

Judith Herrin. *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pp. xxiii + 392, figs. 1-41, maps 1-6. ISBN: 9780691143699.

JUDITH HERRIN'S handsome book is an ambitious undertaking. It aims to offer an engaging overview of the millennium-long history of Byzantium (ca. 300-1453) to "audiences unfamiliar with it" (xiii) in an accessible volume of manageable size. It responds to a question workmen asked her at the University of London: "What is Byzantine history?" (xiii). The book also counters the deeply ingrained stereotype of Byzantium as an inflexible society slave to the ceremonial by presenting it as a dynamic civilization with great capacity to adapt to new circumstances and withstand great calamities (e.g., the threat of Islam; the iconoclastic controversy; and the sack of Constantinople in 1204). Herrin traces the prejudices still prevalent against Byzantium to the cataclysmic year of 1204, suggesting that a fundamental division between Eastern and Western Christianity fueled by the drawn-out discussions over liturgical/dogmatic differences and the primacy of Rome was a key contributor to the negative view of the Greek East and the sack of Constantinople. She further emphasizes the essential and often overlooked role Byzantium played in facilitating the development of Western Europe by serving in the dual roles of protective shield against Muslim conquest and source of cultural inspiration; as she puts it: "Byzantium made Europe possible" (xviii).

The book is organized into four sections corresponding to phases of Byzantine history: the early period (fourth through seventh centuries); Iconoclasm and its aftermath (eighth and ninth centuries); the middle period (843-1204); and late Byzantium (1204-1453). These sections are divided into thematic chapters arranged roughly chronologically. The twenty-eight short chapters function as independent essays, often covering several centuries. They address wide-ranging themes: Constantine and his new capital; Constantinople (fourth to fifteenth centuries); political and bureaucratic structures of the empire; Greek Orthodoxy; Hagia Sophia; Ravenna as Western capital; legal system; impact of the spread of Islam; role of icons; iconoclastic controversy; education, record-keeping, and literature (eighth and ninth centuries); Cyril and Methodios and the conversion of the Slavs; technology of Greek fire; Byzantine economy; role of eunuchs; structure of the court; role of imperial children; monastic life on Mount Athos; relations with Venice and Western states; Emperor Basil II; political crisis in the eleventh century; Princess Anna Komnene; cosmopolitan Byzantium; crusades and the sack of Constantinople in 1204;

Byzantium during the Latin Empire; society and culture of late Byzantium; religious controversies with the West; fall of Constantinople. These themes signal Herrin's intention to shift the focus from the traditional emperor-centric approach to a broader cultural history.

A vivid quotation from a medieval author introduces each chapter. Herrin's extensive use of diverse textual sources (e.g., saints' lives, theological treatises, acts of councils, law codes, histories) throughout the text, many of them non-Byzantine, shows her impressive command of medieval history and draws readers into the narrative. The frequent discussion of visual evidence brings her history to life and highlights the fundamental importance images and public monuments commanded in Byzantium. Readers interested in specific aspects of Byzantine history may turn to *Further Reading, List of Emperors, Chronology*, and maps at the end of the book. Although an index facilitates the use of the book, the lack of footnoting throughout the text will frustrate those wishing to follow up on the sources.

Herrin places Byzantine history into its wider context by emphasizing Byzantine relations with other contemporary societies (e.g., in Western and Eastern Europe, the Papacy, Islamic states) through diplomatic missions, marriage alliances, religious debates, and warfare. Herrin's presentation of Byzantium as a civilization deeply connected to other contemporary cultures is one of the strengths of the book. This approach brings Byzantium out of its perceived isolation and underscores the importance of the network of exchanges between medieval societies of different regions and religious affiliations, demonstrating their fundamental interconnections.

It is perhaps surprising that Herrin, who has done pioneering work on the history of Byzantine women, does not include a chapter exploring the role of women in Byzantine society to complement the chapters on eunuchs and imperial children. Although she devotes a chapter to Anna Komnene, this focuses on Anna's roles as a female historian and member of the imperial family, rather than serving as a framework for a broader discussion of the role of women. Yet, the decision not to segregate women into a single chapter is to be applauded: women feature frequently and substantively in most chapters and are presented as an integral component of Byzantine society. Female roles within the family, religion, diplomacy, artistic patronage, the exercise of authority, as well as in the rhetoric of prejudice are explored in considerable detail. Further, the chapter on eunuchs highlights the importance of a third sex in Byzantium and makes the case that eunuchs (who held high positions in the court with direct access to emperor and empress, and could serve as commanders, clerics, monks, and

administrators) were “exceptionally well integrated into [Byzantine] society” (160), more so than in any other medieval state.

Herrin’s book is indeed an enjoyable read to specialists, although one wonders whether it engages readers outside the fields of medieval and Byzantine studies. While she attempts not to overburden the text with scholarly terminology, names or titles (of artworks or literary texts) are dropped often to illustrate important phenomena without much explanation, rendering the text occasionally bewildering to non-specialists. The tension between the thematic and chronological organization of the book results in detours from the major thread of the argument and repetitions of ideas. For example, in the chapter on Hagia Sophia, Herrin introduces Theodora (wife of Justinian, the patron of the church) without saying much about her beyond that she was “one of the most striking of a series of forceful women who exercised great power” (55). A longish digression on later powerful empresses follows, leaving readers to wonder what this has to do with Hagia Sophia. The wide chronological coverage of individual chapters allows Herrin to trace important developments, yet this type of organization may unmoor the reader unfamiliar with Byzantine history.

Disappointingly, the book contains some errors and misleading statements. Two examples should suffice: Odoacer, not Stilicho, ruled Italy after the fall of Romulus Augustulus in 476; following the discussion of the coins of Justinian II (692-711), which included a portrait of Christ for the first time on Byzantine coinage, Herrin notes: “Thereafter, the Virgin or saints were more commonly shown on coins” (104). This statement implies that after 711 images of saints became common on coins. Yet, this was not the case: the image of the Virgin was first placed on coins ca. 900, and other saints appeared even later.¹

Nonetheless, Herrin’s personal and idiosyncratic view of Byzantine history is a welcome addition to introductory books on Byzantium. Its readers will come away with an impression of a multifaceted, adaptable, and lively society whose impressive achievements are worth pursuing.

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1. Images of Christ also disappeared from the coins from 711 to 843. See Philip Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and Whittemore Collection* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1973), III/1, 146, 169-76.