences between peoples and contributes to the notion of “us” differentiated from “them.”

From the mid-13th century onward adherents of minority religions, ethnic groups, genders and sexual practices came under increasing intolerance because of what Boswell has described as a “deviation from the standards of the majority, enforceable for the first time in the newly emerging corporate states of the High Middle Ages.”²⁰ Differences in eastern and western identity development were intensified by the actual physical extermination of the Byzantine state, furthering the psychological distances between the peoples of the former Empire and Western Europe. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, knowledge of Byzantine civilization was largely forgotten in the West. It was not until the 16th-century with scholars such as Wolf, in Germany, and in 17th-century France, DuCange, that Byzantine civilization was seriously studied as a unique society. However later, in the 18th-century, as the intellectual climate came to be pervaded by sentiments of anti-clericalism, works published regarding Byzantine history began to take on a decidedly negative tone.

Non-Standard Gender Practices in the Western View of Byzantine Identity

Post-Enlightenment hostility to religion does not sufficiently address the question as to why such negative appraisals were made of Byzantine civilization by a broad range of

eminent intellectuals ranging from Voltaire and Montesquieu, to Gibbon, Hegel and Lecky. In particular three cultural characteristics are negatively commented upon with some regularity in historical tracts written from the 18th- to the mid-20th centuries:

- 1) The importance accorded to matters of religion in Byzantium.
- 2) Eunuchism and the influence of eunuchs.
- 3) High-profile women in Byzantine public life.

Intellectuals such as Hegel and Gibbon did not highly value the sheer intellectual complexity of the Byzantines' achievement in the reconciliation of Greek philosophy with Christian belief, resulting in a "philosophical or theological definition of the Christian faith"--a feat Vryonis refers to as "one of the great intellectual monuments of Western civilization."²¹ Gibbon saw religion, females and eunuchs as morally enervating. "Gibbon's work bristles with literary shafts hurled at the effeminacy of Greeks, at the malevolence of eunuchs, and at the heroic hypocrisy of bishops."²² Even the preeminent Byzantine scholar of the first half of the 20th- century, Ostrogorsky, lamented that the "tragedy" of the Empire was partially due to the fact that "its own history was determined by women and eunuchs."²³ Apparently scholars from the 18th-century until the early 20th- century shared some of the same ideological conceptualizations as the Western Europeans who lived from Late Antiquity until 1453. It is important to comprehend how an entire civilization which existed for over a millennium and profoundly affected both the development of western society and the course of history in the Islamic world could become so easily dismissed.

Accordingly, in order to adequately understand why Byzantine civilization has traditionally received such a negative reception from historians from the Enlightenment until

the 20th-century, it is proposed to effect an interdisciplinary examination involving comparative literary analysis of modern historical sources (written since the late 18th-century) about Byzantine civilization with consideration of the geographical, economic and social implications which have affected cultural identity and influenced the representation of Byzantium in the popular imagination.

Historical Overview: The Millennial Realm

On May 11, 330 CE, the Emperor Constantine formally dedicated and renamed the old Greek port of Byzantium (on the Bosphorus linking the Black and Aegean seas) as Constantinople, a new center of imperial residence (map, page 10). The reasons for the emperor's establishment of an eastern capital are many, but as an astute ruler and military commander Constantine primarily realized the strategic advantages of Constantinople's geographic position, the eastern Empire's economic and cultural ascendancy and, most importantly, the imminent physical threat of successive waves of foreign invasion by peoples from the North and East (and later invaders from the South and West) including the Huns, Visigoths, Goths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, Persians, Arabs, Avars, Slavs, Bulgarians, Patzinaks, Cumans, Uzes, Franks, Seljuks, Normans, Catalans, Genoese, Venetians and Ottomans.²⁴

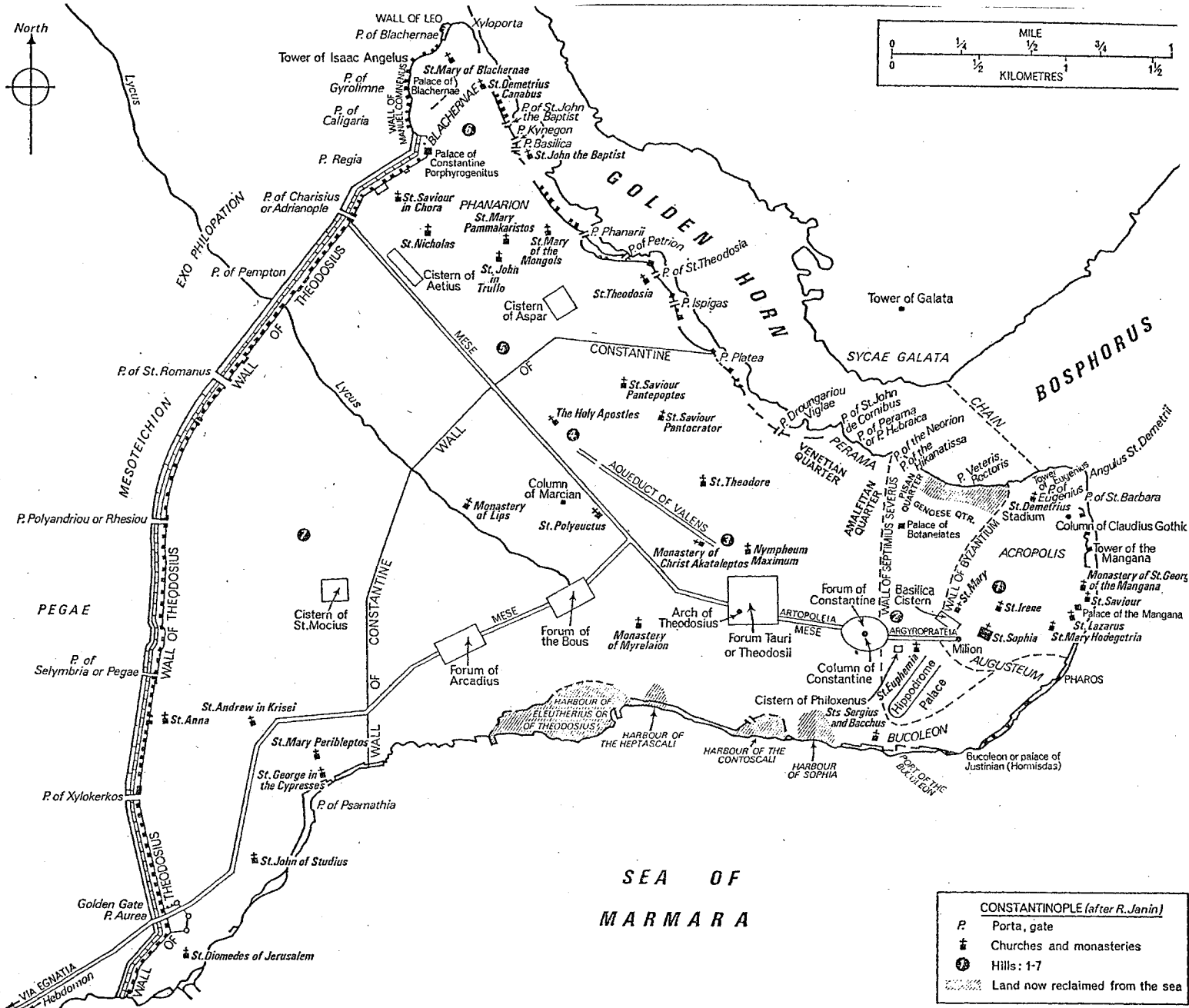
From its inception, Constantinople (map, page 11) was unique amongst the cities of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Equipped with a natural deep harbor, and protected by water on three sides, the city was nearly impenetrable. In the more populous eastern portion of the Empire "Constantinople was strategically located midway between the critical Danubian and Eastern frontiers and between the principal military reservoirs of the Balkans and Anatolia. The Eastern provinces were more populous than those of the West, and urban and industrial development there was more vital."²⁵ Constantinople was located in a culturally Hellenized, Greek-speaking geographic region with a population which was deeply aware of its Greco-Roman inheritance.²⁶

The Byzantine Empire at its Greatest Territorial Extent circa mid-6th century CE*



* Source: John Haldon, *Byzantium at War: AD 600-1453*, Essential Histories (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002) 10.

Constantinople†



† Source: Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453*, History of Civilization (London: Phoenix Press, 1971; 2000) 14.

Greek supplanted Latin as the official language of governance and culture by the 7th-century of the common era, Latin having largely disappeared from the Eastern Mediterranean.²⁷ Roman institutions and legal traditions were overlaid in this area of Greek cultural influence and became infused with the spirit of Christianity, which had become the official religion of the Roman Empire in 395 CE under the Emperor Theodosius I.²⁸ Constantinople “was founded as the heir of the Old Rome with all the privileges and prerogatives of the former capital of the classical world, but cleansed of its pagan associations.” The city on the Bosphorus “has been characterized as a combination of Greek culture, Roman institutions, and Christianity, but it may be identified equally satisfactorily by the three objects of its ascending allegiance: the City, the Emperor, the Faith.”²⁹ To Constantinopolitans the city (of Constantinople) was considered the center of the universe, similar to the classical Greek notion of the city or *polis*. In archaic and classical times the *polis* was a self-sufficient community of citizens.³⁰ According to the historian George Phylactopoulos, “When the ancient Greeks referred to a city [*polis*], they meant not simply a complex of buildings but a unity founded on the common origin, laws, customs, and ways of thinking of its inhabitants.”³¹ Persons not residing in the city were seen as provincial. The residents of Constantinople referred to themselves as *Byzantioi*, and considered their state to be the Roman Empire (*basileia ton Rhomaion*). Citizens of the Empire, regardless of ethnic origin, were considered “Roman” or *Rhomaioi*. The term “Byzantine,” referring to the *basileia ton Rhomaion*, was not introduced until the 16th-century by humanist scholar Hieronymus Wolf (1516-80).³² “The distinctive mark of a *Rhomaios* [an eastern ‘Roman’ or Byzantine citizen] was membership [in]...the Orthodox Church and allegiance to the

emperor.”³³ The Empire with the emperor as supreme autocrat at its head was an earthly replica of the divine hierarchy ruled over by God, the Father.

The Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire was considered by the Byzantines to be the one true and universal church, which mirrored or “reproduced the harmonious movement given to the universe by its Creator.”³⁴ Citizens of the Empire viewed foreign peoples living outside of the Empire with contempt as “heretics and boors unacquainted with the refinements of Imperial Civilization.”³⁵ The people or ethnic groups (*ethne*) living beyond the imperial borders who were not Orthodox Christians and did not accept the authority of the emperor were referred to as “barbarians” (*barbaroi*). By definition “barbarians” (peoples or nations) lived outside the Empire: beyond the jurisdiction of the *oikoumene*—the community under the emperor’s universal sovereignty united by the Orthodox church.³⁶ The Emperor came to be viewed as divinely appointed, and in time adopted many of the external trappings of the Persian concept of kingship. Seen as the Vice-Gerent of Christ on Earth, the main responsibility of the emperor was the protection of the one and only Orthodox faith. The Byzantines inherited an innate reverence for the Rule of Law from their Roman heritage,³⁷ and it was incumbent upon the emperor to uphold the law, to rule his subjects justly and to defend the Empire from enemies both foreign and domestic. However, the most important role of the emperor was as the defender of Orthodoxy.

Although the Byzantines had a strong sense of their individual and collective identity, Byzantium cannot be entirely defined by the modern notion of nationality. The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines nationality as

A national trait, characteristic, or peculiarity. Nationalism; attachment to one’s

*country or nation; national feeling. The fact of belonging to a particular nation; national origin; the status of a citizen or subject of a particular state[...] A nation; a people potentially but not politically a nation; an ethnic group.*³⁸

This was only partially applicable to the Byzantines; rather, Byzantine “nationality” was based not on ethnicity nor national feeling but on Orthodoxy and the sense of a cultural and spiritual mission.³⁹ Byzantine citizenship was thus defined in terms of religious adherence and cultural commitment.⁴⁰ The army, senate and church were instruments of Divine Will and governed by one mortal man--the emperor.⁴¹ In Byzantium, church, state and national identity were one and the same.

Any attempt to classify or place Byzantine history in tidy temporal periods is arbitrary because rigid demarcations of time do not necessarily coincide with historical events, and because “there is no common consensus concerning the borderlines between particular periods.”⁴² Yet as a broad paradigm, very general periodizations can be postulated keeping in mind that their use is only as a heuristic overview. Conventionally, Byzantine history has been divided in a tripartite division of early, middle and late periods. The “Early Byzantine” period was approximated from 330 CE to 565 CE (the death of Justinian). The “Middle Byzantine” period estimated from 565 CE to 1071 CE (the battle of Manzikert), or 1204 CE (the capture of Constantinople by the Latins). Lastly, the “Late Byzantine” period, (*circa*1204-1453), ended precisely on May 29, 1453 CE, when Constantinople fell to the Ottomans.⁴³

More recent scholarly works such as *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, acknowledge the artificiality of historical periodization and examine Byzantine history by

using approximate dates corresponding to “internal developments rather than to changes imposed from without.” Thus, the period of the “Late Roman Empire” is dated from the 4th- to the mid-7th century CE; the period of the “Dark Ages” is seen as mid-7th century CE to *circa* 800/850 CE; the “Age of Recovery and Consolidation” is *circa* 800/850 CE to 1000 CE; *circa* 1000 CE to 1261 covers the Empire of Nicaea and a period of “Westernization”; and 1261 CE- 1453 CE is called the “Empire of the Straits.”⁴⁴

The metamorphosis from the “Late Roman” (from the 4th to mid-7th century CE) into the Byzantine Empire begins with the Emperor Constantine I (the Great) establishing a new imperial residence in the East in 330 CE, and granting toleration to Christian citizens. Until the mid-5th century CE, co-emperors reigned in both the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire. After 476 CE, with Ostrogoth, Visigoth and Vandal advances in the territory of the western Empire, Constantinople emerged as *the* imperial capital with a sole sovereign ruler.⁴⁵ During the one-thousand-year existence of the Eastern Roman Empire several prominent emperors and ruling dynasties emerged. Such was the power and prestige accorded the sovereign that both major and minor aspects of citizens’ lives could be drastically affected by the actions of the emperor.

Some scholars have posited that the “Eastern Roman Empire” only truly became the “Byzantine Empire” under the reign of the Emperor Justinian I (527-565 CE).⁴⁶ Justinian sought to restore the geographic and spiritual integrity of the Roman Empire, which had splintered due to centuries of barbarian incursions and theological schisms. Under his reign many of the old Roman imperial domains were tenuously reconquered, peace overtures were made to the papacy and governmental bureaucracy enlarged.⁴⁷

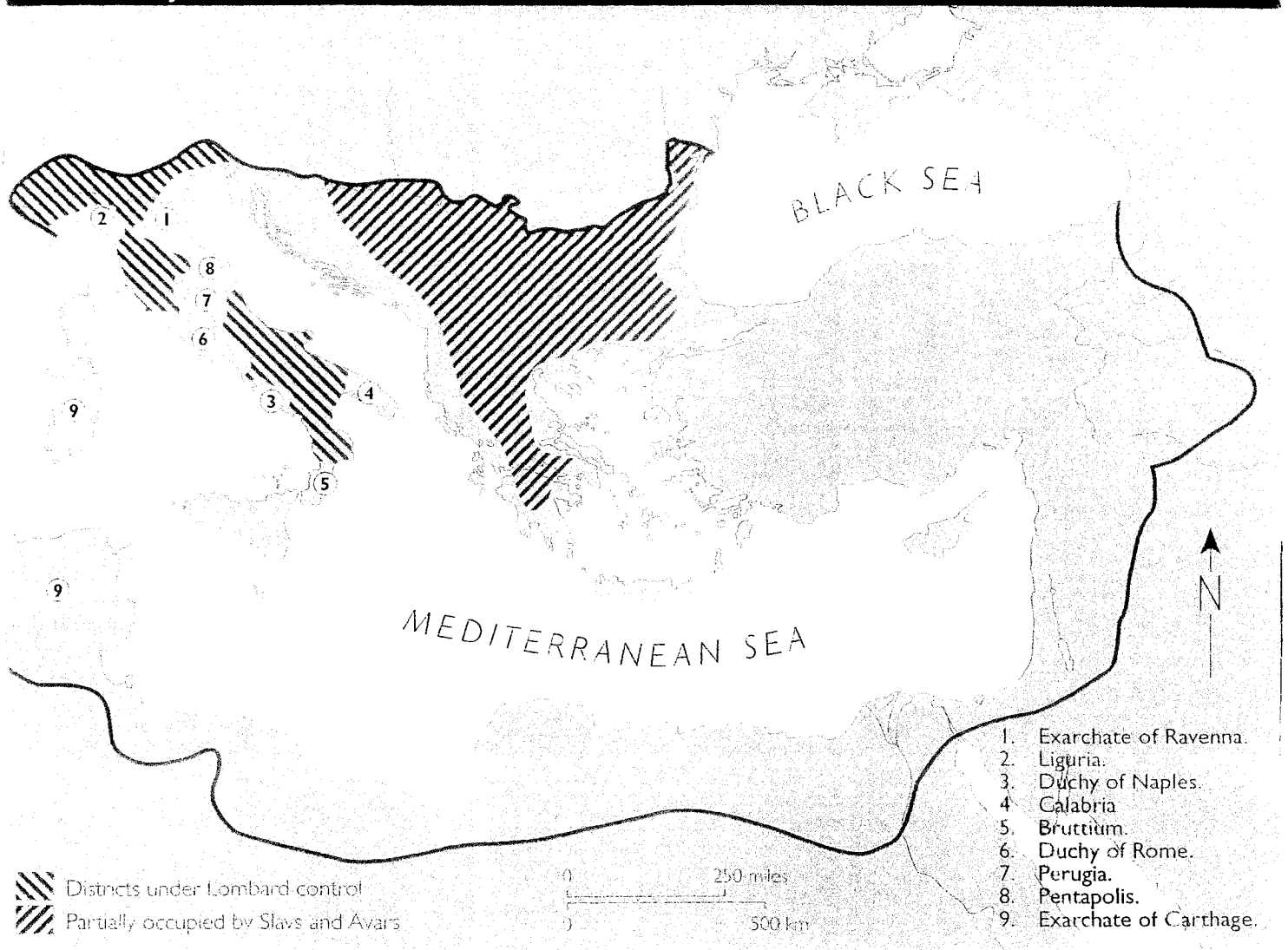
The reign of Justinian is perhaps best remembered for the emperor's attempt at a definitive compilation of Roman law which still bears his name as the *Code of Justinian*. During the reign of Justinian one of the more interesting aspects of Byzantine history was most prominently manifest: the rise of shrewd and very prominent female figures in proximity to the emperor—some who would actually rule the Empire through direct or indirect means. Theodora, Empress, wife of Justinian, became legendary for her colorful personal history and sheer force of personality which strongly influenced the reign of Justinian and the future course of the monarchy.

It was also under the reign of the Emperor Justinian that one of the greatest achievements in world architectural history was completed. The cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, (completed in December 537), was to remain the centerpiece of Byzantium enduring as one of the most prominent symbols of Christendom for nearly one thousand years. “The interplay of the light which entered through the windows in the dome and walls, with the splendid marbles and mosaic decoration, and the spatial arrangement of the building, were to overpower and awe worshippers and observers for a millennium.”⁴⁸ According to legend Justinian was so overcome by the majesty of the cathedral, that upon entering the newly completed Hagia Sophia for the first time the emperor was heard to exclaim “Solomon, I have surpassed thee”⁴⁹

It is thus, during the reign of Justinian, that the Eastern Roman Empire begins to evolve into a distinctly new civilization which scholars now specifically designate as “Byzantine,” thus making the Emperor Justinian the last of the old “Roman” emperors and the first truly Byzantine ruler.⁵⁰ (map, page 18)

The Byzantine Empire circa 600 CE‡

The empire c. AD 600



‡ Source: John Haldon, *Byzantium at War: AD 600-1453*, Essential Histories (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002) 35.

As early as the “Late Roman” period (mid-7th century CE), the eastern and western portions of the Empire were beginning to manifest marked differences. The Germanic invasions of the 5th- century had disrupted political, cultural and economic links between East and West. Western areas became increasingly latinized; whereas in the East, Greek became the predominant language of administration. In the East, urban centers remained strong and government bureaucracy increased in size and efficiency. Religious controversies were hotly debated in eastern centers with state involvement in theological concerns. Ancient civilization was on the decline in the western Empire which saw a dramatic decrease in urbanization and an upsurge in the independence of estates and landed aristocracy.⁵¹

In the course of its one-thousand-year history Byzantium was unremittingly attacked by numerous foreign invaders. In particular during the “Dark Ages,” (mid-7th century to *circa* 800/850), the Empire experienced extensive territorial losses and underwent significant administrative restructuring and societal change. Despite the social disruptions historians such as Sjuzjumov and Weiss maintain that the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Byzantine period is marked by a remarkable “continuity of ideas and institutions.”⁵²

By the 6th-century, traditional Late Roman social categories began to shift and a large urban nobility appeared in Constantinople.⁵³ Following territorial losses to the Arabs, major administrative reforms were made, including the division of land into *themes*, or districts ruled by a military governor (*strategos*) with civil authority.⁵⁴ This transfer of civil authority to military representatives and the court bureaucracy became increasingly important.⁵⁵ A series of internal conflicts convulsed the Empire in the 8th- and 9th-centuries, during which time the emperors struggled to impose order in all things, referred to as *taxis* in Greek.

Vigorous attempts were made to maintain religious uniformity among fractious, often violent differences of public opinion on matters of religious doctrine. The most prominent of these conflicts is known as the Iconoclast Controversy during the 8th- and 9th-centuries CE under the dynasties of rulers known as the Isaurians and Amorians. Since religion and politics were intertwined in Byzantium, the events of the Iconoclast period affected the subsequent evolution of Orthodoxy and Byzantine national feeling. §

The exact origins of the Iconoclast movement are not known. The controversy was most divisive in the 8th-century regarding whether icons could properly be used in Christian worship.⁵⁶ The veneration of icons had been central to Byzantine art and life. As pictorial representations of holy personages, icons were seen as portals through which a reflection of the divine was to be glimpsed. In a theoretical sense not items to be worshipped in themselves, “Byzantine icons had a functional as well as an aesthetic aim: they were made as props in the face of joy and sorrow, happiness and pain. They received the prayers and veneration that passed through them to the ‘other’ world which they symbolized, and they were expected to reflect the powers of God.”⁵⁷

Attempts to suppress or limit the use of icons may first have found impetus in Asiatic parts of the Empire (perhaps influenced by Judaism and Islam). Diehl and other scholars have speculated that the Isaurian emperors sought to proscribe the use of icons in an effort to curb the power of wealthy monastic houses.⁵⁸ Other scholars, such as Norwich,

§ It must be emphasized that in the 8th and 9th centuries the current concept of “national” or “nation” did not exist and is applied here only as a very general definition. The Byzantines did not consider their *oikoumene* a “nation” in the modern sense of the word. Rather Byzantine identity was derived largely from religion and cultural affinities, with little regard to ethnicity.

maintain that the Isaurian emperors had acted out of the sincere conviction that the veneration of icons violated the basic tenet of “Monophysitism.” Monophysitism held that the predominant nature of Christ was divine and therefore unrenderable. However, at the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), Monophysitism had been declared heretical and the Orthodox position maintained that “the two natures of Christ were perfect, separate, and contained in one body or appearance.”⁵⁹ Iconoclasm was renounced at the seventh ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 CE, but reemerged spasmodically in the 9th-century before being definitely suppressed with the restoration of Orthodoxy in 843 CE. The century of bitter strife within the Empire poisoned relations with the papacy (which denounced iconoclasm) and alienated the eastern provinces beyond the border (where monophysite tendencies were pronounced).

Arguably the state gained (for a period of time) a measure of control over the church after iconoclasm⁶⁰ and large monastic communities tended to give way to smaller “individualistically structured *larvras* and small monasteries dependent on state grants in kind and money.”⁶¹ The restoration of Orthodoxy and the turbulent Iconoclast period were to have long-reaching effects on subsequent Byzantine Church and State relations, both internally and with the papacy⁶², influencing the arts⁶³ and imperial military organization.

Kazhdan notes that at the beginning of the “Age of Recovery and Consolidation,” (*circa* 800/850-1000), Latin was no longer widely used and Byzantine culture and language were largely Greek.⁶⁴ Predominant during this period was the Macedonian dynasty, remembered for the reigns of Basil I the Great (867-886), and the sister empresses Zoe (1028-1050) and Theodora (1054-1056)⁶⁵. A civil aristocracy emerged and the development

of a “knightlike” army replaced irregular troops with heavily armed contingents of thematic troops. Restructuring in the army aided the Byzantines in taking the offensive against the Arabs and regaining lost territory in Anatolia and Italy. A cautious alliance was also extended to Otto I, the “emperor of the Franks.”⁶⁶ A cultural upsurge took place at this time in literature and the arts which is sometimes referred to as the “Macedonian renaissance.” Kazhdan believes a more proper term would be “encyclopedism, meaning...the tendency to collect and set in order both Greek and Roman traditions.”⁶⁷

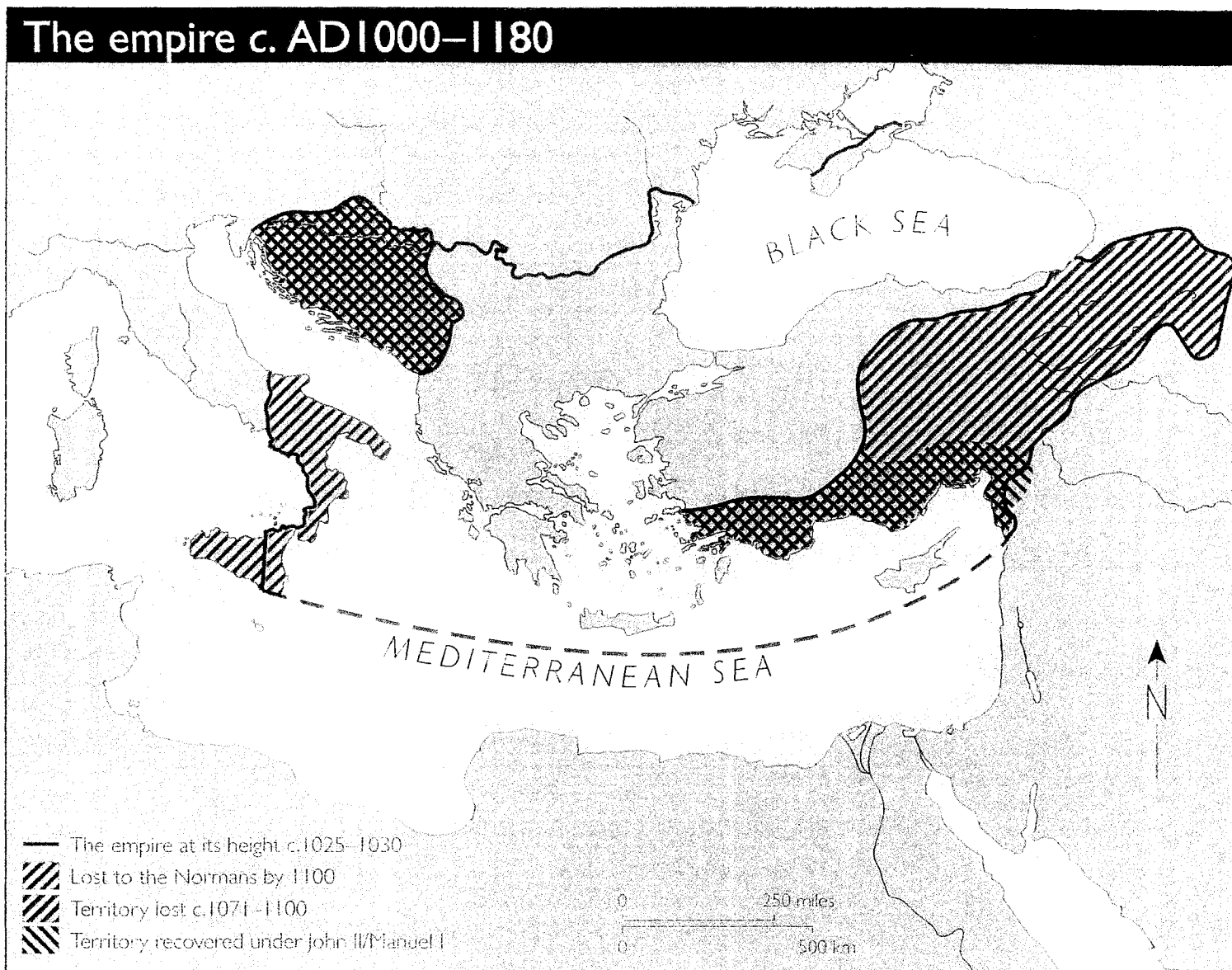
The “Period of Westernization”(circa 1000-1204) began with the impressive victories of Basil II (circa 976-1025, map, page 24) but then witnessed a crushing--and eventually terminal--blow to the Empire at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, and ended in seeming extinction with the fall of Constantinople to the Fourth Crusade in 1204.⁶⁸ Until the 11th century the Constantinople metropolitan area continued to increase in population and remained in the forefront of European cities. A large number of foreigners, in particular Italian merchants, lived affluent lives in Constantinople, making use of generous tax exemptions afforded them in return for their help in the cities’ defense. A robust urban class developed as the militarized aristocracy increased in strength.

However, the peasantry became more and more bound to government, ecclesiastical or private property. The question of whether the 11th-and 12th-century social structure in Byzantium constituted a “feudal” society in the western European sense is still debated by scholars.⁶⁹ Out of necessity the Empire became more welcoming to foreigners, including numerous Turkic groups, Varangians, Normans and Anglo-Saxons (among others), who filled the ranks of the Empire’s armies.⁷⁰ Italians were used sporadically in the navy, but by

the 12th-century a navy could no longer be maintained.⁷¹

Briefly stabilized under the rule of the first three Comneni emperors, society in 11th-century Constantinople witnessed an efflorescence of the arts and learning. Scholars such as Michael Psellus revived interest in reconciling the classical Greek philosophic schools of Platonism and Neoplatonism with Christianity. However, after crushing defeats at Manzikert (1071) and Myrioccephalum (1176), a civilian aristocracy displaced the military aristocracy and the Empire's resources were dissipated.⁷² In particular the loss of effective control of Anatolia, after the battle of Manzikert, meant that the grain supply to the capital could no longer be guaranteed. Spurred by outright avarice, ethnic animosity and religious fervor, a weakened Constantinople was captured in 1204, by Crusaders ostensibly en route to the Near East in what became known as the Fourth Crusade. For the next 57 years a "Latin Empire" was to rule from Constantinople while the Byzantines, fragmented into a number of minor Greek successor states, fought one another for ascendancy with the goal of retaking Constantinople as the rightful and true Orthodox rulers of the *Rhomaioi*.

The Byzantine Empire circa 1000-1180**



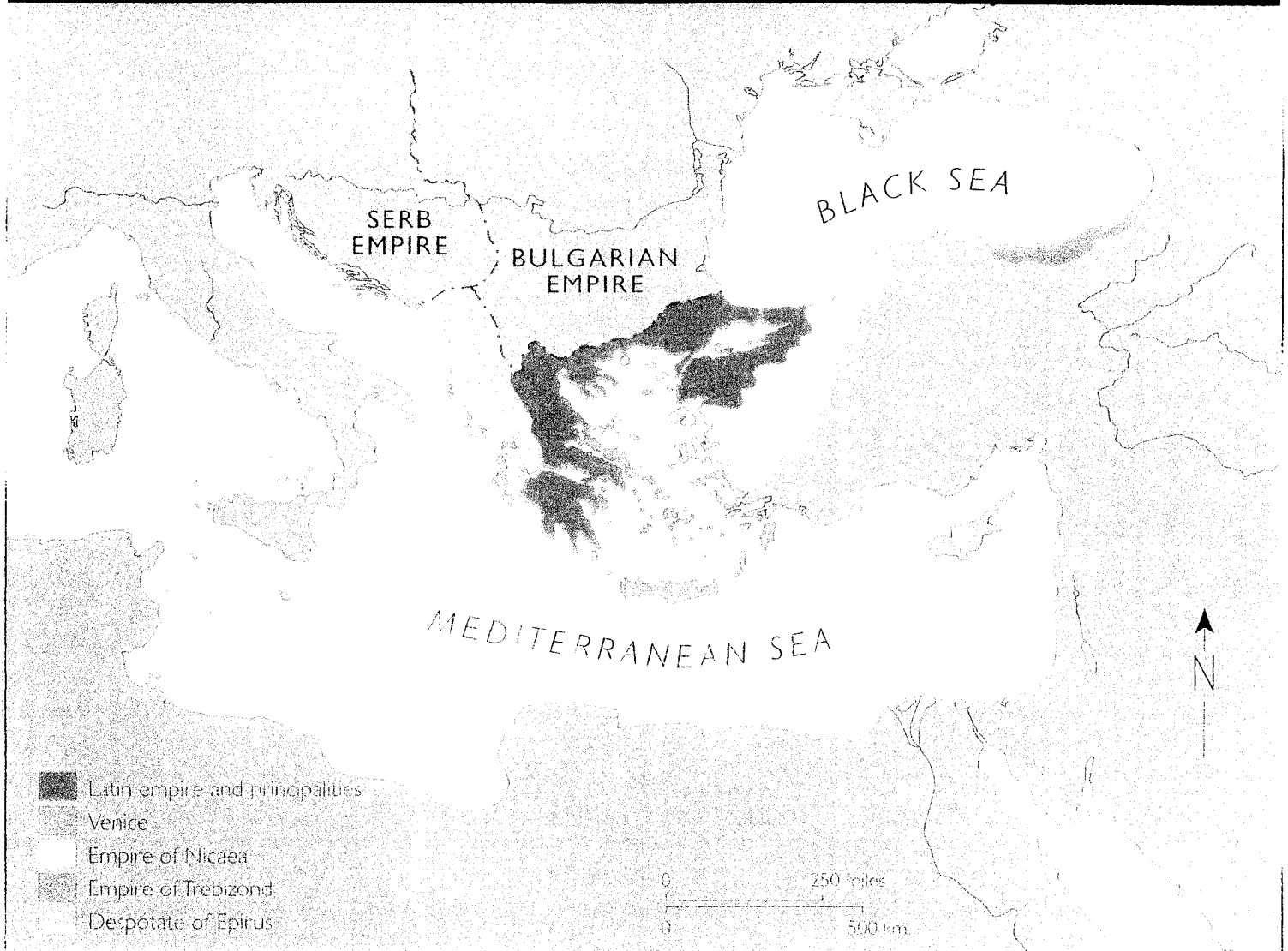
** Source: John Haldon, *Byzantium at War: AD 600-1453*, Essential Histories (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002) 43.

The most successful of the Greek successor states was the Empire of Nicaea, 1204-61 (map, page 26). Founded by Theodore I Laskaris, the Empire of Nicaea was comprised of two territorial holdings in western Asia Minor, which included the capital city of Nicaea.⁷³ Before the Nicaean emperors could restore the seat of the Empire to Constantinople, they needed to establish their right as the sole legitimate rulers of the Byzantine Empire and assert authority over rival claimants: the Empire of Trebizond, the despotate of Epirus, and the Bulgarians. In order to strengthen their position, the Nicaean emperors streamlined government bureaucracy, created an effective state administration and granted the aristocracy an acknowledged place in Nicaean society. The presence of the ecumenical patriarch at Nicaea also added an air of legitimacy to the Nicaean dynasty.⁷⁴ The 1204 Crusader capture of Constantinople was not only a territorial loss for the Byzantines, but also had profound cultural repercussions: it is during this period that Byzantine attitudes towards Western Europeans, in particular the Latins, hardened into implacable hatred.

The emperors of Nicaea were patrons of learning and sponsored the collection and copying of manuscripts preserving the classical “Hellenic’ past [that] was increasingly appreciated in intellectual circles, which added a new dimension to the Byzantine sense of identity.”⁷⁵ This renewed interest in the Hellenic past contributed to a burgeoning sense of nationalism--new in its emphasis on shared ethnic background. Ultimately, in July 1261, Constantinople was restored as the seat of Empire. Acceding to the throne in a city that was impoverished, depopulated and largely in ruins, the new emperor, Michael VIII Palaeologus, presided over an Empire that was dramatically changed in structure and outlook.⁷⁶

The Byzantine Empire in Exile, circa 1204-1250††

The empire c.1204-1250



†† Source: John Haldon, *Byzantium at War: AD 600-1453*, Essential Histories (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002) 54.

The remnants of the restored Byzantine “Empire” after 1261 were moribund and markedly reduced in area, mainly consisting of small parcels of territory around Constantinople, Asia Minor and in parts of Greece. The impoverished Empire was greatly weakened as a result of the Latin occupation and subjected to nearly continual siege from Turkish forces from 1394-1402. After 1371, the Byzantine Empire was reduced to virtually a vassal state of the Ottomans.⁷⁷ The Byzantines’ pleas to the West for assistance in their plight for survival against the Ottoman onslaught fell largely on deaf ears. The papacy and western rulers demanded the union of the Eastern Orthodox Church with the Western Church as a precondition for military assistance.⁷⁸

Internal problems further weakened the rump Empire. Palace usurpations, political instability and a civil war (1341-47) led to neglect or devastation of the remaining agricultural land and squandered resources which could have been more productively expended combating the common Ottoman enemy. A series of urban rebellions demonstrated the animosity of the lower classes toward the landed aristocracy, and rivaling factions invited Serbs and Turks as allies in internecine squabbles, enabling dangerous mercenary elements further encroachments into imperial territory. Another sign of growing imperial weakness was the tendency of the emperor to divide territory amongst his sons, which were ruled as a series of competing autonomous princedoms.⁷⁹

Runciman says that “The tragedy of the long death of Byzantium is above all a financial tragedy.”⁸⁰ Gold currency depreciated in value and the transport of cereal crops into the capital became prohibitively expensive. The naval fleet was dismantled as an economic measure. Most commerce was controlled by the Italian republics, vastly diminishing

customs revenues for the Empire. Money was so scarce that the empress (the former Anna of Savoy) pawned the crown jewels to Venice in return for a loan. The only remaining wealth of the Empire now lay under the control of the great landowners.⁸¹

Ecclesiastical controversies further divided the ailing Empire. During the period 1265-1310, a schism arose between Arsenites⁸² and Josephites (schismatic religious groups supporting different patriarchal candidates), over dynastic successions. In the mid-14th-century an old Orthodox tradition of mystical asceticism called Hesychasm⁸³ (meaning “holy silence”) was reinvigorated. Hesychasm was at first condemned but later accepted as official Orthodox doctrine and deeply colored the cultural and political debate in defining Byzantine identity in the final decades of the Empire. Pressured by the dire menace of the Ottomans at their borders, the emperors Michael VIII and John V Palaeologus agreed to acknowledge the primacy of the Church of Rome in exchange for military relief from Ottoman pressure. Vociferous disagreement over the union of the Eastern and Western Churches in exchange for western military aid against the Turks after the church councils of Lyons (1274) and Florence (1439), outraged the population of Constantinople and compelled the Grand Duke (*Megas Doux*) Loukas Notaras to allegedly proclaim, “It is better to see in the midst of the city the turban of the ruling Turks than the Latin tiara.”⁸⁴

Declining imperial power saw a concomitant rise in the prestige and authority of the Byzantine Church and patriarchate. Jurisdiction of the monasteries in the semiautonomous republic for contemplative monks and hermits on Mount Athos was transferred from the emperor to the patriarch. Monasticism was revitalized. The church was seen as the last bastion of the true Orthodox faith and as a refuge from the tribulations of daily life under

siege.⁸⁵

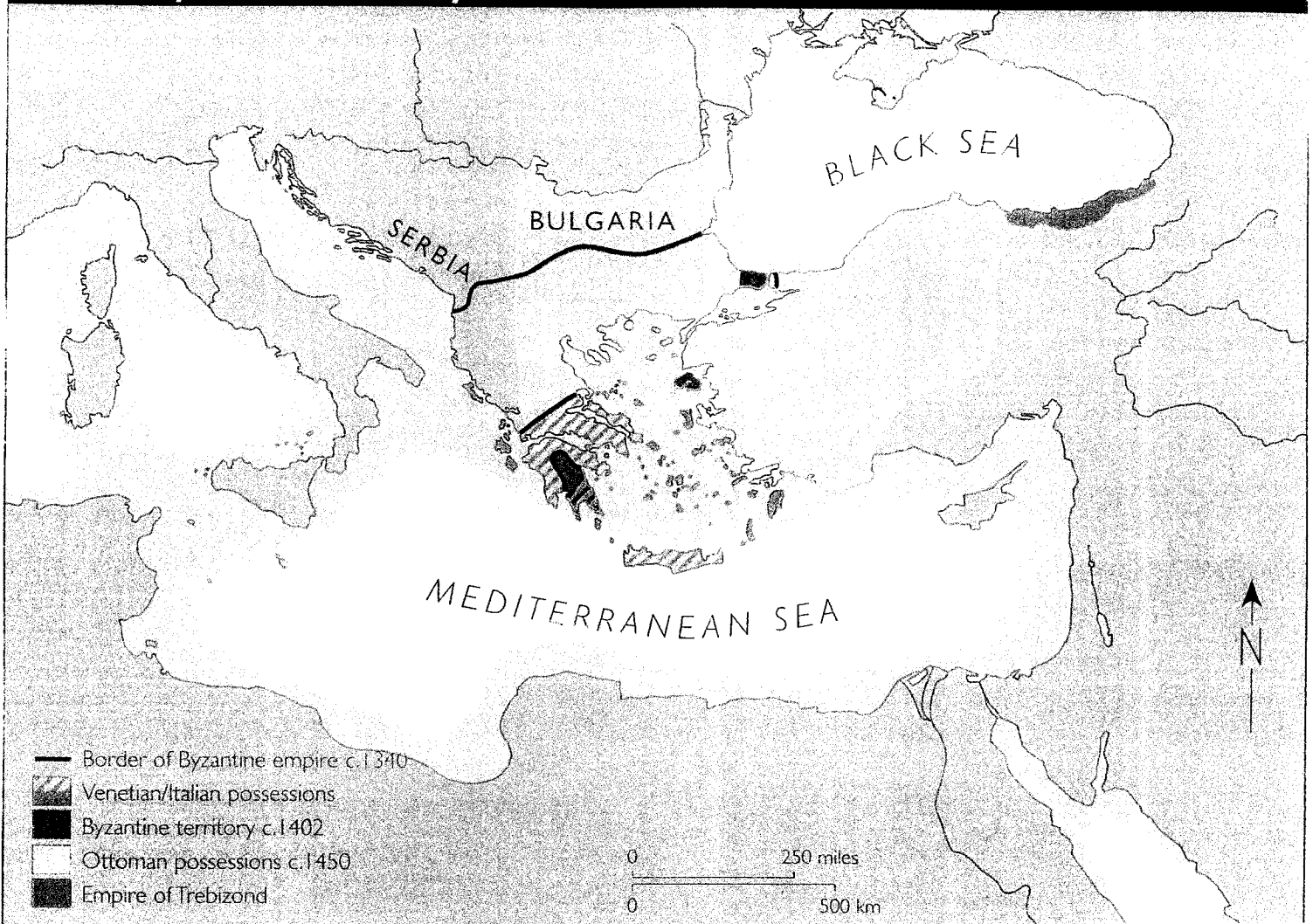
Ironically, as the State declined the arts and letters flourished. A concrete sense of Hellenic national identity was emerging and the works of Antiquity were avidly read and copied. Astronomy, classical philology and medicine were studied by the intellectual elite. Hagiography was popular and the first works of vernacular literature appeared in the form of romantic epics. *Digenis Akritas* (11th-to mid- 13th century) was written in a non-archaizing Greek revealing changing chivalric ideals.⁸⁶ Narrative poems such as the romances of *Kallimachus and Chrysorrhoe* and *Phlorios and Platziaflora* (14th century) were composed in a vernacular form and based on Western European models.⁸⁷ Through contact with Italy, the scholastic and humanistic schools of thought influenced the work of Byzantine scholars. Although Constantinople was largely depopulated by the 14th century, new churches and monasteries continued to be commissioned and adorned, reflecting some of the most vital artistic creations of the entire Byzantine era.⁸⁸

Ultimately, after months of siege, on the morning of Tuesday, May 29, 1453, the Janissaries of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II breached the city's inner defensive walls and subdued the remaining Byzantine and Italian defenders of the city. Citizens not engaged in the actual defense of the city had taken refuge in the Church of Hagia Sophia. Ottoman troops forced their way into the church and murdered, raped and carried off into slavery the last inhabitants of the Empire. "By noon the streets were running red with blood. Houses were ransacked, women and children raped or impaled, churches razed, icons wrenched from their golden frames, books ripped from their silver bindings." Looting and pillage ensued with the walls and streets strewn with the dead and dying. Late in the afternoon of May 29,

or shortly thereafter, Sultan Mehmet II entered the city and followed the central boulevard called the *Mese* to the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia. It is recorded that the sultan with great humility entered the cathedral and surveyed its despoiled magnificence. At the command of the sultan the senior imam mounted the pulpit and invoked the Islamic call to prayer in the name of Allah, hence converting the former central shrine of Orthodox Christianity into a mosque.⁸⁹ The Byzantine Empire (*basileia ton Rhomaion*) had lasted 1,123 years and 18 days⁹⁰ (map, page 31).

The Final Years of the Byzantine Empire, 1340-1453††

The empire in its last years



†† Source: John Haldon, *Byzantium at War: AD 600-1453*, Essential Histories (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002) 87.

Geography: Material Space Recast

The emperor Napoleon I once stated: “The policy of a state lies in its geography.”⁹¹ It follows, therefore, that geography is crucial to any understanding of the Byzantines and their place in the world. The same can be said with regards to culture, at least if one agrees with Mikesell’s assertion (cited in Mathewson) that “the concept of culture is basic to all of human geography.”⁹² The concept of a nation, on the other hand, was astutely described by the poet Dante to be largely a cultural phenomenon.⁹³ In sum then, it is the mix of culture, politics, religion and geography which formed the unique creation of Byzantine “national consciousness.”

The physical geography of Byzantium was both the cradle and background for the events which unfolded between 330 and 1453. The borders of the Byzantine Empire varied with time, stretching from the Euphrates to Gibraltar (under the reign of Justinian I) in the 6th century to merely encompassing a small area around Constantinople with minor holdings in Greece during the 15th century. When the Empire was at its greatest territorial extent, the peoples of three continents and numerous ethnicities considered themselves Roman (whom scholars would now term “Byzantine”) citizens. And all citizens looked to the capital, Constantinople, for protection and spiritual guidance.

Over the centuries historians have given different names to the geographic area governed by the Emperor in Constantinople according to different epochs in the history of the Empire. Some scholars referred to period from 330 CE to the 6th-century as the period of the Eastern or Late Roman Empire when Latin elements were still prominent. Others employ the term of the Byzantine Empire only from the period of the late 6th-century onward when

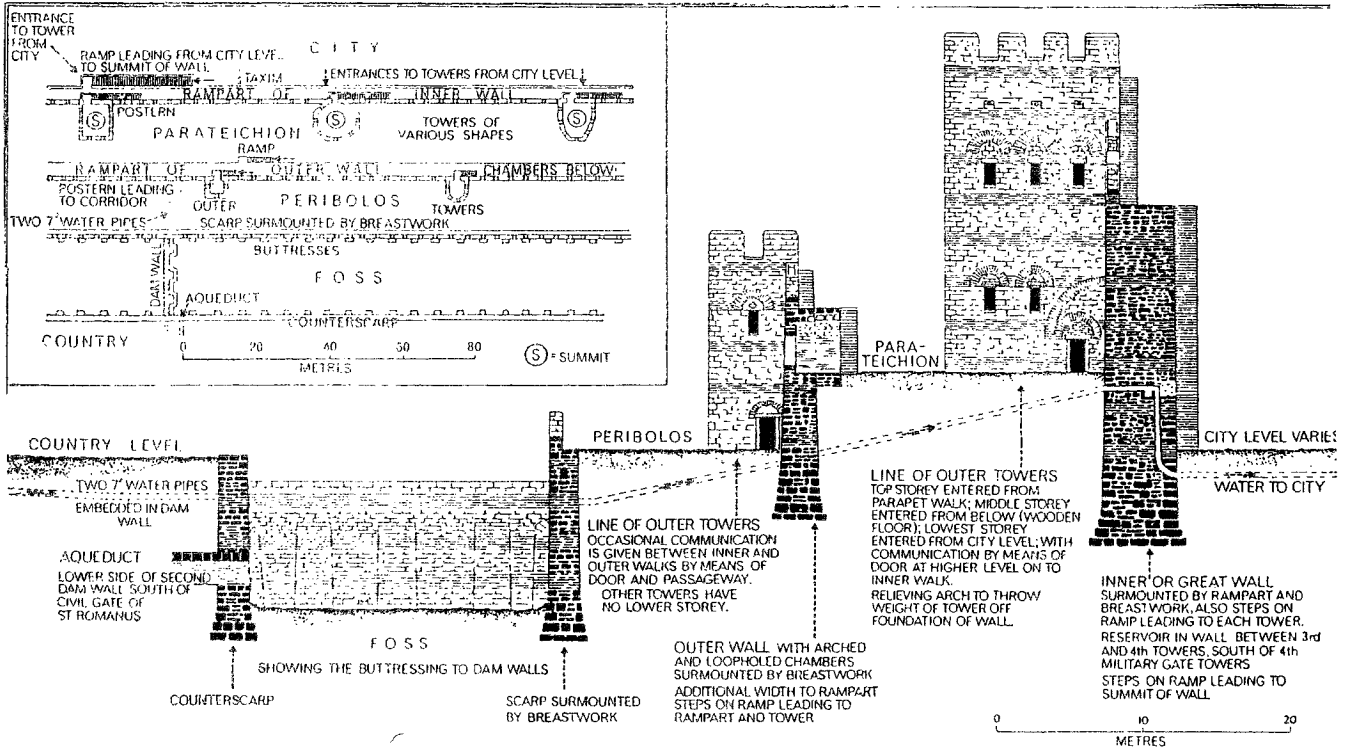
Greek elements came to predominate. Western Crusaders in the 13th century, and even Gibbon himself in the 18th-century, referred to the polity governed by the Emperor in Constantinople as the “Greek Empire.”

For most of its history citizens of the Empire referred to themselves as Romans, and to the capital city as “the city,” or *Byzantion*, (the ancient Greek name for Byzantium). In current Modern Standard Greek usage the present-day city of Istanbul is still referred to as Constantinople, or simply the city. Historians continue to distinguish between the various periods in Byzantine history, but the appellations of “Eastern Roman” or “Byzantine” Empire are now (for the general reader) often used interchangeably as is the noun “Byzantium.” (For the purposes of this study the terms are employed without distinction unless specified.) References made by Gibbon and others to the Empire as the simply “Greek Empire” are inaccurate.

From its inception the Eastern Roman Empire was centered around Constantinople. Obolensky notes the two most important aspects of the city=s geographical position: “its role as a natural, and as a man-made, citadel; and its position as a centre of international communications.”⁹⁴ Surrounded by water on three sides--on the north the city=s deep water harbor called the Golden Horn, the swift-flowing current of the Bosphorus to the east, and the Sea of Marmara to the south--Constantinople was virtually impregnable. However, the one access by land, through the plains of Thrace, was easily accessible and a triple set of defensive walls was established on the city’s western perimeter (illustrations, pages 35-36). “Constantinople’s position at the southern outlet of the Bosphorus, commanding both the

land route from Europe to Asia and the waterway between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, equipped the city for its role as the centre of a world empire.”⁹⁵ The Golden Horn is considered to be one of the finest natural harbors in the world, which enabled the city to become an “international emporium and a port of call for ships from three continents.”⁹⁶

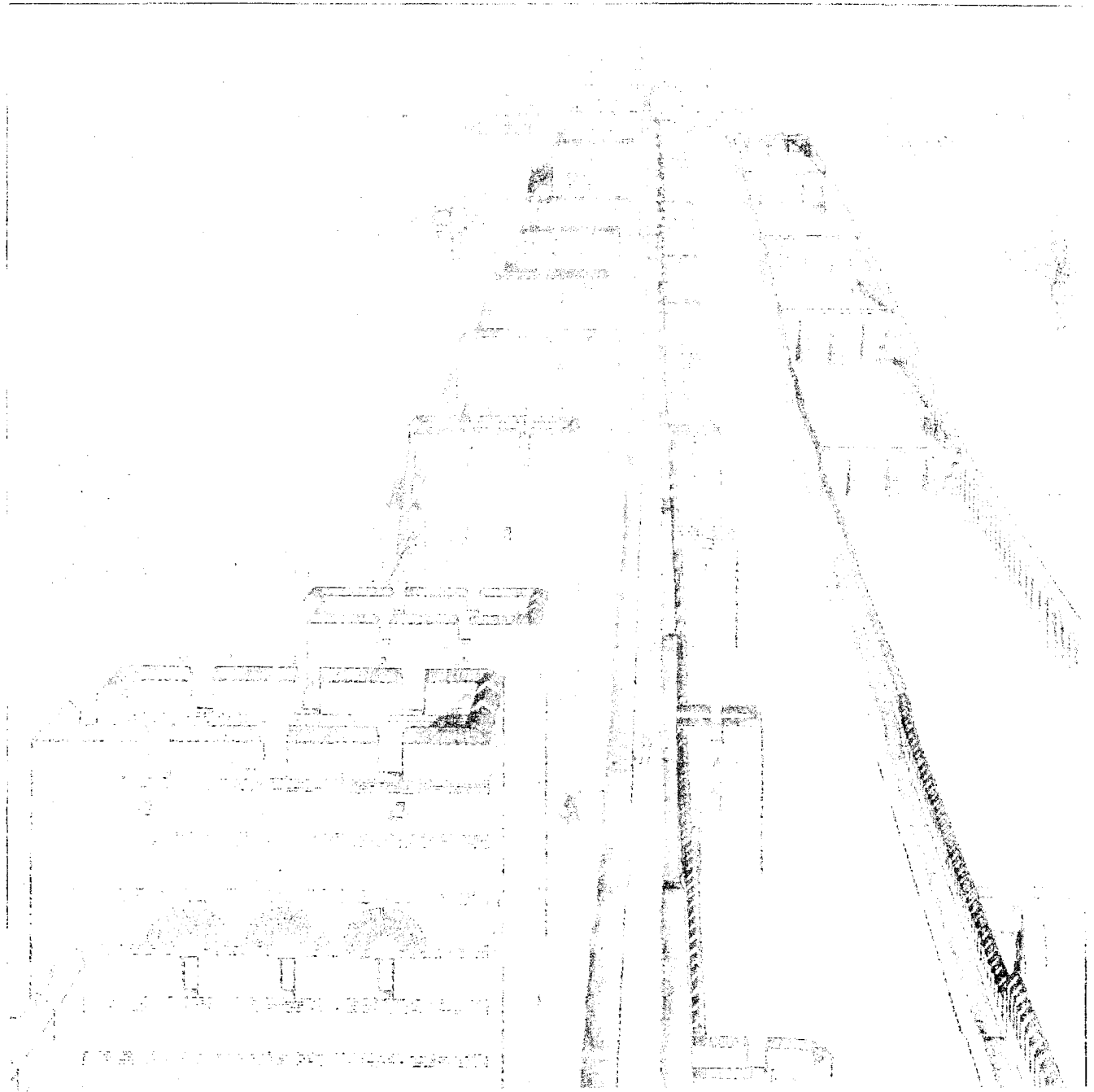
The Land Walls of Constantinople Following the Restoration of Theodosius II, circa 408-50 CE§§



Approximate Section and Restoration of the Walls of Theodosius II

§§ Source: Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453* (New York: Canto-Cambridge University Press, 2004) 90.

**Artist's Rendering of the Defensive Walls of Constantinople,
circa 5th Century*****



*** Source: John Haldon, *Byzantium at War: AD 600-1453*, Essential Histories (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002) 27.

Having a capital city in such a favorable location no doubt helped maintain the economic base of Constantinople and its defensive posture; it also influenced relations with the outside world. Perhaps more important is how the geographic location of Constantinople helped shape the manner in which the Byzantines perceived themselves and others. Indeed, with the frequently changing physical boundaries of the Empire came an accretion of older classical cultures from Europe, Africa and Asia, mixed with a multitude of ethnic groups and languages, to form what became distinctly “Byzantine” culture, over-laid as it was upon a framework of Christianity, Roman law and Greek language and culture within the confines of imperial territory.

According to Peattie, “A geographic region is any area set apart by physical, economic or social circumstances which has an essential cultural unity resulting in a common set of ideas and ideals.”⁹⁷ Persons living within these geographic regions perceive differences and establish boundaries between themselves and others. From these boundaries and feelings of unique or shared culture can arise feelings of “nationalism” or being part of a “nation.” A nation can be defined as “A large aggregate of people so closely associated with each other by a factor such as common descent, language, culture, history, and occupation of the same territory as to be identified as a distinct people, esp. when organized or potentially organizable as a political state.”⁹⁸ Kellas states that “Nationalism is both an ideology and a form of behaviour” which give rise to “a set of attitudes and a programme of action.”⁹⁹ Nationality can best be understood as a “mechanism of social classification,” in which M. Guibernau (cited in Storey) finds five key shared sentiments among a population:

- 1) a psychological sense of being a community;

- 2) sharing a common culture;
- 3) attachment to clearly demarcated territory;
- 4) possessing a common historical past;
- 5) a community claiming the right to rule itself.¹⁰⁰

Throughout their one-thousand-year history, the Byzantines exhibited most, if not all, of these traits. The collective sense of belonging to the one and only true civilization did exist and approximates the modern notion of nationalism as “devotion to one’s nation; national aspiration; advocacy of or support for national independence.”¹⁰¹ It is important to recall however, that modern concepts of “nation” and “nationalism” were not developed, in the geopolitical sense, until the latter portion of the 19th-century—long after the time of the Byzantines; and while may be useful for modern students of civilization to apply the ideas of nation and nationalism in an effort to understand Byzantine society, it must be emphasized that these geopolitical terms do not adequately encompass the totality of Byzantium. For the Byzantines the true common denominator was the religious mysticism of True Orthodoxy and the eternal life hereafter. More specifically, Byzantine “nationalism” manifested a “cultural continuity (which) proved stronger than racial, political, or geographic continuity...” The Byzantines had a “strong consciousness of a cultural mission.”¹⁰² Indeed, by their refusal to acquiesce to the subjugation of the Eastern Orthodox Church as articulated by the Council of Ferrara-Florence¹⁰³ in 1438-9, the citizens of Constantinople *de facto* acquiesced to the physical annihilation of their earthly “nation.” So while the terms “nation” and “nationalism” are useful tools for the study of modern nation-states, they are not sufficient to understand the totality of Byzantine geopolitical and psychological realities.

Humans have the tendency to live in a delineated space over which they feel safe and which gives them independence of action. Boundaries and frontiers are, therefore, social constructions conditioned by human “perceptions of an attitude towards space.”¹⁰⁴ An affective bond between geographical place and its inhabitants, or “topophilia” (as described in modern times by the behavioral geographer Yi-Fu Tuan), deeply influenced the world view of the Byzantines.¹⁰⁵ Prescott points out that “geographers are aware of the influence which boundaries may exert upon the development of cultural landscapes.”¹⁰⁶ Using etymological analysis Kristof (1959) derived the essential difference between a “boundary” and a “frontier.” A frontier comes from the notion of “in front,” (e.g. the “spearhead of civilization”); whereas “boundary” comes from “bounds,” implying territorial limits. “Frontier is therefore outward-orientated and boundary inward-orientated. Whereas a boundary is a definite line of separation, a frontier is a zone of contact.”¹⁰⁷

In Constantinople foreigners were often confounded by the fact that Byzantine definitions of boundaries and frontiers often blurred, so it is not surprising when Wilson and Hastings emphasize that “Borders can create the reasons to cross them and often may act as both barriers and opportunities, often simultaneously.”¹⁰⁸

In the field of human geography an important area of study is understanding the distinctions between public and private spheres of life. And in public and private life gender identity is now a topic considered worthy of scholarly study as is the articulation of gender identities across time and space and in different eras and places. “What interactions with the physical environment have been shaped by the practices of gender identity?”¹⁰⁹ In fact, it is the very fluidity of gender identity in Byzantine society that often confounded foreigners and

became part of the lore used to calumny the Byzantine historical legacy. Even the learned German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) felt compelled to call attention to “the vices and barbarities in the horrible Byzantine history...in which...barbarians...eunuchs...women and priests...are embroiled.”¹¹⁰

Certainly one of the more distinctive aspects of Byzantine society was the existence of castrated men or eunuchs charged with important affairs,¹¹¹ who played prominent roles (especially through the 11th century) in the “church, the army, and the civil administration.”¹¹² The origins of the Byzantine custom of castrating young men are incompletely understood. However, the status of eunuchs rose by the 10th-century to such an extent that according to Runciman, “For a boy to be really successful, it might be wise to castrate him; for Byzantium was the eunuch’s paradise. Even the noblest parents were not above mutilating their sons to help their advancement, nor was there any disgrace in it.”¹¹³

Eunuchs were males--usually castrated as children, in the early Byzantine period often from humble origins--who at times rose to the pinnacles of power in the Empire, becoming imperial chamberlains, high civil and ecclesiastical authorities and even military leaders, such as the famous pacifier of Italy, General Narses.¹¹⁴ In Constantinople the *koubouklion* was the high-ranking and very influential corps of palace eunuchs.¹¹⁵ Eunuchs also served as body guards/chaperons or companions of important women, often living in the women’s private compounds. Gibbon notes that the Empress Theodora’s “secret apartments were occupied by favourite women and eunuchs.”¹¹⁶ The position of eunuchs was paradoxical because both Roman law and ecclesiastical tradition frowned upon bodily mutilation, yet the castration of males into eunuchs continued into the later Byzantine period,

remaining an integral but enigmatic part of Byzantine society.¹¹⁷

Eunuchs navigated the frontiers and traversed the human geographical boundaries of gender. Ringrose states that as a specific gendered group eunuchs were uniquely suited to operate as a sort of “cultural mediators” in a society where “The boundaries between man and God, between Constantinople and heaven were not in fact clearly marked...”¹¹⁸ Indeed, eunuchs did traverse gender boundaries to intimate geographic spaces where men could not tread (as live-in companions/servants and guardians of highly placed women), and offices which were forbidden to females (serving as *parakoimomenos* or chamberlain to the emperor, etc.). Boys born of low estate could rise to the highest positions of power by submitting to castration and entering into the service of the imperial household. At times in Byzantine history the central contact between the emperor and the outside world was through the imperial eunuchs. It is not surprising that since they so well served these intermediary functions (between the emperor and his court or between aristocratic ladies and the outside world), eunuchs have sometimes been likened through the millennia to angels.

Compared to eunuchs, angels act as intermediaries and messengers between two worlds. Angels are believed to serve as harbingers and intercessors between the physical and spiritual worlds. And like eunuchs, angels are of neuter gender yet are always portrayed with the features of male youths--eunuchs were often described as beardless, but with still predominantly male characteristics. The Byzantines viewed their Empire as an reflection of heaven on earth. And as angels abide in paradise, therefore the Byzantines used eunuchs as the nearest human approximation and the imperial court in Constantinople as the earthly symbolic representations of heaven. Guerdan and Diener submit the main function of this

social group of “beardless officials” was similar to that of angels: “to guide, to present, to transform, to transmit.” Foreigners unaccustomed to Byzantine civilization found eunuchs disconcerting. Lebeau (in Guerdan) recounts how the Duke of Spoleto, after capturing and castrating a Byzantine military contingent, mocked Byzantine society, jesting that he had castrated the hostages “to help them get on in life, for they would now be held in high esteem at the Court of Constantinople.”¹¹⁹

Likened in gender to angels, it is not surprising to find that a hagiographic study shows that out of a total of 541 masculine saints, 18 are eunuchs.¹²⁰ The aura of gender ambiguity, which is a part of the eunuch and angel mystic, “draws on a tradition, continuous since classical antiquity, that set forth the androgyne or hermaphrodite as a distinctive ideal of beauty and frequently associated or conflated androgyny with effeminacy, bisexuality, and homosexuality.”¹²¹ However, it is important to reiterate that even though eunuchs were outside the norm of male gender, and yet not within the realm of female gender, they were genetically male--with a more masculine than feminine appearance. And although eunuchs were not able to exert the full range of male prerogative (neither engender biological heirs, nor accede to imperial power), they did nonetheless wield enormous influence in Byzantine society in the 10th- and 11th-centuries and affected foreign perceptions of Byzantium.¹²²

Literature: Thwarting the Stream of Time

With the first publication of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1776, the subject of Byzantine civilization became known to a wide English audience for the first time, but was cast in a decidedly negative tone. Gibbon’s severe appraisal of Byzantine history is traditionally attributed to sentiments of anti-clericalism which predominated the

intellectual climate of the Enlightenment in the late 18th-century. Byzantine religious mysticism and non-standard gender practices remained perplexing to Enlightenment-era scholars. As the modern historiographical method was developed in the 19th-century more complete understandings of Byzantine society and culture were developed. However, this research shows that while Byzantine religiosity has become more fully understood since the 18th-century, the topic of non-standard gender practices—in particular the prominence of high-profile women in public life and the influence of eunuchs remains problematic for students of Byzantine history until the present. And as the modern popular understanding of Byzantine civilization comes largely from historical works (secondary sources), this essay will focus on historical secondary source works written about Byzantium in the past 230 years. In addition to their subject matter secondary sources can reveal much about the period in which they were written. The historian John Arnold notes that secondary sources are the “‘primary’ evidence of their own time.”¹²³ In other words, the choices the historian makes in what subject is to be examined, and how, reveal a great deal. According to Arnold:

*Historians make choices and decisions before they ever lay eyes on the evidence. So perhaps it would be more truthful to say that one way in which history begins is with sources. Another way in which it begins is with historians themselves: their interests, ideas, circumstances, and experiences.*¹²⁴

In this study eight prominent historical works of the modern era (*circa* 1776 to the present) will be studied. Arguably the most influential treatises on the topic of Byzantine civilization for the general reader, these works are examined from a critical interdisciplinary perspective in terms of comparative literary analysis of tone, style, historical accuracy, and

geographical considerations. The works reviewed are sampled from a wide-range of professional and non-professional scholarship spanning the entire European continent and extending to the United States. Four scholars of Eastern European origin or training are compared with four scholars of Western European orientation, and a comparative analysis is made based upon five common aspects of Byzantine history treated by each of the authors. The manner in which Byzantine history is viewed by the authors and what is written or not written is noted. Interestingly, the geographic and ethnic origins of the authors appear to exert less influence on the author's perceptions of Byzantine civilization than do questions of non-standard sexual behaviors.

From Central and Eastern Europe, the works of George Ostrogorsky, A.A. Vasiliev, Dimitri Obolensky and Bertha Diener will be considered. Diener lived in Germany and wrote in the 1930's, but because of a history of Russian-German academic affiliations she will be reviewed with the Eastern European authors. (In the first half of the 19th-century there was a tradition of German scholars who lived in Russia and made important studies in Byzantine history and who were inducted into the Russian Academy of Sciences, remaining permanently in St. Petersburg.)¹²⁵ Western authors reviewed will include Edward Gibbon, Charles Diehl, John Julius Norwich and Warren Treadgold.

History of the Byzantine State (German edition 1952; English edition 1969; 97) by George Ostrogorsky, has long been considered the standard tome of reference for students of Byzantine history. Professor Ostrogorsky, a Russian who resided in Belgrade, devoted many years of scholarship to Byzantine studies and is considered one of the great historians of the 20th-century. *History of the Byzantine State* is a dense, expertly crafted, concise work replete

with exhaustive, chapter-by-chapter, expositions on the sources consulted for each topic covered. Heavy emphasis is given to political considerations and economic development. Republished numerous times since the first German-language edition in the 1950's, the current volume offers a masterful English translation by renowned Byzantinist Joan Hussey, rendering *History of the Byzantine State* accessible and an indispensable resource.

History of the Byzantine Empire 324-1453 (1980, originally published in French in 1932) is a two-volume set which has been translated from the original Russian-language version into several languages and been republished throughout the latter part of the 20th-century. Like Ostrogorsky, fellow Russian A.A. Vasiliev produced another of the most well-known 20th-century histories about Byzantine civilization. *History of the Byzantine Empire* is useful for its extensive survey titled "The Study of Byzantine History," and Professor Vasiliev discusses the phenomenon of the negative commentary Byzantine history has received since the Enlightenment. Both volumes of *History of the Byzantine Empire* offer an excellent overview of Byzantine history and are particularly helpful guides in understanding the effects of social factors on the momentous geopolitical events of the period.

The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453 (1971), by Dimitri Obolensky, focuses on the geographical relationships and the cultural influences of Byzantine civilization on the peoples of Eastern Europe and Russia. Obolensky gives particular emphasis to the cultural diffusion and legacy of Byzantine civilization, which has shaped the current language, religion and culture of millions of people in Russia and in Eastern and Southern Europe.

Colorful aspects of the living Byzantine past are revisited in an unusual book written

in a non-scholarly format entitled *Imperial Byzantium* (1938) by Bertha Diener (a translation from the 1937 German edition of *Byzanz, von Kaisern, Engeln und Eunuchen*). Centrally located between East and West, the Germans showed an early interest in Byzantine history in the 16th century and had longstanding social and cultural contacts with the peoples of the Byzantine Commonwealth in Eastern Europe. Distinguished from other early 20th-century students of Byzantine civilization, Diener perhaps best described the mystical orientation of the Byzantine mindset: the peculiar embrocation of the ineffable with *realpolitik* which gives *Imperial Byzantium* a unique perspective of Byzantine history.

Paradoxically, a book which is considered by many to be the greatest historical work of literature in the English language is also the work which most maligned the reputation of Byzantine civilization, and in some aspects has continued to stigmatize the Byzantine historical record up to the present day. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (in seven volumes), by Edward Gibbon, first appeared in 1776, and has been translated into numerous languages. *Decline and Fall* is a massive body of scholarship of staggering erudition, elegantly written in exquisite prose, rightly earning its place as a literary masterpiece. Although well-researched, much of Gibbon's negative appraisal of Byzantine history is now viewed as inaccurate. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is today considered dated as a historical work but is still highly esteemed as a literary work

In the first half of the 20th-century, the noted French historian Charles Diehl rose to prominence with his pioneering historiographical study entitled *Byzantine Portraits* (1927, originally published as *Figures byzantines* in 1906). This was an unusual work because it was one of the earliest modern historiographical works to examine the role of women and

non-aristocratic people in Byzantine society. Influencing, a decade later, the work of Diener, Diehl examined Byzantine civilization through the lens of history but also with an insight into the mix of the human and the divine which was so characteristic of Byzantium.

Like *Imperial Byzantium*, the three-volume *Byzantium* series by John Julius Norwich (*The Early Centuries*, *The Apogee*, and *The Decline and Fall*) makes no claim to scholarly rigor. Norwich admits he was compelled to write the *Byzantium* trilogy as a work of popular history because of what he found to be a public dearth of information on the subject of Byzantine history.¹²⁶ Though the *Byzantium* series may not meet all professional standards of academic excellence, it is nonetheless an ambitious and important work of popular history, with a broad scope covering political and social events with an emphasis on historical figures and the effects of individual volition upon Byzantine history.

The most recent comprehensive study of Byzantine history is *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* by Warren Treadgold (1997). Providing an overview of the entirety of Byzantine history, Professor Treadgold makes extensive use of statistical and numerical data in examining the role of economics in the life of the Empire. The ramifications of individual rulers' actions upon the lives of the citizenry and the state of the Empire are closely examined. In an attempt to understand the psychological world of the Byzantine mind, Treadgold stresses that modern ideologies "like Marxism, Post-structuralism[sic], or nationalism...[are] unhelpful for studying Byzantium, where social classes and political and religious groups were loose, shifting, and not ideological in the modern sense."¹²⁷

Preview of Chapters

This study, therefore, consists of six chapters. Chapter one includes introductory comments, an historical overview, and describes the research methodology in which eight influential works on Byzantine civilization (historical works) from authors across Eastern and Western Europe and the United States are examined in an interdisciplinary study. The interdisciplinary approach allows five major topics in Byzantine studies to be analyzed in each of the eight selected historical works with regards to comparative literary studies, history and geography.

Chapter 2 examines in depth the works of the Eastern European authors George Ostrogorsky, A.A. Vasiliev, Bertha Diener and Dimitri Obolensky. Chapter 3 focuses on works produced in Western Europe by Edward Gibbon, Charles Diehl, John Julius Norwich and in the United States by Warren Treadgold. All the works reviewed in chapters 2 and 3 compare five topics central to the study of Byzantine civilization:

- 1) The importance of geography in the making of Byzantium;
- 2) Byzantium's medial cultural position to both the societies of the West and Islam;
- 3) Byzantine dominance in commercial, political, and religious affairs;
- 4) The omnipresence of religion in daily life and mystical outlook of the society and state;
- 5) Non-standard gender practices or behaviors and their perception in Byzantium and abroad.

In Chapter 4 the transgression of gender boundaries, or what are perceived as non-

standard practices by the historians writing about Byzantine society, and appears to be a factor in the continuing misrepresentation of Byzantium. In particular, the prominence of high-status women in Byzantine public life and the influence accorded eunuchs in the imperial court and governmental administration is problematic for several of the authors, who comment either directly or indirectly on the topics. Historical study has shown that non-majority or non-standard gender practices have their basis in the Byzantine religious world view and are hence, crucial to an accurate understanding of Byzantine society.

A historical survey outlines the rise of non-standard gender practices and the principle of female enervation from Antiquity through the classical societies of Greece and Rome, until the eventual advent of Christianity, which precipitated a gradual change in the perception of the human body and sexuality, ultimately leading to the conflation of non-standard gender practices vitiated by an underlying anima of female essence. The reintroduction of Byzantine civilization to a wide audience was achieved in the late 18th-century with the publication of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. But Enlightenment hostility to religiosity and sentiments of anti-clericalism along with Gibbon's retention of the ancient notion of the vitiation of female energy in non-standard gender practices led to a widely circulated, but overall negative impression of Byzantine civilization, which was propagated by other scholars until well into the late 20th-century.

Chapter 5 explores how the meaning of Byzantium has changed over time. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Byzantium as a concept was appropriated again and again to serve specific agendas. In Renaissance Italy, Byzantium was seen as merely a repository for the literary masterpieces of Antiquity. It was not until the 16th-century, in Germany and 17th-

century in France, that Byzantine civilization began to be studied in its own right. However, with the European Enlightenment of the late 18th-century intellectual opinion turned against Byzantium. Finally, in the 19th-century, under the auspices of the great German philologists and the transformation of the study of history into a professional academic discipline, Byzantine history at last was considered as a legitimate field in its own right. Interestingly, the rehabilitation of the Eastern Roman Empire was slow to take root in the one modern nation which was the descendant of Byzantium: Greece. Influenced by European Enlightenment, internalized feelings of inferiority, anxious to establish legitimacy and the respect of western governments, the fledgling Kingdom of Hellas looked principally to Antiquity for inspiration in finding a Hellenic identity. It was not until the mid-to-latter portion of the 19th-century that the modern nation of Greece began to embrace its Byzantine heritage and understand its history and language as the very roots of modern Greek identity.

As the Enlightenment gave way in the 19th-century to stylistic and literary trends which became known as Romanticism, the concept of Byzantium was once again appropriated to serve various artistic ends. The concept of an exotic, eastern, once-noble-but-now-dead civilization appealed to Romantic sensibilities, and the most famous Romantic of all, George Gordon, Lord Byron literally gave his life in the struggle for Greek national independence. The Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott also found the notion of Byzantium fertile ground as the backdrop for his romantic novel, *Count Robert of Paris* (1817). At the turn of the 20th-century the diaspora Greek poet Constantine Cavafy was drawn to the pan-Hellenic aspects of Byzantine civilization and contributed to the discussion on which form the modern Greek language should take. The Irish dramatist and poet William Butler Yeats,

in the first half of the 20th-century, admired the mystical visionary aspects of Byzantine society and melded several stylistic trends to compose what was considered one of his most masterful works, the poem “Sailing to Byzantium.”

In the later 20th- and early 21st-centuries the Byzantine civilization has received renewed attention. Partially because of more recent understandings of human sexuality, the non-standard gender practices which once so troubled scholars have become topics of great interest. The roles of women and eunuchs in Byzantine society are now seriously studied by professional historians.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect in the rehabilitation of Byzantium has been its appropriation by the world of popular culture. A line of perfume and a brand of chocolates now carries the name Byzantium. And recently, genres of fiction have sprouted with Byzantine themes ranging from mystery novels with eunuch detective protagonists to sexy blood-sucking vampires stalking the streets of 6th-century Constantinople.

The concluding chapter reiterates salient aspects of the preceding chapters and restates the thesis that the presence in Byzantine society of what were perceived by later commentators, particularly during the Enlightenment, to be non-standard gender practices in the form of eunuchs and high-profile female presence in government biased the presentation of Byzantine history in a negative fashion for generations. Underlying the negative perceptions about Byzantine non-standard sexual practices is the premise of the vitiating effects of a female anima. The stigma associated with non-standard gender practices remained much longer than the opprobrium attached to western misapprehensions about Byzantine religiosity. Lastly, the legacy of Byzantine civilization is discussed as is its

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CHAPTER TWO

Eastern European Scholars Explore Their Heritage

Knowledge about Byzantine civilization in the modern popular imagination is the result of historical events filtered through centuries of perceptions by commentators who wrote about Byzantium long after its extinction. Christian Western, Byzantine and Oriental sources, including Arab ones by 7th and 8th-century chroniclers such as Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam and Ibn ‘Asakir,¹ have documented the momentous geopolitical and historical events which altered the shape of the Empire. Political, religious, ethnic and economic rivalry fuelled conflict between Western Europe, the ascendant Islamic world and the Byzantines until the final destruction of the Empire in 1453. In the West, after 1453, knowledge of Byzantine civilization was mainly the purview of antiquarians and theologians. In the East, despite centuries of Ottoman occupation, the Byzantine heritage vividly lived on in the form of religion, language and culture.

As Ottoman domination weakened, coinciding with nationalistic, pan-Slavic movements in the 19th-century, Eastern European scholars also began in earnest to reappraise their Byzantine heritage. The memory of a supra-national Orthodox Christian community remained alive as questions of national and ethnic identity were raised when the peoples of the Balkans began to gain their independence.

Eastern European Studies of Byzantine Civilization

Because of the direct cultural links between Byzantium and Eastern Europe, including Russia, Eastern European intellectuals took a leading role in the scholarly study of Byzantine civilization in the 19th-century. Prior to this time, travel to the regions formerly

under Byzantine control was difficult and original source materials were scarce, often limited to the libraries of monastic institutions. Indeed, it was not until the first half of the 19th-century that non-Orthodox scholars were allowed access to historic *chrysobulls* (imperial pronouncements) and archives on Mount Athos (the preeminent Eastern Orthodox semi-autonomous monastic community with extensive libraries).² In this chapter, three Eastern European scholars and one Central European scholar whose studies made important contributions to the understanding of Byzantine civilization are examined: Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453* (1971;2000); Bertha Diener, *Imperial Byzantium* (1937;1938); A.A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, 324-1453* (1928;1980); and George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (1952;1997). These studies were written in the course of the 20th-century and are selected here for study because of their general use in university-level Byzantine history courses. The works of Vasiliev and Ostrogorsky, in the second half of the 20th-century, in particular, have been considered canonical texts and standard reading for all students of Byzantine history.

Divergence of Perspectives

In this section the works of the four aforementioned scholars are reviewed in a survey of five salient aspects of Byzantine civilization:

- 1) Byzantium as geographical center;
- 2) The centrality of religion in the Byzantine mind-set;
- 3) The medial position of Byzantium between Western Christendom and Islam;
- 4) Byzantium in commercial, political and strategic affairs and
- 5) Non-standard gender practices in the Byzantine world.

This review shows the issue of gender (more specifically the perception of non-standard gender practices) to cause the most divergence of opinion in the works of the Eastern European scholars. In the four works examined, the topics of geography, religion, commercial and political affairs are covered in a fairly even manner, with a large measure of unanimity and consensus. Obolensky, for one, hardly broaches the subjects and Vasiliev only cursorily examines the roles of females and eunuchs; Diener, on the other hand, shows great interest in the lives of women and eunuchs in Byzantine society while Ostrogorsky gives a negative appraisal when discussing the legacy of eunuchs and women in Byzantium.

A.A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire 324-1453* (1980)

Alexander A. Vasiliev (born 1867) was a prominent Russian historian working in the latter part of the 19th- and first half of the 20th-centuries who eventually emigrated to the United States. *History of the Byzantine Empire* was originally published in Russian and grew from several of Vasiliev's earlier works. The first English versions appeared in 1928-1929, and were published by the University of Wisconsin Press. *History of the Byzantine Empire* is useful not only for its survey of political history, but also for Professor Vasiliev's examination of the social and cultural aspects of Byzantine society which influenced political events.

Vasiliev begins his study with an extensive thirty-nine page survey entitled "The Study of Byzantine History," in which he covers Western European Byzantine scholarship and Byzantine studies in Russia. Vasiliev discusses well-known comments made about Byzantine civilization by Voltaire, Montesquieu, Hegel, Napoleon, etc.; emphasizing whatever their limitations, both Montesquieu and Gibbon shared the "correct view" that

Byzantine history is a “continuation of Roman history.”³ In his assessment of Gibbon, Vasiliev acknowledges Gibbon did not have access to many key original historical sources, and that he was influenced by the unfavorable Enlightenment ideas of his time which were antithetical to the unique confluence of political, religious and social elements in Byzantine civilization.⁴

In describing the traditionally negative reviews that Byzantine history has received during the modern era, Vasiliev quotes the renowned early 19th-century British medievalist J.B. Bury’s comment: “There is no period of history...which has been so much obscured by incorrect and misleading titles as the period of the later Roman Empire.”⁵ In fact, for many years it was generally accepted that the capture of Rome by the Scyrians (a minor Germanic tribe)⁶ in 476 CE marked the end of the Roman Empire. Byzantium was not even seen as part of Roman history. Byzantium, if mentioned at all, became paradigmatic (depending upon the cause being espoused) for all that was good--or more commonly became impugned with a legacy of unmitigated profligacy.

Particular social movements were served by divergent perceptions of Byzantine history. In the early half of the 19th-century, eminent Russian intellectuals used Byzantine history to support the cause of Pan-Slavism while pro-Westernizers in Russia pointed to the dangers that would befall Russia if it followed the example of Byzantine history. The vigor of the debate over the relevance of Byzantine historical study to mid-19th century Russia is illustrated by the fervent slavophile A.S. Khomiakov, cited in Vasiliev: “In our opinion, to speak of the Byzantine Empire with disdain means to disclose one's own ignorance.”⁷ In 1912, the Russian historian Th. I. Uspensky maintained that a thorough understanding of

Byzantine history was indispensable to “the formation and proper guidance of Russian political and national consciousness.”⁸

History of the Byzantine Empire includes a detailed history of the Byzantine state, a review of theological and ecclesiastical disputes, foreign policy, church-state relations, political/social conditions, education and art. The ramifications of the Iconoclast period (circa 717-867 CE) are closely examined. Human agency is viewed as the prime generator of events. Vasiliev stresses the connections between Christianity and its incorporation of pagan cultural aspects.⁹ The social relevance of the circus party factions in the 6th-century is discussed, as is the controversial Fallmerayer hypothesis regarding the Avaro-Slavic invasions of the 7th-and 8th-centuries. Volume II of *History of the Byzantine Empire* continues the epic history of Byzantine civilization covering centuries of successive military and theological conflicts and their impact upon Byzantine society. Vasiliev discusses, as well, the influence of Byzantine culture on the Italian Renaissance. Accordingly, *History of the Byzantine Empire* offers an excellent overview of Byzantine history and is a particularly helpful guide in understanding the effects of social factors on the momentous geo-political events of the period.

George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (1969; 97)

George Ostrogorsky was an eminent Russian historian working in the first half of the 20th-century. Along with Vasiliev, Ostrogorsky remains among the most respected scholars of Byzantine history. His most well-known work was originally published in German with the title *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates (History of the Byzantine State)* 1952. Described by the historian A.A. Vasiliev as a work of the “first rank¹⁰,” *History of the*

Byzantine State focuses largely on the political history of the Empire. Exceedingly useful as a reference work, *History of the Byzantine State* was used as the standard text for Byzantine studies for generations.

History of the Byzantine State begins with an informative chapter entitled “The Development of Byzantine Studies” (pages 1-21) which gives an overview of the growth of Byzantine Studies in the modern era. Ostrogorsky cites the German scholar Hieronymus Wolf (1516-80) and the influence of 16th-century “new humanism” for stimulating interest in the study of Byzantium. The 16th-century Western European struggles against the Ottomans, German Protestant anti-Papal sentiment and the movement for Union among some Catholics, first compelled Western humanists to review Byzantine legal and historical sources.¹¹ However, Byzantine history did not reach a wide readership until the late 18th-century with Gibbon’s “forceful presentation” of Byzantine civilization. The *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* had the ironic effect of making the idea of the Eastern Roman Empire known to the educated public, but “had a strongly deterrent effect on scholars and dampened enthusiasm for Byzantine research for nearly a century. Even in the present day the religious development of Byzantium is often seen through Gibbon spectacles.”¹²

After the foundation of Constantinople in 330 CE, “Roman political concepts, Greek culture and the Christian faith were the main elements which determined Byzantine development.” Ostrogorsky believes all three elements were integral parts of Byzantine identity. “It was the integration of Hellenistic culture and the Christian religion within the Roman imperial framework that gave rise to that historical phenomenon which we know as the Byzantine Empire.”¹³ It is emphasized that “Byzantine history is indeed only a new

phase of Roman history, just as the Byzantine state is only a continuation of the old *imperium romanum*.”¹⁴

Professor Ostrogorsky demonstrates that in order to understand the consolidation of the Byzantine state it is paramount to appreciate the fusion of the spiritual and philosophical:

*there was on the whole a close and intimate relationship between State and Church, a fundamental interdependence of the Orthodox Empire and the Orthodox Church which together formed a single political and ecclesiastical entity...The Emperor was not only the highest military commander, the supreme judge and the only legislator, but also the protector of the Church and of Orthodoxy. Removed as it were from the earthly and human sphere, he stood in direct relationship to God and became the object of a special cult that was both political and religious.*¹⁵

Although a well-trained civil service and administrative structure evolved, “The corruption and greed of the Byzantine civil service became proverbial and was always a source of deep resentment for common people. The wealth of the Empire and the high level of its culture were bought at the expense of the masses who lived in misery without means of redress and without freedom.”¹⁶

History of the Byzantine State also examines the administrative apparatus of the Empire (37), military structure (43), the far-reaching ramifications of Byzantine jurisprudence, and the growth and importance of political parties which originated as sporting fan clubs known as “circus factions” (67). One of the greatest achievements of the Emperor Justinian I in the 6th century was the standardization of previously haphazard and inconsistent laws. “Justinian’s jurists abbreviated and often altered classical Roman law so that the code might be brought into line with the needs of contemporary society, and reconciled with the Christian commandments and the customs of the Hellenistic East. Under the influence of Christianity, it was often modified in the direction of greater humaneness,

particularly with regard to the laws concerning the family.”¹⁷

The Avaro-Slavic invasions of Greece during the 7th-century CE are examined and Ostrogorsky disproves the theories of the German historian J.P. Fallmerayer, who in the 19th-century postulated that Slavic peoples entirely replaced the native population in Greece during the 7th and 8th-centuries, rendering the current population of Greece ethnically impure and unrelated to the ancient Greeks. Ostrogorsky corrects the Fallmerayer misnomer stating:

*even though the Peloponnese itself was under Slav control for more than two hundred years, there was no question of any permanent Slavonization of Greek territory...Under pressure of Slav invasion the original population everywhere had withdrawn towards the maritime districts and the neighbouring islands, and this partly accounts for the fact that the Greek element was strengthened again and gradually preponderated over the Slav on the southern and eastern coasts, while the Roman element reasserted itself on the western shores.*¹⁸

Ostrogorsky reviews the important landmark codification of Byzantine law in the *Ecloga* (726) of the Emperor Leo III (circa 717-41) and his son Constantine V (circa 741-75). The rights of the wife and children were expanded and marriage was given increased protection. Conversely, an increase in gruesome corporal punishments and mutilations are set forth in the *Ecloga*--contrasted to capital punishment in the time of Justinian--and attributed by Ostrogorsky to both the influence of Christianity and to “a coarsening of morals under oriental influence.”¹⁹ The iconoclast controversies of the 8th-and 9th-centuries are thoroughly examined (166), as is the ascendance of the great monastic houses (176).

History of the Byzantine State is written with a professional tone of scholarly detachment. Accordingly, it is incongruous when Professor Ostrogorsky makes uncharacteristically strident statements pertaining to the “immoral”²⁰ mid-10th century Empress Theophano, the “abysmal moral depravity”²¹ of the chief minister and man of

letters Michael Psellus (*circa*1018-96), and the “unhealthy passions” of the Emperor Constantine V (*circa*743-75)²². Also puzzling is Ostrogorsky’s low estimation of high-profile women and the competence of certain eunuch court officials in Byzantine history. In the view of Professor Ostrogorsky, the loss of prestige the Empire suffered in the eyes of the West, *worse* than military defeat, was partially due to perceptions in the West about the influence of women and eunuchs in Byzantium.²³ Yet elsewhere Ostrogorsky admits the importance of eunuchs in Byzantine political and court life. “No office, however high, in Church and State (with the single exception of the imperial dignity itself) was withheld from the eunuchs on principle, and many of the patriarchs, statesmen and generals who distinguished themselves in Byzantine history were eunuchs.”²⁴

Important theological debates, the struggle for primacy between the patriarchate and the papacy, religious schism, the rise of Byzantine “feudalism” (questioned by historians such as Franziska E. Shlosser), and the ultimate collapse of the Eastern Roman Empire are meticulously brought to light by the incisive mind of Ostrogorsky. Some aspects of *History of the Byzantine State* now seem dated: such as Ostrogorsky’s insistence on the rise of Byzantine feudalism and debatable declaration (contradicted by Treadgold) that “It is...momentous factors in foreign and domestic politics, and not the personal qualities of its rulers, which really account for the decline of Byzantium...”²⁵ However, more than earlier historians, Ostrogorsky understood the complex mix of psychological and religious factors which motivated the Byzantines; and in so doing, he was able to authoritatively capture the patina of 1,123 years of Byzantine civilization.

Bertha Diener, *Imperial Byzantium* (1938)

Based on the 1937 German original, the English-language translation titled *Imperial Byzantium*, by Bertha Diener, was published in the late 1930's. Diener relied heavily on the works of recent Byzantinists for her facts, in particular the French historian Charles Diehl. Mostly a work of cultural history, Diener grasped the importance of non-standard gender practices in the functioning of Byzantine society. Her study of eunuchs in the imperial court and their associated symbolism remain ground-breaking and presaged the rise of gender studies nearly half a century later.

Imperial Byzantium is written in a rather stilted style that ranges from almost stream-of consciousness to the historiographical. Circumlocutions such as “For this ascent the Mediator in the Cave of the World thereupon offers up one of the lower beasts, a bull. To its testicles hangs a scorpion as unending torment, and the heavy body is perpetually tricked by the Death-Bitch...”²⁶ strike the reader as overwrought. Nonetheless, aside from stylistic difficulties, Diener makes an important contribution to the understanding of the Byzantine world-view. In particular, *Imperial Byzantium* explores the importance of non-standard gender practices and behaviors to Byzantine society. Diener appears moderate in the majority of her assessments of Byzantine civilization, but she does, like Ostrogorsky, present some contradictory statements referring to “crude Oriental despotism” and writes of Byzantine governmental structure: “Its imposing unnaturalness accounted for its success; for when nature has lapsed into chaos, nothing but obdurate perversion can be kept in being.”²⁷

Influenced by A.A. Vasiliev, Diener concurs that Byzantine civilization was the legitimate continuation of the Roman Empire,²⁸ and asserts “it was really Europeans and not Turks who destroyed the invaluable buffer State of Byzantium.”²⁹ Perhaps the most original aspect of *Imperial Byzantium* is Diener's discussion of the existence of eunuchs in Byzantine society and their function in court ceremonials. Diener compares male eunuchs in Byzantium to biblical angels, both beings of neuter gender. Eunuchs were used emblematically, Diener concludes, as “a magical ‘let’s pretend,’ the aim being, in this earthly life, to imitate the rhythms of the eternal--in the half-belief that by appearing to be what one is not, one can really become what one appears.”³⁰ This explanation is entirely consistent with Byzantine cosmological views. Thus the injunction of St. Matthew 19:12 that “some must be eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake,” allowed for castrated males to be imagined...to be likened to angels--lofty beings who reflected the Divine Majesty of God.³¹

Diener expands further on the selection and creation of eunuchs and notes that certain types of eunuchs were renowned for sexual prowess. However, as a sexual minority attaining high positions of influence, eunuchs frequently incurred the rancor of non-castrated males: “[H]idden beneath an entire man’s scorn for the mutilated, there might be an undercurrent of the mysterious envy, involuntarily producing malice.”³² The highest station of Emperor was one of the few positions not open to eunuchs. Diener conjectures that since eunuchs were likened to angels, they would not be capable of the full range of human dynamism required to be sovereign: “The monarch must be ‘an entire man,’ this being the medieval ideal. The entire man is dynamic, endowed with a freedom of the will which uplifts him above such holy automata as the static angels.”³³ The presence and prestige of

eunuchs in Byzantine society captured the imagination of Occidental visitors to Constantinople, and numerous accounts remain of western visitors' impressions of Byzantine eunuchs.

Diener is most incisive formulating conjectures regarding the human motivations of historical figures. For example, the rumors surrounding Theodora, wife of the Emperor Justinian I, were, according to Diener, "as thick as the blow-flies that buzz around carrion."³⁴ And although Diener judges the 6th-century Empress Theodora as "hot-blooded as an Oriental wanton," it is acknowledged that Theodora must have possessed a keen knowledge of human nature gained from her tenure in Egyptian brothels.³⁵ Such psychological insights into the lives of the Byzantines themselves and an understanding of the complex relationship between the divine and the terrestrial gives *Imperial Byzantium* a surprisingly modern and insightful perspective on Byzantine society.

Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe 500-1453* (1971)

Of aristocratic Russian émigré origins, Dimitri Obolensky (born 1918) spent his career in the United Kingdom in the second-half of the 20th-century specializing in Russian and Balkan history, eventually rising to the rank of professor at Oxford University. *The Byzantine Commonwealth* focuses on the influence of geography in the transmission of Byzantine civilization to the largely Slavic peoples of the Balkans and their subsequent development into the nations of Eastern Europe. Obolensky introduces the idea that the Byzantine Empire constituted a "commonwealth" remarkable for "Sprawling between shifting boundaries, divided into ethnic groups and warring national states, increasingly threatened with disruption by centrifugal forces, this commonwealth, born in the travails of

the barbarian invasions, achieved enough vitality and coherence to survive as a discernible entity from the mid-ninth to mid-fifteenth century.”³⁶

Professor Obolensky premises his use of the word “commonwealth” upon the notion that “The Byzantine heritage of these East European countries was...a significant enough component of their medieval tradition to justify the view that, in some respects, they formed a single international community.”³⁷ Much analysis is given to the geography and topography of the Balkans. The not insurmountable Balkan mountain chains acted as minor barriers or retardants to foreign invasion and cultural diffusion. But more importantly, the plains of the Balkan peninsula served tripartite functions as areas of food production, highways of communications and centers of urban power.³⁸

A myriad of “barbarian” tribes streamed through the funnel of the Balkan landmass toward what is today Greece and the Mediterranean. The Byzantines became well-versed in the time-honored diplomatic subtleties of stirring up strife amongst the barbarians, as evidenced in their duplicitous diplomatic intrigues with the Kutrigurs and Utigurs in 551 CE.³⁹ Because of his interest in the origins of Slavic settlement in the Balkans, Obolensky pays great attention to the ramifications of the Avaro-Slavic invasions of mainland Greece, *circa* 610-41 CE, which caused extensive destruction and disruption. He distinguishes between the Slavs living in Greece and in the Balkan peninsula and the “Antes Slavs” living in the area of modern Ukraine. The Slavs settling in Greece lived in a sort of quasi-democratic clan structure which made them hesitant to accept hierarchical Christianity and, therefore, delayed the acculturation of the Peloponnesian Slavs into Byzantine monarchical society. (Most of the Balkan and Peloponnesian Slavs were fully Christianized by the 9th-to-

10th centuries.) Whereas the Antes Slavs in Russia were well acquainted with the notion of kingship and were faster to adopt Christianity and reap the benefits of Byzantine cultural diffusion.⁴⁰

Obolensky makes the interesting speculation that as a result of the 7th-century Slavic invasions of the lower Balkans, the “cultural schism” between the eastern and western portions of the Roman Empire deepened: prior to the Slavic invasions the area known as *Illyricum* served as a transitional bilingual/bicultural region between Latin-speaking Italy and Greek-speaking Byzantium. After the Slavic invasions Illyricum became thoroughly slavicized and largely Slavic-speaking--effectively disrupting land communications between the eastern and western segments of the Empire for extended periods of time.⁴¹

The Byzantine development of the Cyrillic script is covered in depth and Obolensky regards the resultant “Graeco-Slav” culture serving as a means of transmission of Byzantine civilization to the medieval peoples of Eastern Europe.⁴² Despite the contribution of the Greek language to the formation of Cyrillic as a literary medium, the Byzantines still viewed the Slavs as foreigners (hence, “barbarians”), and Obolensky remarks upon the “characteristic and repulsive snobbery of the Byzantines about the Greek language.”⁴³ Most importantly, *The Byzantine Commonwealth* by Dimitri Obolensky provides a striking reminder that the “death of Byzantium” never happened insofar as its cultural legacy lives on in Russia, Eastern and Southern Europe. Through their written language and religion, Obolensky concludes that modern Eastern Europeans “preserve to this day a living contact with their Byzantine past.”⁴⁴

Byzantium as Geographical Center

Scholars such as Obolensky⁴⁵ and Vasiliev⁴⁶ agree that the geography of Constantinople is the key to understanding the entire evolution of Byzantine civilization. At the juncture of Asia, Africa and Europe, the location of Constantinople affected not only the unique formation of Byzantine society, but more importantly facilitated the transfer of Hellenistic and Byzantine culture to distant regions. And as a cultural gravitational center, many of the momentous events of medieval European history can be seen in relation to Constantinople.

In *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453*, Dimitri Obolensky explores how the geography of the Byzantine Empire shaped the cultural diffusion of Byzantine civilization to the peoples of Eastern Europe. The geography of the Balkan peninsula had a direct effect on the movement of people, goods and ideas.⁴⁷ Diener, in her work, anthropomorphized Constantinople as an imperial heart which pulsed rhythms “betwixt the lungs that were two continents.”⁴⁸ The importance of the geographical position of Constantinople cannot be overstated with regard to its effects on subsequent historical events. It is this geographical setting that not only helped create but also shaped the entire course of Byzantine history. Vasiliev, for example, describes some of the important attributes of founding a capital city--the “New Rome”--on the Bosphorus between Europe and Asia. Economically, the city controlled the trade routes between the Black Sea and the Aegean and the Mediterranean, making it a “commercial intermediary” between Europe and Asia. In *History of the Byzantine State*, George Ostrogorsky notes that Mediterranean trade was completely dominated by Greek and Syrian merchants.⁴⁹ However, the most lucrative

intercourse in luxury items such as silks and spices was carried out circuitously between Constantinople, India and China. In the early Byzantine period, trade between the “East” (China, India) and the Byzantine Empire was not direct, but was mediated by the Persian Empire of the Sassanids. However, until the period of the Crusades, goods arriving from the Far East passed through Byzantine customs houses, making enormous profits for the Byzantine state.⁵⁰ Most importantly, Constantinople's geographic site offered excellent opportunity for resisting invaders as it was inaccessible from sea and protected by massive walls on land.

During the early and middle periods of Byzantine history, Constantinople was the bulwark of Western Europe. Renowned for its fabulous wealth, opulence and culture, seat of the *imperium* and center of Orthodoxy, the imperial capital drew citizens, foreigners, pilgrims, philosophers, diplomats, popes, travelers, merchants, crusaders and would-be conquerors from every point of the known world. This magnetic attraction to Constantinople is described by Ostrogorsky as the “civilizing power”⁵¹ of the Byzantine capital. Culturally, Constantinople had the advantage of being within the sphere of Hellenistic culture which influenced Christianity to help create a new “Christian-Greco-Roman,” or “Byzantine” culture. Ostrogorsky states that the historical phenomenon known as the Byzantine Empire is the synthesis of “Hellenistic culture and the Christian religion within...[a] Roman imperial framework.”⁵² In other words it was the integration of Christianity, Greek culture and Roman political concepts which determined the characteristics of Byzantine civilization.⁵³

Vasiliev cites the early 20th-century Russian historian Th. I. Uspensky: “The choice of a site for the new capital, the construction of Constantinople, and the creation of a

universal historical city is one of the indefeasible achievements of the political and administrative genius of Constantine[...]by his timely transfer of the world-capital to Constantinople he saved the ancient culture and created a favorable setting for the spread of Christianity.”⁵⁴ The dire living conditions which the vast majority of the population endured, coupled with traumatic upheavals in daily life due to barbarian incursions and grinding poverty, gave people what Ostrogorsky termed the need to “turn to religion and the world to come.”⁵⁵ Although religion was an important part in the life of most individuals, questions of religious dogma and cultural sensibilities differed from one part of the Empire to the other. Thus, even as early as the 4th-century under Theodosius, Ostrogorsky emphasizes the fact that while the “conception of imperial unity was tenaciously maintained,”⁵⁶ the eastern and western halves of the Empire already showed marked differences in language, culture, racial composition and philosophical outlooks.⁵⁷

In *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, Obolensky describes the environs of Constantinople, beginning with the western flank of the empire. Directly to the west of the capital are Thrace and the Balkan peninsula. The Balkan peninsula is mountainous, but historically it was easily traversed and in the Byzantine era had no large cities (Thessalonica and Constantinople were on the periphery), nor any commanding geographical center.⁵⁸ The history of the Balkans reveals a complicated interdependence between the peoples of the region and their relationship with the mountains, plains and sea.⁵⁹ Obolensky emphasizes “the mountain, in its human as in its physical aspect, forms an ever present background to the history of the Balkans.”⁶⁰

Although the Balkan mountain chains are rugged, they are not insurmountable and provided no serious impediment to human movement. However, some isolated areas such as the Pindus in Greece and the Dinaric in Bosnia, did retard Byzantine and Venetian cultural diffusion.⁶¹ Throughout the Byzantine period, numerous changes occurred in the ethnic composition of the population in the mountainous regions of the Balkans. Different populations were disgorged, absorbed or disappeared entirely.

Obolensky views the plains of the Balkan peninsula as serving three main functions: as a source of agricultural wealth; as a center of military and civil administrative power, and as a means of communication “providing routes of invasion and channels for the diffusion of culture.”⁶² Perhaps most importantly the Balkan plains served as “highways” of commerce and acted as conduits for the transfusion of cultural influences.⁶³ Well-traveled “trans-Balkan” routes developed such as the “Via Egnatia” (Imperial Way) which served as the principal road from Singidunum (Belgrade) to Constantinople.⁶⁴ Travel time from Belgrade to Constantinople usually took 30-31 days at a leisurely pace.⁶⁵ In the 7th-century, the Belgrade-Constantinople highway would become a major route of invasion by the Avars and Slavs.⁶⁶ Until the early 13th century, the *Via Egnatia* (between Dyrrachium and Constantinople)⁶⁷ was very important as a route of trade and communication between Constantinople and its Adriatic outposts, possessions in South Italy and links with Rome.⁶⁸ Longitudinal and transverse routes were of extreme importance in bringing the more isolated inland areas of the Balkans into contact with the Latin- and Greek-speaking areas of the empire.⁶⁹

Since Antiquity the Romans had transmitted their culture and absorbed Eastern cultural influences largely through the transverse routes which connected Rome to the East. By the 11th-century the Byzantines were transmitting their culture largely through longitudinal channels to the peoples of South-Eastern Europe such as the Russians.⁷⁰ These longitudinal routes were mainly over water and involved traversing the Black Sea and the rivers of Ukraine and Southern Russia such as the Dnieper and the Don. The Black Sea island of Crimea served as a middle ground in the lucrative trade between the Mediterranean world and the steppes of Eurasia.⁷¹ In the Crimean region products such as salt, wax, furs and fish were traded between the Slavs and Byzantium. To the Byzantines trade with the region of Southern Russia not only served economic needs but helped to further Byzantine geopolitical interests in the region. The Byzantines employed what has been termed “defensive imperialism”⁷² in fomenting strife amongst the various ethnic groups surrounding imperial territory. Bribery, payoffs, extortion, propaganda dissemination, dissimulation, etc., were all part of Byzantine foreign relations which were a continuation of the traditional Roman policy of “divide and rule” and “weaken and watch”⁷³ that helped dilute potential threats to the empire. Indeed, the arrival of the Magyars in the Balkans and the rise of medieval Hungary were largely due to the diplomatic intrigues of the Byzantine government bribing the Magyars to leave the Southern Russian steppes and make a rearguard attack on Symeon of Bulgaria from the Dobrudja.⁷⁴

In Late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, the Southern Russian steppe was in culture largely Asian.⁷⁵ Slavic groups in the region such as the Sclavini and Antes later differentiated into modern-day Balkan Slavs, Eastern Slavs and Russians.⁷⁶ So vital to their

local communities as an economic lifeline was trade with Byzantium that the Russians fought what Obolensky describes as a “national crusade” to keep the water routes to Byzantium open.⁷⁷

Thus the rise of medieval Europe and the diffusion of Hellenistic and Byzantine cultural influences to Eastern Europe are intimately tied to the geographical position of the capital city of Constantinople

The Celestial and Earthly Realms

One of the most difficult aspects for modern Western students to understand about Byzantine civilization is the complete interdependence between religion and governance. Although church and state were separate institutions and Rule of Law did exist, all were bound together with origins deep in both the pagan and the Christian traditions. Ostrogorsky observed that under the reigns of Justinian (527-65) and Leo III (717-41), traditional Roman laws were modified by Christian teachings “in the direction of greater humaneness” with regard to laws concerning family life.⁷⁸ The legal modifications executed by the jurists of Justinian and Leo III, combining aspects of the *imperium romanum* and the Christian *oikumene*, subsequently influenced the development of main elements in the legal codes of several European nations.⁷⁹

More than the other Eastern European authors researching the Byzantine Empire, Diener best approximates the manner in which the Byzantines themselves regarded the unique position of Byzantium as *the* divinely ordained center between heaven and earth. Constantinople was erected as a reflection of the Divine Order of the universe--with God (the emperor) at its apex ruling over the universe (the Byzantine Empire). This ineluctable reality

and the iterative symbolism it engendered perfused every aspect of Byzantine life. As the head of state and the “Vice Gerent of Christ on Earth,” every aspect of the emperor's life evolved into highly ritualistic protocols replete with symbolism. The “anointed ruler was bound in a metaphysical universe by the chains of symbolism. Everything about him was symbolic.”⁸⁰ Even the emperor's diadem, according to Diener, represented the interconnection of the temporal to the celestial, a “link between the perishable and the eternal.”⁸¹ “The Emperor of the East...[was the] supreme authority, as the only person entitled to delegate power: legitimized solely by the patent which was invested [by God].”⁸²

However, as a mortal man with free will the emperor could be deposed--and frequently was--if it could be demonstrated that he had violated the Divine Will. (For example, Leo V was beheaded at Christmas mass in 820,⁸³ Justinian II was deposed and suffered the amputation of his nose and tongue in 695,⁸⁴ and in 1185, Andronicus I Comnenus was deposed, blinded in one eye, had his right hand amputated, was dragged by a camel through the streets of the capital naked, beaten, stoned, doused with scalding water and excrement, then eventually bound and hung by the feet until dead.⁸⁵) Diener notes that most commonly emperors were dethroned due to the earthly ambitions of usurpers, nonetheless the belief was maintained that a “priest-king who violates a sacrament is himself no longer sacrosanct.”⁸⁶ Accordingly, as the living embodiment of the relation of earth to heaven and the symbolic ties to the eternal, the ruler's relation to the general populous is described by Diener as one of “profound difference.”⁸⁷ Every aspect of Byzantine life was reflected in this divine hierarchy; indeed, it was nearly impossible to make the distinction between sacred and profane in Byzantium: “In this it was,” according to Diener, “contrasted with western

monarchies and approximated to the Caliphate.”⁸⁸

Vasiliev believed that Byzantine concepts of imperial power were developed by the 4th-century and deeply influenced by the “unlimited deified power of the monarchs” in Sassanid Persia and Ptolemaic Egypt.⁸⁹ In this new type of Byzantine/Christian monarchy, heavily influenced by the East, the concept of autocracy became a distinguishing feature of government structure. Vasiliev notes that even at the time of Diocletian (the late 3rd-to early 4th-centuries), pronounced cultural differences existed between the Greek East and the Latin West of the Roman Empire. Originating in the East, “autocracy in a form closely related to Oriental despotism was definitely established by Diocletian and became one of the distinguishing marks of government structure in the Byzantine Empire.”⁹⁰

Even the urban infrastructure of Constantinople is described by Diener as an “architecture of predestination.” Delving into the Byzantine mindset and its physical manifestation in urban life, Diener describes how the graceful symmetry of Constantinople's domed buildings was “in flight” from the fetters of earthly reality. The transcendent majesty of entering the cathedral of Hagia Sophia and other Byzantine churches was created to demonstrate that temporal beauty served only in a poor intimation of the greater beauties of the eternal.⁹¹ Temporal, geographic realities of urban planning were made to mirror and contemplate the divine order. The “God-protected” metropolis was graced with a divine agency rendering “chaos” into “cosmos.”⁹² It is difficult for modern Westerners to fully comprehend a society in which religion is inextricably intertwined with every aspect of society, government and daily life. To Diener, the perfect Byzantine gentleman was “a Roman with the corners rubbed off plus a Greek who had blossomed into a theologian.”⁹³

One of the episodes in Byzantine history which is most controversial and still not fully understood is known as the “Iconoclast” crisis. This crisis was in reality a movement consisting of two periods covering more than a one-hundred-year span from *circa* 726 to 780 and again from *circa* 813 to 843.⁹⁴ During the Iconoclastic periods, people who did not support the use of images in religious worship and prayer--or “image-worship” as referred to by Vasiliev--were called “icon breakers” or “Iconoclasts,” and came into conflict with those who remained loyal to the traditional veneration of certain images--“Iconodules” or “icon-worshippers”.⁹⁵

Iconoclasm was promulgated by the Emperor Leo III. The motivations behind the emperor's actions have never been adequately clarified. Several factors including Monophysitism (which emphasized only the divine, and hence unrenderable aspect of Christ's nature) and Islam (which prohibited all figurative representations) may have influenced Iconoclast tendencies in the eastern portion of the Empire where support for Iconoclasm was strong (Leo III, himself, was of Syrian origin), by what Ostrogorsky termed an “infiltration” of “oriental” cultural influences.⁹⁶ Impugned with charges of pagan idolatry, Iconodules were compelled to precisely articulate their views that “the image [icon] was a symbol and a mediator in the neo-platonic sense, and[...]the use of the image of Christ by the doctrine of the incarnation--[linked]--the whole question of icons with the doctrine of salvation.”⁹⁷ Ostrogorsky agrees with Vasiliev that the actions of Leo III were driven by a complex combination of religious, political and social motives;⁹⁸ he was perhaps even influenced by Judaism and the growth of Islam.⁹⁹

The immediate result of Iconoclast legislation was virulent discord throughout the empire. In the 730's Pope Gregory III excluded the Iconoclasts from the Church of Rome and detached middle Italy from Byzantine jurisdiction and placed it under papal and Western control.¹⁰⁰ Dogmatically rejected in the seventh and final Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787¹⁰¹ and eventually resolved in favor of the Iconodules by the "Restoration of Orthodoxy" in 843, the Iconoclastic periods underscored the theological divisions in the Empire.

Ostrogorsky found that the Iconoclast crises greatly deepened the rift between Rome and Byzantium¹⁰², and indeed marks a definite decline in the position of Byzantium in Italy.¹⁰³ Vasiliev concludes henceforth, "It is self-evident that this unity of the Empire was purely nominal and theoretical. Both empires led distinctly different lives. Furthermore, the very idea of unity was being forgotten in the West."¹⁰⁴ Ostrogorsky believes that although the idea of one Empire still lingered on, it was not in reality a possibility¹⁰⁵ and any attempt after the time of Justinian to assert imperial authority universally in both the East and West was anachronistic.¹⁰⁶ The attempt to impose a standard religious peace between the two halves of the Empire could only be done by repression of dissenting factions. And as was demonstrated during the Iconoclast crises, obtaining a religious peace with the West could only be bought at the cost of increasing opposition in the East.¹⁰⁷ The religious animosities created during and after the Iconoclast crises facilitated public discontent and the loss of the Monophysite-tending provinces (the Levant and Egypt) to the Persians and Arabs in the 7th-century.

Thus Byzantines viewed themselves as the God-ordained defenders of Orthodox Christianity and as occupying a position between heaven and earth in which mysticism and

religious symbolism imbued all aspects of religion, government and even the physical manifestation of space.

Between Western Christendom and Islam

The Byzantines viewed themselves not only as the protectors of true Orthodoxy within the Christian *oikoumene* but also as the defenders of Christianity in the “barbarian” world. The first contacts of Islam with the Christian world in the 7th-century was with Byzantium. However, the heavy-handed tactics employed by the Byzantines to promulgate Orthodoxy caused intense resentment both in the Catholic West and in the Monophysite regions of the Near East. This intense resentment toward the Byzantines and Hellenic cultural imperialism helped pave the way for the Islamic conquests of Egypt and the Levant in the 7th-century. In the 11th-century, economic rivalry and political antagonisms between Constantinople and Rome incited an army of Western Crusaders, ostensibly fighting Islam in the Levant, to divert course and capture Constantinople, leading to the temporary overthrow of the Byzantine Empire in 1204.

In *History of the Byzantine State*, Ostrogorsky considered the downfall of Iconoclasm to signify the triumph of “Greek ideals” over “Asian characteristics.”¹⁰⁸ Viewing themselves as the chosen people of the New Testament, the Byzantines believed their realm to be supranational, both geographically and spiritually. Diener described the functioning of a supranational realm in tandem with a supranational religion in which “Providence” grants the Empire the right to confer salvation. She says that to the Byzantines, the Empire equaled *cosmos* whereas the rest of the world dwelt in *chaos*.¹⁰⁹ Diener adds: “Outside the Holy Empire whose hierarchy the Emperor, as Christ's Vicegerent, ruled from Byzantium, man

‘could know neither human dignity nor good fortune nor liberty.’” Peoples not living under the jurisdiction of the empire “were only revolted and envious slaves, to whom God had granted no rights.”¹¹⁰ Obolensky emphasizes that religious and political motives were frequently intermingled in the extension of Byzantine hegemony of “the Christian Empire” in relations with the peoples of Eastern Europe.¹¹¹ He notes that in the Balkans, by 1000, the Slavs had been “subdued, then converted and finally civilised.”¹¹² The evangelization of the Slavs also entailed a policy of cultural assimilation employing “Hellenization through Christianization.” Even though Greek was the official language of the central and southern Balkans (in the first half of the 9th-century), the Byzantines made use of tactful diplomacy in following a policy of linguistic tolerance and allowing the propagation of Christianity in the local Slavic vernaculars.¹¹³ In the mid-9th century, competition arose between the Byzantines and the Frankish Carolingians for the political and religious allegiance of the people of the Balkans. Having absolute confidence in the righteousness of their beliefs and place in the world community, the Byzantines resorted not to military force, but to subtle incentives and persuasive means of winning submission of the barbarian *ethne* to the authority of the emperor and converts to the true faith. According to Obolensky, the “Basic tenet of Byzantine political philosophy, according to which a nation, having accepted the empire's Christian faith, became thereby subject to the authority of the emperor, who was held to be the sole legitimate sovereign of the Christian world.”¹¹⁴

There existed in the Middle Ages a commonly accepted doctrine of a single and unique Christian Commonwealth. Nations and peoples outside the borders of the Byzantine Empire were subordinate and owed ecclesiastical as well as a degree of political allegiance to

Byzantium. However, by the end of the 5th-century most of the Western Empire was *de facto* detached from the aegis of Constantinople.¹¹⁵ Accordingly, the position assigned to each “nation” in the ecumenical world order depended upon how much and to which extent it had absorbed Byzantine civilization, political and military power, and what services could be rendered to the empire.¹¹⁶ As late as the early 6th-century the *idea* of a single empire was still very strong among the Germanic kingdoms in Italy.¹¹⁷ The Serbs, in the 9th-century, realized that paganism was an obstacle to political and cultural progress and converted to Orthodoxy, which gave them entree into and access to the wealth of Byzantine civilization.¹¹⁸ Despite the aura and prestige associated with being in the Commonwealth, the newly forming nations of the region developed their own yearnings for political and ecclesiastical independence. This gave rise to ambiguous attitudes of both attraction and repulsion toward the Empire: “Difficulty lay in reconciling the universalist claims of Byzantium with its satellite’s desire for independence.”¹¹⁹

Anti-Byzantine sentiment grew in the Balkans in the 10th-century much as anti-Byzantine sentiment had smoldered in Monophysite Egypt and the Near East in the 6th-century. The heretical religious practice of “Bogomilism” (a cosmological dualist philosophy) gained sizeable popularity in Bulgaria in the 10th-century, promoting social justice and serving as a popular resistance movement by a native population against Byzantine cultural encroachments.¹²⁰ The Byzantines did not take well to the idea of neighboring “lesser” nations challenging the God-ordained universal authority of the emperor and empire. King Symeon was forcefully admonished by Patriarch Nicolas Mysticus in 914 that “Dominion over the whole of the West, belongs to the empire of the

Romans.”¹²¹ Make no mistake, Mysticus exhorts: “The emperor’s authority stands above all earthly authority, and alone on earth was established by the King of all.”¹²² Obolensky relates that Patriarch Theophylact cited Divine precedence in asserting that the realm of the Romans was “governed by God.”¹²³

The evolution and eventual formations into the separate identities of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches is a long and very complicated historical process. To a large extent the fragmentation of the one Ecumenical Church of the empire into regional identities is due to local social, political and geographical factors. Vasiliev describes how from the earliest Ecumenical Councils enormous dissent and tumult surrounded the formation of official church dogma. At the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 381, the rank of the patriarch of Constantinople was established, in the third canon, as “next to” the bishop of Rome.¹²⁴ Also the Nicene Creed was proclaimed the dominant form of Christianity. Ostrogorsky notes that conflict and competition over the primacy of the papacy and patriarchate was continual and in 451, the twenty-eighth canon of the Council of Chalcedon recognized the pope’s “primacy of honor,” but affirmed the complete equality of both Old and New Rome.¹²⁵

In the Near East and in North Africa, ethnic and religious dissatisfaction against Constantinople roiled among the native populations of the older eastern centers of the empire. Citizens in the eastern provinces were incensed by what they saw as Hellenistic imperialism and the usurpation by the see of Constantinople of the prerogatives of the older sees such as Alexandria and Antioch.¹²⁶ Arianism, the concept that the Son of God was a created entity, was condemned as heretical by the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 but

remained particularly strong in the eastern provinces of the empire.¹²⁷ Vasiliev rightly points out that the enormous amount of anti-Byzantine and anti-Hellenistic sentiments helped facilitate the eventual detachment of the rich and civilized eastern districts from the empire and their ultimate absorption with relative ease to Persian and Arab suzerainty.¹²⁸ Ethnic issues often became intertwined with religious issues. For example, in Constantinople during the 4th-century, the Goths (who were largely Arian by faith) were heavily discriminated against.¹²⁹ Dogmas which became the official religious teachings of the Orthodox Church approved by the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon, in 451, further alienated eastern provinces and elucidated definite ethnic conflicts after the Council anathematized Monophysite doctrine--the belief that Jesus Christ had but one, divine nature¹³⁰-- which was predominant in Egypt and Syria.¹³¹ Contention over Monophysitism led in 482 to what Ostrogorsky remarked as one of the first ecclesiastical "schism[s]" between Rome and Constantinople.¹³²

Also the Church of Rome and the sees of Antioch and Alexandria were antagonized by the twenty-eighth canon of the Council of Chalcedon which, in effect, reversed the third canon of the Second Council of Constantinople by proclaiming the patriarch of Constantinople to have "equal privileges with the old Imperial Rome..." Canon twenty-eight of the Council of Chalcedon was never confirmed by the papacy but was generally accepted in the East.¹³³ Contention was to remain continual throughout Byzantine history between the papacy and the patriarchate over the question of primacy. In 600, Pope Gregory I protested against the assumption of the title "ecumenical" by the patriarch, John the Faster.¹³⁴

Roman and later Byzantine suzerainty in the Holy Land helped to keep the ethnic and religious composition of the region relatively stable from Late Antiquity until the 7th-century. However, after the Persian sack and occupation of Jerusalem in 614, the entire region began to undergo massive demographic changes as war, the growth of Islam and the overthrow of Byzantine rule allowed for neighboring Arab tribes to begin to move into the region.¹³⁵ One of the great debates of Middle Eastern history is the relative ease of the Persian and Arab conquests of Byzantine possessions in Syria, Palestine, Egypt and North Africa. The protracted armed conflict in which the Byzantines sought to expel the Persians (and later Arabs) from the Holy Land became imbued with a sense of religious fervor unknown in earlier conflicts, becoming what Ostrogorsky described as the first great holy war of Christendom¹³⁶ and the “First characteristically medieval war and the forerunner of the crusades.”¹³⁷

Vasiliev and Ostrogorsky hypothesize that the swiftness of the Arab conquests (e.g. Alexandria in 618-9) is largely due to the oppressive religious policies of the Byzantines.¹³⁸ Non-standard Orthodox, or Non-Nicene Creed religious schools of thought differed on the question of the exact composition of Christ’s divine and human natures. Monophysitism, Nestorianism, Arianism, and other “heresies” were particularly popular in the ethnically non-Greek Middle East and in North Africa, where they were rigorously persecuted by the Constantinopolitan church and government. Enjoying a greater degree of religious tolerance under Islamic overlords, the peoples of these regions offered minimal resistance and welcomed the loss of oppressive Byzantine Hellenistic rule. In addition, inadequate military control, poor civil administration, turbulent class relations as well as ethnic affinities

between the conquered people and their conquerors facilitated the successful Arab conquest of the region.¹³⁹

Both Vasiliev and Ostrogorsky agree that the Islamic conquests of the 7th-century were accelerated by the “unyielding religious policies of the Byzantines.”¹⁴⁰ Prior to its expansion outside of the Arabian peninsula, the Byzantines viewed the rise of Islam as simply another kind of Arianism, similar to other Christian heresies.¹⁴¹ Like the Byzantines, Ostrogorsky found the tenets of Islam to lack the philosophical sophistication of Judeo-Christian thought, and described the writings of the Prophet Mohammed to be “devoid of intellectual quality.”¹⁴² For Muslims, the first contact with the Christian world was with the Byzantine Empire, and they associated all Christians/Byzantines as ethnically Greek. Vasiliev cites sura XXX of the *Koran*, in which Christians (i.e. the Byzantines, who considered themselves “Romans,” or *Al Rum* in Arabic¹⁴³) are referred to as “The Greeks.”¹⁴⁴

After the loss of Egypt, the main granary of the Empire, and the Muslim conquest of other territories, the psychological posture of Byzantium became largely defensive.¹⁴⁵ The Byzantine’s defeat of large Arab land and sea incursions against Constantinople in 717-18 did dissuade Muslim encroachment into Central and Western Europe and made a strong impression in the West.¹⁴⁶ But gradually, the struggles between the Byzantine Empire and the Arab caliphates took on the character of a sacred war, with the Byzantines hoping to gain Jerusalem and the Arabs coveting Constantinople.¹⁴⁷ Thus the Byzantines were well acquainted with the Arabs and with Islam long before Western Europeans, in the 11th-century, took up the call to arms to expel the Muslims from the Levant, which became known as the Crusades.

At the time of the First Crusade in the 11th-century, the Byzantines considered Western European religious fanaticism against Islam to be puerile. In *Imperial Byzantium*, Diener writes that the Byzantines would have much preferred to sway or influence the Barbarians (i.e. the Muslims) in the same manner in which the Russians were converted: by overwhelming them with the splendor and opulence of Byzantine high civilization. Thus, “It was usually enough to invite their leaders to Constantinople. Festivals, baths, the games in the Circus, church music, attendance at the Divine Liturgy in Hagia Sophia--these were enough to make them ask baptism for themselves and all their subjects, to render them eager for commercial treaties.”¹⁴⁸ Diener makes the case that the Western Crusaders wanted more than their stated aim of the reconquest and re-Christianization of the Holy Land. Rather, they coveted the riches of Byzantium, “which promised more abundant loot.”¹⁴⁹

Diener believed the Western Crusaders to be essentially jealous of Byzantine wealth and sophistication. The Crusaders “rioted in the riches of Byzantium.” Diener reasoned that these Westerners felt inferior in the face of “the unendingly supple gestures of the Byzantines [which] were beyond their comprehension.” Therefore the “uncouthness” of the Crusaders masked deep feelings of cultural insecurity.¹⁵⁰ Underlying the antagonisms of the East and the West was the reality that

*The immature detest and envy the mature, the mature despise and dread the immature....Envy stood in the way, by whatever fine names envy may have been masked. The blunt truth was that Europe would rather see the Crescent of the Osmanlis flying over Constantinople than the Double Eagle of the Palaiologoi.*¹⁵¹

Diener maintained that, under the guise of the rational pretext of recovering the Holy Land for Christendom, “the primary object of the West was never anything but the annihilation of the language, race, and realm of the Greeks.”¹⁵²

Vasiliev also examined the very complex question of the origins of the Crusades. Acknowledging what are now believed to be numerous economic, cultural, political and religious motivations on the part of the Western Crusaders, Vasiliev notes that historically the Crusades have been studied from an “Occidental” point of view “with the tendency to make of the Greek Empire ‘the scapegoat charged with all the faults of the crusaders.’”¹⁵³

By the last decade of the 11th-century, Byzantine rulers had for some time requested auxiliary troops from the papacy and the West in order to fend off encroachments from nomadic Turkic groups (in particular, the Patzinaks and Seljuks). Despite the breach between the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054, the Emperor Alexius Comnenus appealed to Pope Gregory VII *circa* 1091 for auxiliary troops to fight under Byzantine command. The Emperor only requested extra troops, *not* a large well-organized mass movement of a western army.¹⁵⁴

According to Ostrogorsky, what Byzantium needed in the 1090’s was mercenaries, not a crusade.¹⁵⁵ Alexius sought only to protect Constantinople, and harbored no intention of launching a reconquest of the Holy Land.¹⁵⁶ Vasiliev concurs with Diener that the motivations behind the Crusaders’ putative goal of retaking the Holy Land for Christendom had as much to do with capturing and “catholicizing” Constantinople as did the liberation of Jerusalem.¹⁵⁷ Ostrogorsky agrees, stating that “The Papacy was growing in strength, and had seen in the conception of the crusade a new means whereby it could extend its authority in the Christian East.”¹⁵⁸ The appearance of the Crusaders according to the 19th-century Greek patriot D. Bikelas (quoted in Vasiliev), marks “the first act in the final tragedy” of the Byzantine Empire.¹⁵⁹

The immediate result of the Crusades, including the Latin sack and occupation of Constantinople from 1204-1261, was the destruction of the Byzantine Empire as a major power in European and Mediterranean affairs and the impoverishment of its population. The remaining inhabitants of the rump empire after 1261 became increasingly conscious and patriotic of their Greek ethnicity.¹⁶⁰ Ostrogorsky noted that the rivalry and animosity normally felt between Byzantium and the West was exacerbated by the bitter experience of the Crusades.¹⁶¹ Ultimately, the Crusades permanently impressed in the Byzantine (and later Greek) psyche enormous resentment toward the Latins. The historian and imperial court official Niketas Choniates, *circa* 1150-1213 (quoted in Vasiliev), recorded the sentiment of the time as “a bottomless gulf of enmity” between Byzantium and the West.¹⁶²

Thus in its role as defender of Orthodox Christianity, Byzantium encountered several challenges on both its Eastern and Western frontiers: heretical Orthodox sects and an external threat from Islam in the East during the 5th- through 9th-centuries, and rivalry resulting in direct occupation by the forces of Catholicism from the West during the 11th- through 13th-centuries. However, as the projection of Byzantine political power diminished internationally, Byzantine learning remained a potent cultural influence in the Balkans and Russia, pre-Renaissance Italy and in the Islamic world.

Commercial, Political and Strategic Affairs

The main concern of Byzantine Emperors was the defense of Orthodox Christianity and the maintenance of the Empire. In defending Orthodoxy and upholding the Empire, the Emperor believed he stabilized the harmony of the divinely-ordained order. Byzantine society eventually also manifested a strong tendency to proselytization, and the advantageous

geographical position of Constantinople facilitated the conversion of many peoples in the Balkans, Russia, Asia and Africa. But the power, wealth and prestige of Byzantium also engendered covetousness, and with a growing sense of confidence and national identity many Westerners decided to seize the wealth and prestige of Byzantium for themselves.

To the Byzantines the political organization of the world (i.e. the Byzantine Empire) was part of God's universal plan for the salvation of mankind. Obolensky notes that the *Pax Romana* of the Roman era became equated with the *Pax Christiana* in the era of Byzantine hegemony.¹⁶³ The person of the Supreme Autocrat in Constantinople was invested by God to maintain harmony and order in the world, and according to Ostrogorsky reached the full omnipotence of imperial power under Leo VI (886-912).¹⁶⁴ Lesser nations which revolved around the Empire were a reflection of the order in the universe made by the Divine Creator, according to Obolensky.¹⁶⁵ For example, barbarians were not part of the community of Greek culture nor were they members of the Orthodox Church, and they were not subject to the emperor's universal authority.¹⁶⁶ Obolensky describes the Byzantines' belief in their own "providential destiny" which was used to defend the Empire's northern frontiers against barbarian pagan *ethne*. And as consummate diplomats the Byzantines preferred to subdue, tame and civilize the various *ethne* by a combination of faith, technical expertise and diplomacy.¹⁶⁷

In the 9th-century, according to Obolensky, "nationalism as we know it today, did not yet exist; political thought, at least in Eastern Europe, was dominated by the idea of the one universal empire, whose centre was in Constantinople. This empire was, by definition, a unique and all-embracing institution."¹⁶⁸ The foundation of the Byzantine Empire's

hegemony and legitimacy was bifurcate: the Orthodox Church and the emperor's universal sovereignty.¹⁶⁹ According to Diener, the successful budgeting of the entire Empire in great measure depended upon the capacities of the emperor or *basileus*.¹⁷⁰ Yet Ostrogorsky contradicts Diener in his belief stating that the unique qualities of individual rulers did not as a whole contribute to the course of events, notably the decline of the Empire: "It is, therefore,...momentous factors in foreign and domestic politics, and not the personal qualities of its rulers, which really account for the decline of Byzantium."¹⁷¹

Obolensky emphasizes the dramatic demographic and cultural changes and the resultant long-term effects which took place in the Balkans during and after the Avaro-Slavonic invasions of the 7th-century. The *theme* (province or district) of Illyricum, which had long served as the recruiting grounds for the Empire's military, was overrun in the 7th-century by mainly Slavic invaders. Illyricum was traditionally a transitional region between the Roman and Greek worlds. Communications between the extremities of the Empire were disrupted. With the loss of Illyricum the cultural rift between East and West become more pronounced and mutual estrangement ensued.¹⁷² Demographic and cultural upheaval in Illyricum was common until the 10th-century when the human and political face of the Balkans began to stabilize.¹⁷³ Obolensky remarks upon an interesting irony in Balkan history when he notes that the incorporation of Slavs into Turkic Bulgar territory during the 7th-century (in what is presently Bulgaria) most likely enabled the Slavs to retain their ethnic identity: so overwhelming was the pull of Byzantine culture that the Slavs who had settled in Greece, within a matter of centuries, became almost completely Hellenized; whereas Bulgaria became for all purposes a Slavic nation.¹⁷⁴ The Slavs of continental Greece and the

Peloponnese lost political independence and ethnic identity in the 9th-century because of their incorporation into the *theme* system, the acceptance of Greek Christianity, and their absorption by the “superior prestige of Byzantine power and Hellenic culture.”¹⁷⁵ Vasiliev notes that by the 9th-century the Bulgarian ruling class had lost its “Hunnic nationality” and become completely slavicized yet remained deeply influenced by the cultural life of Constantinople.¹⁷⁶

In the 1820's, when much of Western Europe professed sympathy for Greek independence, a theory proposed by a German scholar, Jakob P. Fallmerayer, aroused enormous debate. It was Fallmerayer's opinion that the ethnically “Greek” population of ancient Hellas had been completely exterminated by Slavic invasions and plague during the 6th- to 8th-centuries: “For not a single drop of real pure Hellenic blood flows in the veins of the Christian population of modern Greece.” Fallmerayer estimated that the Slavic invasions of 589, followed by plague between 746 and 775, caused Greece to become “completely filled with Slavs, who gradually covered Greece with their new cities, towns and villages.” Vasiliev believes Fallmerayer overstated his case and notes that although Slavic settlements of “very considerable” size were formed in Greece from the end of the 6th-century, there is no evidence that they “resulted in the pan-Slavonization nor in the complete extermination of the Greeks.”¹⁷⁷ Ostrogorsky concurs, affirming that after the Slavic invasions of the 8th-century, “there was no question of any permanent Slavonization of Greek territory.”¹⁷⁸

From *circa* 814 to 1000 CE, the various ethnic groups in former Illyricum began to acquire a more and more distinctive group consciousness and what could be called a sense of

ethnic identity. Still the leaders of the Balkan peoples looked to Byzantium for legitimacy and the “fruits of Byzantine civilisation.” Obolensky uses the term “commonwealth” to describe the common cultural traditions and association of the groups of settled Balkan peoples who looked to Byzantine civilization for legitimacy, inspiration and their place in the world *oikoumene* or inhabited world (i.e. the Roman Empire). Obolensky states that by the year 1000 CE, “most of the Balkan peoples formed part of the medieval community of East European nations which may be termed the Byzantine Commonwealth.”¹⁷⁹

Byzantine influence was also exerted to the south as far away as Ethiopia. Vasiliev relates how the missionary zeal of the Emperor Justinian and especially the Empress Theodora (herself a Monophysite) helped to convert the African peoples of the Upper Nile between Egypt and Abyssinia to Monophysite Christianity.¹⁸⁰ In the 6th-century the Emperor Justin I supported the Monophysite king of Abyssinia against the Judaic king of Yemen.¹⁸¹ Although the Monophysite doctrine had been condemned in 451 by the Council of Chalcedon¹⁸², and was harshly repressed within the Empire, outside the official boundaries of the Empire the emperor “protected Christianity in general, whether it was in accord with his religious dogmas or not. From the point of view of external policy, the Byzantine emperors regarded every gain for Christianity as an essential political, and perhaps economic, advantage.”¹⁸³

Vasiliev continues with an exposition relating the first contacts between the Byzantines and the Turks. It was not conflict, but business--the silk trade which constituted the first intercourse between Byzantium and the Turks. Shortly before the mid-6th-century Turkic peoples had appeared in Western Asia along the shores of the Caspian Sea. Living

between the Chinese and the Persians, the Turks viewed the latter as rivals in the lucrative trade between China, Byzantium and Europe. Turkish emissaries arrived in Constantinople and tentative plans were made to form a Turko-Byzantine alliance to bypass the Persians as intermediaries in the profitable silk trade with China, using a northern Turkish-controlled land route. The Byzantines simultaneously negotiated with the Abyssinians for a southern sea route to undercut the Persians out of the Chinese silk trade. However, negotiations never culminated in any actual agreements with the Turks nor with the Abyssinians, as the Byzantines redirected their attention in the late 560's to the Lombard invasions in Italy.¹⁸⁴ In 552, Chinese silk worms had been smuggled into the Byzantine Empire and limited silk production began in the Peloponnese under strict state regulation.¹⁸⁵

Even in Late Antiquity the effective control of Constantinople over Italy, one of the most valuable western provinces, was tenuous. Not only did significant language and cultural differences exist between the peoples of the Italian peninsula and the general population of the Byzantine capital, but the West, and Italy in particular, were subjected to frequent and devastating barbarian invasions. In the mid-6th-century, under the Emperor Justinian I, the Ostrogoths had been, with enormous effort, subdued in Italy. However, the Ostrogoths were soon followed by the Lombards who penetrated northern Italy in 568. Bypassing the Byzantine administrative region (ruled by a military governor) or *Exarchate* of Ravenna, the Lombards traveled southward and besieged Rome. With no possibility of assistance from the Byzantine *Exarch* (military governor) in Ravenna, the Pope was not only left to care for the spiritual life of Rome but also had to prepare the defense of the city. After more than 150 years the pope, with Frankish help, was able to break the Lombard

domination in Italy. The consequences of the Lombard conquest in Italy demonstrated the rising influence of Frankish kings in Italy and the growing power of the papacy in temporal as well as spiritual affairs. Most clearly the impotence of Byzantine power in maintaining Italy “laid the foundation for the gradual alienation of Italy from the Byzantine Empire and for the weakening of[...]imperial political authority in Italy.”¹⁸⁶

The wealth and geopolitical importance of Byzantium understandably aroused rivalries and jealousies from surrounding nations and even from different peoples and religious sects within the Empire. Diener documents the growing envy with which foreigners--especially in Western Europe--viewed Constantinople. Political disputes had always existed between the Eastern and Western halves of the Empire. However, by the 5th-century religious disputes grew to such intensity that breaches and religious secessions began to occur between the Eastern and Western Churches.¹⁸⁷ Cultural differences between different regions were exacerbated by a rising sense of ethnic consciousness among various peoples of the Empire. And the wealth of Constantinople was an alluring feature to nations which were not what Vasiliev termed as “culturally advanced and intellectually productive” as Byzantium.¹⁸⁸ Several Western chroniclers visiting Constantinople record being impressed with the physical splendor of the capital but question the competence of Byzantine rule in the Eastern Empire. By the 10th-century, the apogee of Byzantium’s wealth, the comments of Westerners visiting the capital had developed markedly prejudicial overtones. For example, in the 10th-century Pope John XIII addressed the Emperor Nicephorus Phocas as the “emperor of the Greeks.”¹⁸⁹ In 962, the German ruler Otto I sent to Constantinople his legate, Liudprand of Cremona.¹⁹⁰ Liudprand’s disdain for the Byzantines, and in particular

the Emperor Nicephorus Phocas, are cited in *Imperial Byzantium*:

*The ruler of the Greeks wears his hair long, a trailing skirt, wide sleeves, and a woman's cap, is a liar, a cheat, a pitiless and arrogant man as cunning as a fox, full of hypocritical humility, avaricious, covetous, and eater of garlic, onions, and leeks, and a water-drinker. On the other hand the King of the Franks has his hair cut short, wears clothes utterly different from a woman's, and has a hat on his head, is a lover of truth, detests wiles, is compassionate when compassion is proper, but severe when severity is called for, truly humble never avaricious, drinks wine, does not eat garlic, onions, or leeks like Nicephorus.*¹⁹¹

Liudprand continues the diatribe against Nicephorus, describing the emperor as:

*A man of strange aspect, a pygmy in stature, with eyes that looked almost as small as a mole's. He was further disfigured by a short, broad, grizzled beard which hid his throat. His long, thick hair makes him resemble a pig, and his skin is as dark as an Ethiopian's. Not at all the sort of man you would like to meet unexpectedly at midnight...He also has a swollen belly, is lean in the loins, with short thighs but long shanks, and disproportionately large heels and feet. He was dressed in a robe which must, to begin with, have been costly, but it was old, evil-smelling, and faded. Shameless in speech, foxy by disposition, he is a very Ulysses for lies and false oaths. You, my Lords and Emperors, have always seemed to me handsome; but how much handsomer, now that I have seen Nicephorus.*¹⁹²

Vasiliev believes that as early as the 6th-century the cultural differences between the Eastern and Western portions of the Empire were so large as to be unbridgeable: "The gap between the East and the West in the sixth century was already so great that the mere idea of uniting the two was an anachronism. A real union was out of the question. The conquered provinces could be retained by force only, and for this the Empire had neither power nor means."¹⁹³

In summary then, the commercial, political and strategic prominence of Byzantium afforded it enormous prestige and wealth. However, this prominence incited jealousy among peoples in the region. Eventually, religious rivalries, and ethnic differences between East and West developed into major cultural breaches engendering enormous animosities, which ultimately led to outright conflict and the occupation of the Byzantine Empire in 1204 by the

knights of the fourth Crusade.

Non-Standard Gender Behaviors and Practices in the Byzantine World

Non-standard gender behaviors and practices appear to have caused the most difficulty for scholars studying Byzantine civilization since the late 18th-century. To the Byzantines, the presence of castrated males or eunuchs in the imperial court and the influence exerted by high-status females was an integral part of their society. However, to later scholars studying Byzantine society these issues became highly problematic. For the purposes of this study, the phrase “non-standard gender or sexual practices” will refer specifically to the existence of eunuchs in Byzantine society and the influence accorded high-status females in public life. It must be emphasized that the presence of eunuchs and high-status women in public life did not strike the Byzantines as a non-standard gender or sexual practice. However, to scholars writing about Byzantine civilization after the late 18th-century (although the term “non-standard gender or sexual practice” was not employed by them), eunuchs and influential high-status females were considered unusual and fell under the rubric of what *this* study defines as non-standard gender or sexual practices.

The reasons why post-18th-century scholars considered eunuch and high-status female influence to be non-standard gender or sexual practices is a complex historical question and covered more fully in chapter 4. What is relevant here is that it is the topic of non-standard gender or sexual practices which constitutes the most discrepancies amongst scholars studying Byzantium. Eastern European scholars’ views of non-standard gender or sexual practices in Byzantium range from Ostrogorsky’s negative comments on the topic, to Diener’s extensive study of eunuchs and the role of high-status women, to Obolensky and

Vasiliev's relative silence on the subject. But without an understanding of how these non-standard gender or sexual practices became an integral aspect crucial to the functioning of the society, it is impossible to approximate the precise character of Byzantine culture. And this study maintains that it is mischaracterizations of non-standard gender and sexual practices which have largely contributed to the under-valuation of the Byzantine legacy in the modern era.

Of the scholars writing about Byzantine history in the first half of the 20th-century, Diener examined, more than others, the importance of non-standard gender and sexual practices in Byzantine culture. Diener's fluid, nearly stream-of-consciousness writing-style captures, perhaps more than the other academic works, the atmosphere of Imperial Byzantium. An atmosphere in which loosely-defined geopolitical boundaries demarcated peoples such as Roman citizens as opposed to Barbarians, and also where the boundaries of what can now be defined as non-standard gender practices were expansive and somewhat malleable. The importance of non-standard gender practices in Byzantine self-definition and in anti-Byzantine hostility by later historians has not been adequately addressed by Byzantinists until recently. Diener, for example, astutely analyzed one of the most peculiar, and one most alien to the modern reader of all Byzantine customs: the use of eunuchs as important figures in the upper echelons of Byzantine society.

Contrary to the popular belief that eunuchs were used only as guards in the seraglios of Eastern potentates, Diener arrived at the conclusion that eunuchs existed in Byzantium for the purpose of reflecting the divine hierarchy on earth. Accordingly, the patriarch and the emperor symbolized the "two halves of God."¹⁹⁴ The Empire and its citizens represented the

oikoumene. In Christianity, the transmundane and the terrestrial are bridged by angels--beings of neuter gender who intercede between the earthly and heavenly realms. In the gradual ascent from earth to God, angels act as the messengers between the two realms.¹⁹⁵

Thus the Byzantines, in an earthly imitation of the celestial cosmology, had human males castrated to be like angels--a kind of "holy automata" devoid of earthly reproductive prerogative.¹⁹⁶ By their very nature angels are "static, not dynamic. They reflect rather than emit. That is why mortals do not pray to them."¹⁹⁷ The precise extent to which the castration procedure was carried out in Byzantium remains unclear. Diener speculated that some castrations may have simply been the equivalent of the modern vasectomy (resection of all or part of the *vas deferens*,¹⁹⁸ leaving the penis and testes intact) because many eunuchs were renowned for their sexual prowess and physical vigor.¹⁹⁹ (The age at which the surgery was performed and the type of procedure employed would affect hormone production, subsequent sexual abilities and physical appearance.)

Although they could never become emperor, eunuchs attained several of the highest positions in the empire, including noteworthy patriarchs, high-ranking military commanders and civic officials.²⁰⁰ Ostrogorsky counts eight honorary titles which were reserved for eunuchs, emphasizing that patrician eunuchs occupied a position superior to that of other patricians.²⁰¹ Contemporary Byzantine and Western accounts about eunuchs are ambiguous, some written with what Diener saw as "mysterious envy, involuntarily producing malice."²⁰² Ostrogorsky appears to have held an ambiguous opinion about eunuchs, at times admiring their abilities as statesmen and at other times referring to the mid-11th century influential civil bureaucrat John Orphanotrophos as "the eunuch"²⁰³ and a "cunning eunuch."²⁰⁴

Foreign visitors to Constantinople were sufficiently impressed by the presence of eunuchs and remarked upon their presence in both positive and negative terms. In the 10th-century, Liudprand of Cremona, the legate of the German ruler Otto I, recorded that the gifts the Emperor prized the most were “cazimasians [sic], as the Greeks call them, are young eunuchs who have been completely robbed of their virility, the membrum having been removed as well as the testicles. The merchants of Verdun are wont to have children thus mutilated, obtaining immense profit by exporting them to Spain.”²⁰⁵ During his turbulent visit as the legate of Otto I (*circa* 963), Liudprand developed a visceral disdain for all things Byzantine, in particular for the Emperor Nicephorus and for the office of eunuchs. In a dispatch to the German emperor, Liudprand wrote that the expeditionary force sent by Nicephorus to Apulia was meant to “show contempt for you[...]Nicephorus has appointed a man of sorts. Expressly do I write *of sorts*, since this general has ceased to be a man, and yet cannot become a woman.” Of course Liudprand was well aware that some of the most eminent Byzantine *strategoï* (military generals, commanders and governors) were eunuchs.²⁰⁶ Yet he later expressed scorn at the Byzantine *basileus* for having ransomed a eunuch admiral “at a price which no sane man would have paid for such a creature.”²⁰⁷

During Byzantine court ceremonials, the emperor was normally attended by eunuchs who represented angels, following the Biblical injunction that “some must be eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake.”²⁰⁸ Diener found that court ceremonial proceedings “were emblematic,[...]a magical ‘let’s pretend,’ the aim being, in this earthly life, to imitate the rhythms of the eternal--in the half-belief that by appearing to be what one is not, one can

really become what one appears.”²⁰⁹

Women also played an unusually prominent role in Byzantine society, at least when compared to contemporary Western Europe. Though they did not usually exert power openly, women wielded what Diener coined “erotic power” in their dealings with males and in the emotional sphere of family life. Women were so crucial to the proper functioning of Byzantine society that the emperor could not normally accede to the throne without a wife and the empress or *basilissa* was crowned in her own right with mystical significance *before* her wedding.²¹⁰ Diener cites the French historian Charles Diehl regarding the remarkable role of the Byzantine *basilissa* in medieval civilization:

*Few countries gave woman a higher position, assigned her a more prominent role, assured her a more preponderant influence whether in political matters or in the destinies of the government, than did the Byzantine Empire[...]The omnipotent authority legally accruing to the Byzantine Empress can be traced even in the intimate recesses of the women’s apartments[...] But this omnipotence was still more manifest in public life, in the political functions allotted to her by her male contemporaries. The Basilissa was something more than the comrade and associate of the Basileus. From the day when she mounted the steps of the throne of Constantine, she was endowed in her own person with the fullness of sovereign authority.*²¹¹

As with his ambivalent comments about eunuchs, Ostrogorsky also makes ambiguous statements about the role of women in Byzantine history. For example, he notes the remarkable influence of several women upon the upper echelons of government and he notes that a few women did govern as the “independent ruler.”²¹² Several high-status women played enormously influential roles indirectly in the administrations of their husbands, sons and brothers: Empress Theodora to her husband the Emperor Justinian in 6th-century²¹³, the Empress Mary of Antioch as regent for her son Alexius II Comnenus in the 12th-century²¹⁴, and Princess Pulcheria to her brother the Emperor Theodosius in the 5th-century²¹⁵.

On rare occasions, women became the supreme sovereign themselves, ruling under their own names. For example, in 800, as Charlemagne was crowned “Holy Roman Emperor” in Rome, the legitimate ruler or *Basileus ton Rhomaion* in Constantinople was the Empress Irene, who “ruled with the full authority of supreme power”²¹⁶ and signed her name as *Basileus* or “King.” Yet in an uncharacteristically pointed assertion (in an otherwise stolid but lucid *History of the Byzantine State*), Ostrogorsky laments: “It was the tragedy of the old Empire that, at a time when one of the greatest rulers stood at the head of the Frankish kingdom, its own history was determined by women and eunuchs.”²¹⁷ Indeed, the presence of a female emperor did diminish the prestige of the Empire in the eyes of Charlemagne and Pope Leo III²¹⁸, but Professor Ostrogorsky seems to imply that female and eunuch presence in government innately affected the Empire adversely. Vasiliev comments in a more neutral tone than Ostrogorsky on the exercise of supreme sovereign power by females in Byzantine history.²¹⁹

So pronounced had the cultural differences become between East and West by the year 800, that in Rome, the mere notion of a woman ruling the Empire was seen as preposterous. Both Pope Leo and Charlemagne viewed the imperial throne as being empty since it was filled by a woman. Despite his earlier ambivalence about female rule, Ostrogorsky nonetheless describes Pope Leo’s and Charlemagne’s assertions as an “empty claim.”²²⁰ The Byzantines--though they felt female rule to be unseemly--accorded the Empress Irene full sovereign authority and viewed Charlemagne and Pope Leo as impudent usurpers revolting against the duly anointed legitimate ruler of the Romans.²²¹

Interestingly, in 815, the Second Iconoclastic Council gathered in Hagia Sophia blamed the restoration of icon veneration on the Empress Irene--because of her gender. According to Vasiliev, the Council decreed that “female simplicity” had “restored the adoration of ‘dead figures’ and ‘lifeless icons,’ the lighting of candles and burning of incense.”²²² Public sentiment in the East about overt female rule remained ambiguous. In the 11th-century, the sisters/Empresses Zoe and Theodora (of the Macedonian dynasty) directly ruled the Empire as autocratic and sovereign Empresses of the Romans--the last instance of overt feminine rule in Byzantine history.²²³ According to the calculus of Ostrogorsky, the two sister Empresses hated one another which, “made it clear that it was essential to have a man at the head of the government.”²²⁴

It is clear that women and eunuchs played critical roles in the ordering and functioning of Byzantine society and culture. Thus, it is paradoxical that a scholar such as Ostrogorsky, who understood fully the importance of women and eunuchs in Byzantine life, and the “dynamic”²²⁵ nature of the Byzantine state, should offer a negative appraisal on the subjects. Diener seriously considers the importance of women and eunuchs in Byzantium, while Vasiliev and Obolensky recognize their centrality but do not discuss the topic in depth.

Therefore, the origins of animosity between Byzantium and Western Europe are well documented in the historical record. The representation of Byzantine civilization in the modern popular consciousness is attributable to the scholars writing about the topic since the late 18th-century. An examination of the works of four major scholars with Eastern and Central European backgrounds and/or connections reveals that each text contributes

enormously to the understanding of Byzantine civilization. However, certain assumptions on the part of some the scholars, either directly stated or not articulated at all, regarding the roles of eunuchs and high-status women in Byzantium, shapes our understanding of that society.

A comparative literary, historical and geographical analysis of five important aspects of Byzantine history examined in the works of Vasiliev, Ostrogorsky, Diener and Obolensky, reveals the topic of non-standard gender or sexual practices to produce the greatest discrepancies in both the coverage and in the opinions of the authors. Diener acknowledges and freely discusses the subjects of eunuchs and the influence of high-status women in Byzantine society; Vasiliev and Obolensky acknowledge the importance of women and eunuchs but do not explore the subjects in depth; Ostrogorsky notes the importance of eunuchs and females but passes decidedly negative judgments on the topics. Whether directly stated or not, the sources seem to indicate that a more complete understanding of the importance of non-standard gender practices and behaviors in the Byzantine Empire is necessary in order to approximate the reality of that society.

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CHAPTER THREE

Western Scholars Explore the Origins of Their Civilization

It was in Germany, in the 16th-century, and later in France, where modern scholarly analysis of Byzantine sources began. In Western Europe during the Enlightenment era, prominent intellectuals such as Montesquieu, Voltaire and Gibbon voiced decidedly negative views against what they perceived to be “superstition” or excessive religiosity in society. The deeply pious Byzantines and their society were harshly censured by Enlightenment historians.¹ However, it was not only the prominence of religion which incurred the disdain of 18th-century historians. The actual social framework of Byzantine society, deeply rooted in Eastern Orthodox theology, included prominent roles for high-status women and surgically altered males or eunuchs. The influence of eunuchs and high-status women in public life was problematic for 18th-century Enlightenment-era rationalists, who considered both female participation in the public arena and eunuchism to be non-standard sexual behaviors or practices and harbingers of an insidious enervating female anima. An anima which, for 18th-century commentators, was symptomatic of a degenerate, moribund society. It was largely this antipathy toward the importance of religion in Byzantine society and the presence of non-standard sexual behaviors and practices which allowed scholars in Western Europe to undervalue the contributions of Byzantine civilization until the latter portion of the 19th-century.

A trend is discernable in the works produced during the intervening two centuries from the era of Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (first

published in 1776) to *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* by Warren Treadgold (published in 1997). With the progression of the 19th- and 20th-centuries scholars developed a fuller understanding of Byzantine religiosity, and left behind Enlightenment preconceptions of Byzantine religious “superstition.” However, the presence of eunuchs and the influence of women in public in Byzantium remained problematic in scholarly writings well into the 20th-century. With the growth of feminism and an enhanced understanding of human sexuality (due in part to the pioneering work of Freud, Kinsey and Masters and Johnson in the 20th-century), the topic of non-majority or non-standard sexual practices or behaviors is now seriously studied. And although the subject is now more freely examined, scholars have yet fully to understand how non-standard gender practices or behaviors in the Byzantine world--more specifically woman acting in non-traditional roles and the existence of eunuchs--have colored perceptions about Byzantine civilization since Late Antiquity.

In the 18th-century in Western Europe, influential scholars such as Gibbon wrote severe criticisms of Byzantine civilization which were largely factually accurate but replete with personal bias and a misunderstanding of the place of religion and non-standard gender practices or behaviors in the Byzantine world. The growth of German erudition was a leading and influential feature of 19th-century intellectual history.² Under the influence of such eminent scholars as von Ranke and Mommsen came the “science of evidence” and distinctions were made between primary and secondary sources.³(see chapter 5) The “study of sources” and the “process of investigating sources” were aided by increased accessibility to original source materials and improved translations from the Greek and Latin.⁴ Bury notes “a closer union of philology with history” during the 19th-

century.⁵ Most notable in the 20th-century is the growing interest in the lives of women and non-aristocratic individuals (Diehl), and an increased openness to explore more fully the private and sexual lives of historical personages (the non-scholarly popular work of Norwich).

The many animosities, conflicts and cultural misunderstandings developed during the long history of intercourse between Byzantium and the West are generally understood by historians. However, non-sexual gender practices or behaviors and/or unconventional practices in the sexual and gender realms by the Byzantines confounded Western contemporaries as well as the historians who wrote about them generations later. Government, social status, gender, sex and religion were inextricably enmeshed in the ordering of Byzantine society. This fact was not sufficiently appreciated by Enlightenment-era historians whose influential works helped to shape Western popular philosophical and historical thought. The unconventional manifestations of sex and gender deeply confounded scholars. Gibbon is perhaps the most well-known and eloquent of the Enlightenment reviewers of Byzantine history who misapprehended the ability of religion to give order to society and, in turn, the non-standard gender or sexual practices of the Eastern Roman Empire. Even current scholars such as Norwich and Treadgold, can exhibit a tension or anxiety in the study of non-standard gender practices in Byzantium—either by their specific treatment or omission of the topic altogether. Thus, the very works which are meant to instruct a modern readership about the existence and history of Byzantium, by their very interpretations, can also impart a bias toward that society. This is especially true of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, which has ironically served two purposes: exposing successive generations to the existence of Byzantium while

simultaneously vitiating an appreciation of Byzantine civilization with his harsh judgments based upon misunderstandings about religion, culture and non-standard gender behaviors or practices. More recent scholars writing about Byzantine religion and culture have a better understanding of those subjects, but the topic of non-standard gender behaviors remains problematic, as will be shown in this chapter.

Prominent Western Studies

Western scholars produced important studies on various aspects of Byzantine civilization, comparable in scope and erudition to the works of their Eastern European homologues. However, aside from professional Byzantinists or advanced students specializing in the study of Byzantium, one work in particular is most familiar to a general western audience: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, (1776+) by Edward Gibbon. A staple of Western historical curricula for more than a century, *Decline and Fall* is an impressive but dated seven-volume opus. Despite an inaccurate representation of Byzantine history, the palpable specter of *Decline and Fall* still looms large and colors the collective Western imagination about Byzantium. Ostrogorsky noted that *Decline and Fall* “damped enthusiasm” for Byzantine research for nearly a century and until recent times the religious development of Byzantium was viewed “through Gibbon’s spectacles.”⁶ More recent works have moderated the severe tone of Gibbon. Working in both the late 19th- and early 20th-century the noted French historian Charles Diehl was remarkable for his interest in the lives of women and the quotidian affairs of non-aristocratic persons. Diehl’s *Byzantine Portraits* (1927), first published in 1906 in French, was frequently used in 20th-century university Byzantine history courses. Perhaps the work with the widest readership in the late 20th-century was

the *Byzantium* (1990-6) three-volume series by John Julius Norwich. Norwich, a British career diplomat and amateur historian, crafted a non-scholarly work of popular history written for a general educated audience, which offers a highly readable presentation of Byzantine civilization. The latest study to encompass a comprehensive history of Byzantium is *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (1997) by Warren Treadgold, an American professor of history at Saint Louis University. *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* is now widely used as the standard text for university Byzantine history courses.

Differing Perspectives

As with the works of the Eastern European scholars examined in chapter two, Western scholars are generally in agreement about the conventionally accepted, major topics of Byzantine civilization. Gibbon diverges significantly from the other authors in his opinions about the significance of religion in Byzantine society. However, it is the interpretation of non-standard gender behaviors and practices which elicits distinct divergences of opinion among all four authors. Gibbon, for instance, views non-standard gender practices and behaviors negatively, with little appreciation of their place in Byzantine society, religion and culture. By contrast, Diehl explores the role of women in depth, he but treats the subject of eunuchs only superficially while Norwich discusses the roles of both women and eunuchs but does not explore the deeper, more nuanced meanings of non-standard gender behaviors and practices. Treadgold, for his part, makes minimum discussion of non-standard gender behaviors and practices in an impartial manner, but like Norwich, he does not fully examine the reasons why non-standard gender behaviors and practices became such an integral part of Byzantine society.

Salient Studies by Western Scholars

Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vols 1-7, (1776+; 1900-11 edition; 1974 re-issue, ed. Bury)

It is paradoxical that a publication considered by many to be one of the greatest historical works of literature in the English language is also largely responsible for casting Byzantine civilization into ill-repute in the popular consciousness, and in some respects continues to this day to negatively color historical perceptions. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by Edward Gibbon (1737-94), has been translated in numerous languages and widely read since its first publication in 1776. A massive corpus of staggering erudition, *Decline and Fall* is elegantly written with exquisitely phrased prose, and was used for generations as the standard for writing history, rightly earning its place as a literary masterpiece.⁷ Although meticulously researched, *Decline and Fall* is now considered dated as a historical study but still highly esteemed as a literary work.

It must be remembered, however, that when *Decline and Fall* was first published it was stylistically acceptable for historians to pass moral and value judgments on their subject matter. Accordingly, throughout much of the seven-volume work, the Byzantines are derisively referred to as “the Greeks,” who are in turn described as “feeble princes”⁸; “servile”⁹; “meager”¹⁰; “cowardly”¹¹; possessed of a “superstitious” church¹² and an “enfeebling” religion¹³; as well as being religiously obstinate,¹⁴ “pusillanimous” and “base.”¹⁵

Why did Gibbon come to have such a critical view of the Byzantines? He was most certainly affected by the prevailing Enlightenment philosophy of the late 18th-century. Enlightenment theory viewed religious dogma as backward and an impediment

to social improvement through science and reason. Evolved from Aristolean philosophy, which endeavored to investigate, examine, collect and categorize, many Enlightenment intellectuals of the late 18th-century regarded Byzantine mysticism and religious zeal as superstition.¹⁶ To Gibbon, “the subjects of the Byzantine empire, who assume and dishonour the names both of Greeks and Romans, present a dead uniformity of abject vices, which are neither softened by the weakness of humanity nor animated by the vigour of memorable crimes.”¹⁷ In Gibbon’s view--compared to the “sublime masters,” (i.e. the ancient Greeks)—the Byzantines deserved “the shame of a degenerate people. They held in their lifeless hands the riches of their fathers, without inheriting the spirit which had created and improved that sacred patrimony: they read, they praised, they compiled, but their languid souls seemed alike incapable of thought and action.”¹⁸ “The minds of the Greeks were bound in the fetters of a base and imperious superstition, which extends her dominion round the circle of profane science.”¹⁹ According to R.R. Bolgar, Gibbon missed entirely the fact that to the Byzantines, Hellenism served merely as a propaedeutic to Christianity; the Emperor, the church and the state were united in the True Christian Kingdom for the Glory of God--the agglutinated apogee of Greek culture, Roman legal tradition and Christian theology.²⁰

Interestingly, despite his disdain of Byzantine civilization, Gibbon did understand the significance of Byzantium to world history and in fact devotes the majority of all seven volumes of *Decline and Fall* to the study of Byzantine history. Gibbon attaches importance to several individual leaders who fared prominently in the life of the Eastern Roman Empire. Grafton notes that Gibbon and the historians of his era took a strong interest in “the low details of private life.”²¹ Gibbon was aware that historical sources

relating lurid details of persons' intimate lives may be sensationalistic; yet accounts of the era seem to have made sufficient an impression upon him and his notions about the profligacy of Byzantine transgressions:

*Those who believe that the female mind is totally depraved by the loss of chastity will eagerly listen to all the invectives of private envy or popular resentment which have dissembled the virtues of Theodora, exaggerated her vices, and condemned with rigour the venal or voluntary sins of the youthful harlot.*²²

Gibbon concedes that

*A sentence of death and infamy was often founded on the slight and suspicious evidence of a child or a servant; the guilt of the green faction, of the rich, and of the enemies of Theodora, was presumed by the judges, and paederasty became the crime of those to whom no crime could be imputed.*²³

Conflating homosexual behavior with the concepts of effeminacy and “natural law,” Gibbon follows a line of reasoning dating back to the 12th-century.(see chapter 4) Any semblance of impartiality abandons him when he touches upon the topic of

*voluntary and effeminate deserter[s] of his [one's male] sex...I touch with reluctance, and dispatch with impatience, a more odious vice, of which modesty rejects the name, and nature abominates the idea. The primitive Romans were infected by the example of the Etruscans and the Greeks...*²⁴

Even Sultan Mahomet II (Mehmet II), the conqueror of Constantinople (*circa* 1451-1481), does not escape Gibbon's censorious pen, who was said to be infected with this “unnatural lust.”²⁵

More than two centuries after the publication of *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon remains a perplexing figure. An erudite historian and unequalled stylist, he exhibited contradictory tendencies: reviling Byzantine civilization but obliquely acknowledging its historical relevance by expatiating at length in more than two thousand pages about its importance; reporting gossip about the sexual peccadilloes of various empresses yet reminding readers that such accounts must be taken in the context of the time; and decrying, in the words of 19th-century medievalist J.B. Bury, the “decay of taste and

genius,”²⁶ yet never precisely explaining how so “depraved” a society as Byzantium could have endured for over one thousand years.

J.B. Bury saw Gibbon as “a powerful representative of certain tendencies of his age”--an age in which the historical development of human societies (after the second century of the common era) was seen to be a retrogression for “which Christianity was largely to blame.”²⁷ At times Gibbon demonstrated equanimity and a remarkably measured tone: “Our calmer reason will reject such pure and perfect monsters of vice or sanctity, and will impute an equal, or at least an indiscriminate, measure of good and evil...”[referring to quarrelling early Christian sects].²⁸ Gibbon’s ability to amass large quantities of data and present them in a stylistically elevated prose, creating a synthesis of philosophy and history, is impressive. However, he tended to denigrate works produced in the “middle age” and as historian Anthony Grafton has noted, “long felt ambivalent about the relation between scholarship and narrative.”²⁹ Bury cautions that what should concern the reader is how Gibbon’s point of view in *Decline and Fall* “can be accepted as faithful to the facts, and in what respects it needs correction in the light of discoveries which have been made since he wrote.”³⁰ Yet, according to Professor Bury, Gibbon did correctly stress the “continuity of history” and raised important philosophical questions for the historian such as how “progress” is to be defined? How can “retrogression” be recognized?³¹ So great has been the impact of Gibbon in historical thought that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* exhorts : “Whatever else is read Gibbon must be read too.”³² As an intellectual of the highest rank who reflected the prevailing philosophical attitudes of the late 18th-century, perhaps it is best to judge Gibbon by his own words: “The observation which has been applied to a man may be extended to a whole people, that the

energy of the sword is communicated to the pen; and it will be found, by experience, that the tone of history will rise or fall with the spirit of the age.”³³

Charles Diehl, *Byzantine Portraits* (1927 edition)

In the first half of the 20th-century the noted French historian, Charles Diehl (1859-1944), rose to prominence with his pioneering work entitled *Byzantine Portraits* (1906;1927). This is a remarkable publication because it was one of the earliest historiographical works to examine the role of women in Byzantine society: “Under few governments have women had a better position, or played a more important part, or had a greater influence in politics and government, than under the Byzantine Empire.” Visible signs of authority and evidence of legitimately held power not only in the life of the *Gynaecium* but in public affairs as well, were prominent.³⁴ Moreover, noble birth was not necessary to become empress and once a woman was crowned *basilissa*, she was invested with sovereign powers.³⁵

Diehl’s sentences flow, in the English translation by Harold Bell, as if he personally knew the characters discussed. The reader’s interest is engaged and soon engrossed with people remote from the present time, yet vaguely familiar. Diehl recounts the deeds of famous personages such as the 5th-century poet/Empress Athenais-Eudocia, who in her writing strove to clothe the life of Christ with the language and rhythm of Homer, achieving a strange union of pagan and Christian elements.³⁶ The controversial 6th-century Empress Theodora is likewise discussed, and while Diehl refrains from calumniating her personal life, he diplomatically concludes that Theodora was ambitious and intelligent, with “a stern fixity of purpose and serene courage[...]the equal of the emperor.”³⁷ By the beginning of the 11th-century, the much-married Empress Zoe

Porphyrogenita ruled for a time in her own right and instructed the senate to ratify a “Contract of Friendship” by which she authorized herself and her husband to cease from sexual relations.³⁸

Endeavoring to reconstruct daily life in Byzantium,³⁹ Diehl was also interested in the lives of non-aristocrats and gives an affecting portrait of the life of Theodota, the mother of the great statesman and theologian, Michael Psellus (*circa*1018-78).⁴⁰ Perhaps what Diehl does best is to convey to the reader the paradoxical and contradictory atmosphere that was Byzantium:

Nowadays, when the word Byzantium is mentioned, we think instinctively of marvelous splendour, of extraordinary refinement, and we conjure up, in a setting of magical loveliness, scenes of unheard-of cruelty and excessive corruption and baseness; we think of palace intrigues, street riots, barrack revolutions, and of theological quarrels, and subtle heresies that are meaningless to our lucid Latin minds. We conceive a Byzantium splendid and corrupt, forever oscillating between two poles...⁴¹

John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* (1990); *The Apogee* (1993); *The Decline and Fall* (1996)

Like Bertha Diener in *Imperial Byzantium*, John Julius Norwich (born 1929) makes no pretensions to academic rigor in his three-volume *Byzantium* series.* In fact, historian Warren Treadgold states outright that Norwich’s work is “an uncritical compilation of largely obsolete work.”⁴² Nonetheless, as an uncritical piece of popular history the *Byzantium* trilogy is a delight to read. Norwich writes in an avuncular manner, clearly demonstrating his genuine affection for the subject. He notes he was first compelled to study Byzantine history because of the public dearth of knowledge about the subject:

* Some Byzantinists such as Treadgold and John Wortley, object strongly to Norwich’s *Byzantium* series as unscholarly. Despite its limitations, in the late 20th-century, the *Byzantium* series has reached a very wide general audience introducing Byzantine civilization into the popular culture.

*During my five years at one of England's oldest and finest public schools, Byzantium seems to have been the victim of a conspiracy of silence. I cannot honestly remember its being mentioned, far less studied; and so complete was my ignorance that I should have been hard put to define it in even general terms until I went to Oxford.*⁴³

Though the *Byzantium* series may not meet the standards of academic scholarship, it is an ambitious work of broad scope, covering political and social events with an emphasis on historical figures and the effects of individual volition in Byzantine history...up until its “heroic—and almost unbearably tragic—end.”⁴⁴ While occasionally “uncritical” with sources, Norwich is not naïve. For example, he does not hesitate to label the historian and *illustris* Procopius (*circa* 490-565) a “sanctimonious old hypocrite,” while simultaneously but mischievously citing at length Procopius’ scurrilous account about the much vilified 6th-century Empress Theodora.⁴⁵ Including entertaining details about the sexual tastes and exploits of Theodora and the Emperors Theodosius⁴⁶ and Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus,⁴⁷ Norwich produces an excellent survey of Byzantine history and brings its inhabitants vividly to life. He correctly notes: “Our civilization has never adequately acknowledged the debt it owes to the Empire of the East.”⁴⁸

Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (1997)

According to a review in the *Canadian Journal of History*, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* by Warren Treadgold has “superceded”⁴⁹ Ostrogorsky’s *A History of the Byzantine State*. There is no doubt, at any rate, that Treadgold’s monumental achievement stands side by side with Ostrogorsky. Treadgold has written an updated, thorough overview of Byzantine history with an extensive bibliographic survey. Unlike Ostrogorsky, who focuses more on political and economic history, Treadgold pays closer attention to the actions of individual rulers and the events surrounding their

reigns: “What the emperor did, or did not do, could rapidly confront ordinary Byzantines with economic ruin, new religious doctrines, or conquest by a foreign power. Byzantine society, originally defined by the state, was constantly changed by it.” Treadgold stresses that modern ideologies “like Marxism, Post-structuralism, or nationalism [are] unhelpful for studying Byzantium, where social classes and political and religious groups were loose, shifting, and not ideological in the modern sense.”⁵⁰ Emphasis is given to statistical data relating to estimated governmental budgetary spending. Much attention is also given to the military throughout the Empire’s long history, and the ramifications of conflicts among the landholding, military, civil and merchant classes are examined.

The underlying premise of *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* is Treadgold’s assertion that the Byzantine Empire was the living continuation of the Roman Empire changed by Greek culture and by Christianity.⁵¹ Most interesting is Treadgold’s interpretation of how the Byzantines viewed themselves. Being a *Rhomaïos* or “Roman,” as the Byzantines called themselves, had nothing to do with ethnicity and little to do with speaking Greek or living within the territorial bounds of the Empire: “It was mostly a matter of culture and religion.”⁵² Byzantine culture and religion have made a firm impress upon the cultures of former Byzantine territories--even until the present, especially among the many members of the Eastern Orthodox Church who still recognize the primacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople. In its conservative, religious, non-materialistic society and autocratic political regime, Byzantium may seem alien to a modern audience. Yet no other political entity in “the West nor anyone else has matched it in maintaining a single state and society for so long, over a wide area inhabited by heterogeneous peoples.”⁵³ Treadgold concludes: “the history of the Byzantine Empire is

a reminder that people of different nationalities can live together as one, over wide areas, for centuries.”⁵⁴

The Geographical Center of Empire

Like their Eastern European counterparts, Western scholars have always fully understood the importance of geography to the development of Byzantine civilization. Accordingly, the general portrait that emerges from their works is that of an Eastern Roman Empire hewn of a disparate ethnic blend of European and Near Eastern peoples, superimposed by Hellenistic culture mixed with Roman legal and administrative structures and imbued with Christianity. As for Constantinople, the capital served as an essential and unique confluence, the entrepot of a civilization born of geography and culture.

Gibbon, in particular, appreciated the impressive natural surroundings of Constantinople and its importance to statesmen, soldiers and citizens. He wrote, for instance, of the “incomparable position of Byzantium; and [...] how strongly it was guarded by nature against an hostile attack, whilst it was accessible on every side to the benefits of commercial intercourse.”⁵⁵ Gibbon goes on to give a detailed account of the geographical environs of Constantinople, describing the area as roughly “an unequal triangle. The obtuse point, which advances towards the east and shores of Asia, meets and repels the waves of the Thracian Bosphorus. The northern side of the city is bounded by the harbour; and the southern proximity is washed by the Propontis, or Sea of Marmara. The basis of the triangle is opposed to the west, and terminates the continent of Europe.” The winding channel called the Bosphorus is described, as is the “Euxine”(or the Black Sea).⁵⁶ The “Golden Horn,” as the harbor of Constantinople was

known since Antiquity, earned its appellation from the riches which flowed into it from “the most distant countries into the secure and capacious port of Constantinople.”⁵⁷

Norwich, too, appreciates the “supreme” geographical location of Constantinople. He affirms that the city’s harbor is a “deep and navigable inlet, some five miles long.”⁵⁸ The defensive posture of the city was unsurpassed in that it could only be attacked on one side by land which was protected by a “well-nigh impregnable” triple wall and moat fortifications. Even attack by sea on the remaining three marine sides was arduous due to the long and narrow straits of the Bosphorus to the east, and the Hellespont (or Dardanelles) constricting access from the Aegean to the Sea of Marmara to the west. Norwich recounts the folk legend about the inhabitants of Chalcedon (on the eastern side of the Bosphorus), who become infamous for their proverbial blindness in choosing to build their metropolis on the “wrong” or completely indefensible side of the Bosphorus.⁵⁹ Pagan sculptures from Antiquity and Christian artifacts from the farthest reaches of the Empire were brought to Constantinople to form a unique stylistic blend of what Norwich describes as “Apollo, Sol Invictus and Jesus Christ all[...]subordinated to a new supreme being ...”⁶⁰

Treadgold, for his part, emphasizes the cultural implications of the geographic location of Constantinople. He stresses that even before the area came under Roman rule *circa* 30 CE, the entire eastern Mediterranean basin had been subject to a largely Greek-speaking ruling class.⁶¹ Ethnic Greeks were a minority in the eastern Mediterranean area⁶², but Greek speakers continued to dominate the region’s cultural, administrative and economic life. Although many linguistic and ethnic groups inhabited the eastern Mediterranean during the period of Roman hegemony, the *koine*, or Hellenistic form of

the Greek language, carried the most prestige in the articulation of elevated or lofty philosophical and cultural expressions. Treadgold asserts that the lack of linguistic barriers (e.g., local languages which held the prestige of *koine* Greek) greatly facilitated the expansion of Christianity. The New Testament of the Bible was originally written in *koine*, and many of the first converts to Christianity were Greek speakers.⁶³ Gibbon maintains that the reliability and relative safety of the road network in Late Antiquity, *circa* the 4th-century CE, also greatly facilitated the spread of Christianity and the growth of monasticism.⁶⁴ Interestingly, Treadgold points out that during both the late-Roman and into the Byzantine eras, the state and society “did not always match each other” in the eastern Mediterranean,

*since the state could have weak influence over some of its subjects, but strong influence over others who lived outside [the Empire]. Outside the Latin-speaking West, the people of the Roman Empire had never had much in common with each other. Most Egyptians, Syrians, and Greeks shared no language, and shared a religion only in the sense that most of them did not repudiate the others' gods.*⁶⁵

Norwich notes that by the mid-4th century CE, Rome and most of Italy had become a “backwater.”⁶⁶ Moreover, he agrees with other scholars in emphasizing that in 476, the fall of Rome to Odovacar (a member of a minor Germanic tribe known as the Scyrians) was not really the end of the Roman Empire in the West, but simply a return to the Empire being governed by a sole ruler.⁶⁷ Indeed, Odovacar did not seek to usurp the authority of the Emperor and he “made no claim to sovereignty for himself”; but requested only the rank of patrician and to be allowed to “administer Italy in the name of the Emperor.”⁶⁸ The most populous, wealthy and culturally sophisticated regions of the Empire lay in the East. Also, the most pressing security threats to the Empire’s territorial integrity were in the East, in particular the Sassanian Empire of the Persians.⁶⁹ Different

regions of the Empire were, of course, important for different reasons. For instance, until the Islamic conquests of the 7th-century, Egypt acted as the granary of the empire. Even after significant inroads had been made by the Arabs and later by the Turks into Byzantine territory (well into the 10th-century), the eastern portion of the Empire remained highly important because of its rich agricultural potential, as a “seemingly bottomless” source of fighting men and, according to Norwich, as “the front line of Christendom, on whose integrity and inviolability all Europe depended.”⁷⁰

In summary then, Western scholars studying Byzantine civilization have stressed the crucial impact of geography on the formation, expansion and decline of the Eastern Roman Empire. We can conclude from their works that a knowledge of the natural traits of Constantinople is essential to understanding the development and geopolitical importance of the capital. The human geography and demographics of the region are equally important to comprehend how cultural factors came to bear upon the melding of this area into an amalgam that developed into the unique cultural, political and religious entity known as Byzantium.

The Earthly and Celestial Realms: Byzantium as Intercessor

The unique and utter embrocation of Byzantine society, culture and government is difficult for a secular, modern, Western audience to understand. Yet this fact was crucial to the order and functioning of Byzantium. Moreover, the Eastern Roman Empire’s influence in matters of religion was felt in the expansion, proselytization and arbitration of religious issues far beyond the borders of the known Christian world or *oikoumene*. Accordingly, modern Western scholars now attempt to understand and study the religiously/politically concatenated identity that was Byzantium. Diehl, Norwich and

Treadgold, for instance, have each examined the influence of Byzantium in the resolution of major dogmatic issues of the day which bore direct effects on politics, governance and international relations. For example, the eventual reversal of Iconoclasm and the restoration of Orthodoxy in the 9th-century not only had political and theological implications but influenced subsequent developments in European art history, culminating in the Italian Renaissance in the 14th-century.⁷¹ By contrast, Enlightenment-era scholars, such as Gibbon, considered the importance of religion in Byzantine society to be detrimental. He rendered rather inaccurate assessments of the socially ordering power⁷², psychological impact and motivation of human agency that religion manifested in the daily life of the Byzantines.⁷³

Diehl understood how difficult it is for a modern audience to comprehend the “excessive religious” emotions which formed the basis of the Byzantine world.⁷⁴ In his words, this represented a “stoic austerity of soul” which sacrifices everything to religion.⁷⁵ This crucial understanding of the Byzantine’s psychological outlook was, however, missed by Gibbon, who viewed Eastern Orthodoxy as “superstition”⁷⁶ and “Greek religion” as “enfeebling.”⁷⁷ Norwich holds a less strident view and observes that the Byzantine Empire was in reality a continuation of the ancient world where the world of the intellect gave way to the world of the spirit.⁷⁸ According to Norwich, modern Westerners living in a secularized world have enormous difficulty comprehending the intricacy, depth and nuances of Byzantine Orthodox theology.⁷⁹ Although averse to religion, Gibbon does acknowledge the centrality of Orthodoxy to the peoples of the Eastern Roman Empire; he relates that by 541 CE, several religious sects had splintered from the main branch of Orthodoxy, including the Nestorians,⁸⁰ the Armenians,⁸¹ the

Jacobites⁸² and the Copts.⁸³ The spread of Orthodox Christianity to northeastern Africa is discussed by Gibbon, but he holds a negative opinion of the peoples in the region, referring to the Copts as “illiterate beggars”,⁸⁴ and he deemed the Nubians unable to embrace Orthodox Christianity because “A metaphysical religion may appear too refined for the capacity of the Negro race; yet a black or a parrot might be taught to repeat the *words* of the Chalcedonian or Monophysite creed.”⁸⁵ In his gloss of Gibbon’s text, Professor Bury discusses the racial origins of the Abyssinians (whom he considers to be related to the Arabs), and the Nubians (whom he describes as “pure Negroes”). Although racial classification is no longer generally used in anthropology, Bury makes an instructive point in noting that “The ancients beheld, without much attention, the extraordinary phaenomenon which has exercised the philosophers and theologians of modern times.”⁸⁶

Norwich dates the earliest dogmatic schism between the Eastern and Western Churches to 484 CE. The schism was centered on the Monophysite heresy and stemmed from the Western Church’s dissatisfaction with a conciliatory encyclical, known as the *Henoticon*, proposed by the Emperor Zeno (reigned *circa* 474-91) together with Patriarch Acacius, affirming that Christ could be both God and man while avoiding problematic questions about the actual “nature” of Christ.⁸⁷ Finding this appeasement of the heretical Monophysites to be untenable, Pope Felix III, in 484, excommunicated the Patriarch Acacius, who felt compelled to respond in kind by excommunicating Pope Felix—an act which effectively placed the see of Constantinople on the same hierarchical level as the see of Rome and opened a 35-year breach between the churches.⁸⁸ Norwich traces the rise in temporal power and consequent assertiveness in military and doctrinal matters by

the papacy to the lack of an emperor in the West after 476 CE.⁸⁹ After the Council of Chalcedon in 451CE, the Fourth Ecumenical Council, Norwich sees an increased importance in the position of the patriarchate and a more religious, mystical concept of sovereignty as seen in the coronation of Leo I by Patriarch Anatolius in 457 CE.⁹⁰ The so-called “Chalcedonian Definition” of 451 CE resolved Christ to be one being with two natures: “perfect God and perfect man.” Also the “pride of place” of the patriarchate was reiterated in the Christian hierarchy, placing the Patriarch of Constantinople second only to the see of Rome.⁹¹ However, Norwich observes, the assumption of the title “Ecumenical” by the Patriarch John “the Faster,” in 588 CE, only exacerbated the bitter rivalries between the papacy and the patriarchate, ultimately leading to a final schism between the two churches in the 11th-century.⁹²

The complex history and convoluted events of the Iconoclast period (*circa* 726 to 780 CE and from 813 to 843) are reviewed by Gibbon. He asserts that monasteries in the eastern portion of the Empire came to be inhabited by a “swarm of fanatics.”⁹³ By the 6th-century CE, the veneration (or what Gibbon terms “the worship”) of religious images became firmly established: “By a slow though inevitable progression the honours of the original were transferred to the copy.”⁹⁴ The common uneducated masses in Constantinople and the European regions of the Empire were enthralled by what Diehl called the “mystical piety” and “splendors of ritual.”⁹⁵ Thought to have gained its impetus in the Monophysite Asian and North African regions of the Empire, Norwich believes Iconoclasm to have been an obvious progression of Monophysitism.⁹⁶ He cites Jewish and Islamic influence⁹⁷ and considers Iconoclasm to have been an “Asiatic ideal,”⁹⁸ which gradually lost influence after 843 CE.⁹⁹ Treadgold notes a revival of

learning after the Iconoclast period (post 843 CE).¹⁰⁰ In Byzantium, according to Diehl, “It was the saints who ruled the world.”¹⁰¹

The extremely complicated union of religion (the church) and government (the Emperor) in Byzantium mirrored--in the minds of the Byzantines--the relationship between God and the earth. This complex relationship and its attendant manifestations in government, international relations, culture and politics are explored by Diehl, Norwich and Treadgold. Gibbon was aware of the concatenation of religion and governance in Byzantium but failed to fully appreciate its import. Viewing religion in Byzantium as “enfeebling” and “superstition,” Gibbon did not accurately assess the profound and complex motivational factors in human agency.¹⁰²

Uneasy Existence between Western Christendom and Islam

In the 7th-century CE, the first contacts between the burgeoning faith of Islam and the outside world was with Byzantium. Seen by the Byzantines as another heretical religious sect along the lines of Monophysitism, little attention was heeded the Muslims until they emerged from the Arabian peninsula in the 8th-century and conquered vast holdings of imperial territory. By the 11th-century when Western Europeans launched the first of a series of Crusades to regain the Holy Land from the Seljuks, the Byzantines had already experienced nearly five centuries of conflict in their relations with the Muslim world. Both Norwich and Gibbon explore in depth the rise of Islam and Islamic expansion. But only Norwich stresses the fact that Byzantium not only acted as an intermediary between Christian Western Europe and the Moslem Near East and North Africa, but served as the defensive bulwark for the southeastern frontier of Europe, repelling two major Islamic incursions in 668-75 and again in 716-18.

Despite references to the “fanaticism of the Koran” and of “Ismaelians,” Gibbon actually devotes a great deal of attention to the rise of Islam and the origins of the Arabs.¹⁰³ Positing somewhat incongruous statements, Gibbon refers to Moslems (whom he equates with Arabs) as “insatiable fanatics.”¹⁰⁴ Yet he accedes that Arabs are “fortified with the austere virtues of courage, patience, and sobriety...”¹⁰⁵ Gibbon expounds at length on the theological intricacies of Islam, describing it as a “doctrine of eternal decrees and absolute predestination[...],” reconciling “the prescience of God with the freedom and responsibility of man.”¹⁰⁶ The precepts of Islam are compared by Gibbon to both Judaism and Christianity:¹⁰⁷ “The authority and station of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Christ, and Mahomet rise in just gradation above each other; but whosoever hates or rejects any one of the prophets is numbered with the infidels.”¹⁰⁸

Gibbon reviews the Arab sieges of Constantinople in both 674-79 and 716-18, involving massive naval and military engagements--and credits the defeat of the Moslems to Greek fire.¹⁰⁹ However, Gibbon attaches more importance to the defeat of the “Saracens” by Charles Martel in a relatively minor skirmish near Tours in 732, stating that Martel had saved not only his country but perhaps all of Europe from the “Mahometan yoke.”¹¹⁰ Gibbon extends the analogy further, conjecturing that had Martel not halted the advance of Islam into Western Europe, “Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet.”¹¹¹

Unlike Gibbon, Norwich sees the Byzantine victory over the Arabs in 674-9 as a major event in world history, which effectively saved Western civilization. Norwich reasons that the impregnable fortress of Constantinople blocked further Arab incursions

into Eastern Europe, obliging the Arabs to extend their lines of communication and supply all the way to the Atlantic coast of present-day Morocco. By the time the Arabs had traversed all of North Africa, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and subdued the Iberian peninsula, their reach could not be effective much farther north than the Pyrenees.¹¹² Norwich notes that in the Christian East (consisting of areas formerly under Byzantine jurisdiction such as the Levant and North Africa), the inhabitants were largely Monophysite and held divergent dogmatic versions of Orthodoxy; accordingly, they “frankly welcomed” Moslem rule, preferring to live under “infidels” rather than “heretics.”¹¹³

In summary, in his appreciation of the interactions between the Byzantine world and Islam, Gibbon once again displays contradictory tendencies; the Arabs are referred to as “fanatics,” yet he devotes much attention to the rise of Islam and the Arabs. Norwich more clearly sees the import of relations between Western Christendom, Byzantium and Islam: the role of Byzantium as a buffer between Islam and the West and the intricate cultural and religious factors at play facilitated rapid Islamic expansion in the Monophysite Near East and in North Africa. Treadgold merely relates the events of the 7th- and 8th-century Arab sieges in historical order and discusses mainly the internal effects on the empire,¹¹⁴ while Diehl does not examine Islamic-Byzantine relations in *Byzantine Portraits*.

Commerce, Politics and International Affairs

Until the sack of Constantinople in 1204, during the Fourth Crusade, the capital city was arguably the cultural, military, political and religious cynosure of all Europe. No city outside of China held so large a population¹¹⁵ as Constantinople and no city in

Europe held the cultural prestige of *the polis*.¹¹⁶ Western European and barbarian visitors were often overwhelmed by the splendor of the capital. In *Chronicles of the Crusades*, the French Crusaders Jean de Joinville and Geoffroy de Villehardouin recorded their amazement upon viewing the majesty of Constantinople in 1204. Dumbfounded, they “never imagined there could be so fine a place in all the world,” that “no one would have believed it to be true if he had not seen it with his own eyes[...]for never before had so grand an enterprise been carried out by a people since the creation of the world.”¹¹⁷ Gibbon, Diehl, Norwich and Treadgold all agree on the prominence of Byzantium, the magnetic appeal and prestige of the Empire attracting Western Europeans and barbarian hordes. Byzantine cultural and military superiority also had far-reaching effects beyond the borders of the Empire and had, in particular, a major impact on the cultural development of Russian and other Slavic civilizations.

Diehl notes that unlike the often idle aristocracy in Western Europe, in the Byzantine world “Western aristocratic prejudices” were unknown and that work and commerce had no stigma attached to them.¹¹⁸ Norwich reminds his readers just how important the capital city of Constantinople was in the politics of the Empire. During several periods in Byzantine history the citizens of Constantinople served as a potent political force.¹¹⁹ Often allied with the urban aristocracy and traditionally opposed to the landed Anatolian aristocracy, Constantinopolitan popular acclamation was instrumental in the accession of several rulers, including Constantine Porphyrogenitus in 945¹²⁰ and the Empresses Zoe and Theodora in 1042.¹²¹

The importance of “Greek fire”¹²²—a flammable liquid invented by the Byzantines, which was ejected from special siphons on ships, spread over the sea and

ignited--cannot be exaggerated in Byzantine naval defenses. Norwich believes that it was the use of Greek fire which delivered the Byzantines from certain defeat in their numerous engagements with the “Saracens” and the Russians.¹²³

As the major entrepot between Asia and Europe, Constantinople attracted a myriad of peoples and ethnicities. Gibbon, in particular, demonstrated a keen interest in the origins of many of the peoples who came into contact with the Eastern Roman Empire. For example, the arrival of the Huns in Europe (*circa* 376 CE) is duly discussed¹²⁴ and includes an informative account of the reception accorded by Attila to a Byzantine embassy.¹²⁵ Gibbon does not fail to note that the physical appearance or “features” of the Huns appeared to “improve”--“whiten their swarthy complexions”¹²⁶--after their arrival in Europe due to the climate and miscegenation with other peoples.¹²⁷ Additionally, Gibbon deems the “Tatar” youth of both sexes to have been “promiscuous.”¹²⁸ Gibbon likewise devoted much research to the origins of many of the often diverse peoples, ranging from the Uzes¹²⁹ to the Normans.¹³⁰ He surveys the exploits of the Mongols in the 13th-century¹³¹ and makes note of the first settlements of Turks in Europe *circa* 1341-7.¹³² Norwich also remarks upon the first appearance of Turkic peoples in the history of the West, dating their arrival at 568-9 CE, when a Turkish embassy arrived in Constantinople to sign “a treaty of allegiance in the event of renewed hostilities” with the Persians.¹³³

Gibbon acknowledges that with the sack of Rome in 476 CE, and the overthrow of the Western Emperor, “the seat of universal empire” was transferred to Constantinople.¹³⁴ But he often compares what he believed to be the moribund nature of the Eastern Empire with the vigor of Western Europe. The East is equated with

enervation, effeminacy and decline. To Gibbon, the annals of the Byzantine Empire present “an ungrateful and melancholy task[...]a tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery.”¹³⁵ Comparing the Reformation in 16th-century Western Europe to the Byzantine Iconoclast period of the 8th- and 9th-centuries, Gibbon believes the Western European reformers “expanded all the faculties of man, the thirst of innovation superseded the reverence of antiquity, and the vigour of Europe could disdain” the “sickly and servile weakness of the Greeks.”¹³⁶ He notes that successive Ottoman governments sought new soldiers “not in effeminate Asia, but among the hardy and warlike natives of Europe.”¹³⁷

In summary then, the unique character of Byzantine civilization, with its concatenation of religion and politics, is emphasized by Treadgold who states that in the later period, the Orthodox Church spread not only religion but also cultural and political leadership throughout the Empire.¹³⁸ Most importantly in the cultural and religious leadership was the development of a Cyrillic script (*circa* 864 CE) by the Byzantine missionaries Cyril and Methodius, giving the Slavs a literary language and a means of written expression. Norwich reviews the military technological superiority of the Byzantine 9th-century, including Greek fire. And Diehl reveals a society that was surprisingly open for ambitious non-aristocratic citizens who were able to rise up the social hierarchy. Gibbon, while acknowledging the preeminence of Byzantium in commercial, political and strategic affairs, still labels the Eastern Roman Empire as moribund and “servile.”

Transcending Gender

The public display of non-standard gender behaviors and/or practices in Byzantine civilization is one of the most problematic topics for scholars and one not at all well understood. Gibbon, for one, had decidedly negative views on these topics; believed the vitiating presence of female influence produced by women and eunuchs enervated the vitality of the empire. Norwich, for his part, does discuss the actions of prominent women in Byzantium and their effects on that society. However, his discussion of eunuchs tends to be rather sensationalistic, and does not emphasize the great importance of eunuchism to the Byzantine cosmological outlook. Diehl, using a measured tone, examines not only the roles of women who attained great influence in Byzantine society and government, but also non-aristocratic women and their importance in the sphere of home life. Treadgold, reminiscent of Diehl's understated style, discusses the existence of eunuchs and powerful women, but basically as a record of fact with no analysis. Neither Diehl nor Treadgold examine in-depth *why* these non-standard gender behaviors became prominent in Byzantium. What did non-standard gender behaviors reveal about Byzantine society?

A vast expanse of time separates the publication of *Decline and Fall* (1776) from Treadgold's *History of the Byzantine State and Society* (1997). Writing styles have changed enormously, as have attitudes toward the roles of women, sexuality and gender. Yet regardless of the prevailing attitudes which have most likely influenced each author from Gibbon onwards, what is clear is that in their assessment—or total disregard—of the roles of women and eunuchs in Byzantine society, Western scholars have helped to perpetuate misconceptions about that society. This trend was especially pronounced in

the West, notably in the English-speaking world, following the first publication of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* in 1776. Subsequent publications have also been characterized by value judgments, or at any rate a sense of unease, in their assessment of non-standard gender behaviors or practices, thereby contributing, in their turn, to continuing misconceptions.

Diehl was astute in his estimation that in order to understand the world of Byzantium, it is absolutely necessary to understand the position of women in that society.¹³⁹ Citing the 19th-century Byzantinist, A. N. Rambaud, Diehl remarks that the position of women in Byzantine society was “one of the most striking characteristics of Greek history in the Middle Ages.”¹⁴⁰ When discussing the role of women in Byzantine society, Norwich cites (from Diehl) the fact that the Byzantine Empress was the holder of a recognized rank; she was given the title of *Augusta*¹⁴¹ and wielded considerable power, including absolute control over her “immense revenues”¹⁴² and large retinue. She also exercised total authority over her quarters, the *Gynaecium*, which one chronicler referred to as a “New Eden.”¹⁴³ The Empress regularly appeared in public, and the freedom of association between men and woman was a remarkable characteristic of the Byzantine court.¹⁴⁴ Diehl notes that female seclusion in the *Gynaecium* was not, for the most part, a prominent feature in Byzantine civilization,¹⁴⁵ and the *Gynaecium* could be open to everyone—not only eunuchs and courtiers.¹⁴⁶

Interestingly, a noble birth was not a necessary prerequisite for all prospective empresses. Upward mobility was possible and an ennobling of the emperor's betrothed was achieved in the coronation ritual. The future empress was metaphorically transfigured during her coronation ceremony from a simple woman to the Empress, to

become what Diehl believed was an “entirely new character[...]the incarnation of power and holiness.”¹⁴⁷ A special ceremony was required to crown the Empress as *Augusta*. The *basilissa* became invested with her own sovereign powers¹⁴⁸ and exercised her authority legitimately, including absolute control over her own finances, and she could impact foreign policy with her indispensable role in court ceremony.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, Diehl duly records the imprimatur of the Empress Theodora¹⁵⁰ in religious and state policy during the reign of her husband Justinian I (*circa* 527-65CE). Since power and holiness were legitimately invested in the *basilissa*, she could appoint the next Emperor if succession was not clear.¹⁵¹ If her son became Emperor while still a minor, the Empress had the right to sit on the regency council.¹⁵² And on more than one occasion in Byzantine history the *basilissa* came to rule over the Empire in her own right as sovereign *basileus* (emperor-king); the Empress thus received what Diehl termed “the fullness of imperial power.”¹⁵³ In comparison, in the contemporaneous West the mere notion of a female ruling in her own right was viewed as preposterous, and what was known as the Salic Law proscribed females from ruling in their own right.¹⁵⁴ Norwich asserts that one of the reasons Pope Leo III had the temerity to anoint Charlemagne as “Emperor of the Romans”¹⁵⁵ in 800, was because both men considered the throne in Constantinople vacant since it was occupied by the Empress Irene.¹⁵⁶

In stark contrast to Diehl, Gibbon displays a marked tendency to severely criticize actions or persons remotely associated with “effeminacy,” or what he considered to be effeminate. Any perceived “softness,” enjoyment of luxury or nexus with the female gender was not only to be rigorously condemned, but in his view this is what ultimately contributed to the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Thus, “manly” virtue was to be

praised, whereas “femaleness” vitiates, is enervating, and anything associated with it is to be avoided: “Female courage, however it may be raised by fanaticism, or confirmed by habit, can be only a faint and imperfect imitation of manly valour that distinguishes the age or country in which it may be found.”¹⁵⁷ Like Gibbon, Diehl perceives action and intelligence as male attributes; he describes the Empress Theodora (wife of Justinian I) as having a “masculine vigor,”¹⁵⁸ and the Empress Irene¹⁵⁹ (*circa* 800 CE) as possessing a “masculine intellect.”

Gibbon’s views regarding the linkage between effeminacy, profligacy and decline was ascribed to entire nations. For example, he considered the “large and masculine limbs” of the Germans to inspire them with “constitutional bravery.”¹⁶⁰ By contrast, the “Greeks [Byzantines]” were seen by Gibbon as “feeble,”¹⁶¹ subject to “vice [homosexuality]”¹⁶² and lacking in “courage”¹⁶³ whilst the warmth of Assyria incited “a luxurious people to the gratification of every sensual desire[.]”¹⁶⁴

Referring to the physical or natural world as he understood it, Gibbon selectively uses “nature” as a template which he believed should serve as a paradigm for human behavior. For example, Gibbon describes the appearance of the Hun leader Attila as “scarcely human,”¹⁶⁵ but believes the physical appearance or “features” of the Huns were “insensibly improved” by their arrival on the eastern shores of the Caspian, with its milder climate and more sophisticated cultural influences than existed in their prior place of residence in Eastern Asia.¹⁶⁶ The Alani, in Gibbon’s view, were less “deformed and brutish” than the Huns, because the admixture of German and Sarmatic blood had improved their features by whitening their complexions.¹⁶⁷

Constantinople, in particular, was a place where “the palace...was ruled by female influence, and agitated by female passions...” Passions which Gibbon felt were contrary to the “female virtues of mildness and fidelity.”¹⁶⁸ Yet these “female passions” could assume masculine vigor when needed. Gibbon notes that the Eastern Roman Empire was “for the first time submitted to a female reign” under the Empress Pulcheria (circa 450 CE).¹⁶⁹ In his view it was the resolve of the Empress Theodora, during the *Nika* revolt in 532 CE, that helped save the reign of her husband Justinian I. However, Gibbon does not fail to emphasize that Theodora was once a “prostitute” and that her resoluteness came at the price of renouncing “the timidity, as well as the virtues, of her sex.”¹⁷⁰ The city of Rome is anthropomorphized by Gibbon with the pronoun “she,” and is said to have lost the attributes of “freedom, of virtue, and of honour.”¹⁷¹ Female “passion” may need to take on masculine potency when necessary, but to Gibbon the successive, short reigns of the Empresses Zoe and Theodora (circa 1054 CE) were exemplars of metaphoric impotency. He implies that any defects in government of the period can be attributed more to female “impotency” and “the influence of four eunuchs” rather than to misgovernance. Gibbon “gladly” dismisses “this shameful and destructive period...in which the Greeks [citizens of the Byzantine Empire] degraded below the common level of servitude, were transferred like a herd of cattle by the choice or caprice of two impotent females.”¹⁷²

In his *Byzantium* trilogy Norwich also makes note of persons in Byzantine history who crossed the lines of gender expectations—in the view of 20th-century popularly accepted western notions--although Norwich never precisely explains why it is necessary to describe such non-standard gender behaviors or practices. Treadgold dates the

development of the first formal code of canon law in the Byzantine Church to the 8th-century *circa* 726, under the reign of Emperor Leo III, “the Syrian.” The *Ecloga* (or the “Selection”), was an attempt to make moral legislation more stringent. For example, abortion was outlawed and the clergy was forbidden to remarry. The “sin” of sodomy was outlawed¹⁷³ and the death penalty was prescribed for homosexual acts.¹⁷⁴ Treadgold notes the earlier legal proscriptions from the *Code of Justinian* aimed to bring Christian morals into agreement with secular society as early as the mid-6th century.¹⁷⁵ In 691, under the reign of the Emperor Justinian II *Rhinotmetus* (the “slit-nose”), *circa* 685-695, a synod of eastern bishops known as the *Quinisextum* convened to regulate matters left outstanding from the Fifth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils.¹⁷⁶ Norwich recounts that Canon 62 of the *Quinisextum* prohibited dances by either sex in honor of pagan gods and all transvestites. Canon 96 brought the disapprobation of the Church on all who “curled their hair in a provocative or seductive manner.”¹⁷⁷ Avoiding overt value judgments, Norwich does discuss with some frequency the sexuality of famous personages in Byzantine history. He notes for example that the apparel of Emperor Constantine the Great was considered to be “effeminate.” Norwich feels obliged to assert that rumors insinuating Constantine’s reputed penchant for homosexual activity to be “almost certainly without foundation.”¹⁷⁸ And the Emperor Constans (*circa* 350), Norwich reports, rather than devoting effort to reinforcing the eastern frontier of the Empire, preferred to “take his pleasures with certain of his blond German prisoners, as dissolute and debauched as himself.”¹⁷⁹ The Emperor Gratian, *circa* 383, had a “predilection” for his tall, blond Alani personal guards.¹⁸⁰ In the 5th-century CE, the grandson of the Vandal king in Carthage was, according to Norwich, “a mildly homosexual bachelor.”¹⁸¹

Two young nephews of the aged Emperor Anastasius (*circa* 520) displayed “affection for each other” which “seems to have gone somewhat beyond family feeling.”¹⁸² The 4th-century CE eunuch Eutropius, described by Norwich as having an “egg-bald head and wrinkled yellow face,” is rumored to have had a successful career as a “catamite and procurer” before rising to the position of “Superintendent of the Sacred Bedchamber” to the Emperor Arcadius.¹⁸³ Diehl relates that the Empress Irene (797-802) filled the imperial palace with “creatures, particularly the eunuchs of her household.”¹⁸⁴ Eunuchs, writes Norwich, were more numerous than “flies.”¹⁸⁵ And Diehl notes that Byzantine empresses were traditionally associated in popular thought of the time with their retinue of eunuchs.¹⁸⁶

Norwich understands the crucial functions that eunuchs fulfilled in the functioning of Byzantine society, and the negative reputation traditionally associated with them. He reminds the reader that eunuchs in Byzantium were “neither the mincing male sopranos of later Western Europe nor the overweight and epicene harem-keepers of the Oriental tradition.”¹⁸⁷ Certain of the highest-ranking social stations in the empire, relates Norwich, were open only to eunuchs and a number of respected members of society and holders of the highest ranks in both ecclesiastical and civil affairs had been castrated—including Narses, one of the greatest generals in imperial military history. Although the Church frowned upon bodily mutilation, and laws were in effect proscribing castration, the practice was infrequent but continued to take place. Treadgold notes that having a eunuch in the family could be useful.¹⁸⁸ Norwich elucidates that by the 10th-century, ambitious families having a younger son castrated could be almost assured of his promotion and social advancement. Norwich offers more mundane explanations than

Diener for the relative importance of eunuchs in Byzantine life: Eunuchs, as opposed to their “more completely-endowed colleagues,” were more “industrious” and “dedicated,” since they usually lacked wives and progeny. They could not ascribe to the highest office of the Imperial Dignity and were frequently the individuals with the most access to the royal family. Treadgold concurs, noting that many palace officials (mainly eunuchs) were influential because of their close contact with the Emperor.¹⁸⁹ Positions could be awarded to eunuchs on merit alone since they lacked heirs and could therefore stake no hereditary claims. In this respect, Norwich believes that eunuchs constituted an invaluable bulwark against “feudalism.”¹⁹⁰ However, Treadgold observes that the prominence of eunuchs in government began to diminish by the mid-11th century with the development of a hereditary military aristocracy.¹⁹¹

Popular attitudes toward eunuchs were mixed, even in Late Antiquity and Byzantine times. The Empress Sophia (*circa* 572 CE), according to Gibbon, is rumored to have insulted the eminent General Narses with the comment that “he [Narses] should leave to *men* the exercise of arms, and return to his proper station among the maidens of the palace, where a distaff should be again placed in the hand of the eunuch.”¹⁹²

Gibbon understands the importance of eunuchs in Byzantine society, yet often makes reference to them in derogatory or condescending terms. For example, the elderly Superintendent of the Sacred Bedchamber or *Praepositus Sacri Cubiculi*,¹⁹³ Eutropius (*circa* 399), is referred to as an “audacious eunuch.”¹⁹⁴ The first recorded instance of eunuchs in the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity is dated by Gibbon to the time of the Emperor Constantius II (*circa* 350-361 CE), during which time “a reign of the *eunuchs*” was established over the “Roman world.” According to Gibbon,

*Those unhappy beings” were “the ancient production of oriental jealousy and despotism, were introduced into Greece and Rome by the contagion of Asiatic luxury. Their progress was rapid; and the eunuchs, who, in the time of Augustus, had been abhorred, as the monstrous retinue of an Egyptian queen, were gradually admitted into the families of matrons, of senators, and of the emperors themselves.*¹⁹⁵

Referring to eunuchs in a tone one would normally reserve for vermin, Gibbon continues:

*they [eunuchs] multiplied in the palaces of his [the Emperor Constantine I (circa 324-337 CE)] degenerate sons, and insensibly acquired the knowledge, and at length the direction, of the secret councils of Constantius. The aversion and contempt which mankind has so uniformly entertained for that imperfect species appears to have degraded their character, and to have rendered them almost as incapable as they were supposed to be of conceiving any generous sentiment or of performing any worthy action. But the eunuchs were skilled in the arts of flattery and intrigue; and they alternately governed the mind of Constantius by his fears, his indolence, and his vanity.*¹⁹⁶

Norwich also refers to eunuchs in a supercilious manner. Castrated men are frequently referred to as “the eunuch” rather than by their names.¹⁹⁷ The object of an eviscerating sermon by the dour St. John Chrysostom (enthroned 398-404), Eutropius is described as “the trembling eunuch” cowering, and becoming more “shriveled[...]*than ever.*”¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, Norwich also cites Bury’s moderating--yet somewhat paternalistic—exhortation: “we must make great allowance for the general prejudice existing against a person with Eutropius’ physical disabilities.”¹⁹⁹ Norwich continues Professor Bury’s paternalism, referring to the great General Narses’ (circa mid-5th to mid-6th century) “condition”²⁰⁰ and describing him as “shriveled” and an “old eunuch.”²⁰¹ “History offers few examples,” Norwich dryly adds, “of a campaign as swift and decisive as that of Narses being successfully concluded by a general in his middle eighties; nor, surely, any more persuasive argument in favour of castration.”²⁰²

Norwich understands that the “atrocious press” that Byzantine history has received in the modern era is partially due to lurid rumors of sexual debauchery and profligacy. The most prominent account of this nature is in *The Secret History*, by Procopius (*illustris* and Prefect of Constantinople, *circa* 500-565 CE), whose intent was to slander the Empress Theodora, wife of Justinian I. Norwich humorously acquiesces that the salacious rumors transmitted by respected historians ranging from Procopius to Gibbon and Lecky make “Byzantine history sound not so much monotonous as distinctly entertaining.”²⁰³ But like Gibbon, Norwich does appear to hold women to a different behavioral standard, or rather pronounce upon their actions more harshly than their male counterparts. For instance, Anna Comnena (*circa* 1083-1153) is said to imply “rather bitchily”²⁰⁴ unfair commentary about the Empress Helena. Even Gibbon occasionally modulates his usually harsh critique of Byzantine women by inserting the caveat “Those who believe that the female mind is totally depraved by the loss of chastity will eagerly listen to all the invectives of private envy or popular resentment, which have dissembled the virtues of Theodora, exaggerated her vices, and condemned with rigour the venal or voluntary sins of the youthful harlot.”²⁰⁵ Norwich dates the accession of the Empress Eudoxia (*circa* 399) as the “first of that long line of Byzantine Empresses, beautiful, worldly and ambitious, whose names were to become bywords for luxury and sensuality.”²⁰⁶ According to Diehl, Empress Athenais-Eudocia (*circa* 421) kept her eyes “modestly lowered.”²⁰⁷ Guile and a propensity for following circuitous or unconventional paths to power are ascribed to certain women. Diehl expresses the belief that “Theodora [mid-6th century] was a woman and knew how to get herself out of trouble.”²⁰⁸ He continues: Theodora knew that her beauty “was the best guarantee of her

absolute power,”²⁰⁹ and encountered “much impurity and indiscreet familiarity in her stage career.”²¹⁰ But, adds Diehl, Theodora belonged “to a profession where virtue is not necessarily a virtue.”²¹¹ Treadgold describes the musings of Procopius in *The Secret History* as “intemperate,”²¹² but unable to avoid his tabloid instincts, Norwich mischievously quotes Procopius at length in perhaps the most scurrilous diatribe ever written to calumny an empress:

Now for a time Theodora was still too immature to sleep with a man or to have intercourse like a woman, but she acted as might a male prostitute to satisfy the dregs of humanity, slaves though they were, who followed their master to the theatre and there took the opportunity to indulge in such bestial practices; and she remained some considerable time in a brothel, given over to such unnatural traffic of the body... But as soon as she reached maturity she joined the women of the stage and became a harlot, of the kind that our ancestors used to call ‘the infantry’ ... The wench had not an ounce of modesty, nor did any man ever see her embarrassed: on the contrary, she unhesitatingly complied with the most shameless demands... and she would throw off her clothes and expose to all comers those parts, both in front and behind, which should rightly remain hidden from men’s eyes.

Never was any woman so completely abandoned to pleasure. Many a time she would attend a banquet with ten young men or more, all with a passion for fornication and at the peak of their powers, and would lie with all her companions the whole night long; and when she had reduced them all to exhaustion she would turn to their attendants—sometimes as many as thirty of them—and copulated with each in turn; and even then she could not satisfy her lust.

And although she made use of three apertures in her body, she was wont to complain that Nature had not provided her with larger openings in her nipples, so that she might have contrived another form of intercourse there. And though she became repeatedly pregnant, yet by various devices she was almost always able to induce an immediate abortion.

Often in the theatre, too, in full view of all the people... she would spread herself out and lie on her back on the ground. And certain slaves whose special task it was would sprinkle grains of barley over her private parts; and geese trained for the purpose would pick them off one by one with their beaks and swallow them. And when she rose again to her feet, so far from blushing she actually seemed to take pride in this performance.²¹³

Unlike the reasonably well-documented life of the Empress Theodora, the lives of non-aristocratic women in Byzantine society had barely been studied until the pioneering

work of Diehl. The majority of women in Byzantium married, raised children and ran their households. Skill in “feminine accomplishments” such as “spinning, embroidery and weaving” was expected, and some rudimentary literacy was often required to run the household.²¹⁴ Diehl notes that in the domestic sphere wives were more important than their husbands.²¹⁵ However, the horizons of middle-class women were bound by their husbands’ wishes, good management of the household and the proper education of the children.²¹⁶ Generally daughters of non-aristocratic families were less educated than boys and raised largely within the confines of the home.²¹⁷ An affecting depiction in *Byzantine Portraits* is made of the life of a middle-class woman in 8th-century Constantinople.²¹⁸

In the spirit of gender equality, Norwich also does draw attention to the sexual peccadilloes of figures in Byzantine history who did conform to more traditional gender roles. The Emperor Jovian’s (*circa* 363) fondness for “wine” and “women”²¹⁹ is discussed, as is the acknowledgement that all of the Byzantine Emperors were surrounded in the imperial palace by “women and eunuchs.”²²⁰ However, the allure of what seem to be less common sexual proclivities and acts are duly noted by Norwich. Constantine V (*circa* 743) is labeled as “Shamelessly bisexual,”²²¹ and Emperor Valens (*circa* 378) is described as “a malformed, middle-aged sadist.”²²² In his introduction to the *Byzantium* series, Norwich makes no claim to academic nor scholarly rigor. Aside from the amusing tabloid and lurid accounts regarding sexual aspects in the lives of Byzantine personages, the *Byzantium* series does focus attention on the fact that the reputation or mythology of non-standard gender practices or behaviors is still very much

associated with Byzantine civilization by persons writing about the Eastern Roman Empire.

Therefore, the works of Gibbon, Diehl, Norwich and Treadgold continue to call attention to the reputation of Byzantine non-standard gender behaviors and practices in various ways. For example, Gibbon reacted most negatively to the idea of women exerting power in public life and the influence of eunuchs. He associates and conflates religion, women and eunuchs with enervation, effeminacy and decline. Unlike Gibbon, Diehl examines topics of social history and shows a more accurate understanding of the world-view of the Byzantines than Gibbon. Whereas Treadgold's *History of the Byzantine State and Society* is a mixture of political, economic and social history, written in a style of scholarly detachment. His understatement, however, does not fully convey the impact that Byzantine non-standard gender behaviors and practices had on earlier historians. Norwich's popular three volume work is highly entertaining and full of lurid details about non-standard gender behaviors and practices in Byzantium, with an ironic tone which at times verges on the supercilious regarding eunuchs in particular. Nonetheless, the Norwich trilogy does bring attention to the reputation ascribed to non-standard gender behaviors and practices which so became associated with the name of Byzantium. All four of the Western authors reviewed directly or indirectly treated the topic of non-standard gender behavior in Byzantium, but none specifically named the topic as a major contributing factor to the lingering negative associations toward Byzantine civilization in the modern Western consciousness.

As with the works of Eastern European scholars, Western scholars also imparted great erudition and enormously advanced the study of Byzantine civilization. However,

like their Eastern homologues, the Western scholars paradoxically (subtly or not so subtly) transmitted along with their knowledge the unease or discomfort with non-standard gender behaviors or practices which have for so long distorted perceptions about Byzantine civilization in the West. The works reviewed of the scholars Edward Gibbon, Charles Diehl, John Julius Norwich and Warren Treadgold, factually agree on many of the major aspects (with only minor differences) of Byzantine civilization, such as geography, foreign relations, economics, political affairs and religion. Taking into consideration the large periods of time between which the various works were written, and accounting for stylistic differences, the authors present their views with varying degrees of forcefulness or understatement. However, the topic of non-standard gender behaviors or practices in Byzantine civilization remains the most problematic issue for all of the four authors: specifically, the influence of eunuchs and high-status women in public life. Diehl considers vigor and intellect to be masculine attributes, and does not discuss the prominence of eunuchs, but does examine female agency in Byzantine aristocratic and non-aristocratic life. Norwich, for his part, examines the lives of high-status women and eunuchs, and acknowledges their influence in Byzantium, but does not explore the deeper meanings and symbolic value of why non-standard gender behaviors and practices came to be of such importance. What is discussed in the four works reviewed is as relevant as what is not discussed. For instance, the attribution of decline to the enfeeblement caused by religion, women and eunuchs, as supported by Gibbon, or the opposite view placing little attention to non-standard gender behavior or practices (as done by Treadgold), fails to relate the integral roles these behaviors and practices played

in Byzantium and how this misunderstanding has distorted the legacy of Byzantine civilization in the modern Western consciousness.

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Chapter Four

Ghosts of Byzantium: The Old Ways Endure Under a New Dispensation

An interdisciplinary comparative literary analysis of historiographical sources with attention to geography, from the late 18th- to the late 20th-centuries of the common era, indicates that the reasons for the stigmatization of Byzantine civilization in the modern Western consciousness appear to be predicated, in part, on two related factors perceived by post-Enlightenment commentators: excessive religiosity and the presence of non-standard gender behaviors or practices. And as will be seen in this chapter, what were perceived as non-standard gender behaviors or practices to Enlightenment intellectuals were, to the Byzantines, an accepted part of their society, and hence their religion. The most representative work of Enlightenment opinion which had the widest circulation and cast an umbra over the reputation of Byzantium for two centuries was *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776+), by Edward Gibbon. There are many reasons for his severe critique of Byzantine civilization but the religious, mystical orientation of Byzantine society appears to bear the main onus in Gibbon's negative appraisal, as does the presence of non-standard gender behaviors or practices. To Gibbon, what are termed here as non-standard gender behaviors and practices appear to be bifurcate, and involve the visible role of women in Byzantine society and governance, and the ancillary issue of vitiating female anima as manifest in the presence of eunuchs in the governing bureaucracy. Gibbon's beliefs about gender expectations have their origins in the long evolution of western notions of gender and sexuality beginning in pharaonic Egypt,¹ continuing to classical Greece and ancient Rome, before undergoing dramatic

changes with the advent and development of Christian doctrine in Late Antiquity, the Middle and Late Byzantine periods. Female assertion of power in the political sphere and the existence of eunuchs rigorously challenged accepted notions of gender, which had narrowed by the time Western European intellectual thought distinctively articulated itself in the 18th-century period known as the “Enlightenment.”

Profound religious as well as cultural differences between Byzantine civilization and Western Europe have been acknowledged and commented upon from at least as early as the 5th-century of the common era.² Western European Enlightenment intellectuals commenting on Byzantine civilization were themselves (consciously or not) the heirs of centuries of Catholic-influenced anti-Byzantine/anti- Eastern Orthodox thought dating back nearly a millennium. For example, Gibbon’s use of the French historian Tillemont on ecclesiastical history manifests “pronounced Enlightenment presuppositions” on what defines excess of religion or “superstition.”³ Thus it is through the prism of anti-clerical Enlightenment thought, with fixed notions about gender expectations, that Gibbon transmitted his rendering of Byzantine civilization to the English-speaking public and subsequent generations of historians. Current methods of historical research, including analysis and presentation of historical data, have their origins in the 19th-century with scholars such as von Ranke and Mommsen who were influenced by their Enlightenment-era predecessors. Since the late 18th-century, some deep-seated beliefs have been resistant to change. The place of religion in society and the meaning of gender remain issues relevant to contemporary society. Gibbon’s views about Byzantine religion and non-standard gender behaviors and practices are views which are still prevalent, and

illustrate how deeply engrained the legacy of Enlightenment thought remains in the present era.

The Enlightenment: Articulation of the Modern Individual

In the English-speaking world generations of students have been slow to emerge from what the British historian Donald Nicol termed “the spell of Edward Gibbon,” in which over one thousand years of Byzantine history are presented as a prolonged decline—in Gibbon’s memorable phrase, the degeneration from a golden age to the inevitable “triumph of barbarism and religion.”⁴ As with other scholars of the 18th-century, Gibbon was deeply influenced by the prevailing philosophical trends of his time. The late 18th-century is now referred to as a time of “Enlightenment,” a period of “rationalism” or an “Age of Reason” in which a profusion of new ideas shed the “light” of a critical empirically-based methodology (“naturalistic philosophy”: the precursor of the “scientific” methodology of the 19th-century), in order to understand the physical world and all human experience. This new application of empirical, systematic thought to the world and humanity was the intellectual perquisite to reform...and later revolution.⁵ The Enlightenment represented a trend of thought or reasoning that not only influenced European thinkers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu and Gibbon, but also had a profound influence in distant regions of European settlement, in particular upon several of the framers (such as Jefferson, Franklin and Adams) of the United States constitution and Bill of Rights.

After the tumultuous period of the European religious Reformations of the 16th-century, followed by counter-Reformations, the devastating Wars of Religion of the 17th-century and numerous natural catastrophes (such as the great Lisbon earthquake of

1755⁶), leading thinkers of the 18th-century struggled to develop a philosophy which offered a possible consensus between “Reason and Faith.”⁷ Partially, as a consequence Enlightenment philosophy was born, according to the American historian Norman Davies, from a “clash of ideas,” and a “measure of toleration” which strove to explain the underlying, seemingly chaotic rules of the human and material worlds.⁸ Thus, in an epistemological sense, Enlightenment thinkers sought a theory of knowledge in which “the autonomy of reason”—the ability to think for oneself, free of dogma—would be supreme.⁹ Stressing empiricism, the burgeoning “naturalistic” method consisting of observation and deduction was embraced and applied to both philosophical principles and human affairs.¹⁰ Enlightenment ideas were

*critical ideas, ideas that did not so much propose goals as raise questions, point to absurd impediments to good sense, ridicule established beliefs and institutions. Pamphlets or treatises or encyclopedia articles were aimed at showing that the accepted beliefs were contrary to experience, that the institutions did not work.*¹¹

The historian John Garraty notes that it is often assumed that “Science and theology are rivals, because each professes to supply mankind with a comprehensive account of the universe, including man and his deepest concerns.”¹² Students of history have been traditionally taught that the Enlightenment era was a period in which leading thinkers of the day were implacably hostile to religion. But the historic record indicates that many 18th-century philosophers held more moderate and nuanced opinions regarding the role of religion in the modern world. Beginning in the 17th-century with Newton (1642-1727), Locke (1632-1704), and Tillotson (1630-1694), a view known as “natural religion” developed which applied “natural philosophy” to the search for unity in intangibles such as “Truth” and “Reason,” and came to the conclusion that religion could be a deductive science just like mathematics. God could be inferred just as a “beautifully

made watch implies ...[a] watchmaker.”¹³ Thus natural religion posited a God of “supreme artisanship.”¹⁴ Natural religion or “Deism,” as it came to be called, reached a compromise between materialism and atheism by embracing God without abandoning science. However, the philosophies of materialism and atheism continued to attract converts in the late 18th-century.

What the philosophers of the Enlightenment *were* implacably opposed to was the hierarchical clericalism in established religions and the institution of monasticism, which was seen as superstitious and corrupt. Religions that were considered “unthinking” or which disregarded reason were deemed by many 18th-century thinkers as unreasonable and obscurantist. Throughout the European continent Enlightenment thought influenced several reigning monarchs such as; Catherine II in Russia, Charles III in Spain, Frederick the Great in Prussia and Joseph II in Austria. These “Enlightened despots” prided themselves in their progressive thinking and modified certain governmental policies accordingly, such as “freeing” serfs, granting limited religious toleration and ending the practices of witchcraft trials and Inquisition. Unfortunately, some non-majority religious and ethnic groups fell within the Enlightenment criteria of “unreasonable” and were treated with scorn by intellectuals. For example, the Jesuits were expelled from Portugal in 1759, suppressed in Spain and France in 1767, and finally abolished altogether by Pope Benedict XIV in 1773.¹⁵ The pre-Enlightenment English poet and dramatist John Dryden (1631-1700) referred to the Jews as a “headstrong, moody, murmuring race...”¹⁶

Enlightenment ideals also extended to the writing of history. What Davies describes as the writing of “rationalist” history came to the fore. The understanding of

history shifted from the mere recitation of events to “become the science of causation and change.” Historical “facts” could no longer be accepted without evidence. Leading intellectuals such as Vico, Bayle, Turgot, Montesquieu, Voltaire and Hume “All rejected the role of providence as an explanation for past events, and in so doing were returning to habits of thought not exercised since Machiavelli and Guicciardini.”¹⁷ The notion of progress gained currency. According to 18th-century French economist Turgot, human history and society were continually flowing, fluctuating between “good times and bad,...steadily though slowly towards a greater perfection.” “Historians increasingly applied the social, economic, and cultural concerns of their own day to the analysis of the past. The doings of kings and courts no longer sufficed.” And while Enlightenment historians greatly expanded the scope and reputation of writing history, and generally agreed on methodology and aims, they never reached a consensus of views about an ultimate propaedeutic meaning to be drawn from history.¹⁸

The most prominent historian produced by the Enlightenment known to the English-speaking public was Edward Gibbon (1737-1794). In the introduction to the 1909 edition of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, J.B. Bury ranked Gibbon as a historian of equal rank with Thucydides and Tacitus. Bury described Gibbon as the “singularly happy union of the historian and the man of letters...[with a] brilliance of style and accuracy of statement [that] are perfectly compatible in an historian.” But Bury also fully recognized Gibbon as a “powerful representative of certain tendencies of his age.” These tendencies included a view of the world that held “the historical development of human societies, since the second century after Christ, to be a retrogression, for which Christianity was mainly to blame.”¹⁹ Concordant with the anti-

clerical tone of many Enlightenment thinkers, Gibbon manifests a marked tendency to denigrate church clergy and the hierarchical structure of monastic institutions and refers to the religious doctrines of the Orthodox Church as “superstition.”²⁰ In the late 18th-century when Gibbon worked, it was not yet fashionable for the historian to maintain a scholarly detachment from his subject matter. Gibbon at times did so. However, many writers, including Voltaire, Montesquieu and Gibbon himself, overtly and routinely inserted their opinions into their works in a need to adduce some sort of moral principle from the study of history for propaedeutic purposes. J.B. Bury reminds the reader that Gibbon believed the historian demonstrating enthusiasm to be “inconsistent with intellectual balance.” But in his “zealous distrust of zeal,”²¹ Gibbon fell prey to the very practice he condemned, and worked from the flawed premise of a decline from a golden age as “a uniform tale of weakness and misery”²² For example, his treatment of Slavic history in the empire was described by Bury as being “conspicuously inadequate.”²³ Gibbon “allowed his temperament to color his history...;” nonetheless Bury correctly reminds the reader that Gibbon is still a first-rate historian with an amazing accuracy for relating fact.²⁴

Gibbon must be credited for his vast erudition; however, he was somewhat handicapped by an imperfect knowledge of *koine* Greek and its variations used during the Byzantine era. Also many important ecclesiastical documents housed on Mount Athos were not available for study by non-Orthodox researchers—and indeed would not be until the 20th-century. Since Gibbon’s day much new material evidence has been located and deciphered in the fields of numismatics, sigillography, constitutional history and epigraphy, vastly expanding scholars’ knowledge of the Byzantine world.²⁵

Bury notes that one of Gibbon's main weaknesses was his failure to understand that beneath the intrigues, dramatic palace coups and flamboyant personalities in Byzantine history, "deeper causes [were] at work, and beyond the revolutions of the Capital City wider issues implied. Nor had he any conception of the great ability of most of the Emperors."²⁶ Although Gibbon had command of the facts (the ones available to him), he failed to grasp the crucial importance of religious mysticism to the Byzantine psychology. Viewing the later empire as merely a degraded remnant of the Greco-Roman past, he did not fully comprehend that Byzantium was an essentially new creation: the heritor of a Greco-Roman past but in a new Christian form.²⁷ The Byzantine identity of the Palaeologan period was a completely different entity than the Roman citizens of Late Antiquity.

According to Geanakoplos, Gibbon remains a paradox of the Enlightenment. Despite his lack of detachment²⁸ and nearly pathological aversion to clericalism, he was one of the first modern historians to place ecclesiastical history within its proper historical framework as an integral part of Byzantine civilization.²⁹ He correctly observed that after 1054 (and especially after the Fourth Crusade of 1204), Greek hostility focused on the Latin faith as an outward symbol of western culture³⁰, and that the widening schism between the Eastern and Western Churches from the 8th-century onwards had deep historical and psychological roots in the enmity held by the Byzantines for the Latins, and vice-versa.³¹ The historian Deno John Geanakoplos remarks that Gibbon usually demonstrated a very adequate knowledge of Byzantine theology and understood the differences between eastern and western doctrines. But he did not sympathize with Eastern Orthodoxy and failed fully to comprehend the nuanced

relationship between church and state (Gibbon overemphasized the emperor's authority over the church). And due to this "temperamental incapacity to understand religion,"³² Gibbon could not relate to nor really accept the motivating factors engendered from the internal dynamics of Byzantine Christianity.³³ It is not only the Eastern Church which comes under Gibbon's censorious gaze; the western clergy is also harshly criticized. Ironically, in his ardent anti-clerical stance Gibbon himself can almost be seen as religious (in a rationalist, nearly Deistic sense) by his zeal to hold the institutions of Christianity up to ridicule.³⁴ Despite his lack of appreciation for the charismatic spiritual meaning of Christianity, Gibbon nonetheless understood the theological subtleties of Eastern Orthodox theology³⁵ and is considered an excellent ecclesiastical historian by the ecclesiastical historians Fuglum and Geanakoplos. Geanakoplos cites Newman in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, written in 1854: "It is melancholy to say it but the chief, perhaps the only English writer who has any claim to be considered an ecclesiastical historian, is the unbeliever Gibbon."³⁶

The topic of non-standard gender behaviors and practices was exceedingly problematic for Gibbon. He described these behaviors and practices in terms of women and eunuchs figuring prominently in governance, both contributing, in his view, to the senescence and eventual ruin of the empire. Gibbon believed "female influence" in government, "agitated by female passions,"³⁷ lead to an enfeebling, or loss of virility of the metaphoric potency and viability of the Empire because of contamination by "impotent females."³⁸ When referring to the "unhappy name" or subject of eunuchs Gibbon again uses the word "feeble," and adds to the description "flatter[er]" and "persuade[er]".³⁹ Closely aligned in Gibbon's view with the character of females and

eunuchs were the practitioners of male-to-male homosexual behavior or “unnatural vice,” who were ipso facto “effeminate,” and “deserter[s] of [their] sex.”⁴⁰ These same descriptions of enervation, loss of potency, effeminacy, and degradation from what Gibbon considered to be a more appropriate masculine active vigor, were extended to the entire empire of the “pusillanimous and base”⁴¹ Byzantines. To Gibbon, non-standard gender behaviors and practices in Byzantium led to the devitalization of masculine vigor. This dilution of manly potency, by the vitiating presence of effeminizing females and eunuchs, in Gibbon’s view, contributed to the decline and fall of the Eastern Empire along with the fanatical “superstition” and “ecclesiastical tyranny”⁴² of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In his beliefs about the deleterious effects of non-standard gender behaviors and practices upon the Eastern Empire, Gibbon is the heir to the legacy of more than one millennium of transformation in Christian thought and redefinition of the meaning of human sexuality and gender itself.

Therefore, the towering influence of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by Edward Gibbon, has had a contradictory effect on the dissemination of knowledge about Byzantine civilization in the western world. A work of staggering breadth and enormous erudition, *Decline and Fall* did introduce the existence of Byzantium to a wide readership in the 19th-century. However as an intellectual of the Enlightenment, Gibbon held certain immutable beliefs based upon sentiments of anti-clericalism and anxiety over what he perceived as non-standard gender behaviors and practices. In relating the history of the Eastern Empire Gibbon mischaracterized aspects of Byzantine civilization, consigning the reputation of Byzantium to ill-repute for generations to come. A moderate agnostic⁴³ himself, it appears that the influence of Christian morality in the traditions of

Western Catholicism and Protestantism affected him far more deeply than he ever knew, as evidenced by the judgments he rendered. The historian Butterfield, cited in Geanakoplos, concurs, noting: “It is not a sin in a historian to introduce a personal bias that can be recognized and discounted. The sin...is bias [that] cannot be recognized.”⁴⁴

Gender Remade

The evolution of the concept of gender in the Western world has been an arduous, convoluted and exceedingly complex enterprise. Traditions rooted in the remotest mists of pre-history attest to the importance accorded to gender by early societies in the development of civilization. Inspired by the rhythms of the natural world, early humankind prized fecundity and potency. Notions of biological gender such as male and female existed side-by-side with created (physically, psychologically or spiritually) and indeterminate genders. Persons of indeterminate biological gender were sometimes viewed as intermediaries between the spiritual and natural worlds and could be considered portentous or valued for shamanistic capabilities. Sexuality was not constrained to what is now referred to as heterosexual contact, but was enormously varied and imaginative. However, the definitions of gender and of parameters allowed sexuality were rigorously defined and enforced by their respective societies.

With the advent of Christianity, in the first centuries of the common era, gender and sexuality were still substantially defined and controlled by society, but the very concepts of gender and sexuality changed radically. The most prominent change was the manner in which the human body was viewed. In the pre-Christian societies of classical Greece and ancient Rome, the body of a male citizen was valued for what that citizen could contribute to the well-being of the city. “Sexual desire itself was unproblematic,”

says Peter Brown.⁴⁵ As the doctrines of Christianity came to be more fully elucidated over the centuries, the parameters for sexuality and gender became more sharply defined. The perception of the human body changed from an autonomous sensual entity positioned between the “gods” and the “beasts,”⁴⁶ to the sacred vessel of Christ. Unlike the polymorphous sensuality in the ancient city, Christian philosophers envisaged expanded horizons for the human body as the receptacle of an immortal soul which toiled against sin for ultimate union with God in eternity. Christian moralists exhorted their congregations to strive for Christ-like lives. The human body came to be viewed as a “sacrosanct temple.”⁴⁷ Brown describes an entirely new Christian sensibility sweeping aside the notions of the ancient world:

In even the most stable regions of the Mediterranean, the city itself had come to lose its ancient shape. The classical notion of the civic community had weakened its hold on the Christian inhabitants of the towns, both in reality and in the imagination. Christian attitudes to sexuality delivered the death-blow to the ancient notion of the city as the arbiter of the body. Christian preachers endowed the body with intrinsic, inalienable qualities. It was no longer a neutral, indeterminate outcrop of the natural world, whose use and very right to exist was subject to predominantly civic considerations of status and utility. God had created the human body and Adam had brought upon it the double shame of death and lust.⁴⁸

These new articulations of Christian thought had a profound effect upon all aspects of life for Christians. Sexuality, marriage and even the notion of gender itself came to be more precisely and more narrowly defined. The polymorphous sexuality of the ancient world remained a troubling concern for Christian moralists. As with their pagan predecessors Christian thinkers found female sexuality, in particular, with its potential destabilizing effects on civic and familial integrity, exceedingly worrisome. Through philosophical developments in Christian thought what was believed to be the

insidiously etiolate and rapacious nature of the female condition was extended by analogy to homosexual behavior and the non-standard gendered condition of eunuchs.

Non-Standard Gender Behaviors and Practices: Ancient Traditions in the New Empire

One of the more conspicuous aspects in the evolution of the modern Western persona from Antiquity through the advent of Christianity, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Romanticism and until the current day, has been the narrowing of the concept of personal identity to a definition based largely on sexuality. Prior to the middle of the 19th-century the burden of individual identity was distributed and derived from family, class, vocation and “affiliation to religion, nation, or clan.”⁴⁹ With the breakdown of the religious and spiritual authority⁵⁰ of the church after the Enlightenment (in the late 18th-century) and the advent of the Industrial Revolution (early 19th-century), increasingly more and more of the burden of personal identity was transferred to sexuality and sexual object choice. Indeed, the word “homosexual” is itself a 19th-century neologism compounded macaronically of a Greek prefix and a Latin root.⁵¹ For centuries, under the growing influence of Christianity, a variety of sexual behaviors such as homosexuality, transvestism, and the physical condition of eunuchism had become conflated with effeminacy. Since Antiquity, effeminacy had been associated with rapaciousness (sexual and otherwise) and an utter lack of self-control. Women, and therefore women’s bodies, were viewed as passive and not as instruments of visible action.⁵² In the pre-modern warlike city-states of ancient Greece physical prowess was highly valued. The externality of the male genitals became symbolic of the ancients’ world-view.⁵³ Paglia cites Spengler’s description (based on Nietzsche) of “the principle of *visible limits*” applied to the psychology of the ancient Greek city-state: “All that lay

beyond the visual range of this political atom was alien.”⁵⁴ This emphasis was extended to the externality of the male sex organs and male prerogative became one of the organizing principles for much of ancient Greek society. Consequently, there developed “a homosexual emphasis” which according to Morkot was “one of the most striking developments of Greek society.”⁵⁵

Homosexual relations were regulated in ancient Greece by local tradition in the various city-states. For example, in 5th-century BCE Athens, custom allowed for mature men to take post-pubescent boys under their aegis in a form of institutionalized ephebophilia. In theory the boy was the social equal of the elder male and the relationship was extolled for its propaedeutic aspects. “The younger was to see in the older a model to be emulated, the older would admire the younger for his beauty which was identified with his physical strength as a young warrior. It was supposed to be a question of love of character, rather than physical attraction.”⁵⁶ Of course, the relationships often involved sexual relations, and it is this aspect of institutionalized homosexuality in the classical world that has been so problematic for medieval students of history writing more than a millennium and a half after the advent of Christianity.

Paglia notes: “Homosexuality may be the key to understanding the whole of human sexuality. No subject cuts in so many directions into psychology, sociology, history and morality.”⁵⁷ In order to have a clearer view of sexuality in the classical Greek world, it is necessary to comprehend that sexuality for the ancients was merely one aspect of life in a stratified class-bound society which could not be separated from the “complex social and educational structures”⁵⁸ of the city-state. In classical Athens the ideal in mental, physical and sexual behavior for citizens was the notion of moderation or *meden*

agan (“nothing too much”).⁵⁹ All male citizens strove to comport themselves with *enkrateia* or self-mastery.⁶⁰ Passions, hungers and desires were accepted as a normal part of the human condition, and were to be indulged in moderation. The Greeks understood, in the words of Davidson, that they were “part of the world, somewhat bestial, somewhat part of humankind.”⁶¹

However, the overriding consideration of comportment to be upheld at all times was the principle of *meden agan* or moderation. Excess or gluttony in anything—food, gambling, lust, etc.-- was to be avoided. Moderation made good citizens and was hence viewed as a civic duty. Persons unable to master their desires were stigmatized as slaves to their appetites and viewed as shameful.⁶² Nuanced, usually derogatory, epithets were used to describe people who were considered unable to restrain their appetites. They were seen as *akrateis*, or incontinent before their desires.⁶³ For example persons showing a lack of self-control or *akolasia*⁶⁴ regarding certain appetites could be labeled as “greedy fish eaters” (*opsophagos*) or “drink-lovers” (*philopotes*).⁶⁵ In the realm of sexual behavior, men could be called *gunaikomanes* (“woman-mad,”) *philogunes* (“woman-lover”) or *pornomanes* (“whore-mad.”)⁶⁶ Males who had sexual relations with other males in what was considered excess could be given the sobriquet of *kinaidos* or “male seducer of men.”⁶⁷ One of the worst terms of opprobrium was *katapugon*. A *katapugon* was a creature—animal or human, male or female--who had sex without restraint, demonstrating an utter lack of self-control (*akolasia*).⁶⁸

For later writers of history one of the most misunderstood aspects of ancient Greek sexuality was the homosexual emphasis of that society. Enlightenment writers such as Gibbon commented negatively on the “impure manners of Greece,”⁶⁹ and even

20th-century scholars such as Ostrogorsky commented disdainfully on the combination of women and eunuchs⁷⁰—subjects traditionally linked in popular thought to homosexuality and effeminacy. In the mid-20th century, the French historian Michel Foucault developed a power-relations schema and superimposed it upon his understanding of ancient Greek homosexuality. According to Foucault, homosexual relations in classical Athens reflected a hierarchical model of an aggressive, domineering, free adult male penetrating a submissive, passive, adolescent, lower-class male partner. In this “hierarchical relation of structured inequality,”⁷¹ opprobrium was heaped upon the passive/receptive partner for being woman-like, while the penetrator/active partner suffered no loss of status or manliness. Subsequent historical evaluation by scholars have found this hierarchical coital scenario in classical Greek society to be inaccurate. Paglia, for instance, notes that evidence reveals that the youth or boy was traditionally of the same social status as the older male figure. In fact the youth was actually considered “spiritually *superior* by virtue of his youth and beauty.”⁷²

Nor does Davidson find the Foucauldian penetrator/penetrated, dominator/passive theory of ancient Greek male-male sexual relations to be tenable. According to Davidson, it was not passivity that incurred opprobrium but rather insatiability, promiscuity or the inability to control one’s passions which labeled one a *kinaidos* or *katapugon*. In “classical Athens the penetrated were not seen as the inert objects of someone else’s gratification[...]The *kinaidos/katapugon* is not a sexual pathetic, humiliated and made effeminate by repeated domination, [rather] he is a nymphomaniac, full of womanish desire, who dresses up to attract men and has sex at the drop of a hat.”⁷³ What the ancient Greeks most disdained was not a man who allowed himself to be

penetrated, but *excess*: a man made womanish by an inability to control his desires...what Davidson terms “a precursor to the modern addict.”⁷⁴ Thus it is no surprise that classical Greek literature is replete with characters who fuse the *akrates* (the incontinent) and the *asotos* (the prodigal) in the archetype of the *katapugon*; “a figure who encapsulates lack of self-control [and] is often depicted as a paragon of profligacy.”⁷⁵

As in Greece, Romans in the ancient world did not appear to attach great importance to the sexual gender object choices of male citizens. But unlike the Greeks, Romans in the classical world did attach moral significance to which partner assumed a passive posture and which took an active role in homosexual male relations. Nevertheless, according to Boswell,* “It is extremely difficult to convey to modern audiences the absolute indifference of most Latin authors to the question of gender” with regards to object of sexual desire.⁷⁶ Republican Romans were more concerned with proprietary issues: in particular the right of the *paterfamilias* over the household, spouses, children, slaves, etc.⁷⁷ Male citizens could largely discharge their sexual energies in any way they chose as long as they did not infringe upon the property (e.g., real estate, wives, children) or rights of other male citizens. Many sexual mores of the Republican era carried over into the time of the Empire. During the Empire large amounts of literature were composed dealing with both heterosexual and homosexual behavior. Lurid pornographic genres of homosexual literature flourished, while other

* Since its publication in 1981, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* by Boswell has come under criticism from a number of scholars ranging from Frantzen to Paglia. Critics question Boswell’s selective use of data and overstatement of the acceptance of homosexuality in Late Antiquity. Nonetheless, CSTH remains a carefully researched work, by a respected historian, useful in surveying the growth of anti-homosexual sentiment in Europe from Late Antiquity through the High Middle Ages.

works depicted deep love and affection among men. For example, the *Metamorphoses* 10 (Apollo and Hyacinth) of Ovid, Virgil's *Eclogues* 2, and *Odes* 4.1 of Horace.⁷⁸

However, if an adult male citizen took a passive role in homosexual intercourse, intense obloquy could be incurred. The notion of sexual passivity was anathema to male citizens of the Republic. Non-citizens, foreigners and youths could engage in such behavior without a loss of status, but sexual passivity in an adult male citizen was associated with political passivity and impotence. "The idea that a Roman citizen should be exploited in this way evoked a particular horror among Romans who prided themselves on their control of the world around them."⁷⁹ One of the most grievous epithets which could be imputed upon a man was to be called *mollis* or "soft"--connoting effeminacy, sexual passivity or political non-assertiveness.⁸⁰

It was the introduction and gradual spread of Christianity in the first four centuries of the common era which profoundly influenced popular views about sexuality and the human body. Ancient Mediterranean tradition and Christian philosophy acquired aspects of each other and long-held views about sex gradually changed. Prominent among these changes, Davidson notes, were an altered concept of bodily integrity; growing juridical movements to define previously nebulous sex acts; an effort to distinguish human sexuality as separate from that of the animal kingdom, and an expansion of the Roman cultural legacy by emphasizing and further distinguishing the "active" partner from the "passive" partner in sexual relations.⁸¹

Leaving behind Traditional Perceptions: Homosexuality in the Christian Empire

The period of the 4th-century CE was a time of intense turmoil marked by disruptive barbarian incursions deep into imperial territory, demographic shifts, and the

decline of large urban centers in the West. Modern conventional wisdom has held that the Christian Church was traditionally opposed to sexuality in general and strongly opposed to homosexuality in particular. Without doubt the advent of Christianity did have an effect on the sexual lives of early converts, but Boswell believed it not as profound as previously thought.⁸² He found social attitudes towards all forms of sexuality outside of marriage did narrow in the 3rd- through 6th-centuries, and Christianity altered the common view of limiting prostitution (male and female) and slavery to non-citizens.⁸³

Concepts of popular morality had been shifting since before the Edict of Religious Toleration (which decriminalized Christianity) was promulgated by the Emperor Constantine I in 313 CE. Surprisingly, the first legislation enacted outlawing homosexual behavior came in 533,⁸⁴ and was civil in origin rather than ecclesiastical. Promulgated under the Emperor Justinian I (*circa* 527-65), this legislation placed homosexual behavior in the same category as adultery (which was punishable by death),⁸⁵ and occurred more than two centuries after Christianity had been a state religion. Articulating his motivation in enacting laws proscribing homosexual behavior, Justinian invoked Christian rhetoric claiming the laws were necessary to assuage God's anger "on account of the multitude of our sins...For because of such crimes there are famines, earthquakes, and pestilences."⁸⁶ Justinian expressed his opposition to homosexuality in religious terms, but such rhetoric—often with an appeal to scriptural injunction—was the main currency of expression used to impose social, political and religious control.

Even commentators of the 6th-century, such as Procopius, suspected that the enactment of anti-homosexual legislation had more to do with prosecuting personal

enemies of Justinian (such as wealthy opponents and the rival circus faction of the Greens), rather than out of personal piety. Justinian's formidable wife, the Empress Theodora, had a member of the Green circus faction, who made an uncomplimentary comment about her, indicted as a homosexual and "forcibly removed from the church in which he had taken refuge, hideously tortured, and then castrated without benefit of trial." Boswell acknowledges that the *Anecdota* or *Secret History* of Procopius was biased against Justinian and Theodora; however, he notes that the *Secret History* does accord with other accounts, such as that of Malalas regarding the random enforcement of anti-homosexual legislation.⁸⁷ Boswell believes Procopius viewed the criminalization of homosexuality as a ploy for the Emperor to extort money from unpopular individuals such as "Samaritans, the pagans, unorthodox Christians, and astrologers."⁸⁸ Referring to the "new spirit" of Christian legislation passed under Justinian, Gibbon reports that the same penalties were applied for the "passive and active guilt of paederasty," and "the lovers of their own sex were pursued by general and pious indignation."⁸⁹ However, Gibbon is suspicious of the "purity" underlying the Emperor's actual motives in his campaign against "inhuman lust":

*A sentence of death and infamy was often founded on the slight and suspicious evidence of a child or a servant; the guilt of the green[sic] faction, of the rich, and of the enemies of Theodora, was presumed by the judges, and paederasty became the crime of those to whom no crime could be imputed.*⁹⁰

The imputation and prosecution of political adversaries with the crime of homosexual behavior became a common practice in the Middle Ages. Boswell reiterates: "Almost without exception the few laws against homosexual behavior passed before the thirteenth century were enacted by civil authorities without advice or support from the church."⁹¹ In fact Boswell concludes that "the earliest and most influential objections (to

homosexual behavior) were based on fundamental misunderstandings of natural history and Christian Scripture.”⁹²

Under the influence of classical Greek intellectual traditions, three major philosophical trends began to manifest themselves in early Christianity: the Judaeo-Platonist or Neoplatonist schools of Alexandria, Dualist schools with their aversion to the physical body and sexual pleasure, and the Stoic school with its concepts of “natural sexuality.”⁹³

Dualism was a philosophy which postulated that the forces of good and evil are in a continual state of war over the human soul. Anything which distracts a person from spiritual ends (e.g. sex, gluttony, worldliness, etc.) is evil. All sexuality is seen as intrinsically evil because it preoccupies the soul and binds it in “worldliness,” to the detriment of spiritual pursuit. Homosexuality, with the exception of Saint Augustine and a few others, was not viewed as intrinsically more evil than heterosexuality. Saint Augustine (circa 354-430 CE) was involved with the Manicheans, a dualist sect, prior to his conversion to Christianity and, according to Boswell, appears to have directed anti-homosexual references at the Manicheans in his *Confessions*.⁹⁴

Like Dualism, Neoplatonism rejected the physical world as bad or inferior. Neoplatonists believed the physical world to be an imperfect copy of an ideal, flawless realm. Thus any deviation from the road to perfection was viewed with disdain. Sexual feelings were seen as deflecting one’s full attention and energies from the quest for spiritual perfection. Hence, heterosexual sex was viewed as an equal deviation to homosexual sex from the road to perfection.⁹⁵

Stoicism, the third philosophical influence, espoused a conviction that all human passions should be governed by reason and emphasized the pursuit of virtue.⁹⁶ The tenets of Stoicism are believed to have affected later Christian philosophy about sexual morality, and Boswell found the early Stoics not particularly opposed to homosexual behavior. Stoicism appears to have regarded homosexual behavior on the same level as heterosexual behavior: morally neutral in itself, but objectionable and a vice if practiced in excess. (However, in the 1st and 2nd-centuries of the common era several of the Stoic tenets were incorporated by early Christian fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, with a much less tolerant and more strident tone.)⁹⁷ In the view of Seneca (circa 4 BCE?-65 CE), “All vices...violated nature, none more than others.” The concept of “normal” behavior was contrasted with excessiveness or “going beyond.” Hence the notion of “against nature” meaning “going beyond” or in excess to what was considered “normal” began to gain currency.⁹⁸

From the 5th-century CE onwards, state attitudes against homosexual behavior, heretical religious groups and Jews began to turn decidedly negative. Boswell found four common trends of thought popular in philosophic circles which were commonly used as rationales for legislating against homosexuals (and other unpopular minorities such as Jews and “heretics”): comparisons of human to animal behavior, unsavory associations with violent and criminal behavior, the prevailing concepts of “nature,” and contemporaneous gender expectations.⁹⁹

Some of the earliest objections to homosexuality by Christian theologians were based on arguments derived from animal behavior. For example, the apocryphal “Epistle of the Barnabas”(circa 1st-century CE) “equated [the] Mosaic prohibitions of eating

certain animals with various sexual sins.”¹⁰⁰ Hares were likened to boy molesters and weasels were said to conceive through their mouths. Hyenas were believed to change sex yearly, while rabbits were thought to be hermaphroditic. During the early Middle Ages bestiaries (medieval moralizing treatises on beasts) of fanciful zoology were very popular, extracting Christian morals “from the various aspects of animal behavior.”¹⁰¹ Clement of Alexandria, *circa* 150-215? CE,--conflating various aspects of the “Epistle of St. Barnabas,” popular zoologies, the works of St. Paul, and Moses from the Old Testament--published his influential “Paedagogus” in which men and women were instructed that “sexual intercourse must be directed toward procreation in order to be moral.”¹⁰²

During the early Christian era large numbers of children were orphaned or abandoned. The majority of these children ended up being sold into slavery or turned to prostitution. Christian moralists made the unsavory connection of the possibility that fathers may be unwittingly committing incest with their abandoned offspring by frequenting prostitutes. Perhaps due to the large numbers of male prostitutes, male homosexuality came to be viewed as increasingly hedonistic, with the specific acts of passive oral and anal intercourse seen as inviting particular contempt at the time. “Christian revulsion against social ills such as the abuse of children, originally perceived as the evils of a generally sinful society, gradually come to focus more and more on [being attributed to] particularly unpopular groups: barbarians (non-citizens), heretics, Jews and persons associated with homosexuality.”¹⁰³

The concept of “nature” and what was considered “natural” concerned early Christian theologians just as it had pagan philosophers centuries before. In the New

Testament St. Paul made use of the Platonic phrase “against nature” when referring to persons performing homosexual acts. Boswell points out that the concept of “natural law” was not fully developed for more than a millennia after the death of St. Paul. “For Paul,” Boswell writes, “‘nature’ was not a question of universal law or truth but, rather, a matter of the *character* of some person or group of persons, a character which was largely ethnic and entirely human: Jews are Jews ‘by nature,’ just as Gentiles are Gentiles ‘by nature.’ Nature is not a moral force for Paul: men may be evil or good ‘by nature,’ depending on their own disposition.”¹⁰⁴

The early church fathers faced the incongruous task of reconciling Aristotelian and Platonic beliefs to Christianity. For example, while many Christians considered the physical world to be evil, some like St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (circa 354-430 CE), defended “nature” and exhorted doing what is “natural.”¹⁰⁵ Early Christianity took root in societies which were profoundly influenced by “Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of ‘ideal nature.’” “Hellenized Jews, strongly influenced by both Stoic morality and Platonism, invoked the ‘natural’ as a corollary of divine law, the earthly reflection of the will of God, and used it to provide a philosophical justification for the Old Testament morality.”¹⁰⁶

Judaeo-Platonists, such as Philo, believed procreation to be the only legitimate use of sex, and viewed celibacy as “unnatural” as homosexual acts. Other early church fathers viewed all sex as sinful. They viewed “Marriage in the New Testament ...[as] not ‘nature’s’ way of peopling the world, but man’s way of avoiding fornication by compromising with the awesome forces of uncontrolled sexual desires.”¹⁰⁷ St. Augustine’s abhorrence of non-procreative sexuality was so intense that he counseled

“Christian woman to have their husbands perform such acts with prostitutes if they felt a need for them.”¹⁰⁸ Boswell reiterates:

*For Augustine as for Paul, ‘nature’ referred to the characteristics of individuals or things rather than an ideal concept. Where ‘nature’ occurs in a broader sense, it means ‘all that is,’ as in “The City of God” (16.8), where...[Augustine] suggests that whatever exists is perforce ‘natural’ and part of the divine plan.*¹⁰⁹

Another important factor which impressed upon early Christian moralists in their condemnation of homosexual acts was the notion that homosexuality transgressed acceptable gender boundaries, or what Boswell termed “gender expectations”¹¹⁰, by rendering the (male) participants effeminate. Unlike the traditional Roman notion that only the passive partner in male-to-male sexual activities was emasculated, some Christian moralists like Saint John Chrysostom (*circa* 347-407 CE) equated all homosexual activity as passive, hence effeminate or female-like. “For I maintain that not only are you made...[by male-to-male homosexual acts] into a woman, but you cease to be a man; yet neither are you changed into that nature, nor do you retain the one you had.” While patriarch of Constantinople, Chrysostom followed the same line of reasoning used in the West by Saint Augustine who manifested disgust at allowing the male body to be used “as that of a woman.” According to Augustine, “the body of a man is as superior to that of a woman as the soul is to the body.”¹¹¹ Oddly, as averse to homosexual sex as Chrysostom was, he considered same-sex attraction common and similar to heterosexual attraction. He warned parents about the “beast” of lust impelling youths to be debauched by men or to become debauchers of women.¹¹² This underscores Boswell’s assertion that “younger, unmarried men were expected to provoke desire among older men in the premodern population of the Mediterranean.”¹¹³

Accordingly, the period between the 4th- and 8th-centuries of the common era saw the greatest decline in urban centers since classical times. Governmental authority was weak and laws were difficult to enforce. Repeated barbarian invasions fueled xenophobia and persons or groups outside the majority population in local areas were viewed with suspicion. Boswell notes a gradual narrowing of social attitudes during this time regarding sexuality. Male prostitution was banned in the West after the late 3rd-century most probably due to a decreasing distinction between the status of citizens and non-citizens, which made slaves and non-citizens more difficult to find. The ascendancy of Christianity also altered the public's view of slavery and innate human dignity regardless of social standing.¹¹⁴

Evidence suggests that despite various attempts to prohibit homosexual behavior, enforcement was lax and the church itself viewed homosexual acts as a form of adultery. After 476 CE, and the collapse of urban Roman culture, ecclesiastical thought was intensely hostile to all forms of sexuality—perhaps in reaction to rapidly changing social patterns and as a reaction to what was perceived as a tradition of Hellenistic hedonism.¹¹⁵ Ecclesiastical authorities of the 4th- and 5th-centuries tended to view the married state as inevitable for adult males (a distraction from a life of asceticism but necessary as a means of avoiding adultery), and homosexual acts as a form of adultery.¹¹⁶ Penitential guidelines of the era varied greatly from region to region regarding the penances required for specific homosexual acts. For instance, the offense of heterosexual adultery by a married man carried a penance of eighty days of bread and water. Homosexual anal intercourse by a married man carried the penance of forty days of bread and water in the *decretals* (a collection of canon law) of Burchard, bishop of Worms (died *circa*

1025).¹¹⁷ In one Anglo-Saxon penitential (*circa* mid-10th- to 11th-centuries) a man having intercourse with his neighbor's wife was assessed a penance of three years. But in a contemporaneous Latin penitential authored in Britain, the "sodomite" (active partner in homosexual sex) receives a penance of seven years for the "wicked deed," whereas the "mollis" (passive partner in homosexual sex) receives the same penance as an adulteress.¹¹⁸ Hincmar of Reims, an influential Carolingian theologian, applied the term "sodomy" to all non-procreative and some reproductive sexual acts.¹¹⁹

Boswell notes that by the 8th-century the word "sodomy" had been given the common meaning of "any emission of semen not directed exclusively toward the procreation of a legitimate child within matrimony, and the term included much—if not most—heterosexual activity."¹²⁰ Monastic institutions were also greatly concerned with the sexual behavior, both heterosexual and homosexual, of their members. Peter Damian, abbot of Fonte Avellana (*circa* 1051), demanded that Pope Leo IX remove monks and clergy from their orders for the offences of "mutual masturbation, inter-femoral connection, and sodomy."¹²¹ St. Benedict (*circa* 480-547) exhorted his monks to "sleep with their clothes on, and the young men were to be 'mixed with the older men and not allowed to sleep side by side.'"¹²²

After 1250, Southern Europe was increasingly urbanized and cultural centers became more and more removed from agricultural lifestyles. The sentimental concept of "nature" was revisited by Christian moralists who based moral arguments on zoological examples. *Bestiaries*¹²³ became the chief sources of moral allegory.¹²⁴ Theological notions in the 13th-century of "natural law" were appropriated from the Roman jurist Ulpian (died *circa* 228 CE), who influenced the *Digest* of Justinian I with the idea that

*Natural law is what nature has taught all animals. This law is not unique to the human race but common to all animals born on land or sea and to birds as well. From it comes the union of male and female which we call marriage, as well as the procreation of children and their proper rearing (educatio). We see in fact that all other animals, even wild beasts, are regulated by understanding of this law.*¹²⁵

This understanding of “natural law” was incorporated by Saint Thomas Aquinas (circa 1224-74) in his *Summa theologiae* and became a standard of Roman Catholic dogma on sexual ethics for the next millennium.¹²⁶

Even though Aquinas believed mankind to be superior to animals in every way, he paradoxically “resorted again and again to animal behavior as the final arbiter in matters of human sexuality.”¹²⁷ Citing examples such as the (supposed) monogamy of birds and the “fact” that homosexuality does not exist in animals, Aquinas considered all vice to be “unnatural” but specifically singled out “intercourse between males” as *the* “vice against nature.”¹²⁸ He inflamed public prejudices against homosexuality by equating it with the most vile forms of behavior imaginable. Boswell notes:

*[By] suggesting subliminally to his 13th-century readers that homosexual behavior belonged in a class with actions which were either violently antisocial (like cannibalism) or threateningly dangerous (like heresy), Aquinas subtly but definitively transferred it from its former position among sins of excess or wantonness to a new and singular degree of enormity among the types of behavior most feared by the common people and most severely repressed by the church.*¹²⁹

In the later 12th- to early 14th-centuries social attitudes towards homosexual activity and minority groups such as Jews began to turn decidedly negative. Smythe goes so far as to state that women were also seen as outsiders in Byzantine society—along with people of other races and religions: people all outside the boundaries of a male-dominated power structure.¹³⁰ Boswell attributes the growing intolerance to a

sedulous quest for intellectual and institutional uniformity and corporatism throughout Europe...Secular and ecclesiastical concerns were melded in the interests of uniformity, as in the collections of canon law which joined Roman civil law with

*Christian religious principles in an effort to standardize clerical supervision of ethical, moral, and legal problems.*¹³¹

Homosexuals and Jews began to be seen as suspect, hence “heretic.”¹³² Age-old understandings of “nature” were used to promote conformity as the influence of Justinian’s anti-homosexuality legislation reached the far corners of Europe. “Between 1250 and 1300, homosexual activity passed from being completely legal in most of Europe to incurring the death penalty in all but a few contemporary legal compilations.”¹³³

To recapitulate, in the course of his research Boswell found: from the late Roman world until around 400 CE, male-to-male sexual activity was widely accepted with no particular opprobrium incurred except when an adult male citizen assumed a sexually passive posture (as Romans equated sexual passivity with political non-assertiveness.)¹³⁴ Active legislation against homosexuality was first promulgated by secular authorities circa 533, most likely for political motivations by the Emperor Justinian I and his entourage. Justinian may have been responding to threats from his political rivals and attempting to appease a restive population in the West from urban decay and barbarian invasion,¹³⁵ and in the East from plague, earthquake and fiscal mismanagement.

The period between 1100 and 1250 has been referred to as a time of “urban revival.” Boswell credits the growth of large urban centers in the West (for the first time since the collapse of Rome in 476) to “increased domestic security; stabilization of economic, social and political institutions, trade, technological advances; changes in climate and agricultural techniques; and population growth.”¹³⁶ In the later 12th- and early 14th- centuries social attitudes towards homosexual behavior and persons perceived as minorities such as Jews began to turn decidedly negative. In Western Europe growing

absolutist monarchies championed nascent notions of nationhood, emphasizing uniformity as evidenced by an astronomical increase in the amount of legislation enacted.

Another interesting contribution of Boswell was his analysis of what have traditionally been perceived as Biblical injunctions against homosexuality. He found “the earliest and most influential objections (to homosexuality) were based on fundamental misunderstandings of natural history and Christian Scripture.”¹³⁷ According to Boswell, Christian Scripture was mis-translated and later detached from its original context by early Christian moralists (such as Saint John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine), who conflated homosexual sex with animal behavior, unsavory associations, misnomers about the natural world and non-standard gender behaviors and practices.¹³⁸

Thus the long evolution of Christian philosophy and theological thought in the first millennium of the common era culminated by precisely delimiting which sexual behaviors were acceptable and under what conditions. The human being was characterized as distinct from the natural world and sexuality regulated into “acceptable” heterosexual procreative channels sanctified by Christian marriage. Biblical scripture was used to deem homosexual behavior as sinful, as it was deemed subversive to the God-ordained moral order and masculine vigor. Homosexuality became associated with femininity, and was therefore perceived as inferior to male heterosexuality and consigned because of its non-procreativity as “outside of nature.”

Agency Through Unspoken Voices: Women in Byzantium

An anxiety about women’s place in society permeates world literature and some scholars attribute this phenomenon to atavistic human psychology, dating to earliest pre-

history where female procreative capabilities produced both fear and awe.¹³⁹ In the historic era traditional beliefs from Antiquity persisted, which considered the female to be an imperfect version of the male. The role of woman and their influence on the highest workings of the Byzantine government, affecting its policies, had long confounded historians recording the history of Byzantium. Male chroniclers recording the lives of prestigious women in Byzantium often only noted scandal engendered by female agency perceived as outside the realm of what was considered appropriate.¹⁴⁰ This unease about the place of women in Byzantine society reflects perhaps more about the chroniclers' expectations than how in reality women were viewed by the Byzantines themselves--both male and female. For example, Hill labels Byzantium as both "patriarchal" and "misogynistic,"¹⁴¹ which is true in a postmodern post-industrial Western outlook, yet is hardly how the Byzantines thought of themselves. Hill is correct in asserting that female power in Byzantium was not the same as male power¹⁴² and that female assertion of power traditionally existed within the framework of male authority.¹⁴³ And nearly all the surviving texts written by the Byzantines themselves were composed by men rendering a male viewpoint as normative.¹⁴⁴ While it is generally true the only power or legitimacy Byzantine women could achieve was through males or via their proximity to masculine prerogative, this was not always the case.

In Byzantium the Emperor—as the Vice-Gerent of Christ on Earth---was, like Christ, male. This close relationship between the Emperor and Christ was in fact one of the fundamental aspects which defined the Emperor's identity.¹⁴⁵ According to Barber, the imperial office existed as a masculine prerogative. The feminine was seen to lie outside of this socially defined space.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, Barber believes that part of masculine

identity was constructed and defined in the domestic sphere by controlling women.¹⁴⁷ However, it must be emphasized that Byzantine woman traditionally had considerable power in the domestic sphere,¹⁴⁸ and often were the predominating influence in the rearing of both male and female children. Smythe views Byzantine women as “outsiders” in Byzantium who were only related to society in a functional sense as a “means of exchange.”¹⁴⁹ But this fails to take into account the Byzantine placement of women prominently in their cosmological and phenomenological world as influenced by Orthodoxy. For a fundamental and central tenet of Orthodox theology is the exalted position of the Virgin Mary, *Panagia* (“All-Holy”), the *achrantos* (“spotless” or “immaculate”). As Mother of God or *Theotokos*, Eastern Orthodoxy maintains Mary is the instrument which enabled the Incarnation to take place. Without Mary, the incarnation of God into human flesh would have been impossible. Hence a profound awe and place of honor is accorded to *Panagia*. According to the Orthodox ecclesiastical historian Timothy Ware, “When people refuse to honour Mary, only too often it is because they do not really believe in the Incarnation.”¹⁵⁰

And it is important to note that as custom-bound as Byzantine society may have been, a fair amount of flexibility existed allowing women, men and families to adapt to changing political, religious and social events.¹⁵¹ “Patriarchal” as Byzantium may seem to a modern audience, women (even more so than eunuchs) were crucial to the functioning and continuance of society.¹⁵² What Herrin terms an “anomalous combination of social norms and expectational issues” allowed for at least three empresses (Irene, Euphrosyne and Theodora, of the Macedonian dynasty) to be highly influential in their own right, affecting governmental policies in the late 8th- to mid-9th

centuries.¹⁵³ Many other aristocratic women, such as the princess and historian Anna Comnena (*circa* 1083-1153), the Empresses Zoe and Theodora (1042), Anna Dalassene (*circa* 1081), Maria of Bulgaria (*circa* 1272), Maria of Alania (*circa* 1081), and Mary of Antioch (*circa* 1162) had an enormous impact on Byzantine governmental policy whether ruling directly or through oblique influence or kinship to males, traversing the public and private spheres of Byzantine society.

As has been noted, ambiguity existed in Byzantine attitudes toward the role of women in society.¹⁵⁴ Traditionally in the Christian world of the Eastern Mediterranean, women were seen to be of fallen nature who were inherently sexually rapacious and emotionally unstable. For the Byzantines, borrowing on their ancient Greek heritage, the notion of *enkrateia* or self-control was retained and used in maintaining *taxis* (order) in the world. Effeminacy was seen as a vitiating force. Females were the font of effeminacy, and both women and effeminacy were considered to be potentially destabilizing forces to *taxis*. Women were expected to behave modestly, with self-control being an eminent point of virtue.¹⁵⁵ Both for men as well as women certain ideals of physical beauty were upheld, and referencing these ideals the Byzantines believed that inner or spiritual beauty could be deduced from a graceful and harmonious physical appearance; or in the words of Hill, the Byzantines “deduced inner qualities from outer characteristics.”¹⁵⁶ “Visible beauty was understood as moral goodness rather than external handsomeness.”¹⁵⁷ In other words a rejection of worldly vanity was an admired quality for women; nonetheless physical beauty was also esteemed.¹⁵⁸

The roles and social standing of women changed over time in Byzantine society according to the ambient conditions. The 4th- to 7th-centuries were generally hostile to

women as the emphasis expounded by church fathers stressed asceticism and renunciation of earthly pleasure, including marriage and sexual relations. Women were considered instigators of temptation. In Byzantine jurisprudence females were believed unable to distinguish right from wrong.¹⁵⁹ The gender attitudes of medieval Byzantium were forged in the early Christian and post-Constantinian periods with a “strongly misogynistic” tone taken in written tracts.¹⁶⁰ Epithets used to depict woman who did not behave in socially acceptable ways—or “bad” women—usually implied a female had transgressed one of more of the dicta considered appropriate for female decorum and rendered the transgressor “unwomanly.” For example, accusations of moral and sexual laxity, impiety, lack of modesty and lack of maternal feelings were all standard criticisms leveled at women who did not behave in socially appropriate ways according to their station (e.g. Theodora, Pulcheria, Eudokia, etc.).¹⁶¹

Hill found the 7th- to 11th-centuries, a period during which the empire found its borders under nearly continual siege, to have reflected a change in the role of women—with emphasis given to motherhood and fertility. The growth of the extended family as an entity marking identity (from the 9th- to 11th-centuries), the increasing importance of inheritance and the enhanced status of marriage and motherhood empowered females in proximity to the emperor to be the carriers of male “majesty” and sometimes as rulers in their own right.¹⁶² Even the famed “bridal shows”—essentially beauty competitions recorded through the late 9th-century¹⁶³ in which the Emperor chose a prospective wife from amongst the most alluring young woman of the Empire—served economic, cultural and social purposes by not only debuting a future empress, but also by bringing the provincial populous into closer contact and acquiescence with the imperial capital.¹⁶⁴

The 11th-century was marked by the apogee of female power in government with the joint rule of two Empresses, the sisters Zoe and Theodora (1042). After the death of Constantine IX and his wife Zoe, Theodora (Zoe's sister) ruled as sole Emperor from 1055-6 in her own right. Like Irene (who reigned in 797 to 802 as sole ruler) before her, Theodora appropriated the male prerogatives and titles of *basileus* (emperor) and *autokrator* (supreme ruler). However, the majority of Byzantines still regarded female rule as a "twisting [of] the thread of the purple robe," or an aberration.¹⁶⁵ Nonetheless the proximity of both Irene (as wife of Leo IV and mother/regent of Constantine VI) and Theodora (as the descendant of Basil I) to male rulers empowered both women with legitimate and absolute authority over their subjects. Hill believes the profile of active female participation in government becomes less overtly conspicuous during the 12th-century under the reign of the Comneni.¹⁶⁶ According to Hill, the years of active female participation in government rule from 1080-1180 provoked a "crisis" in male authority and "tension" in the male mind,¹⁶⁷ leading to reinstatement of male power under the Comneni¹⁶⁸ and a consolidation of the male-dominated prestige system of governance.¹⁶⁹ Hill believes the reign of Comneni strengthened male authority through strategic dynastic marriages and support from nobles¹⁷⁰ which rendered females merely "partakers" in male authority rather than executors of authority.¹⁷¹

One of the more interesting areas of research in Byzantine cultural history which has gained popularity in recent years is the question of *how* women in Byzantium were able to exercise power. Aside from the few instances of females actually ruling the Empire in their own right, it has traditionally been believed that imperial women exercised power only by way of their relationships to influential male figures.¹⁷² This

question is difficult to answer directly because women, especially in aristocratic circles, traversed both the spheres of domestic and public life and manifested their presence by the influence exerted on male offspring and spouses, as well as by philanthropic deeds such as the charitable distribution of funds--which were crucial to creating networks of support.¹⁷³ Scholars disagree on how prominent women exercised power while escaping the restrictive ideology of their time. Garland believes women were able to exercise power and not appear to be “unwomanly” by cloaking themselves behind the ideologies of the era, for example, by masking their political assertions in the mystic of motherhood, claiming to be acting only in the interests of their family (such as Anna Dalassene).¹⁷⁴ Contrarily, Hill argues that women in the 11th- and 12th-centuries were able to act politically in a manner that did not call their femininity in question; not by a negation of or hiding behind dominant ideology, but because the dominant ideology actually conferred power on women in certain roles (such as widowhood and motherhood) which allowed for masculine action without seeming “unwomanly.”¹⁷⁵

Whether women hid behind the dominant ideologies of their times or used ideology to their advantage, or a combination of both, it is undisputed that the input of the female population could have a major influence on governmental policies in the capital and throughout the Empire. For example, historians have long held that icon veneration was especially popular among the lower classes and women: largely disenfranchised people who felt a personal devotional attachment to icons.¹⁷⁶ Cormack disagrees, asserting that the traditional importance ascribed to women in promoting icons to be nothing more than an oppressive “chimera” by “male oppressive strategies” simplistically ignoring the fact that icons served an important role as a “symbolic expression” of the

Christian world.¹⁷⁷ However, historical evidence shows female recalcitrance and female mob reaction to the introduction of Iconoclasm in 726 by Leo III, did ignite smoldering tensions, engendering full-scale resistance to governmental policy.¹⁷⁸ Herrin emphasizes female agency in the restoration of Orthodoxy in 843 and notes that the triumph of the Iconodules was largely carried out under the auspices of three female rulers and regents. According to Herrin, had Iconoclasm triumphed the entire power balance in the region would have shifted with profound effect.¹⁷⁹

Hill notes that between 1028 and 1081, six of ten males ruled as Emperor because of their affiliation to highly-placed females, either by marriage or kinship.¹⁸⁰ Kinship alliances were frequently strengthened by strategic marriages. Also non-blood related kinship alliances could be legally formed by adoption (allowed for women by legal modifications made under the reign of Leo VI (886-912 CE),¹⁸¹ or by a “spiritual kinship” bond made as godparents.¹⁸² Additionally, the state of widowhood offered women a fair amount of autonomy in the dispensing of estate administration and the education, dowering and marriage of children. If the widow was an Empress and the succession was not clear, it was her right to appoint the new Emperor and to administer the Empire if the new monarch was in his minority.¹⁸³

According to historians of the Enlightenment, such as Gibbon, the active participation of women in Byzantine society and government was partly to blame for the decline and fall of the Eastern Empire. Women acting outside of traditional roles recognized by Byzantine culture and religion were seen as potentially destabilizing agents to the “natural order.” Female nature was believed to devitalize the vigor of the natural order, and by extension the Empire. However the definitions of “traditional”

roles expected of women changed over time. And the negative appraisal of female prominence in the Byzantine world reveals more about Gibbon's (and subsequent authors) deeply held beliefs than any reflection of reality. The historical record shows women exercised power, while not in equal measure with their male counterparts, but nonetheless in a variety of ways which scholars are just now beginning to understand.

**Eunuchs:
Aspiration to the Divine Using Human Means**

Although eunuchs were absolutely crucial to the functioning of the Byzantine government (as it was conceived and organized), their significance in Byzantium has not until very recently begun to be seriously studied.¹⁸⁴ Any scholar endeavoring to understand Byzantine civilization must attempt to grasp the Byzantines' views of the phenomenological, trans- and extramundane worlds. Eunuchism was an integral and indispensable part of the Byzantine's sense of world order and function. A world the Byzantines considered to mirror the spiritual plane. Students of history unable to comprehend the importance of eunuchs in Byzantine society risk misunderstanding the unique character of Byzantine civilization entirely.

Kazhdan and Epstein note "At least thirty eunuchs are known to have occupied important posts within the state and ecclesiastical organization between the death of Basil II (circa 1025) and the beginning of the reign of Alexios I (circa 1081)."¹⁸⁵ Eunuchs also served as bodyguards/chaperons and companions of wealthy, high-profile or royal women, some living in the woman's compound or *Gynaeceum*. Gibbon noted that the Empress Theodora's "secret apartments were occupied by favourite women and eunuchs."¹⁸⁶ The existence of eunuchs in Byzantium was paradoxical because both Roman law and ecclesiastical tradition frowned upon bodily mutilation; yet the castration

of youths continued (with attenuated frequency after the mid-12th century) into the later Byzantine period and remained an important part of Byzantine society.¹⁸⁷

The origins of the practice of castrating males so they could serve designated roles as eunuchs is unknown and dates to the pre-historic period. From the early historical record it is known that eunuchs existed and fulfilled designated roles in Egypt, Assyria and Persia. Purportedly an “orientalizing” effect occurred during Roman contact with Persia. Tougher dates the introduction of eunuchs into the Roman Empire to the reign of Diocletian (circa 284-305 CE).¹⁸⁸ The sociologist Keith Hopkins believes the capture of the Persian king’s harem and eunuchs by Galerius in 298 CE, may have led to an increase in the number of castrated males at the Roman court. Hopkins also speculates that Roman Emperors borrowed elaborate Persian court rituals to elevate themselves from their courtiers, and as the need for ritual grew the Roman office of Chamberlain became exclusively reserved for eunuchs.¹⁸⁹ Although later legislation passed under Domitian declared no Roman citizen should be castrated, the practice of eunuchization continued, especially in border areas outside the Empire where vanquished or enslaved males often were castrated and sold in the Empire’s booming slave markets.¹⁹⁰

Pre-pubescent castration produced physical characteristics manifest in a visibly distinct “eunuchoid” phenotype. Depending upon the age an individual was castrated the results of androgen (male sex hormone) deficiency were manifold: Eunuchs were said to be beardless (the opposite of males with testicles on whom beards were considered to be a sign of virility), and their skin color was often described as fair, without “any trace of a suntan”—a feminine characteristic associated with the traditional rearing of females indoors, sheltered from the sun. Voices of males castrated before puberty were said to be

distinctly high-pitched. Inefficient nitrogen metabolism due to androgen loss contributed to asthenia, a lack of muscular development, and influenced fat deposition in a female pattern while the penis remained incommensurately small. The long bones of the body failed to properly fuse resulting in the hands, arms and legs continuing to grow disproportionately long with the hips remaining proportionally broad.¹⁹¹ Eunuch stature, again if castrated before puberty, was noted to be “taller than the average, and lean, with long arms, legs and fingers.” Eunuchs associated with the imperial court also wore “distinctive ceremonial dress”¹⁹² and were said to exhibit pronounced affectations in comportment, gesticulations and speech.¹⁹³

Different procedures were employed to effect castration. Some contemporaneous accounts estimate that the mortality rates from the castration procedure were exceedingly high.¹⁹⁴ The most common methods were either “compression” or “excision.” Tougher cites Paul of Aegina, a 7th-century physician who described the most common procedures employed:

*That by compression is thus performed: Children, still of a tender age, are placed in a vessel of hot water, and then when the parts are softened in the bath, the testicles are to be squeezed with the fingers until they disappear, and, being dissolved, can no longer be felt. The method by excision is as follows: let the person to be castrated be placed upon a bench, and the scrotum stretched; two straight incisions are then to be made with a scalpel, one in each testicle; and when the testicles start up they are to be dissected around and cut out, having merely left the very thin bond of connexion between the vessels in their natural state. This method is preferred to that by compression...*¹⁹⁵

According to Ringrose, eunuchs in Byzantium constituted a fluid, socially-dependant, separate gender category.¹⁹⁶ Although in the view of Ringrose eunuchs lacked the full-male status of non-castrated men, they were nonetheless considered by the Byzantines as male.¹⁹⁷ As “invented” beings created to serve certain functions, eunuchs

were outside the standard gender dichotomy of male/female but they were certainly not outside of the cultural conceptual framework. Ringrose concludes that the physical state of eunuchism in Byzantium existed as a “‘constructed’ but stable frame of reference that, somewhat paradoxically, defines eunuchs by not directly defining them. This is one of the several facets of Byzantine culture that allows us to think of eunuchs as a separate gender group within the society.”¹⁹⁸ Even the normally nimble Greek language, which was the language of elevated philosophical and theological thought, had difficulty precisely defining the unique nature of eunuchs in Byzantine society. But an understanding that human language did not have the ability to fully articulate divine intent and spiritual states of being was well acknowledged in the Byzantine theological tradition. Supernatural states of being including the description of God, Christ or the angels, were believed to be beyond the capability of human thoughts or words to describe.

Certain transcendent states of existence could only be hinted at by describing what they were not. In literary terms the description of something by what it is not is termed “apophasis.” Thus negative or “apophatic” descriptions were frequently used in Byzantine theological treatises describing the Deity, heaven, angels and eunuchs in “terms of what they are not, since humans cannot comprehend what they really are.”¹⁹⁹ For example, since human minds cannot truly encompass what sort of beings angels are and language cannot adequately describe their majesty, angels are described “apophatically” as “ageless” (that is without age or not aged), “immortal” (not mortal), “incorporeal” (not corporeal), and “unstained” (without stain or sin).²⁰⁰ Similarly, eunuchs were described as “contrived” (not usually born as eunuchs, therefore

not “natural”) beings who were “marvels” (not “normal,” pedestrian or quotidian) existing “outside of human nature”(not being of entirely male or female gender).²⁰¹

Ringrose found Byzantine sentiment regarding eunuchs changed over time and was often ambiguous but remained generally hostile. Chroniclers, with the exception of Psellus or Theophylaktos of Ohrid,²⁰² penned largely negative portraits of eunuchs. Eunuchs were criticized as “weak, deceitful, grasping, greedy, lacking moral fiber, effeminate, incapable of self-control, sexually frustrated or sexually dead.”²⁰³ The worst criticisms leveled at eunuchs were imputations often given to women or the ascription of feminine traits.

Ringrose espouses the theory that as an artificially “gendered” group, eunuchs were uniquely and specifically suited to operate as sort of “cultural mediators” in a society where “The boundaries between man and God, between Constantinople and heaven were not in fact clearly marked...”²⁰⁴ And if termed as an intermediate gender, eunuchs did indeed traverse traditional gender boundaries where no non-castrated male could access. For example, eunuchs lived as servants and guardians of high-placed women in traditionally female spaces, but could also attain positions which were closed to both women and non-castrated men such as the office of High Chamberlain to the Emperor. Boys born into poor families could rise to the highest echelons of power by being castrated and entering into the service of the imperial household. Frequently the only contact or mediation between the Emperor and his subjects was through the imperial eunuchs.

Thus it is not surprising that since eunuchs occupied a unique and artificially created gendered space, which allowed them to circulate between traditionally gendered

geographic locations (e.g. the *Gynaecium* or the Emperor's bed chamber), they came to be compared to angels. Like eunuchs, angels operated as intermediaries and messengers between two realms. Angels were believed to serve as harbingers and intercessors between the physical and spiritual worlds. And like eunuchs, angels were of neuter gender yet were always portrayed with the features of youthful males. (Although several descriptions of eunuchs as older individuals exist, it is usually noted that the eunuchs retained a youthful air, with physical features recognizable as biologically male.) In artistic representations of angels, "The beautiful boy as angel floats above the turmoil of nature...the angel, though sexless, is always a youthful male."²⁰⁵ According to Paglia, "The beautiful boy [or angel/eunuch] is a rebuke to mother nature, an escape from the labyrinth of the body, with its murky womb and bowels. Woman is the Dionysian miasma, the world of fluids, the chthonian swamp of generation."²⁰⁶

Sharing characteristics with angels, it is not surprising to find a hagiographic study which has indicated that out of a total of 541 masculine saints, 18 were eunuchs.²⁰⁷ The aura of gender ambiguity which is a part of eunuch and angel iconography "draws on a tradition, continuous since classical antiquity, that set forth the androgyne or hermaphrodite as a distinctive ideal of beauty and frequently associated or conflated androgyny with effeminacy, bisexuality, and homosexuality."²⁰⁸ It must be emphasized that although eunuchs were outside the norm of male "gender" and yet not within the realm of female "gender," eunuchs were in genotype and phenotype typically male and radiated a more masculine than feminine appearance. In Greek, the noun "eunuch" takes the masculine article (*o eunuchos*).²⁰⁹ And while not possessing the full range of male prerogatives, such as siring offspring nor acceding to the imperial dignity, eunuchs

wielded enormous power and were indispensable to the existing order and functioning of Byzantine society until the 12th-century.²¹⁰

Hence, like holy men, angels and prepubescent boys, eunuchs transcended the boundaries of regular gender and traversed barriers non-castrated males could not. Like angels, eunuchs traversed gender limitations,²¹¹ accessing spiritual realms not accessible to either men or women.²¹² Similarly, they mediated between their earthly sovereign and the mundane world—a world by which members of the royal family, for example, could not be sullied.²¹³ Eunuchs became, in the words of Ringrose, “liminal figures” operating across boundaries.²¹⁴

Popular sentiment toward eunuchs changed markedly over time.²¹⁵ The influence and importance of eunuchs in Byzantine society intermittently increased and eventually diminished throughout three general periods: From the 2nd- to 8th-centuries, eunuchs became increasingly more important in Byzantine society and government but were generally viewed negatively and imputed the negative characteristics often attributed to women. The 9th- to 11th-centuries saw an amelioration in the status of eunuchs and their increased prominence in governmental administration was partially due to changing attitudes regarding familial life and clan affiliations, and the increasing distance between the imperial family and the aristocracy. During this period the majority of the Emperors’ contacts with the world beyond their courts was mediated through the imperial eunuchs.²¹⁶ Although generally disliked by the nobility, imperial eunuchs were sometimes stereotyped during this period as loyal, well-trusted servants.²¹⁷ Also the increasing prestige accorded holy men (i.e. ascetics and sexual celibates) was extended to eunuchs (assumed by many at the time of being sexually celibate).²¹⁸ Eventually the

prominence of eunuchs began to wane after the accession of the Comneni (late 11th-century) and continued to decline until the destruction of the Empire in 1453. This lessened influence was due to several factors, including changed alliance and prestige-acquiring mechanisms—which were introduced by the Comneni--followed by periods of severe disruption caused by foreign invasion, occupation, and later western influences acquired under the Palaiologoi.²¹⁹

During the 4th- and 5th-centuries of the common era, several eunuchs in the imperial court rose to prominence. The increasing prestige of eunuchs mirrored changing perceptions of the status of the Emperor. As the Emperor came to be semi-deified, occupying a spiritual plane (higher than his subjects) between heaven and earth, he became more and more isolated from human contact with mere mortals.²²⁰ The increasing distance and isolation of the Emperor from his subjects had the effect of enhancing the Emperor's mystique, prestige and sense of divinity. Thus the Emperor's legitimacy was reinforced by separation from his subjects. Eunuchs, since they were human males but beyond the limitations of standard gender in Byzantium, increasingly became the sources of information and human contact for the Emperor—acting as intermediaries between the divinity of the Emperor, his courtiers and subjects.²²¹ More and more of the ceremonial and administrative functions of state and governance began to be controlled by eunuchs.

The elaboration of court ritual was associated with the rise of the position of eunuchs.²²² In Byzantine society a noble person's power was largely measured, more than by hereditary title or rank, by his proximity or degree of association to the Emperor.²²³ Non-eunuch governmental officials and aristocrats frequently had to transact

their business or communications with the Emperor through the imperial court eunuchs (such as the Grand Chamberlain). These court eunuchs became increasingly influential and wealthy as they often charged fees for their intermediary services.²²⁴ The traditional nobility became increasingly resentful of their dependence upon eunuchs for access to the Emperor and the hereditary aristocracy were especially offended by what they perceived as the social mobility of eunuchs, whom they considered to be parvenus.²²⁵ In theory, a eunuch who was a former slave could rise in station to be of equal or greater rank than the highest of the hereditary nobles²²⁶ and accumulate considerable wealth.²²⁷

As “lifetime professionals,” in the description of Hopkins, eunuchs became an institutionalized independent force with their own interests.²²⁸ Prior to the 8th-century, they were largely of ignoble, slave or foreign birth, and therefore never assimilated into the standard nobility, but they became a formidable check counteracting the power of the traditional Byzantine aristocracy.²²⁹ Indeed, Hopkins believes the institution of court eunuchism was crucial to the preservation of effective central monarchic authority because, unlike in the West, the imperial eunuchs of Byzantium constituted a critical balance of power between the army and the aristocracy.²³⁰ In a society which Hopkins describes as employing “rumours” as the “currency” of the political system,²³¹ eunuchs also came to serve the important function of acting as “scapegoats,”²³² by absorbing criticism, malcontent and aggression from the nobility and public directed at the person of the Emperor.²³³ Eunuchs served as an effective barrier between members of the civil and military aristocracy who were potential rivals to the imperial dignity and the Emperor himself, who was able to avoid the necessity of awarding excessive honors to any potential usurpers amongst the nobility.²³⁴ Consequently, eunuchism in the Byzantine

imperial court became a powerful socio-economic institution in itself until the rise of the Comneni.²³⁵

Although eunuchs in ecclesiastical offices were not as numerous as eunuchs at court, castrated males did nonetheless figure prominently in the church and monastic life and indeed acceded to the patriarchal throne on at least one occasion. Ringrose believes altered notions regarding the relationship of eunuchs to sanctity changed in the 9th-century, as evidenced by an increased number of eunuchs holding important ecclesiastical offices.²³⁶ Increasing appreciation for the piety of ascetic holy men and monks in the 10th-century also extended to some “good eunuch[s],”²³⁷ although popular and ecclesiastical commentators still manifest deeply ambivalent opinions of eunuchs.

From the 8th- to 11th-centuries eunuchs became a distinctive population, but were accepted as a “normal” group within Byzantine society.²³⁸ As the prestige and power of imperial eunuchs increased over time the perception of eunuchs evolved in ways which give insights in Byzantine psychology. Ringrose notes that since eunuchs differed from standard male members of society because of their often foreign birth, lack of family ties and inability to procreate, eunuchs earned the image of being consummate “outsiders.”²³⁹ And as “outsiders” by birth, with no birth family affiliation and altered gender status, eunuchs were not believed to be troubled by sexual desires or familial responsibilities.

Legal modifications enacted under Leo VI (886-912 CE), which allowed for certain single women to adopt children, also decreed that eunuchs could adopt orphans.²⁴⁰ This legislation is significant for several reasons. First, it served as an admission of the problem that a sizeable number of children were orphaned or abandoned in Byzantium. And by expanding the population of adults eligible to care for and receive the “blessing”

of having children, the number of potential caregivers and guardians increased.²⁴¹ Secondly, the legislation passed under Leo VI in the 9th-century allowing eunuchs to adopt orphans tacitly acknowledged the growing status of eunuchs as viable but distinct members of Byzantine society. Nonetheless, the general perception persisted that eunuchs, in a sense, lived outside of conventional time and space (as the Byzantines conceived time and space), not having biological family connections nor affinity toward any particular geography. This notion, according to Ringrose, idealized eunuchs in the middle Byzantine period²⁴² as the perfect servants: beings unencumbered by a past and without allegiance to biological kin. Beings not quite within the ken of regular human relations. Beings whose sole purpose in life consisted of unselfishly and unceasingly serving their masters.²⁴³

After the 6th-century, an increasing number of the males castrated for the governmental bureaucracy came from within the Empire of free-born, non-foreign origin. Ambitious families could have a son castrated and placed on a career track for the ecclesiastical or imperial bureaucracy with the hopes of advancing the family fortunes.²⁴⁴ Eunuchs, who had previously been viewed as foreign slaves without any particular allegiance to their birth families nor their ethnic groups of origin, became (after the 8th-century) mostly citizens of the Empire by birth who maintained close ties with their biological and extended families. Evidence suggests that by 900, free-born eunuchs were being trained and educated in an established system to produce servants for imperial and bureaucratic service.²⁴⁵ In the 12th-century many important eunuchs in the imperial bureaucracy were the sons of well-established and prominent families.²⁴⁶ Eunuchism had become a strategy for family promotion.²⁴⁷

An understanding of the role of eunuchs in the Byzantine world may be one of the keys to understanding the ideational frame of reference of Byzantine society. Scholars of the Eastern Empire have struggled with the existence of eunuchs for centuries. Indeed, the sexual indeterminacy of eunuchs perplexed and troubled the Byzantines themselves. As concepts evolved in the early Christian world about which states of gendered being were acceptable, negative stereotypes attributed to women and homosexuality were also extended to eunuchs. Eunuchs became a distinct group within Byzantine society and immensely influential in governmental, administrative, military and ecclesiastical offices over the course of centuries and then diminished in influence after the accession of the Comneni. It is perhaps the mystical, out of conventional time and space, spiritual role of eunuchs that most captivates the imagination and remains so foreign to the modern audience. At once enigmatic and transcendent, existing in both the earthly and extramundane realms, eunuchs give perhaps the best glimpse into the Byzantine's conceptualization of their world; their longing for spiritual succor and how these artificially engineered beings served to fill those needs.

The modern Western consciousness is a direct descendant of the philosophy of the Catholic and (later Protestant) nation-states in Western Europe which had evolved into distinct entities by the 15th-century. Indeed, Western culture--which incontestably dominates world culture today--is heir to this legacy. A legacy that has its foundation in the older civilizations of the Eastern Mediterranean. And it was largely through the civilization of Byzantium that the learning of the classical world reached the West. Tensions and strife defined the relationship between Byzantium and the West since the founding of Constantinople in 330 CE. After the fall of the Empire in 1453 CE, the

extinction of Byzantine material culture, and the isolation of former Byzantine territories under Ottoman rule, knowledge of Byzantine civilization in the West was viewed largely through the lens of Catholicism, sometimes with an-overtly anti-Byzantine perspective. The presentation of Byzantine civilization to the Western world was recast in the 18th-century through the prism of the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment, most prominently in the English-speaking world, by an unsympathetic Edward Gibbon.

Gibbon largely attributes the decadence of Byzantine civilization to two major defects in its society: the superstitious, fanatical and “religious obstinacy” of the “Greeks,”²⁴⁸ and, though not directly stated, he insinuates that what he believed to be non-standard gender behaviors and practices in Byzantine society helped to emasculate the Empire. Both women and eunuchs represented for Gibbon enervating forces associated with the declivity of vital masculine agency. Gibbon’s views on the function of females and eunuchs in society can be traced far back in Christian and pre-Christian thought to the formative centuries (first millennium of the common era) in the Western Christian world when injunctions on homosexuality, female prerogative and castration helped to mold the ideal Christian personality. In turn, Christian theology served as a formative influence in the development of Enlightenment intellectuals, who later rejected aspects of clericalism. The exceedingly dim perspective taken by Gibbon with regard to Eastern Orthodoxy can be seen as directly influenced by the intense anti-clerical posture in currency during the Enlightenment.

Thus, it is the paradoxical contribution of Edward Gibbon to posterity that his monumental *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* introduced Byzantine civilization to the West, but also stigmatized that society because of his negative appraisal. As a

representative of the Enlightenment, he carried forth intellectual presuppositions, such as anti-ecclesiastical sentiment and a limited understanding of gender and sexuality, which left him unable to fully appreciate the mystical orientation of Byzantine civilization. In Gibbon, Byzantine history found a wide audience but at the cost of being consigned to long-standing ill-repute in the Western consciousness.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The Changing Meaning of Byzantium

Over the centuries, to various peoples and cultures, the meaning of Byzantium has evolved continually. From Late Antiquity onwards the Eastern Roman Empire stood as the reflection and model of divine order on earth, cynosure of the civilized world and the bulwark of Christianity against both barbarian and infidel. But in the course of its millennium of existence Byzantine civilization, in the West, came to be misunderstood, denigrated, reviled and after 1453 largely forgotten. Even in the former Byzantine territories of the East, the perceptions and understanding of the importance of the Byzantine legacy were heavily distorted by centuries of Ottoman occupation. However, over time and in different geographical locations engendered by endogenous cultural climates, the rehabilitation of Byzantium commenced. Even before the fall of Constantinople, ethnic Greeks in Southern Italy, Byzantine emigrants and exiles contributed enormously to the efflorescence of the Italian Renaissance.

In the centuries after 1453 the majority of Western Europeans probably had little or no knowledge of *any* other societies or cultures distant from their own. But the Byzantine cultural legacy lived on in Italy where, for example, Italian Hellenism had deep roots in Calabria and Sicily. Ethnic Greeks in Southern Italy, such as the scholars Barlaam (died 1348) and Leontius Pilatus (died 1364), in the 14th-century translated the Greek classics into literary Latin, influencing prominent Italian intellectuals such as Boccaccio (1313-75) and Petrarch (1304-74).¹ During the mid-14th to mid-15th centuries the greatest of the Byzantine humanists in Italy, Manuel Chrysoloras (1353-1415), Gemistus Plethon (1355-1450/52) and Bessarion of Nicaea (1403-1472), all contributed

to the efflorescence of art and culture known as the Italian Renaissance.² Byzantine didactic tradition and elements of the Palaeologan Renaissance (an intensification of classical Greek learning after 1261--which had never been lost in the East) had influenced the growth of Italian Renaissance humanism.³ Yet despite the assimilation of the rich Greek cultural inheritance to the Latin and vernacular traditions of Renaissance Italy,⁴ Byzantium was appreciated not for its own culture and civilization but mainly as a conduit for the preservation and transference of the classics. Byzantine literary works were completely overshadowed by the interest in the Greek classics and largely unknown in the West. Cultural differences which had become pronounced since Late Antiquity, legitimate theological disputes, and outright covetousness of Byzantine affluence all contributed to the negative stereotype of Byzantium which developed in the West. After the destruction of the Eastern Empire in 1453, esteem for and knowledge of Byzantine civilization remained low in the West and the papacy continued to regard Eastern Christians as heretical.

Nonetheless, serious interest in the Eastern Roman Empire was never totally abandoned and persisted in limited intellectual circles as demonstrated by the German scholar Hieronymus Wolf, who labored to undertake a systematic study of Byzantine history in the 16th-century. It is under the auspices of the 17th-century French royal court that Byzantine history and culture were finally deemed topics worthy of legitimate scientific study. In the early 17th-century King Louis XIII (1601-43) developed a keen interest in the lives of the Byzantine monarchy and translated from the original Greek into French the instructions of a 6th-century deacon to the Emperor Justinian.⁵ French interest in Byzantine scholarship continued under the auspices of Cardinal Mazarin

(1602-61), King Louis XIV (1638-1715), Colbert (1619-83, director of the royal library), and Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642). French scholars such as Labbe (Labbaeus) and Du Cange, in the 17th-century, stressed the importance of the history of the “Eastern Greek Empire,” which impressed Labbe as “so astonishing in the number of events, so alluring in its diversity, so remarkable in the length of its duration.”⁶ From the 17th- to 18th-century, France remained the center of Byzantine studies. However, with the advent of the Enlightenment in the mid-18th century the topic of the Eastern Roman Empire fell out of favor in scholarly circles. The Enlightenment or the “Age of Reason” was “characterized by denial of the past, by skepticism toward religion, by strong criticism of clerical power and despotic monarchy, [and] could no longer find anything of interest in the Byzantine Empire.”⁷ It is rather ironic to note that while many Enlightenment French philosophers, such as Montesquieu and Voltaire, were highly critical of the clerical prerogatives in the Catholic church hierarchies and disdained blind faith in religious doctrine without reason, these same philosophers were the heirs to Roman Catholic antipathy for the “schismatic Greeks;”⁸ and unwittingly revealed the imprimatur of Roman Catholicism in their denunciations of the Byzantines, lacking the insight (without truly using reason) to comprehend the subtleties and nuances of Byzantine religion and culture. Blind faith in reason, without understanding, became for some Enlightenment philosophers analogous to the thoughtless religion they had so criticized in the Roman Catholic clergy and in the Byzantines. Unwittingly, the Enlightenment philosophers reflected many of the same anti-Byzantine assumptions which were predominant in their Roman Catholic societies.

It was not until the middle of the 19th-century that the attitude toward medievalism once again changed in the scholarly world. Having experienced the revolutionary period of the 1790's and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars, Western European scholars showed a renewed interest in the "Gothic, barbarian' period, and according to Vasiliev, Byzantine history once more became a field for serious scholarly investigation."⁹

Beginning in 1798, the influential German critics, and brothers, Friedrich (1772-1829) and August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767-1845) defined a difference between the art and literature of the Middle Ages, the classical Renaissance, and their own time.¹⁰ The terms "modern" or "Romantic" came to be applied to certain strains of 19th-century art and literature. The works of the Romantics or the stylistic trend which came to be called "Romanticism" stressed a liberal humanist philosophy away from Enlightenment ideals of fixed physical laws governing human existence. The term "Romanticism" has always remained vague, and as late as the 1830's the poet/philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe(1749-1832) felt compelled to comment that the word "Romantic" remained contentious, causing "so many quarrels and divisions..."¹¹ Perkins attempts to define the nebulous term Romanticism:

*The 'Romantic' refuses to recognize restraints in subject matter of form and so is free to represent the abnormal, grotesque, and monstrous and to mingle standpoints, genres, modes of expression (such as philosophy and poetry), and even the separate arts in a single work. Ultimately it mirrors the struggle of genius against all limitation, and it leads to a glorification of yearning, striving, and becoming and of the personality of the artist as larger and more significant than the necessarily incomplete expression of it in his work...*¹²

To the exponents of Romanticism, reeling from the social dislocations of the Industrial Revolution of the early 19th-century in Northern Europe and dissatisfied with

the empiricism of the Enlightenment, the societies of Southern Europe and the Levant held particular interest. The more agrarian, less industrialized countries in the Levant and Southern Europe appealed to the Romantics' notions of a simpler, more "natural" (non-industrialized) life and echoed the influence of the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) who expounded the leading of a simple, non-urban life in close contact with the natural world. But unlike Rousseau's ideal of the perfectibility of humankind, the Romantics were drawn to the exotic mystic of the once fabled but now dead Byzantium. What was considered to be the moribund nature and tragic fate of the Eastern Roman Empire especially appealed to the Romantics. The very aspects which were disdained by Enlightenment scholars, such as the supposed dissipation of Byzantium, were embraced as exotic by the Romantics. Thus an orientaling tendency is to be noted in the works of several of the Romantic writers such as George Gordon/Lord Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelly (1792-1822), John Keats (1792-1821), and later Theophile Gautier (1811-72) and Charles Baudelaire (1821-67). Lord Byron, in particular, believing the people of Greece to be the noble descendants of the ancient Greeks and the Byzantines, took to heart the struggle of the Hellenes in the war of independence against the Ottomans.

One of the most interesting aspects in the recovery of the Byzantine legacy is how the modern European nation-state of Greece, the direct cultural and linguistic heir to Byzantium, rehabilitated and incorporated Byzantium in the articulation of a sense of ethnic Greek nationality. Surprisingly, the rehabilitation of Byzantium was slow to take root in Greece in the 19th-century and not fully appreciated until well into the 20th-century. Emerging from nearly four centuries of Ottoman rule and a protracted war of

independence (1821-32), the founders of the emergent Greek nation endeavored to define a modern Greek identity and to take their place among the society of modern European nations. Immediately after independence controversies arose over precisely what the identity of the fledgling nation would be. The newly independent Kingdom of Hellas consisted only of a small portion of European territory recovered from the Ottomans; territory much smaller in surface area than the areas traditionally inhabited by Greek-speaking peoples in classical times, and also smaller territorially than that which was administered under most of Byzantine imperial suzerainty. Ethnically, the newly liberated territory of modern Greece was composed mainly of ethnic Greeks, but with sizeable Turkish, Albanian and Slavic minorities—yet was markedly less diverse ethnically than the domains once controlled by the Byzantines. And linguistically no standardized form of the Greek language existed as the historic result of diglossia between the archaizing, artificial form of the language (favored by the intellectual class) and the organically evolved demotic (spoken, with regional variation, by the majority of the population).

Thus the fathers of the nascent Kingdom of Hellas were faced with a dilemma: Exactly what would the identity of the new nation be? Obviously the Orthodox religion bound the Christian inhabitants of the country together, much as it had the disparate ethnic groups which had lived in the Byzantine *oikoumene*. The Greek language was also common to most of the inhabitants of the new kingdom, but which form of the language was to be officially endorsed was an exceedingly contentious issue pregnant with both political and social/class implications. It is to the past that the founders of the new Kingdom of Hellas looked for guidance in order to answer the question of who the newly

liberated Greek people were and would become. People living in Greece in the early 19th-century based their identity on their Eastern Orthodox faith and familial associations. Few referred to themselves as “Greek,” and some still styled themselves “Romans,” as the Byzantines once had. The citizens of the new nation of Greece did possess a notion that they were the descendants of the inhabitants of the classical Greek world. Historically, the ethnic links between the ancient Greeks and the Greeks living in the Eastern Roman Empire subsequent to Antiquity had been downplayed after the advent of Christianity, because of the association between “Hellenes” (the Greeks of Antiquity) and paganism. But the negative connotations associated with the term Hellene lessened over the centuries, and in particular after the sack of Constantinople by the Latins in 1204. After the recovery of the capital by Michael VIII Palaeologus (1224?-1282) in 1261, the remaining citizens of the Empire, the majority of whom were ethnically Greek, came more and more to identify with their Hellenic pre-Christian ancestry. This rediscovery and embrace of a Hellenic identity served both to fortify a sense of cultural solidarity to the beleaguered population and, importantly, dramatically distinguished the Byzantines from their Latin and Moslem adversaries.

At the beginning of the Greek Revolution in 1821, most Greek intellectuals looked to classical Greece as the cradle of their civilization. The Byzantine period was viewed as a period of foreign occupation, “the mere continuation of Roman rule.”¹³ Many 18th-century Greeks, and indeed the Byzantines themselves in 1453, sincerely believed the fall of Byzantium to be divine retribution for the “sins”¹⁴ of reconciling with the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Florence-Ferrara in 1439. Some Orthodox even remained firm in the belief that God had placed them under Ottoman rule in order to

protect them from the “Franks” (Catholics).¹⁵ Influenced by popular trends in late 18th-century Enlightenment philosophical thought from Western Europe, the burgeoning merchant and intellectual class in the young Hellenic Kingdom had been imbued with what Ricks and Magdalino refer to as a “Gibbonian animus against Byzantium...”¹⁶ This Gibbonian animus was enunciated by leading 18th- and 19th-century Greek intellectuals such as Adamantios Korais (1748-1833);¹⁷ yet the two-thousand-year gap between ancient and modern Greece, and what has been called by the modern scholar K. Th. Dimaras the “void of Byzantium,”¹⁸ remained troubling for Greek intellectuals of the revolutionary period of the 1820’s and 1830’s.¹⁸ Accordingly, early 19th-century Greek self-consciousness as a “nation” developed with Western European Enlightenment affinities.¹⁹ And included with Western European Enlightenment affinities came the Western European Enlightenment disdain of Byzantine civilization. Antiquity was to be the glory and anchor of the modern Greek identity, not Byzantium.²⁰ Eager to be considered as an equal in the society of modern nations but ignorant of their own cultural heritage, and by incorporating what Makrides refers to as “an unthinking imitation” of “foreign” Enlightenment attitudes, 19th-century Greece internalized an “inferiority complex” which could not fully be exorcised until their Byzantine heritage was recovered.²¹

It was not until the mid-19th- century that the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Hellas began to consider their Byzantine heritage in a more favorable light. This change in perception was due in large part to the pioneering work of the historian Constantine Paparrigopoulos (1815-91). Published from 1885-7, Paparrigopoulos’ five-volume *Istoria tou ellinikou ethnous* (*History of the Greek Nation*) has been termed by

Kitromilides as a “monumental synthesis” and is regarded as the most important intellectual achievement of 19th-century Greece.²² Paparrigopoulos, a Greek nationalist and professor of history at the University of Athens, rehabilitated Byzantium in Greek social and political thought by demonstrating the centrality of Byzantine history in the continuum of Greek historical development.²³ Emphasizing the Hellenistic aspects of Byzantine civilization, Paparrigopoulos wrote that it is “to the Byzantine State we owe the conservation of our language, our religion and more generally of our nationality.”²⁴ By his redefinition and reordering of Greek history²⁵ to include the “Byzantine Millennium,” Paparrigopoulos demonstrated “the diachronic presence and continuity of the Greek nation,”²⁶ from Antiquity to the modern era via the nexus of Byzantium. Other Greek scholars of the 1800s, such as Spyridon Zambelios (1813-81), aided in the rehabilitation of Byzantine civilization. Undertaking a broader approach in his study than Gibbon’s emphasis on political history, Zambelios concluded that an examination of theological works, spiritual attitudes and historical and linguistic data unambiguously support the centrality of Byzantium in the “Greco-Roman continuity,”²⁷ and also proved the modern Greek language to be in direct line of descent from Hellenistic koine and medieval Byzantine Greek.²⁸ The “triadic schema” of “ancient-medieval-modern” proposed by Paparrigopoulos and other 19th-century Greek scholars emphasized the linear continuity of historical time, placing Byzantium, as the medieval phase, squarely between the ancient and modern periods of Greek history, and stressed the civilizing “mission” of Hellenism in the transmission of classical Greek culture and Christianity to the regions and peoples influenced by Byzantine rule.²⁹ In the view of Paparrigopoulos, Byzantium had “imposed unity and the concept of the state.”³⁰ The modern Greek

historian P. A. Agapitos is cited by Mackridge in stating that for Paparrigopoulos and other Greek nationalist of the mid- and late 19th-century, Byzantium had not only decisively contributed to the creation of modern Europe, but served as the model for the modern Greek state, acting as a paradigm for “the expansion of the State in geographical space and historical time.”³¹ (illustration, page 246)

Greek 19th-Century (circa 1830-9) Fanciful Rendering of the Fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans*



*Source: Ioannis Makriyiannis, *Memoirs*, ed. and trans. Vassilis P. Koukis (Athens: Narok Editions, 2001) 564.

At the end of the 19th-century the “Mannerist late phase of [the] Romantic Style” came to be known as “Decadent.”³² Contrary to Romanticism’s emphasis on the beauty of the natural world and the notion of the perfectibility of humankind, Decadent literature stresses the non-utilitarian right of art to exist for art’s sake. The excess and cruelty of a moribund natural world is dwelt upon.³³ The Decadent writers turn energy towards stasis. “Romantic creative passivity becomes Decadent aestheticism.”³⁴ The literary apogee of aestheticism is achieved. Man’s ultimate attempt to tame, control and distance himself from the brute, coarse realities of the physical world becomes the ultimate goal. Refinement, in an attempt to sterilize the fetid dross of the physical world, is taken to the extreme.³⁵ Described by Paglia as “a process of objectification and fixation [...] Decadence takes western sexual personae to their ultimate point of hardness and artificiality. It is drenched in sex, but sex as thought rather than action.”³⁶ In the French literature of the 19th century Decadence reaches its apogee in the works of Gautier and Huysmans. In the postromantic orientation as “Art is primarily concerned with itself. It constitutes its own microcosm and forms the center of critical reference.”³⁷ Jusdanis situates Cavafy in the late 19th century mainstream of aestheticism and Decadence along with Huysmans, Wilde and Whistler.³⁸ Homosexuality, existing for the non-procreative sake of pleasure itself—an affront to traditionally perceived values, is a topic often obliquely evoked in Decadent literature.

Constantine P. Cavafy (1863-1933) spent most of his adult life living in Alexandria, Egypt. A leading figure in the ethnic Greek diaspora of Alexandria, Cavafy’s family descended from the *Phanar*, “the once elite Greek district of modern

Constantinople.” And similar to Constantinople under Byzantine rule, the Alexandria of Cavafy’s time was a vibrant mix of foreign and Hellenistic protagonists.

*These include[d] nomadic men of letters, sophists, scholars, and their followers and pupils; musicians, sculptors, and their patrons; puppet monarchs; ousted courtiers; financial and sexual adventurers; variously authentic Greek Orthodox laity and clergy; and a far-flung fraternity of political intriguers made up of usurped and usurping rulers, mercenaries, propagandists, and bureaucrats.*³⁹

As a Greek of the diaspora living in Alexandria, Cavafy was steeped in the rich Hellenistic culture and Orthodox religion, acutely aware of his classical and Byzantine heritage which had survived outside the geographical boundaries of the modern nation-state of Greece during centuries of Islamic rule. He refers to Byzantium in “In Church”:

*I love the church—its standards bearing cherubim,
the altar’s silver articles, the candlesticks,
the lights, its icons, its pulpits,*

*When I step inside there, into a church of the Greeks;
with its incense aromas,
with its liturgical voices and harmonies,
the attendant priests majestic,
their movements all a solemn rhythm—
their ornate vestments all candescent—
my thought turn to all that’s grand, that honors our race,
to our glory, our civilization—Byzantium.*⁴⁰

In *Anna Komnina* Cavafy skillfully weaves his own commentary and textual analysis in *Katharevousa* (an elevated, archaizing form of Greek), with the Byzantine Greek of the *Alexiad*.⁴¹

*In the prologue to her Alexiad
Anna Komnina laments her widowhood,*

*Her soul is all vertigo. “And
I flood my eyes,” she tells us, “now
gutters for tears...Alas the waves” of her life,
“alas the uprisings.” Grief burns her
“to the bones and marrow, to the rending of the soul.”*

*But the truth seems to be that she only felt
one mortal blow, this woman in love with power;
she had only one deep-cutting sorrow
(even if she doesn't confess it), this haughty female Greek,
that she didn't manage, for all her cunning,
to acquire the kingship; that instead a man
took it, virtually out of her hands—one impertinent John.⁴²*

Cavafy, in the posthumously published *Before Time could Change Them: The Complete Poems of Constantine P. Cavafy*, also wrote about other Byzantine topics, including *Manuel Komninos* (32), and *Anna Dalassini* (152). In *A Byzantine Gentlemen in Exile, Composing Verses* (117) Cavafy criticizes the rigid classicizing tendencies of the Byzantine literary elite: “This Perfectionism may well be what’s brought about their censure.” In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (92-3) Cavafy concludes: “So now what will become of us, without barbarians./Those men were one sort of resolution.” The Byzantines were in part defined by their adversaries. Through apophatic reasoning--excluding barbarians as not members of the civilized *oikoumene*, non-Byzantine--a distinct Byzantine notion of identity was reinforced. The state of being of an Eastern Roman Christian citizen was therefore perceived to be the antithesis of being a barbarian. In Cavafy’s time the debate was still ongoing about what the identity and language of the nation of Greece would be. To Cavafy the “barbarians” could also come from inside the Greek world. As an artist, and in direct line of descent of the Decadent movement, Cavafy (according to Jusdanis) “asked his readers to become aware of literature as a thing-in-itself when literary texts were still regarded as part of the discussion of national language and identity. This was his challenge to fellow poets and critics. And herein lies perhaps Cavafy’s real anomaly—he decided to talk about Art when it did not yet exist in Greece.”⁴³

Liddell writes: “No one can deny Cavafy’s passion for the Hellenic world, but his interest in the current affairs of the modern kingdom of Greece was limited.” Much as the Byzantines had viewed their empire as the vast *oikoumene* of Orthodoxy with Hellenistic refinement and Roman legal tradition, so too Cavafy found the reality of the modern nation of “Greece” a far too limited concept to encompass Hellenism.⁴⁴ Cavafy viewed himself “more as a Philhellene than as a Greek.” Liddell cites the English novelist E. M. Forster (1879-1970), a friend of Cavafy, who wrote:

*His attitude to the past did not commend him to some of his contemporaries, nor is it popular today. He was a loyal Greek, but Greece for him was not territorial. It was rather the influence that has flowed from his race through the ages...Racial purity bored him, so did political idealism.*⁴⁵

Cavafy’s homosexual poems, while not dealing explicitly with Byzantine themes, exude the same sense of longing evoked in the lost glory of Byzantium, as do the bittersweet reminiscences of his youthful sexual conquests. *Days of 1908* (183-4), “he stood then naked everywhere;/ flawless in beauty; a miracle.” In *Pleasure in the Flesh* (67), Cavafy sentimentally reflects upon the “Joy and balm of my life, the memory of those hours/ where I found and where I held pleasure as I wanted it./ Joy and balm of my life, that I turned displeased away from/ every amusement of routine erotic touch.” Time suspends its flight in the decadent *Desires*: “Beautiful bodies of the dead who did not age/,” and in *Artificial Flowers* (249), the Decadent aesthetic of malaise with the physical world is manifest: “I don’t want real narcissi—nor do I like/lilies, or real roses./[...] I love flowers fashioned of glass or of gold,/ faithful gifts of a faithful Art;/.”

The insinuations of homosexuality imprecated against the Byzantines, reaching a crescendo with the works of Gibbon, replete with convoluted subtextual references to Byzantine luxury, effeminacy, attacks on female rule and eunuch influence, *au fond*,

usually connoted an imprecation of homosexuality. Even the Greek Nobel laureate George Seferis (1900-71), writing in the 1930's, viewed Byzantium in a negative light and considered the demise of that civilization due to luxury and excess.⁴⁶ But just as Cavafy believed the borders of the nation-state of Greece to be insufficient to reflect the richness of the Hellenistic *oikoumene*, so did he stand outside of the accepted sexual norms of his day. Hirst notes that although Cavafy's influence was ultimately not enormously influential on shaping modern Greek perceptions about Byzantium, his work did help to shape the discussion in determining the development of the modern Greek identity through language.⁴⁷ And it is precisely these echoes from the Byzantine world which underscore the relevance of Cavafy to modern readers: the amalgam of Orthodox Christianity, Hellenistic culture, the use of the different forms of the Greek language and non-standard gender behavior and practices employed by this latter-day "Byzantine Gentleman in Exile."

Writing at approximately the same time as Cavafy, the Irish dramatist and poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was also early in his career influenced by the cynicism and lassitude of the fin-de-siecle late-phase of Romanticism called Decadence. At first reacting against 19th-century Darwinian naturalism and scientific materialism,⁴⁸ Yeats was later influenced by the concise precision of the Symbolist Movement and the poets Stephane Mallarme (1842-98) and Paul Verlaine (1844-96).⁴⁹ In his later years Yeats melded his previous influences with occultism and a fervent love for his native Ireland. Seeking a direct approach to experience⁵⁰ and to create a unity of cultures, Yeats felt the symbol of Byzantium came closest to his ideal. In *A Vision* (1938) Yeats ponders:

I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato. I think I could find in some little wine-shop some philosophical worker in mosaic who could answer all my questions, the supernatural descending nearer to him than to Plotinus even, for the pride of his delicate skill would make what was an instrument of power to princes and clerics, a murderous madness in the mob, show as a lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body.

I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers...spoke to the multitude and to the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject matter and that vision of the whole people.⁵¹

Yeats illustrates just how much attitudes toward Byzantium had changed since the writing of Gibbon in the late 18th-century. As interest in spiritualism grew after the first World War (1914-18), the idea of Byzantium—a society which had successfully fused the knowledge of Antiquity with spiritual beliefs—became more appealing to many people. In what is considered by many critics his most mature work, *Sailing to Byzantium*(1928), Yeats addresses questions that in O'Donnell's opinion are informed by a reading of Socrates and Blake, which contemplate "being" versus "becoming," creation, decay, death and eternity.⁵²

Sailing to Byzantium (1928)

*That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
--those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas
Whatever is begotten, born, or dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.*

II

*An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there any singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.*

III

*O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, pern in a gyre,
And be the singing masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.*

IV

*Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.⁵³*

A similar, sentimental and nostalgic, romanticized view of the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire is offered by Yeats in his 1933 poem "Byzantium."

Byzantium (1933)

*The unpurged images of day recede;
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song
After great cathedral gong;
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.*

*Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.*

*Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planed on the starlit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.*

*At midnight on the Emperor's pavements flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.*

*Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor*

*Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.*⁵⁴

Prior to poets Cavafy and Yeats, the Scottish historical novelist Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) had been so intrigued by the legend of Byzantium that he crafted a historical romance set during the reign of the Emperor Alexius Comnenus (1081-1118). *Count Robert of Paris*, (originally published circa 1832), is highly fanciful, recounting the adventures of an errant Western Crusader in 11th-century Constantinople who attains unlikely proximity (not to mention familiarity) with female members of the imperial family such as the Empress Irene and the Princess Anna Comnena. Despite its artistic license *Count Robert* does demonstrate that despite the negative press of Gibbon and others in the late 18th- and early 19th-century, there was a public curiosity (if little knowledge of Byzantium) about this long lost civilization of the East.

In the intervening century between the work of Sir Walter Scott and the mid-20th-century, enormous advances had been made in Byzantine Studies. Residual negative attitudes did remain in some scholarly circles regarding gender/sexual aspects of Eastern Roman civilization. But as advances were made in the understanding of human sexuality and social mores changed, the gender/sexual perspective became more studied and of interest to some scholars. Diehl in his pioneering research on women in Byzantine society and Diener's examination of eunuchism distinguished them as among the first scholars seriously to examine the importance of gender roles in Byzantium.

After the women's and other counter-cultural movements of the 1960's and 1970's, the study of gender became more widely accepted in university settings. In the past decade not only has the study of sexuality and gender become accepted in Byzantine

Studies (the works of Liz James and Judith Herrin), but the topic of Byzantine civilization, in particular the subjects of sex and gender in Byzantium, has now crossed into the realm of pop culture.

Although most of the general population has a minimal knowledge of world history at best--and even less a grasp of Byzantine history—some of the unique gendered institutions of Byzantium appear to capture the popular imagination. Several fictional works treating Byzantine topics have been developed in recent years, from the 1962 historical novel entitled *Julian* by Gore Vidal, which covers the life of the Late Antiquity Emperor known as the Apostate, to the massively popular gothic/vampire/horror/romance author Anne Rice's *Blood and Gold* (2001). *Blood and Gold*, an installment of Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* series, is noteworthy for transmitting the previously little-known academic subject of Byzantium to a massive lay audience. In *Blood and Gold*, the immortal vampire Marius travels to 6th-century Constantinople where he becomes embroiled in conflict with the glamorous blood-sucking vampire Eudoxia. Rice not only manages to create a vibrant picture of Constantinople in the 6th-century as a cosmopolitan world capital, she makes Byzantium *sexy*. Sex appeal is carried further by Christopher Harris in *Memoirs of a Byzantine Eunuch* (2002). Harris, with a fair degree of historical accuracy, brings to life the world of 9th-century Constantinople with an unusual protagonist: a eunuch slave named Zeno. Zeno's origins in obscurity in Russia, capture, enslavement, castration and subsequent rise to the highest echelons of power in the imperial palace make for compelling reading, punctuated by explicit sex scenes. The eunuch theme is repeated in an unusual manner in *Four for a Boy, a John the Eunuch Mystery* (2003) by Mary Reed and Eric Mayer. In this fourth installment of the series,

John the Eunuch, Lord Chamberlain to the Emperor Justinian I, is presented with another murder to solve. Reed and Mayer do a good job in their presentation of the diversity of 6th-century Constantinople, both the splendor and the squalor, while representing the protagonist eunuch character in a realistic, if not somewhat anachronistically modern, manner. Perhaps the most accurate literary portrayal of Byzantium during the Crusader period is *Baudolino* (2000), a historical novel by the Italian scholar and best-selling author Umberto Eco. Constantinople during the sack of the city in 1204 forms the setting for the exposition of the novel. The rapine, destruction and psychological trauma of the era are pellucidly brought to life. Historical personages such as the German Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (c. 1123-1190) and the Byzantine historian and imperial minister Niketas Choniates (c. 1150-1213) are characters woven into the narrative, interacting with the itinerant Italian knight Baudolino as he recounts his quest for the legendary eastern kingdom of the Christian ruler Prester John.

Modern pop culture's appropriation of Byzantium is not limited to the realm of the novel. In 1997-9 the Microsoft© Corporation created a video game entitled the *Age of Empires II—Age of Kings*, in which participants gauge the various military and economic levels of development of a select number of world civilizations and do battle against one another. The Byzantine Empire is included as one of the formidable civilizations in the *Age of Empires*. In recent years a perfume from the French house of Rochas named *Byzantium*, has appeared. And, no doubt, the Byzantine sweet tooth would be delighted to learn that the Russell Stover© company has produced a collection of *Byzantine Assorted Chocolates*, informing buyers on the back box cover that the Byzantine Empire was a major actor in European history and served as a conduit between

the ancient and modern worlds. Just as the “Byzantine Collection is designed to be your link to the other popular Russell Stover© assortments.”

The meaning of Byzantium has constantly changed over the centuries and is necessarily dependent upon those who impose meaning to it. To the Byzantines, their Empire was the cynosure of the civilized world. To the Catholics the Byzantines were schismatics. To Gibbon and the Enlightenment philosophers, Byzantine civilization represented the degeneracy of the classical Roman Empire. However in the past century and a half the rehabilitation of Byzantium has greatly advanced in the intellectual community, in particular since the European Enlightenment of the late 18th-century. Knowledge of Byzantine civilization remains vague among the general public but has increased recently by the appropriation of Byzantine themes into the popular culture. And, interestingly, topics such as gender and sexual themes which previously had compelled scholars to stigmatize Byzantine civilization as degenerate, are now used as selling-points valuable for promoting sex-appeal in the marketing of Byzantium. Perhaps the ever-evolving concept of Byzantium is best described by Professor Cyril Mango in his preface to *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, “Byzantium has not changed: our attitudes have, and will doubtless change again in the future.”⁵⁵

ENDNOTES

¹ A.A. Vasiliev, History of the Byzantine Empire, 324-1453, Vols I & II (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980) 714-7.

² Vasiliev, HBS, 718.

³ Deno John Geanakoplos, Constantinople and the West: Essays on Late Byzantine (Palaeologan) and Italian Renaissances and the Byzantine and Roman Churches (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) 3.

⁴ Geanakoplos, CAW, 34.

⁵ Vasiliev, HBS, 3.

⁶ Vasiliev, HBS, 4.

⁷ Vasiliev, HBS, 6.

⁸ Alexis Politis, "From Christian Roman Emperors to the Glorious Greek Ancestors," David Ricks and Paul Magdalino, eds. Byzantium and the Modern Greek Identity, Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College London, Publications 4 (Brookfield USA: Ashgate, 1998) 14.

⁹ Vasiliev, HBS, 7.

¹⁰ David Perkins, ed., English Romantic Writers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1967) 2.

¹¹ Perkins, ERW, 2.

¹² Perkins, ERW, 2.

¹³ Politis, "From Christian Roman Emperors to the Glorious Greek Ancestors," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 1.

¹⁴ Politis, "From Christian Roman Emperors to the Glorious Greek Ancestors," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 6.

¹⁵ Politis, "From Christian Roman Emperors to the Glorious Greek Ancestors," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 10.

¹⁶ David Ricks and Paul Magdalino, eds. Byzantium and the Modern Greek Identity, Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College London, Publications 4 (Brookfield USA: Ashgate, 1998) viii.

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- ¹⁷ Peter Mackridge, "Byzantium and the Greek Language Question in the Nineteenth Century." BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 50.
- ¹⁸ Mackridge, "Byzantium and the Greek Language Question in the Nineteenth Century." BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 53.
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- ²⁰ Politis, "From Christian Roman Emperors to the Glorious Greek Ancestors," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 13.
- ²¹ Vasilios N. Makrides, "Byzantium in Contemporary Greece: the Neo-Orthodox Current of Ideas," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 149.
- ²² Kitromilides, "On the Intellectual Content of Greek Nationalism: Paparrigopoulos, Byzantium and the Great Idea," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 28.
- ²³ Kitromilides, "On the Intellectual Content of Greek Nationalism: Paparrigopoulos, Byzantium and the Great Idea," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 31.
- ²⁴ Kitromilides, "On the Intellectual Content of Greek Nationalism: Paparrigopoulos, Byzantium and the Great Idea," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 28.
- ²⁵ Kitromilides, "On the Intellectual Content of Greek Nationalism: Paparrigopoulos, Byzantium and the Great Idea," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 32.
- ²⁶ Kitromilides, "On the Intellectual Content of Greek Nationalism: Paparrigopoulos, Byzantium and the Great Idea," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 29.
- ²⁷ Huxley, "Aspects of Modern Greek Historiography of Byzantium," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 18.
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- ²⁹ Mackridge, "Byzantium and the Greek Language Question in the Nineteenth Century." BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 53.
- ³⁰ Mackridge, "Byzantium and the Greek Language Question in the Nineteenth Century." BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 54.
- ³¹ Mackridge, "Byzantium and the Greek Language Question in the Nineteenth Century." BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 54.

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- ³² Camille Paglia, Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 389.
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- ³⁵ Paglia, SP, 434-5.
- ³⁶ Paglia, SP, 389.
- ³⁷ Gregory Jusdanis, The Poetics of Cavafy: Textuality, Eroticisim, History (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987) 156.
- ³⁸ Jusdanis, POC, 159.
- ³⁹ Intro. of Theoharis Constantine Theoharis in Constantine P. Cavafy Before Time Could Change Them: The Complete Poems of Constantine P. Cavafy (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2001) xxiv-xxv.
- ⁴⁰ Constantine P. Cavafy Before Time Could Change Them: The Complete Poems of Constantine P. Cavafy (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2001) 33.
- ⁴¹ Jusdanis, POC, 124.
- ⁴² Cavafy, BTCCT, 116.
- ⁴³ Gregory Jusdanis, The Poetics of Cavafy: Textuality, Eroticisim, History (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987) 178.
- ⁴⁴ Anthony Hirst, "Two Cheers for Byzantium: Equivocal Attitudes in the Poetry of Palamas and Cavafy," BMGI, Ricks and Magdalino, 105.
- ⁴⁵ Robert Liddell, Cavafy: A Biography (New York: Schocken Books, 1974) 78.
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⁵⁰ O'Donnell, Sailing to Byzantium, 43.

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⁵² O'Donnell, Sailing to Byzantium, 69-70.

⁵³ W.B. Yeats, The Poems, A New Edition, Ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1983)193-4.

⁵⁴ Yeats, The Poems, 248-9.

⁵⁵ Cyril Mango, preface, The Oxford History of Byzantium, ed. Cyril Mango (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) v.

Conclusion

Paglia has written that “The human record is virtually universally one of cruelty barely overcome and restrained by civilization.”¹ To modern eyes the years between 330 and 1453 CE appear to have been a time of grinding poverty, misery, ignorance, cruelty and violence. In the transition from the society of Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire believed itself to be the embodiment of Christianity and purveyor of civilization. As defender of the faith charged with the mission of evangelization, Byzantium bestowed not only the gift of civilization but with Eastern Orthodoxy also the promise of salvation. Life was fragile during the Middle Ages and there was no shortage of suffering. Death pervaded every aspect of daily life and was often sudden. To the Byzantines, death was nothing to be feared. What was to be feared was death without the saving grace of Christ through Orthodox Christianity. And with this in mind the Byzantines constructed a society in an earthly, physical sense but, more consequentially, always maintained a perspective toward the eternal life beyond. The metaphysical realities of the spiritual world were a tangible reality to the Byzantines. They accordingly structured their administrative, ecclesiastical and governmental bureaucracies in a manner which they believed exactly mirrored the lattice of heaven replete with artificially gendered angelic-resembling intermediary beings belonging to both the earthly plane of the Empire and the heavenly realm of God. It is this conceptualization and physical manifestation of faith that has so perplexed subsequent post 16th-century reviewers of Byzantine history who based their views of non-standard

gender behaviors and practices on perceptions dating back to Antiquity and on Enlightenment notions of scientific objectivity.

Our current understanding of Byzantium comes largely from historical works written since the European Enlightenment of the late 18th-century. Tensions and conflicts between Byzantium and the West date from Late Antiquity and their underlying causes have been examined by scholars and are largely understood. It is generally acknowledged that influential historians writing about Byzantine civilization in the past two centuries (for example, Gibbon and Herder) formed negative appraisals of the Eastern Roman Empire because of their misapprehensions about the mystical and religious orientation of Byzantine society. And these negative opinions became part of the generally received perception of Byzantine civilization. However, a study of the historical works written on the subject of Byzantium since the Enlightenment shows another salient factor in the negative appraisal of Byzantine civilization: A trend of negative pronouncements made either directly (Gibbon and Ostrogorsky), or obliquely (Norwich), about what was perceived to be the invidious influence of female anima or energies as manifest in non-standard gender behaviors and practices such as the prominence of women of high status in governmental affairs and the influence accorded castrated males known as eunuchs. Other scholars, such as Treadgold and Vasiliev, do not thoroughly address the Byzantine's motivational factors for allowing female influence in government nor the importance of eunuchs in Byzantine society, and hence do not adequately convey to the reader the phenomenological outlook which animated the Byzantine perspective. To Gibbon, for example, Byzantine Eastern Orthodox religion and the practice of using eunuchs in the court bureaucracy in addition to female influence

in governmental affairs were all indicative of enervation and decay caused by an eastern orientaling principle: the vitiation of masculine vitality and action by the luxurious indolence of female anima. For the scholars of the Enlightenment and well into the 20th-century, female presence in governmental affairs, eunuchism, and homosexual behavior were vaguely conflated, ending in the same deleterious result: the diminution of the active, assertive qualities of manly vigor which led to the enervated, vitiated, irrational, lacking self-control state of being woman-like. Since pre-historic times the female principle has been equated with what Paglia has termed a “grounding in nature,”² a symbolic return to the anxiety-causing anarchic vicissitudes of the natural realm.

Since its foundation in the 4th-century of the common era, the Eastern Roman Empire has remained enigmatic for outside observers. To a general modern audience the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine Empire (as it came to be called in English in the 19th-century--long after the empire’s destruction in the 15th-century),³ remains exotic. Accordingly, a much greater appreciation of Byzantine civilization has developed since the mid-20th century. Long-standing historically-based conflicts arising from religious and political disagreements and cultural differences between the Hellenized Eastern Orthodox world of the Byzantines and Roman Catholic Western Europe have been recorded since the 5th-century of the common era. Both the Byzantines and Western Europeans held particular, often stereotypical views of one another. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and the extermination of Byzantine material culture followed by centuries of Ottoman rule, it was predominately in the West that historical studies of Byzantine civilization were made. And in the West in particular, the interpretation of

Byzantine history which came to be known in the popular imagination originated largely from the works of Enlightenment historians and their intellectual protégées.

The Western European Enlightenment of the 18th-century was an era distinguished by the development of a world-view consisting of a set of protocols based on empirical data known as the modern scientific method. Late 18th-century intellectual thought was also generally characterized by antipathy to the rigid clerical hierarchism as it existed, for example, in the Roman Catholic Church. With this frame of reference Enlightenment scholarly historical studies enunciated a decidedly negative appraisal of Byzantine civilization, which they considered as steeped in overly religious irrationality and superstition and run by insidious clerics. These assessments, which reached their most eloquent articulation in the work of Edward Gibbon, ironically, betrayed an underlying Roman Catholic Western bias against the Byzantines based on religious antagonism and fundamental misunderstandings about the nature of Byzantine society.

The Enlightenment antipathy to clericalism and unease with non-standard gender behaviors and practices were inherited by intellectuals of the 19th-century, during their development of historiographical writing into an actual academic discipline. An accurate understanding of the very nature of Byzantine society and the exceedingly complex social relationships within that society are still difficult for a modern audience to appreciate. These social relationships, which for centuries have interested scholars who have endeavored to evaluate the place of Byzantium among world civilizations: God and mankind; the universe and the earth; Constantinople and the Empire; the present time and eternity; the Emperor, his subjects, and the Church; master and slave; barbarians and citizens; and what can be described as non-standard gender behaviors and practices for

certain women and the artificially created intermediate gendered state of eunuchism. All of these conflated with the archaic concept of vitiating female anima, and all are crucial to a better understanding of the unique nature of Byzantine civilization and how that unique nature lay the foundations of the modern world.

As the legitimate continuation of the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire encompassed 1,123 years from 330 CE to 1453. The Late Roman phase of the Empire, dating from the end of Antiquity, approximately the 4th through mid 7th century of the common era, was chiefly distinguished by the consolidation of power by a senior emperor, the economic and political ascendancy of the eastern portion of the Roman Empire emphasized by the foundation of the new eastern city of imperial residence, Constantinople, and by the gradual Hellenization of old Roman legal and administrative institutions and the incorporation of Christianity.

The middle period (*circa* 750-850), has been referred to as a “dark ages” due to the paucity of artistic and cultural output available to modern historians that is still not fully understood. This middle period of Byzantine history was a turbulent time marked by violent religious controversies—most notably the Iconoclast disputes. Major doctrinal positions were more fully articulated by the Eastern Orthodox Church and dramatic administrative changes were enacted in which civil authority was transferred to military authorities in outlying regions or *themes*.

After the upheavals of the iconoclast controversies, the years 850-1000 saw a period of relative prosperity for the Empire. Some territorial gains were made against the Arabs on the eastern front and cautious political alliances were forged with Western Europe. An upsurge in the artistic and literary output of this era, due perhaps to increased

internal security and stability, has been termed the “Macedonian Renaissance,” eponymously named after the ruling dynasty founded by the Emperor Basil I, the “Macedonian”(circa 826-835? –886).

Impressive victories against the Bulgars marked the beginning of what has been called the period of “Westernization,” from approximately the year 1000 to 1204. But an era which began with such promise for the Empire rapidly deteriorated into a period of military decline with crushing defeats by the Seljuks at the battles of Manzikert in 1071, and Myriocephalum in 1176, ending with the temporary overthrow of the Byzantine government and occupation of Constantinople by the knights of the Fourth Crusade from 1204 to 1261. Before the occupation of 1204, this period was distinguished by an efflorescence of the arts under the rule of the Comneni, and increased contact with and absorption of western cultural influences. A robust urban class developed as did the strength of the military aristocracy. However conditions for the free peasantry worsened as more rural farmers became bound to large landowners.

The years 1261-1453 witnessed the final economic and military decline and collapse of the Byzantine Empire. Following the reconquest of Constantinople by Michael VIII Palaeologus in 1261, the Empire emerged in a much weakened and vulnerable condition. Huge territorial losses had been sustained and the capital was in ruins facing imminent economic collapse. The gold currency depreciated in value, and trading concessions to various Italian states in return for military aid deprived the Empire of crucial customs revenues. As a cost-reducing measure, the Byzantine naval fleet was scrapped, leaving the Empire even more vulnerable to foreign aggression. Internally, palace usurpations, political instability and a civil war (1341-47) left the Empire in an

even more precarious position. Ecclesiastical controversies further divided the ailing Empire, however the position of the Patriarchate and church were somewhat strengthened during this period as citizens rallied behind the church as both the giver of solace in dire circumstances and the defender of true Orthodoxy.

Ironically, as the state disintegrated, Byzantine cultural life remained vigorous during this period. The first works of vernacular literature began to appear and renewed interest in the classics was shown as the Byzantines began to cultivate a sense of Hellenic identity with roots in Antiquity. Literary works produced during the late period were sometimes interpreted as static and unimaginative by later commentators but Nicol notes: "The style of classical rhetoric was that which the Byzantines thought fit for the expression of their literature [and art][...]The eternal verities which it expressed do not change."⁴ By the beginning of the 15th-century the Empire was essentially a vassal state of the Ottomans, comprising only the city of Constantinople and a few minor territorial holdings in Greece. The end came on the morning of May 29, 1453 with the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II, ending the 1,123 year history of the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire.

For three centuries after the collapse of the Empire, persons interested in Byzantine history were mainly non-professional historians, often dilettantes, concerned not with Byzantine society itself but only with certain aspects of Byzantine society such as its monarchy or retrieving classical Greek texts preserved by the Byzantines. The "science" of writing history as an academic discipline was formalized by scholars relatively recently in the mid-1800s. Particularly in Germany and Austria, university professors such as Leopold von Ranke, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Theodor von Sickel and

Theodor Mommsen developed the discipline of “historiography,” in which historical source materials were carefully scrutinized for legitimacy, and particulars from the sources were used in creating a narrative history. The emphasis was on scrupulous attention to the sources, precision and historical accuracy. Professional “detachment” of the historian with regard to his subject also was encouraged. Prior to that time the writing of history was considered more a pass-time of dilettantes, in which authors felt free to insert their own personal or moral opinions into their texts, oblivious to the historical sources.

In reviewing historical works written during the past two centuries, the present expectation is that more recent works should be more comprehensible to the modern reader, and concerned with interpreting historical data in relation to current concerns. Professional historical detachment or “impartiality” is expected, and topics which are of interest to a modern audience, such as sexuality and gender identity, are construed to be viewed through the prism of historical fact. While this may be generally true, this study has shown that writers as early as Diehl and Diener (writing in the 1920’s and 30’s) displayed surprisingly “modern” insights by examining topics which are of great interest today, such as the importance of female agency and non-standard gender behaviors and practices in Byzantine society. And it must also be noted that Gibbon, often considered to be the most strident critic of Byzantine history, did obliquely acknowledge the importance of female presence and eunuchism in Byzantium; however, his assessment is now viewed as not entirely accurate.

This thesis has sought to gain an understanding of why Byzantine history has been generally viewed negatively or been absent entirely from the modern Western

historical consciousness. To this aim a review of secondary sources was undertaken, examining eight historical works, both scholarly and popular, concerned with Byzantine history and civilization, authored by scholars from Eastern, Central and Western Europe and North America. The main works reviewed are widely accepted by scholars as among the most authoritative studies written about Byzantine civilization since the mid-18th century, and form the basis of current understanding of the Eastern Roman Empire for a general audience. Researched and written during a period of more than two hundred years, these works reveal the state of knowledge, at the time of publication, about Byzantium and reflect the particular cultural perspectives of their authors.

The works reviewed here include *History of the Byzantine State* (1969; 97) by George Ostrogorsky, which for most of the 20th-century served as the standard reference for Byzantine history, with an emphasis on political and economic history. *History of the Byzantine Empire 324-1453* (1980), by A.A. Vasiliev, consists of two volumes which not only review the political history of Byzantium but also examine cultural aspects in Byzantine history and society. *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453* (1971), by Dimitri Obolensky, deals largely with the importance of geography in the political and cultural diffusion of Byzantine civilization in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Russia. *Imperial Byzantium* (1937) by Bertha Diener is an eclectic study of certain cultural aspects of Byzantine society; it includes an insightful study of Byzantine temperament and examines the importance of eunuchs in court rituals surrounding kingship. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88) by Edward Gibbon, in seven volumes, has for the past two centuries probably been the most widely read account of the history of the Eastern Roman Empire, translated into several languages

and re-printed numerous times. But with an examination of only political history and firm convictions against clericalism and non-standard gender behaviors and practices, Gibbon adduces an unsatisfactory summary of Byzantine history and its cultural legacy. Unlike *Decline and Fall*, *Byzantine Portraits* (1927) by the renowned French historian Charles Diehl is noteworthy because Diehl was one of the first major historians to show an interest in and understand the importance of women in the functioning of Byzantine society. Also remarkable was Diehl's research into the lives of people from the lower and middle classes. The *Byzantium* series (1988-96) by John Julius Norwich is an engaging three-volume work of popular history encompassing the entire breadth of Byzantine history. Particularly engaging is Norwich's colorful rendering of the major personalities of the period and their influence on events. Prominent female and eunuch personages are discussed. Although sometimes lacking in scholarly rigor, and rife with tabloid-appeal regarding sensationalistic sexual exploits, the *Byzantium* series nonetheless makes Byzantine civilization accessible to a large general readership. And lastly, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (1990) by Warren Treadgold is the most recent comprehensive scholarly synthesis of the entire history of Byzantine civilization. With an emphasis on economic factors and the importance of the monarchy in everyday life, Treadgold does not fully discuss the significance of female rulers and eunuchs in Byzantine history. *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* is a reference work of the highest scholarly merit, but because of the lack of a more thorough examination of the public roles of women and the office of eunuchism, it does not fully convey to a modern reader the vivid character of Byzantine society.

A comparative analysis based upon five important aspects of Byzantine civilization was made with the eight selected historical studies. Despite spanning over two centuries of historical thought, there was surprising concordance in four of the five selected subject headings. The prominent exception being perceptions regarding non-standard gender behaviors and practices in Byzantium. The topics compared in each of the eight historical studies were: Byzantium as a geographical center; the medial position of Byzantium to both the cultures of Islam and Western Europe; the central role of commercial, political and strategic affairs; the religious orientation of Eastern Roman society, and non-standard gender behaviors and practices in Byzantine society.

All of the authors reviewed unanimously agree on the crucial role of geography in the formation and development of Byzantine civilization. Particularly detailed and helpful in understanding the importance of geography in the formation of Byzantine civilization, and Balkan and Russian cultures, is Obolensky's *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500-1453*. Not only in terms of topography, but also in human terms as influences from both the East and West helped to create the unique character of Byzantium. The capital city of the Empire, Constantinople, situated on the Bosphorus between the Black and Mediterranean seas, was fortuitously placed as an entrepot between Europe and Asia and in convenient distance to Russia and the Balkans in the north, and in proximity south to the northern coast of Africa. Constantinople itself was nearly impregnable, surrounded by water on three sides and a triple fortification of walls on the western, land-bound side. Most consequentially in geographical terms, Constantinople was located in the eastern portion of the Roman Empire which gave the city its distinct character based on Hellenistic culture.

The importance of geography is further manifest in Byzantine history after Byzantium developed into the geographical and cultural transitional zone between Western Europe and the Middle East. The Byzantines considered themselves to be the true defenders of Christianity, the purveyors of civilization in the Christian *oikoumene*, who felt it their mission to proselytize the barbarian world under the banner of Christ and Emperor. The birth of Islam in the 7th-century was at first of no great concern to the Byzantines who merely considered Islam as a variant of one of the numerous heretical sects of Orthodoxy, such as Arianism or Monophysitism. However, with the ascendancy of Islam in North Africa and the Levant in the 8th-century, Byzantium became a bulwark against the westward expansion of the caliphate. Both Vasiliev and Norwich duly note the importance of 8th- and 9th-century Byzantium as the defender of Europe against Islamization. In the West, as tension mounted between the Papacy and the Patriarchate, Byzantium imparted one of its most important and lasting legacies: the evangelization of the Slavs. Courted by both Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, certain Slavic peoples, including the Russians, by the 10th-century did eventually choose Orthodoxy. Through Byzantium these peoples were not only given an alphabet and a literary language, but also received their very cultural foundations which would later become the basis for the formation of several nations, including Serbia, Bulgaria and Russia. In the later phases of Byzantine history, from the 11th-century onwards, Byzantium came to occupy a precarious place situated between Western Crusading ambitions on Byzantine territories and in the Levant; and from the East, the growing imperialistic reach of the Seljuks and later Ottomans.

Until its capture by the crusaders of the Fourth Crusade in 1204, Constantinople possessed the largest population of any city in Europe and was the economic bulwark of the West. Even when founded as a center of imperial residence in 330 CE, by the Emperor Constantine I, Constantinople was located in the richer, more populous and vastly more cultured eastern region of the Roman Empire. The new city of imperial residence quickly surpassed, both in population and in economic importance, the ancient eastern centers of Antioch and Alexandria to become the premier city of the Empire. From Constantinople decisions were made that affected the economic, cultural and political affairs throughout the Empire. Administrative territorial districts or *themes* were organized and re-organized, and currency was minted. Missionaries were dispersed to proselytize to numerous foreign ethnic groups living outside the Empire, and entire peoples upon accepting Eastern Orthodoxy were lifted from illiteracy and placed within the sphere of Christian Hellenistic culture. The political, economic and cultural domination of Byzantium is well documented by Gibbon, Treadgold, Norwich, Ostrogorsky and Vasiliev.

Ecclesiastically, until the 9th-century Byzantium was an important factor in religious thought in Western Europe, though it held less sway with Rome after the Iconoclast controversies of the 8th- to 9th-centuries. But in the East, the see of Constantinople retained its primacy of place as first among equals in the world of Eastern Orthodoxy. Ironically, it is the very preeminence of Byzantium in material wealth and cultural prestige which allured numerous foreign interlocutors throughout the centuries from the East, West, North and South to covet the riches of the capital city of the Eastern Roman Empire, eventually leading to the capture of Constantinople by the crusaders in

the 13th century and the final destruction of the Empire by the Ottomans in the 15th century. Diener, Vasiliev and Norwich offer trenchant analyses of relations between the Crusaders and the Byzantines in the 13th century.

Any appreciation of Byzantine civilization would be inaccurate without an understanding of the primacy of religion in the world of the Byzantines. The anagogical or spiritual, mystical and allegorical interpretation by Byzantine society helped to create a distinct and highly nuanced culture which was perceived as inscrutable by foreign visitors and misunderstood by later scholars in their review of Byzantium. To the Byzantines the supernatural and spiritual realms were a real and tangible presence in daily life. And as the appointed guardians of the true Christian Orthodox faith, the Byzantines (or Romans as they styled themselves) felt it their duty to uphold the Empire which fused the tripartite cultural influences of Christianity, Hellenistic culture and philosophic thought with Roman legal and administrative traditions. With a strong sense of Antiquity⁵ and cultural superiority, the Byzantines felt it their Christian duty to convert the foreign or “barbarian” peoples living outside the Empire. To the Byzantines, the Empire *was* the civilized world, or *oikoumene*, and by definition anyone living outside was barbarian, uncultured, benighted and unsaved. And since the Empire with its resplendent capital at Constantinople was the defender of Christianity and the epitome of civilization itself, the hierarchical political, military, ecclesiastical, governmental and societal structures of Byzantine society became an earthly reflection, in degraded form, of the celestial hierarchy between God and the world. Thus the emperor ruled by the will of God and was believed to stand “half-way to God” as Vice-Gerent of Christ on Earth.

The Empire of the Romans with Constantinople as the capital city, composed of myriad social hierarchical gradations, was presided over by the Emperor, who as autocrat exactly duplicated Christ's rule as pantocrator over the universe. Religious thought and spiritual mysticism suffused every aspect of daily life in Byzantium. The verities of the metaphysical universe were represented by symbolism not only in religious thought, literature and art, but also in distinctive physical manifestations such as the castration of males into eunuchs. Contemporaneous Western chroniclers such as Liudprand of Cremona in the 10th-century were contemptuous of Byzantine religiosity. The Western disdain to Orthodox Christianity was exacerbated in the Enlightenment by critics such as Gibbon who felt strong antipathy to clericalism and aspects of religious practice which they deemed to be superstition. The effects of this antagonism toward Byzantine religion persisted well after the Enlightenment. Sociologist and author of *Conquerors and Slaves*, Keith Hopkins rightly notes that by dismissing the Byzantines' religious-based phenomenological view of the world, one risks misunderstanding entirely that society's underlying *anima humana*. Hopkins refers to the "modern rationalistic antipathy to 'superstition' as unworthy of a 'fact-based' history. The antipathy has allowed modern scholars systematically to under-value" myths, etc. "Modern scholarly concentration on "facts" and on the surviving epigraphic 'evidence' has diverted attention from the beliefs and feelings which prompted the creation of the evidence." Incongruities in feeling and action do exist:

Belief can be, and often is, at odds with action; indeed there would be little point in having ideals if they were always or even often realized. Nor is there any profit in accusing the inconsistent of hypocrisy or deceit; spoken skepticism and conformist superstition may simply belong to different pigeon-holes or different social contexts.⁶

As manifestations of Byzantine religiosity, it is in the realm of non-standard gender behaviors and practices that this research has found to be a major factor in the negative valuation given to Byzantine civilization since the time of the late 18th-century European Enlightenment. An historical unease with women asserting a major influence in Byzantine society and, in particular, with the existence and integration of eunuchs into the highest echelons of power has been articulated by influential critics such as Gibbon in the 18th-century, Lecky in the 19th-century and even the preeminent 20th-century Byzantine scholar George Ostrogorsky. And yet the reasons for this animus on the part of scholars has never been fully addressed. The principle of feminine-vitiating energy of the East was applied to “Orientalize” and imprecate Byzantium with sexual and moral implications. The fear being, according to Paglia, that “The western analytic mind is reabsorbed into its sultry Asiatic origins.”⁷ Cameron discusses how Byzantium came to be included in this Orientalizing trend:

First of all, and most fundamentally, it [Byzantium] is defined as representing ‘the other’. Whereas the classical Greeks are somehow like ourselves, the Byzantines are not. In Montesquieu’s ‘Considerations on the Greatness and Decadence of the Romans’ (1734), Byzantium was already classified as an oriental despotism, contrasted with Roman constitutionalism, a line of thought which Gibbon developed further. In this tradition, luxury, corruption and superstition are taken as the hallmarks which separate Byzantine culture from the rational and ‘liberal’ civilization of ancient Greece. Byzantium is subsumed under the category of oriental societies which are seen as ‘soft’, ‘indolent’, and therefore feminine, while classical Greece, and still more, Rome, stand for toughness and strength. The set of insidious assumptions and attitudes which has been labeled ‘orientalism’, has thus also had a major share in forming attitudes towards Byzantium. They tend to focus round sets of polarities. One of the most pervasive is that of male/female, the latter featuring often in the characteristic guise of the femme fatale. Take Gustave Flaubert, for example: Edward Said writes, ‘woven through all of Flaubert’s Oriental experiences, exciting or disappointing, is an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex...the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies.’⁸

The issues of non-standard gender behaviors and practices--in the form of high status-women asserting power and the existence of eunuchs--are interrelated with roots in Antiquity and form a basis in Byzantine religious conceptualization. In the Byzantine world, the pre-Christian belief that females were a sort of defective variation of males was incorporated, but overlaid with the Christian interpretation of the fallen nature of woman as temptress to man. Women and femininity were believed to exert a vitiating effect on masculine vigor. Yet Byzantine women of high social standing, due to their proximity to the Emperor, acquired an elevated status which enabled several ambitious women to assert power indirectly through their husbands and sons, or to assume power themselves as regents or actually as Emperor.

Likewise, appreciating the significance that court eunuchs came to play in the ordering of Byzantine society is essential to gaining an adequate understanding of the Byzantines' psychological perspective and ordering of their world. Deeply religious, immersed in the mysteries of spirituality, the Byzantines endeavored to replicate the celestial hierarchy of heaven in daily life, producing a blend of "culture and spirituality which characterizes Byzantine civilization."⁹ Accordingly, the re-enactment of the divine taxonomy required a substitute for God (the Emperor), with angels as intermediaries between the Almighty and his creation (eunuchs), and the civilized Christian world (represented by Constantinople and the Empire with all its citizens) opposed by the demonic forces of evil (the heathen and/or schismatic foreign "barbarian" peoples outside the jurisdiction and saving grace of the Empire). More than other symbolic representation of the cosmological drama between earth and heaven, the practice of incorporating eunuchs into Byzantine governmental and administrative structures became

of crucial importance to the functioning of the Empire. The origins of castrating males for imperial service are lost in the distant past, but the custom appears to have originated in the ancient societies of the Middle East and was eventually incorporated into Roman and subsequently Byzantine cultures. Enmeshed with religious symbolism, eunuchs in Byzantium came to be likened to angels: beings of neuter gender--yet always in the guise of young males--who intermediated between God and the earthly realm. In Byzantium where the Emperor governed his realm by the will of God, it was only logical that eunuchs, genotypically male but--like angels--technically neither male nor female, took the role of intermediaries between the sovereign and his subjects.

In theory, while not always in practice, eunuchs were looked upon as almost supernatural beings. For example, in the 2nd- to 8th-centuries, many eunuchs were of foreign origin; they were thus, for all practical purposes, without relevant earthly ties in the Empire. Therefore without "space." And since castration prior to puberty enabled eunuchs to retain a more youthful appearance than other males, eunuchs in an aesthetic sense existed as "timeless." In a figurative sense, out of both time and space, eunuchs not only functioned as intermediaries between the Emperor and his courtiers, but were also allowed access to the innermost recesses of the women's quarters in the imperial palace. Just as angels, eunuchs traversed across boundaries of gender and class, bound by neither "space" (of obligation to country of origin or family) nor obviously subject to the ravages of time. With no hope of producing their own biological progeny, loyalties could be directed wholeheartedly to their masters. And as the prestige of the Emperor increased with time, his legitimacy was enforced by separation from contact with his subjects (mirroring the distance between God and the world of mere mortals). All interactions

between non-royal family members and the Person of the Emperor were mediated through imperial eunuchs with elaborate symbolic rituals. This conferred enormous power on certain castrated royal court officials, who evolved into a professional, independent, institutionalized force with their own interests. Hopkins believes that the presence of eunuchs became crucial to the preservation of central monarchic authority because imperial eunuchs, with allegiance only to the Emperor, came to form somewhat of a buffer institution between the Emperor and the power of the civil, military and landed aristocracies.¹⁰ Impervious to the seeming limitations of time and space, and capable of traversing gender and class boundaries with no aspirations for children of their own, and resolutely loyal, eunuchs became the ideal servants.

The functions and status of eunuchs varied throughout the history of the Empire. In the 2nd- to 8th-centuries of the common era the incorporation of castrated males became more and more frequent in Late Roman and later Byzantine court and government. Many eunuchs of this period were foreign-born, frequently of slave origin. During the 9th- to 11th-centuries eunuchs in the imperial court gained increasing prominence and influence in government administration. This period is distinguished by the growing distance between the aristocracy and the imperial family, as nearly all access to the person of the emperor was now conducted through eunuchs. Amassing influence and wealth, the majority of eunuchs began to originate from native-born males from within the empire, many from upper-class families. Being castrated for service in government became a lucrative career opportunity for many younger sons of well-to-do families. Even though several eunuchs of this period attained wealth and status, popular opinion toward them remained mixed. Some considered eunuchs as holy men while others, envious of the

wealth and imperial access afforded to castrated individuals, considered them untrustworthy and corrupt. Eventually the prominence of eunuchs in the court began to decline with the accession of the Comneni dynasty in the late 11th-century, which consolidated power by favoring blood kin and through marriage alliances, hence diminishing the influence of non-related advisors. However, the presence of eunuchs in the imperial court as potent symbols of Byzantine spirituality persisted until the final destruction of the empire in 1453, and the practice of utilizing eunuchs in court life was incorporated, in altered form, by the Ottomans.

The most negative epithets directed toward eunuchs nearly always assigned to them what were commonly perceived to be feminine characteristics. Like females, eunuchs were derided as being deviously cunning, vessels of unbridled passion and feckless emotion, attributes which—contrary to masculine restraint and straightforwardness--were viewed as destabilizing to society. Inability to control one's emotions or excess in food, drink or sensual pleasure, smelling of perfume and having soft white skin were considered feminine traits¹¹ which were generally believed to exert an ensnaring and enervating effect on masculine vigor and decorum. Similar characteristics referring to a lack of self-control had been ascribed since Antiquity to persons engaging in what was considered excessive sexual behavior, which due to changing Christian-influenced perceptions of the human body (and its relation to public space and the city since Late Antiquity)¹² came to be more narrowly attributed to male homosexual behavior. Thus traits which were considered to be feminine, homosexual behavior and eunuchism came to be nebulously conflated. For example, commentators such as Saint Basil (*circa* 329-79) denounced eunuchs as being both effeminate and

sexually rapacious with women,¹³ while others viewed them as seducers of boys. Ambiguity and antithetical language fills the historical record in regard to eunuchs.¹⁴ A contradictory mixture of contemptuous epithets and praises about individuals who were simultaneously reviled and held in awe, indeed often respected, perhaps best conveys the anxiety this enigmatic, artificially gendered state-of-being elicited from the Byzantines, and continued to do so for centuries to come.

The curious association* in popular conception of feminine attributes, eunuchism and homosexuality developed over a long period of time and was influenced by each of the succeeding cultures of the ancient Middle East, classical Greece, Rome and early Christianity thought. The oldest of these associations--the concept of "male enervation and female license"¹⁵--has existed since Antiquity. Perhaps originating in anxiety surrounding the uncanniness of female reproductive capabilities and because of lesser physical strength, the female body was viewed to be an inferior, imperfect version of the male body. Believed to be closer to the physical world, female nature was believed to be not only capable of generating life but also potentially dangerous. Most notably the characteristics of insatiable sexual lust and lack of self-control became attributed to female nature.

In classical Greece the female form was not considered beautiful because it was not seen as a visible instrument of action. Masculinity was prized because it represented vigor and action, assets essential for any free-born male citizen in his contribution to the defense of his *polis*. Free-born male citizens could discharge their sexual energies in any

* Modern research into the topics of women in history, eunuchism, and homosexuality are, of course, now carried out independently from one another. But as this study shows, this was not always the case and in the long process of the forging of western absolutist identity eunuchism and homosexual behavior did historically become viewed as imbued by a female anima.

way they saw fit as long as their actions were in accordance with their social standing and the general rules of comportment for the *polis* were respected. Homosexuality and institutionalized pederasty were aspects of classical Greek society and incurred no special opprobrium. What did evoke strong disapprobation was engaging in any sort of excess: be it eating, drinking, gambling or engaging in sexual behavior. Intemperance was viewed as giving in to a female nature, characteristic or *anima*. Being unable to control one's appetites was considered a serious character flaw because giving in, uncontrollably, to one's lusts made one womanlike.

The eschewal from what was perceived as characteristics of female nature was further elaborated in the Roman Empire where male citizens were encouraged to take active or dominant roles in sexual encounters with persons of both genders. Sexual passivity was equated with political passivity and would invoke the deepest shame for a Roman citizen, degrading him to the same level as a slave or woman. With the advent of Christianity, the early church fathers struggled to reconcile Christian teachings with classical philosophy, in particular Aristotelian and neo-Platonic thought. Conceptions of nature, of the natural world and what was "natural" for human behavior in conjunction with Christianity were developed. However, the ancient belief in the vitiating power of feminine nature was incorporated intact by the Church fathers who now added the concept of "original sin" to the condition of womanhood. In this Christian era of Late Antiquity, the human body also came to be perceived entirely different from classical times. No longer an autonomous being in the public *polis* designed to revel in sensuality and beauty, the body was now to be the personal vessel of Christ, concealed, chaste and private. Sexual relations were to be conducted only through the sanctity of marriage.

Drawing from scriptural exegesis and misconceptions about the “natural” world, homosexual behavior was deemed to be an abomination because of its non-procreative nature and because of a long-standing belief that certain passive sexual practices could render males “woman-like.” Henceforth non-standard gender behaviors and practices such as homosexual acts and eunuchism came to be imbued with the stigma of enfeebling and destabilizing female anima, eunuchs being included because of their lack of generative capability.

After the material destruction of the Eastern Roman Empire in 1453, most of the areas which had been under Byzantine suzerainty came under Islamic, largely Ottoman rule. Western Europe, in particular after 1492, turned its attention west across the Atlantic to the Americas, in hopes of establishing direct and lucrative trading arrangements with the wealthy societies of Eastern Asia and India, without having to engage costly Turkish and Arab middlemen in the regions once under Byzantine control. With the Byzantines no longer extant to define themselves, the reputation of Byzantium was largely left in the hands of societies which had been hostile to its very existence. Thus the negative Western attitudes toward Byzantium, which arose from a millennia of disagreements, misunderstandings, competitiveness and outright jealousy, became the standard representations of a society which no longer existed. Although the Byzantines could no longer speak to counter negative caricatures of their society, several prominent ethnic Greeks in Italy and Byzantine émigrés did carry the flame of classical learning, which had been preserved in Byzantium, to the West. This was Byzantium’s most prominent contribution to Western civilization. Scholars such as Barlaam, Bessarion and Manuel Chrysoloras were very influential in the transmission of Greek learning and

language, which greatly stimulated the nascent Italian Renaissance in the 14th and 15th-centuries. However, in Renaissance Italy the main interest was the collection of classical Greek texts archived in Byzantium and not in Byzantine civilization. Another century would pass before serious interest would be shown in Byzantine civilization.

Although Byzantium was most appreciated as a repository of classical learning, interest in the Eastern Roman Empire as a subject worthy of study in itself had never entirely ended nor been forgotten. In Germany in the 16th-century, and in France under royal patronage in the 17th-century, interest was shown in the monarchy and certain aspects of Byzantine civilization. France remained the center of Byzantine Studies until the Enlightenment in the 18th-century, when the subject of the Eastern Roman Empire fell out of favor with intellectuals. Prominent Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire and Montesquieu wrote scathing condemnations of Byzantine civilization, which in their views, represented the most reactionary features of society such as clericalism, superstition, blind faith and a despotic monarchy. Despite the rhetoric stressing the importance of reason, in their negative commentary about Byzantine civilization, the Enlightenment philosophers unwittingly brought to their calculus a Christian, rather narrow Catholic perspective, about gender roles and relied upon ancient notions about the vitiation of society by female energy and incorporated Roman Catholic biases against the Eastern Orthodox Church. Enlightenment disdain for Byzantium reached its apogee in the late 18th-century with the publication of Edward Gibbon's multi-volume *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. *Decline and Fall* was translated into several languages and reached a wide international audience, thus bringing the existence of the Eastern Roman Empire long overdue publicity. Unfortunately, Gibbon's emphasis on political history,

and his rather dismissive treatment of the importance of religion on the character of Byzantine society, created an unsatisfactory portrayal of Byzantine civilization. *Decline and Fall* therefore holds the ironic position of making the Eastern Roman Empire known to a wide readership, but creating an inaccurate view of that civilization.

It was not until the mid-19th century that the study of history as an academic discipline came to be developed. Scholars following the example of influential German philologists and academics, such as the Schlegel brothers, von Ranke and the Austrian Theodor von Sickel, developed the “scientific” discipline of historiography in which scrupulous attention was paid to primary source material. Emphasis was given to precision and academic scholarly detachment of the researcher from his subject. The history of Byzantium came to be viewed under a somewhat more balanced view than that of Gibbon by 19th-century historians such as Baynes, Finlay and Bury.

Contemporaneous with the changes in the academic world of the early 19th-century, changes in trends in popular literature and thought were underway in a movement which came to be called “Romanticism.” Romanticism represented a departure from Enlightenment thought in advocating a liberal humanist agenda, rejecting the notion of unchanging physical laws governing human existence, and embracing the beauty of the natural world. The mysterious, the exotic and the supernatural captured the Romantics’ imagination. And the lands of Southern Europe and the Levant were particularly appealing as largely pre-industrial idylls seen as close to nature, places once endowed with greatness by the long-dead civilizations of Antiquity. The mid-19th century conception of the Eastern Roman Empire was especially suited to the Romantic “orientalization” of people and places in Southern Europe because Byzantium could be fit

into the Romantic's notion of a lost great civilization, heirs to the genius of classical Greece, ruled by kings who nobly went to their deaths, and of which nothing remained but ruins. The popular Scottish author, Sir Walter Scott, composed in the early 19th-century the historical romance novel *Count Robert of Paris*, recounting the fanciful tale of a Western Crusader knight at the court of the Comneni in the 12th-century. The most well-known Romantic of his generation, Lord Byron was so moved by the plight of the people he felt to be the heirs of the ancient Hellenes (and Byzantines) fighting Ottoman occupation in Greece, that he joined the cause for Greek independence and died in Missolonghi at the age of thirty-six.

Surprisingly, the rehabilitation of Byzantium was particularly late to take root in the place whose inhabitants were the direct lineal descendents of the Byzantines and with the strongest affinity to Byzantine language, culture and religion: Greece. After the founding of the Kingdom of Hellas in 1832, following centuries of Ottoman rule, controversy ensued amongst Greek intellectuals regarding which identity the new nation would take. Much of the support and funding for Greek independence had come from diaspora Greeks living abroad in Europe. Deeply influenced by Enlightenment ideals of the Europe they inhabited, 19th-century diaspora Greeks looked to the glory of classical Greece as the inspiration for the new Greek nation, and viewed the Byzantine period as a time of foreign occupation—the mere continuation of Roman rule. Seeking political recognition and hoping for the Kingdom of Hellas to be welcomed into the international community of nations, the founding fathers acceded to the “mediating,” or “protecting” powers’ (Britain, Russia and France) determination that Greece should adopt a hereditary monarchical form of government replete with a Bavarian king.¹⁶ The fledgling Greek

nation was to look to Antiquity, not Byzantium, as source of its Hellenic identity. However, in downplaying the Byzantine period of their history (the period during which the definitive characteristic of the modern Greek identity developed: Eastern Orthodox Christianity), the early intellectuals of the Kingdom of Hellas were in fact reinforcing the inferiority complex imposed upon them by Western Christendom, a Western Christendom which had once been so envious of Byzantine civilization and was instrumental in its downfall. Centuries-old negative attitudes held by the West toward Byzantium became internalized in the new Greek nation. It was not until the mid-to latter portion of the 19th-century, with the publication of the monumental *History of the Greek Nation* by Constantine Paparrigopoulos, that modern Greeks began to understand their debt to the Byzantines for the preservation of their Hellenic identity. Using historical data and linguistic evidence, late 19th-century Greek scholars such as Paparrigopoulos and Spyridon Zambelios definitively demonstrated the continuity of Greek history from Antiquity through the Byzantine period to the present.

In the late 19th-century as citizens of the Kingdom of Hellas began to rediscover their Byzantine heritage, the Romantic movement in Western Europe moved into its final or “Decadent” phase. Like the Romantics earlier in the century, the “romanticized” image of the noble but doomed Empire of the Byzantines appealed to the Decadent sensibility. The perception of a moribund civilization fit into the Decadents' obsession with cruelty and death. To the Decadents, the world was squalid and life relatively meaningless. Art for art's sake was the only way of objectifying the fetid physical world. Any act of subverting the harsh dictates of the natural world by confrontation or with “an aesthetics of profanation”¹⁷ sharpened the senses and served as a victory over uncaring

nature. Sex was viewed as an unsavory part of the natural world, but non-procreative sex such as homosexuality was held to be an act of defiance to nature, a forger of “absolutist western identity.”¹⁸ Following in the tradition of the late 19th-century Decadents such as Gautier and Huysmans, Constantine Cavafy produced highly stylized poetry using themes from both the Decadent style, such as homosexuality and impending doom, in an elevated form of Greek known as *katharevousa*, frequently incorporating Byzantine topics. Cavafy, a diaspora Greek living in Egypt during the early years of the 20th century, is notable for his insistence (not widely popular at the time) that the notion of a Greek nation was far too restricting a concept to encompass Hellenism. In his use of Byzantium as an example of extra-national pan-Hellenism, masterfully controlled use of archaizing *katharevousa*, and incorporation of decadent topics such as homosexuality, Cavafy made his readers aware of the importance of literature-in-itself as a vehicle in the ongoing discussion of the Greek language and nationality.

After the destruction of Byzantine material civilization in 1453, the meaning of what Byzantium was and represented changed dramatically and continually, with each succeeding generation projecting its own concerns upon a society which no longer existed. In the opening years of the 20th century the meaning of Byzantium continued to be embodied in a variety of changing fashions. The increased availability of previously restricted primary source materials aided in the progression of historiographical scholarship and new works such as Ostrogorsky's *History of the Byzantine State* and even the reissue of *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Gibbon, with new annotations by renowned 19th-century medievalist J.B. Bury, made Byzantine history accessible to a larger and larger readership. Knowledge of Byzantine civilization in the West remained

limited but with the availability of new scholarly works, general awareness did increase. By the mid 20th-century the Irish poet and philosopher W.B. Yeats was sufficiently inspired by the legacy of the Eastern Roman Empire to state his belief that the lost civilization of Byzantium represented the perfect fusion of history, religion, aesthetics and art. Yeats' poem "Sailing to Byzantium" remains one of his most critically well-received works.

A great number of scholarly works have been produced since the mid 20th-century on Byzantine civilization, and knowledge about the subject has enormously advanced. Most 20th-century works viewed Byzantine religiosity in a more balanced fashion than did Enlightenment and 19th-century intellectuals, but several 20th-century historians continued to work under a misunderstanding about aspects of non-standard gender behaviors and practices, particularly eunuchism and the role of feminine exertion of power in government, practices which were crucial to understand if one wished to present an accurate view of Byzantine society and the importance of these practices to the functioning of that society.

Due to societal changes in the late 20th- and early 21st-centuries, aspects of Byzantine society, such as non-standard gender behaviors and practices, which were so troubling to previous generations of scholars, have become points of interest for engaging a new generation with Byzantine civilization. Topics such as sexuality, eunuchs, women in power, luxury, etc. are now seen as more appealing than repellant to a large audience as Byzantine civilization is once more appropriated by Western society (A Western society which once defined itself by its difference from Byzantium). Modern historiographical and feminist research is seriously examining the role of non-standard

gender behaviors and practices in Byzantine society, while popular culture has seen a profusion of literary works set in Byzantium featuring lurid sex scenes with eunuchs, 6th - century eunuch detectives and femme fatale blood-sucking vampires roaming the streets of Constantinople. A video game, a fragrance of perfume and even a line of chocolates has been produced with Byzantine themes.

The study of Byzantine civilization remains relevant today. Not only is the study of non-standard gender behaviors and practices in Byzantine society informative, but our reaction to these practices is instructive as is understanding why they have been so problematic for students of Byzantine history for more than two centuries. Also it is important to understand why the civilization which was the cultural antecedent to our own, the purveyor of classical Antiquity and the disseminator of Christianity, can have been so misunderstood or overlooked in the past two centuries—begging the question of Norwich: was there a “conspiracy of silence”¹⁹ about Byzantium in the West? More importantly in the current international geopolitical climate, with tensions existing between the industrialized West and the burgeoning nations of Islam, it is important to recall that the first interactions between Islam and the Christian world were with the Byzantines. Though conflict was frequent, Byzantium reached an accommodation with the Islamic world that lasted several centuries, and existed in a unique position between Western Roman Catholicism and Islam. In the Balkans, before the arrival of Islam in the region, successive Byzantine emperors dealt with rival ethnic tensions not dissimilar from events in the 1990’s. Dating from the time of the Roman Empire, the Balkans had formed a transitional zone between Europe and the Near East, and continued to do so during the Middle Ages. The West, Byzantium and Islam all developed in areas

previously under the jurisdiction of the Roman Empire, and hence were influenced by Greco-Roman traditions²⁰ and in Late Antiquity shared a diffuse cultural uniformity.²¹ After the later Middle Ages, Greek influence lessened in the West, replaced by Germanic influences. In the East, the Greek element (which had always been tenuous) was overpowered by the cultures of Persia and Arabia. Byzantium remained closest to its parental Greco-Roman roots, while the East and West moved further and further from their origins and evolved their own distinct cultural traditions. According to historian Speros Vryonis,

*Byzantium represents a society and culture midway between those of Islam and the Latin west, more akin to either than the west was to Islam or Islam to the west. It was the result of the medial position that the Orthodox peoples were psychologically prepared to accept westernization at least a century before the Muslims, and that they have felt less ill at ease than the Muslims about the problems which such an adjustment has demanded.*²²

Orthodox peoples have struggled the past 150 years to reconcile their cultures with Westernization. Often with mixed results. For the majority of Byzantines, the question of Westernization in the form of submission to the see of Rome became not only a matter of losing cultural identity, nor mere life and death. Abandoning the one and true Eastern Orthodox faith would have been tantamount to losing one's immortal soul. On a wistful and fatalistic note--probably very much as the Byzantines themselves felt in 1453, Professor Donald Nicol mused:

For the Byzantine Empire was the last Christian civilization which had its beginning, its middle and its end in the pre-Columbian era. It died before the dawning of the new age of discovery and technology, before the widening of men's horizons. Its historians, philosophers and theologians were the last of their kind who had to transmit their thoughts and ideas in manuscript alone. If they had been spared to set up a Greek printing-press at Constantinople they would have found a ready and profitable market for editions of the treasures of classical literature that they had preserved through the centuries. But in other respects the Byzantines would probably not much have enjoyed or participated in the new developments in the western world. By the fifteenth century it had

been amply proved that they could neither stomach their dislike of the westerners nor survive without their help. Most of them would prefer to go it alone than to sacrifice their faith as well as their fortune. They would rather submit to infidels whose ways, though unpleasant, were familiar, than prolong their agonies by soliciting the charity of foreign Christians who had never understood what it meant to be a Roman.

There was a streak of fatalism in the Byzantine mentality. They had sensed, with growing conviction, that their world would not after all endure until the Second Coming; that their Empire was something less than a pale reflection of the Kingdom of Heaven; and that the only permanence, the only security, and the only certain happiness were to be found in the true Kingdom above and beyond this vale of tears. When the end came in 1453 they were ready for it. It is surprising that it had not come sooner. It is perhaps as well that it came when it did.²³

It seems odd, indeed preposterous, that a civilization so remote from the modern western post-industrialized world could bear any relevance to the present day. Yet, surprisingly, as Byzantine civilization has a way of unceasingly being, Byzantium presents to us a society which is paradoxically both extinct and germane. Aside from being the purveyors of classical Greek thought and the very foundation of Western civilization, Byzantium often seemed (behind the pen of a censorious critic) largely shrouded in time by the mists of the priest's censor behind a smog of profound religiosity and stifling convention. However, a more intense look through the particulate matter, the eyes adjust and the haze partially lifts. The Byzantines leave to the modern world important questions such as, what is gender and how does society react to it? What constitutes personal and national identity? How should the church and state interrelate? Byzantium set the example of accommodation (via various methods) with different cultures, and the ability of disparate peoples to live together, united by common goals, over vast periods of time. Should a society compromise its identity in order for a slim hope at survival? Was life without freedom worth living? The most pressing question was decisively answered on the fateful Tuesday morning of May 29, 1453.

Knowledge of Byzantine civilization has ebbed and flowed periodically over the centuries in the “River of Time” described by Anna Comnena, but the civilization which was the cultural antecedent of our own society could not be indefinitely erased from history. The mystical, nearly mythical civilization which existed on the shores of the Bosphorus bequeathed to the West a rich and enduring cultural patrimony. A bequest which has grown far from its roots, having been appropriated and consigned labyrinthine appellations by succeeding generations, each intent to voice their own interpretation of the meaning of Byzantium. The truly remarkable trait of Byzantine civilization is the fact that the society represented a triumph of the faith over the material world. With its capital city nestled on the shores of the Bosphorus, protected behind thick walls, gaze fixed toward heaven, the Byzantines by sheer force of faith crafted not only their physical environment into a reflection of divine emanation, they transcended even gender to offer a view of the eternal. Safeguarding the masterpieces of Antiquity for posterity, Byzantine civilization elevated entire peoples from illiteracy into the sphere of Hellenistic culture and Christianity which consequently became the basis of several national cultures. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the vast epic which unfolded in Byzantium for more than a millennium is the courage of its citizens to remain steadfast to their faith in the face of impending doom.

The historian John Arnold has noted that the study of history does not present us with lessons to be learned from past, but rather gives us lessons which can be drawn for contemplation.²⁴ In the case of Byzantine civilization, centuries of scholarship have advanced our understanding of that society enormously. Re-examining long-held assumptions about Byzantine civilization, raises important questions not only about

political or economic history, but also issues of religion, gender, how we define gender and determine which behaviors are standard or non-standard to gender, and how very different societies and cultures can reach accommodation over vast periods of time or be consigned out of historical memory altogether. Our reaction to Byzantium perhaps tells us more about ourselves than the Byzantines. In the end Byzantium presents us with one of the prized fruits of its resplendent cultural legacy: Knowledge. Knowledge born of reflection beyond the mundane, beyond gender, beyond time. And that is a legacy “which do[es] not deserve to be consigned to Forgetfulness nor to be swept away on the flood of Time into an ocean of Non-Remembrance.”²⁵

The Anastasis
Fresco from the Church of the Chora (Kariye Djami),
Constantinople, circa 1316-21[†]



Source: Paul A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami: Vols. 1-4 of the Publication of an Archaeological Project of the Byzantine Institute, Inc.*, vol 3 (New York: Bollingen Series LXX/Pantheon Books, 1966) 343 [plate 201].

Endnotes

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- ⁵ Ruth Macrides and Paul Magdalino, The Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe, ed. Paul Magdalino, "Fourth Kingdom and the Rhetoric of Hellenism" (London: The Hambledon Press, 1992) 139-41.
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Appendix I

Chronology and Byzantine Emperors

	Constantine I (306–37)	439	Vandals capture Carthage
312	Constantine defeats Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge	441–7	Victories of Attila in the Balkans
313	Edict of religious Toleration; death of Maximinus		Marcian (450–7)
324	Constantine defeats Licinius at Chrysopolis; foundation of Constantinople	451	Fourth General Council (Chalcedon)
325	First General Council (Nicaea I)	453	Death of Pulcheria and Attila
330	Inauguration of Constantinople		Leo I (457–74)
337	Constantine's baptism	471	Overthrow of Aspar
	Constantius II (337–61)		Zeno (474–91)
340	Constans defeats Constantine II	475–6	Usurpation of Basiliscus
350	Revolt of Magnentius and murder of Constans	476	Deposition of Romulus Augustulus
355	Julian made Caesar	484	Rebellion of Illus
	Julian (361–3)		Anastasius (491–518)
363	Julian invades Persia	492–7	Isaurian revolt
	Jovian (363–4)	502	Persians besiege Amida
363	Retreat from Persia; surrender of Nisibis	505	Construction of Dara
	Valens (364–78)	513–15	Revolt of Vitalian
365–6	Revolt of Procopius		Justin I (518–27)
378	Goths defeat Romans at Adrianople	525	Destruction of Antioch by earthquake
	Theodosius I (378–95)		Justinian I (527–65)
381	Second General Council (Constantinople)	532	Nika riot; 'everlasting' peace with Persia
388	Usurper Maximus defeated	532–7	Construction of St Sophia
391	Edicts against paganism	533–4	Belisarius reconquers North Africa
394	Usurper Eugenius defeated	535–40	Belisarius in Italy
	Arcadius (405–8)	540	Sack of Antioch by Persians
408	Alaric invades Italy	542	Plague at Constantinople
	Theodosius II (408–50)	544–9	Belisarius' second expedition to Italy
410	Alaric sacks Rome	548	Death of Theodora
431	Third General Council (Ephesus)	552	Narses defeats Totila in Italy
		553–4	Fifth General Council (Constantinople)
		559	Kutrigurs invade Thrace
		562	Peace with Persia

Source: *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, Cyril Mango, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 307.

- Nikephoros I (802–11)**
805 Byzantine control of Peloponnese restored
806 Arabs advance to Ancyra
809 Death of Caliph Harūn al-Rashid
811 Nikephoros defeated and killed by Bulgarians
- Michael I Rhangabe (811–13)**
812 Bulgarians capture Develtos and Mesembria
813 Bulgarian victory near Adrianople
- Leo V the Armenian (813–20)**
814 Death of Bulgarian Khan Krum
815 Iconoclasm reimposed
- Michael II the Stammerer (820–9)**
821–3 Revolt of Thomas the Slav
827 Arab occupation of Sicily begins
c.827 Conquest of Crete by Arabs begins
- Theophilos (829–42)**
838 Arabs destroy Amorion and Ancyra
- Michael III the Drunkard (842–67)**
843 Final restoration of Images
856 Deposition of Empress Theodora
858–67 First patriarchate of Photios
860 Russian attack on Constantinople
863 Arabs defeated at Poson
c.864 Conversion of Bulgaria
866 Basil murders Caesar Bardas
- Basil I (867–86)**
872 Defeat of Paulicians in Asia Minor
873 Victories over Arabs
877–86 Second patriarchate of Photios
878 Arabs take Syracuse
- Leo VI (886–912)**
894–6 War with Bulgaria
902 Fall of Taormina
904 Sack of Thessalonica
911–12 Attempt to recover Crete fails
- Alexander (912–13)**
- Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913–59)**
913 Symeon of Bulgaria appears before Constantinople
917 Symeon's victory at Anchialos
920–44 Romanos I Lekapenos co-emperor
923–44 Successful campaigns against the Arabs by John Kourkouas
941 Russian expedition against Constantinople
- 946 Princess Olga of Russia converted
- Romanos II (959–63)**
961 Crete conquered by Nikephoros Phokas
962 Otto I crowned emperor
- Nikephoros II Phokas (963–9)**
965 Conquest of Tarsus; annexation of Cyprus
969 Conquest of Antioch and Aleppo
- John I Tzimiskes (969–76)**
971 John annexes eastern Bulgaria; defeats Sviatoslav
975 John invades Palestine
- Basil II Boulgaroktonos (976–1025)**
989 Baptism of Vladimir
997 Samuel of Bulgaria devastates Greece; conversion of the Magyars
1000 Annexation of Georgian principality of Tao
1001–18 Conquest of Bulgaria
1022 Annexation of Armenian kingdom of Vaspurakan
- Constantine VIII (1025–8)**
- Romanos III Argyros (1028–34)**
1031 Byzantium gains Edessa
- Michael IV Paphlagonian (1034–41)**
1038 Reconquest of Sicily by George Maniakes begins
1040 Bulgarian revolt
- Michael V Kalaphates (1041–2)**
- Zoe and Theodora (1042)**
- Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–55)**
1043 Russian attack on Constantinople
1043–4 Rebellion of Maniakes fails
1044–5 Annexation of Kingdom of Ani
1054 Schism with papacy
- Theodora (1055–6)**
- Michael VI Stratiotikos (1056–7)**
- Isaac I Komnenos (1057–9)**
1058 Patriarch Michael Keroularios deposed
- Constantine X Doukas (1059–67)**
1061–91 Norman conquest of Sicily
1064 Seljuk Turks conquer Greater Armenia

	Romanos IV Diogenes (1067–71)		Isaac II Angelos again (1203–4)
1071	Bari falls to Normans; Byzantine defeat at Manzikert		Alexios IV co-emperor
	Michael VII Parapinakes/Doukas (1071–8)	1204	Alexios Komnenos founds Kingdom of Trebizond
1071–81	Seljuk Turks occupy Anatolian highlands and Jerusalem		Alexios V Doukas Mourtzouphlos (1204)
	Nikephoros III Botaniates (1078–81)	1204	Constantinople falls to Crusaders
1078	Civil war with Nikephoros Bryennios and others		
	Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118)		LATIN EMPERORS OF CONSTANTINOPLE
1082	Normans take north-west Greece; grant of trading concessions to Venice		Baldwin of Flanders (1204–5)
1091	Defeat of Pechenegs		Henry of Flanders (1206–16)
1097	Passage of First Crusade		Peter of Courtenay (1217)
1099	Franks establish the kingdom of Jerusalem		Yolande (1217–19)
1108	Alexios defeats Bohemond		Robert II of Courtenay (1221–8)
	John II Komnenos (1118–43)		Baldwin II (1228–61)
1122–6	Byzantium at war with Venice		John of Brienne, regent (1229–37)
1127	War with Hungary		
1137	John annexes Antioch		
	Manuel I Komnenos (1143–80)		GREEK EMPERORS OF NICAEA
1147–9	Second Crusade		Theodore I Laskaris (1208–21)
1152–4	Byzantium at war with Hungary	1219	Creation of separate Serbian church; Theodore makes peace with Venetians
1159	Manuel enters Antioch		
1171	Venetians at Constantinople arrested		John III Doukas Vatatzes (1221–54)
1176	Manuel defeated by Turks at Myriokephalon	1222	Mongols appear in Europe
1180	Foundation of Serbian monarchy by Stephen Nemanja	1235	Patriarch Germanos II makes head of Bulgarian Church a patriarch
	Alexios II Komnenos (1180–3)	1240	Mongols destroy Kiev
1182	Massacre of Latins in Constantinople	1246	John III takes Thessalonica
	Andronikos I Komnenos (1183–5)		Theodore II Laskaris (1254–8)
1184	Isaac Komnenos makes himself ruler of Cyprus	1254	Mamluk Turkish Sultans established in Egypt
1185	Thessalonica captured by Normans	1258	Mongols destroy Baghdad
	Isaac II Angelos (1185–95)		John IV Doukas (1258–61)
1186	Bulgaria becomes independent		Michael VIII Palaiologos (1259–61)
1187	Saladin captures Jerusalem	1259	Battle of Pelagonia
1189–92	Third Crusade	1261	End of Latin Empire at Constantinople
1191	Richard I of England occupies Cyprus		
	Alexios III Angelos (1195–1203)		
1201–4	Fourth Crusade		

Appendix I

Chronology and Byzantine Emperors, cont'd.

<p>GREEK EMPERORS AT CONSTANTINOPLE</p> <p>Michael VIII Palaiologos (1261–82)</p> <p>1269. Byzantine annexation of Mistra</p> <p>1274 Council of Lyons; Michael submits to Rome</p> <p>1281 Sicilian Vespers</p> <p>Andronikos II (1282–1328)</p> <p>1282 Serbian conquest of Skopje</p> <p>1302 Byzantine defeat by Ottomans at Bapheus</p> <p>1303 Andronikos calls in aid of Catalan Company</p> <p>1308 Ottoman Turks enter Europe</p> <p>1321–8 Civil war between Andronikos II and Andronikos III</p> <p>1326 Ottoman Turks take Prousa</p> <p>Andronikos III (1328–41)</p> <p>1331 Ottoman Turks take Nicaea</p> <p>1331–55 Stephen Dušan King of Serbia</p> <p>1332 Death of Andronikos II and Theodore Metochites</p> <p>1337 Ottoman Turks take Nicomedia</p> <p>John V, 1st reign (1341–54)</p> <p>1341–7 Civil war</p> <p>1347–54 Joint rule with John VI</p> <p>1351 Synod at Constantinople approves Hesychasm</p> <p>1354 Ottoman Turks take Kallipolis; civil war between John V and John VI</p> <p>John V, 2nd reign (1354–76)</p> <p>1354–7 Civil war with Matthew Kantakouzenos</p> <p>1355 Serbs now control most of Greece</p> <p>1369 Ottoman Turks capture Adrianople; John submits to Rome</p>	<p>1371 Serbs defeated by Turks at Černomen</p> <p>1371/2 John becomes vassal of Murad I</p> <p>Andronikos IV (1376–9)</p> <p>1376–9 Civil war</p> <p>John V, 3rd reign (1379–91)</p> <p>1387 Thessalonica taken by Ottoman Turks</p> <p>1389 Serbs defeated at Kosovo; accession of Bayezid I</p> <p>John VII Palaiologos (1390)</p> <p>Manuel II (1391–1425)</p> <p>1393 Turks conquer Thessaly and Bulgaria</p> <p>1394 Manuel renounces vassalage to Bayezid</p> <p>1396 Crusade defeated at Nicopolis</p> <p>1397–1403 Siege of Constantinople by Bayezid I</p> <p>1399–1403 Manuel II tours Europe</p> <p>1402 Turks defeated by Timur at Ankara</p> <p>1403–13 Turkish civil war</p> <p>1422 Constantinople besieged by Murad II</p> <p>1424 Vassalage to Turks renewed</p> <p>John VIII (1425–48)</p> <p>1430 Thessalonica retaken by Turks</p> <p>1438–9 Council of Ferrara–Florence</p> <p>1444 Crusade defeated at Varna</p> <p>Constantine XI Dragases (1449–53)</p> <p>1451 Accession of Mehmed II</p> <p>1452 Mehmed builds castle of Rumeli Hisari; celebration of union with Rome</p> <p>1453 Fall of Constantinople</p> <p>Turkish conquest of Mistra (1460)</p> <p>Fall of Trebizond (1461)</p>
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Source: *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, Cyril Mango, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 311.

Appendix II

Patriarchs of Constantinople, 381-1465

Name	Tenure	Name	Tenure
NEKTARIOS	381-397	JOHN VII GRAMMATIKOS	837?-843
JOHN CHRYSOSTOM	398-404	METHODIOS	843-847
Arsakios	404-405	IGNATIOS	847-858
ATTIKOS	406-425	PHOTIOS	858-867
Sisinnios I	426-427	Ignatios (2nd patr.)	867-877
NESTORIOS	428-431	Photios (2nd patr.)	877-886
Maximian	431-434	Stephen I	886-893
PROKLOS	434?-446	ANTONY II KAULEAS	893-901
FLAVIAN	446-449	NICHOLAS I MÝSTIKOS	901-907
Anatolios	449-458	EUTHYMIOS	907-912
GENNADIOS I	458-471	Nicholas I (2nd patr.)	912-925
AKAKIOS	472-489	Stephen II	925-927
Fravitas	489-490	Tryphon	927-931
Euphemios	490-496	THEOPHYLAKTOS	933-956
Makedonios II	496-511	POLYEUKTOS	956-970
Timothy I	511-518	Basil I Skamandrenos	970-974
John II Kappadokes	518-520	Antony III Stoudites	974-979
Epiphanius	520-535	Nicholas II Chrysoberges	979-991
Anthimos I	535-536	[vacancy]	991-996]
MENAS	536-552	Sisinnios II	996-998
EUTYCHIOS	552-565	SERGIOS II	1001-1019
JOHN III SCHOLASTIKOS	565-577	Eustathios	1019-1025
Eutychios (2nd patr.)	577-582	ALEXIOS STOUDITES	1025-1043
JOHN IV NESTEUTES	582-595	MICHAEL I KEROULARIOS	1043-1058
Kyriakos	595/6-606	CONSTANTINE III LEICHOUDES	1059-1063
Thomas I	607-610	JOHN VIII XIPHILINOS	1064-1075
SERGIOS I	610-638	Kosmas I	1075-1081
PYRRHOS	638-641	Eustratios Garidas	1081-1084
Paul II	641-653	NICHOLAS III GRAMMATIKOS	1084-1111
Pyrrhos (2nd patr.)	654	John IX Agapetos	1111-1134
Peter	654-666	Leo Styppeiotes	1134-1143
Thomas II	667-669	Michael II Kourkouas	1143-1146
John V	669-675	Kosmas II Attikos	1146-1147
Constantine I	675-677	NICHOLAS IV MOUZALON	1147-1151
Theodore I	677-679	Theodotos II	1151/2-1153/4
George I	679-686	Neophytos I	one month in 8 1153/4
Theodore I (2nd patr.)	686-687	Constantine IV Chliarenos	1154-1157
Paul III	688-694	LOUKAS CHRYSOBERGES	1157-1169/70
Kallinikos I	694-706	MICHAEL III	1170-1178
Kyros	706-712	Chariton Eugeniotes	1178-1179
John VI	712-715	THEODOSIOS BORADIOTES	1179-1183
GERMANOS I	715-730	Basil II Kamateros	1183-1186
ANASTASIOS	730-754	Niketas II Mountanes	1186-1189
Constantine II	754-766	Dositheos of Jerusalem	Feb. 1189
Niketas I	766-780	Leontios Theotokites	Feb./Mar.-Sept./ Oct. 1189
Paul IV	780-784	Dositheos of Jerusalem (2nd patr.)	1189-1191
TARASIOS	784-806	George II Xiphilinos	1191-1198
NIKEPHOROS I	806-815	JOHN X KAMATEROS	1198-1206
THEODOTOS I KASSITERAS	815-821		
ANTONY I KASSYMATAS	821-837?		