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ELLEN S. SCHWARTZ (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Art and Architecture*. New York: Oxford University Press 2021. XXX, 628 pp., 140 black-and-white illustr., 24 colour plates. – ISBN 978-0-19-027735-2 (£ 97.00)

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The mighty German *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst* is now nearing completion. Italians have the splendid *Enciclopedia dell'arte medievale* available both on paper and (minus the plentiful colour illustrations) [online](#). Francophones can read several long art-historical chapters in the recent three-volume collection *Le monde byzantin*. Since no comparable guide to Byzantine art was previously available in English,<sup>1</sup> the handbook under review is a much-needed reference work. One will dip into it to get a notion of, say, Byzantine fortifications, Byzantine imperial imagery, or Byzantine enamel, and to learn what has been published on those topics.<sup>2</sup> One can also read it from cover to cover, as a general reflection of the state of research in our field of study. But who precisely are we? What is our field? How do we study it, and to what end?

The first question is partly answered by the choice of contributors. These number thirty-eight, including the editor herself. Two, if I am not mistaken, are under the age of fifty. Twenty-five are graduates of North American universities. (Germany, France, Denmark, and Georgia are represented by a scholar each. Italy and Russia are missing.) Twenty-three are women. All are professional academics – except one, who argues for the benefit that private collecting and the antiquities market bring to scholarship (pp. 147–157). It does the editor credit to have invited him.

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1. Excepting ALEXANDER P. KAZHDAN (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. 3 vols. New York 1991; LYN RODLEY, *Byzantine Art and Architecture. An Introduction*. Cambridge 1994, and MARGARET MULLETT et al., *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*. In: JANE TURNER (ed.), *The Grove Dictionary of Art*. Vol. 9. London 1996, pp. 506–669. This is not the place to weigh the relative merits of these works.

2. By and large, the Oxford handbook is organised in the same manner as ROBIN MARGARET JANSEN – MARK D. ELLISON (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*. New York 2018 and as ORMONDE MADDOCK DALTON, *East Christian Art. A Survey of the Monuments*. Oxford 1925.

The handbook's scope is defined from the outset as 'art made in the eastern Mediterranean world, including Italy, the Balkans, Russia, and the Near East, between the years 330 and 1453' (p. 1). This definition is flexible: one of the contributors thinks hard about the usefulness of 'post-Byzantine art' as a classificatory category (pp. 255–257), another wonders whether church mosaics in Kyiv, Venice, or Palermo can be properly called 'Byzantine' (pp. 403–404). 'Art' itself turns out to be an elastic concept: the volume includes an excellent introduction to Byzantine field archaeology (pp. 287–305) and a short but informative overview of Byzantine unglazed pottery (pp. 551–553). Art history thus spills over into broader study of material culture: settlements, burials, items of everyday use. This foreshadows a future Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Archaeology.

The field's geographical limits are likewise fuzzy – a fuzziness which the editor chose to frame in terms of 'reception of Byzantine art and architecture'/'acceptance and adaptation of Byzantine architectural types'. The corresponding text falls into discrete sections about Armenia, Georgia, Syria/Palestine/Jordan,<sup>3</sup> Sicily, Venice, Cyprus after 1191, Rus', Muscovy, Serbia, and Bulgaria. Moldavia and Venetian Crete are dealt with under the aforesaid 'post-Byzantine' rubric (pp. 258–261). Pre-Islamic Egypt, on the other hand, 'was a full participant in the empire' (p. 409) and requires no separate treatment. The same evidently applies to Cappadocia, Apulia, and Calabria.

'Reception', 'acceptance', 'adaptation', and the occasionally mentioned 'influence' (pp. 13, 242, 322, 373–375, 429) presuppose a stable source of borrowing. This source, all contributors seem to agree, was a territorial unit centred on Constantinople. In this sense Byzantine art was the art of the East Roman state, 'the longest-lived empire of the West other than ancient Egypt' (p. 2). Created 'in large part to serve the Orthodox faith' (p. 2), it was also the art of the Byzantine Church. Unlike the empire, that Church still endures; I surmise that about a quarter of the volume's writers were baptised in it. By way of shorthand, several refer to its religious images with a definite article, in the singular, as a stable entity: 'Investigation of this crucial art form, the icon, needs to be continued' (p. 28), 'agency of the icon does not exist outside language' (p. 42), 'the icon appears to have a consistent theological life' (p. 62).

Another recurrent word, 'tradition', likewise implies stability: 'sculpture

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3. This is what the title 'Islamic States and the Middle East' (pp. 201–214) stands for.

in stone was a hallmark of the Byzantine architectural tradition' (p. 443),<sup>4</sup> the 'heavy hand of visual tradition' weighs 'implacably across the Byzantine centuries' (p. 482), 'Cypriot glazed pottery represents a continuation of the Byzantine tradition' (p. 560), 'the Byzantine textile tradition was disseminated throughout the Orthodox world and perpetuated in a tradition that long outlasted the empire itself' (p. 601, cf. p. 257). This static view is balanced by frequent references to change, which the authors variously term 'shift', 'transformation', 'evolution', or 'development'. The eleventh and twelfth centuries, for instance, are marked by 'new, more literal portrayal of emotion' (p. 65) and by 'gradual downsizing of public displays of religiosity, diminution in the scale of church architecture, and development of monasticism and private religious foundations' (p. 530). The ninth and tenth centuries witnessed 'a technical shift from the single main warps to the paired main warps characteristic of "classic" Byzantine silks' (pp. 597–598). 'In the course of the sixth century, icons went from being simple, separate offerings to an assembly on the templon barrier around the altar' (p. 26).

So how does one map changes in Byzantine art? To start with, the editor squarely bases her handbook's chronology on turning points in political and ecclesiastical history: the imperial ban on religious images (726–843), the founding of Constantinople (330), its successive conquests by the Crusaders (1204), Palaeologues (1261), and Ottomans (1453). On this view, church and state form a sort of matrix for artistic activities: 'religious images ... changed as they intersected with the political and religious events in which their production was embedded' (p. 59), iconographic 'types of the Virgin that might seem fixed in fact emerged and then were transformed under political and religious pressures' (p. 60), 'political events may consistently have had an effect on the creation of new works' in mosaic (p. 405). Imperial and ecclesiastic developments were paralleled, or perhaps echoed, by the more subtle influence of what one might roughly term 'ideology' and 'religiosity': e.g., ruler portraiture, 'like rhetoric and public space, was a medium through which subjects articulated both their personal relationship to the reigning emperor and their judicial relationship to the state' (p. 135), or 'Marian types displayed on pectoral reliquary crosses closely follow the evolution of the devotional patterns of Byzantine society' (p. 532). Then there is the somewhat imponderable factor of changed fashion: 'Around

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4. A doubtful statement if one considers the much more prominent role of stone sculpture in Romanesque and Gothic art.

the year 1000, Byzantine taste began favoring silks with monochrome patterns rather than multiple colors of weft' (p. 598). One must also reckon with the Byzantine economy's effects on artistic production: 'study of patronage has always been at the centre of Byzantine studies' (p. 430),<sup>5</sup> silver hoards reveal 'the social context from which... donors emerged' (p. 497), 'the social milieu to which [copper-alloy icons] most likely belonged includes the middle-to-upper-class patron or household' (p. 522). The handbook's most emphatic socioeconomic explanation is formulated, tellingly, by an archaeologist: twelfth-century ceramic tableware was 'produced for consumers who were rising financially and seeking social recognition, a public that apparently had high aesthetic requirements and found in glazed vessels a substitute for valuable metal ones with sophisticated decoration that it desired but could not afford' (p. 557).

'Imitation of metal vessels' (ibid.) brings up various ways of classifying the 'realia', i.e. monuments big and small, of Byzantine art. One can imagine chapters on Tableware, metal items included, rather than Ceramics and Glass; on Church Decoration, including floor mosaics, rather than Mosaics, Monumental Painting, and Stone Sculpture; on Prayer Images rather than Bronze and Copper Icons, Ivories and Steatites, Enamels, etc. The volume does feature synthetic treatments of this kind (dress, jewellery, and cosmetics, for instance, are all discussed as Bodily Adornment and Modification), but on the whole the editor prefers to categorise by raw material rather than by setting/use. This is probably because the 'Byzantine tradition' was a tradition of many continuously maintained artisanal practices, each of which involved different substance-specific techniques. Several contributors stress the need for scientific laboratory studies of Byzantine artefacts (pp. 21, 547, 587, 602) and discuss the processes of these artefacts' manufacturing (pp. 425–428, 516, 519, 541–542, etc.). 'Questions of dating and provenance are extremely difficult to answer, however, and cannot be determined through analysis of material, style, and technique of production alone' (p. 112). Note that those are the kind of questions for which only one answer is correct. With disarming honesty, the author of the handbook's chapter about icons writes beneath the fifth and last illustration to her text: 'date unknown' (p. 71).

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5. It is unfortunate that the handbook includes no special chapter on Byzantine patronage. A good starting point would be GORDANA BABIĆ, *Peintures murales byzantines et de tradition byzantine (1081–1453). Possibilité et limites des analyses sociologiques*. In: XVIII Международный конгресс византистов. Пленарные доклады. Moscow 1991, pp. 348–398.

Supposing that we were able to establish the date (and provenance) of that particular icon, what else would we like to know about it? In other words, why do we study Byzantine works of art? The handbook seems to imply two possible answers. Most contributors seem to view such works as windows to a way of life and way of thinking that are different from our own (they are, therefore, interesting because they enrich, perhaps even modify, the ways in which we ourselves live and think): ‘portraits, inscriptions, and commissioned imagery [can be used] as a source for social history’ (p. 430), magical objects ‘document the desires, needs, and fears of people’ (p. 85), ‘the same forms occurred in literature and the visual arts as parallel expressions of common habits of thought’ (p. 170), ‘individual devotions [are] occasionally disclosed by architectural and artistic evidence’ (p. 344), and so on. At its most radical, this approach focuses not on tangible artefacts but on mental phenomena: ‘our art history could shift from mainly studying what is represented to what is imagined through the encounter with these icons’ (p. 42). A reverse and in fact complementary approach assumes that ‘careful contextualisation of our extant material’ (p. 130) goes some way toward explaining the shape of artefacts, e.g. the visible appearance of a painting. Scholars study a work of art not just in order to understanding the past but also in order to understanding that work itself. While this approach, too, can be taken to extremes (‘In this essay, only monuments for which a clear context and purpose can be discerned are discussed’ [p. 410]), in principle it implies that an aesthetic object is important in its own right, even without context, that its value goes beyond the historical circumstances of its production.

The phrase ‘artistic value’ does occur in the handbook (pp. 48, 196) but is never closely defined. One cannot blame the authors for that. Of course the value of Byzantine artefacts is different for the person who kisses the icons in church and for the one who looks at them in a museum, for the collector who buys antiquities and for the scholar who professionally studies them. I have no doubt that, in different ways, each of these people will find the Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Art and Architecture useful.

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Since a useful handbook needs to be accurate and up-to-date, I append a few small remarks:

‘The well-preserved Church of Hagia Sophia in Serdica built presumably in the sixth century is a large, elongated basilica with a transept’ (p. 314).

It has been argued on good grounds that in its present form this church dates from the eighth century – which makes it much more interesting historically.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, according to dendrochronological data the Church of Hagia Eirene in Constantinople was rebuilt not ‘probably after 753’ (ibid.) but circa 800.<sup>7</sup>

‘Vanderheyde, C. 2007. *The Carved Decoration of the Middle and Late Byzantine Temple*. Electronic archives’ (p. 455). This article was actually printed in *Mitteilungen zur spätantiken Archäologie und byzantinischen Kunstgeschichte* 5, pp. 77–111. Pity that the same author’s brilliant monograph on middle and late Byzantine sculpture appeared too late for it to be cited in the handbook.<sup>8</sup>

‘Scribes practicing distinctive handwriting styles’ (p. 459) have been identified for several clusters of middle-Byzantine illustrated manuscripts.<sup>9</sup> These important discoveries ought to have been noted.

Manuscript *Arundel 547* is in the British Library, not ‘Oxford, Bodleian Lib.’ (p. 467), and manuscript *Med. Pal. 244* is in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, not ‘Vatican’ (ibid.).

Manuscript *Erlangen Univ. Lib. A2* contains an Euchologion and an Horologion. The image of St John Chrysostom on f. 5v illustrates the former, not the latter (p. 471).

It is not true that ‘Ptolemy’s *Geographia Hyphegesis* [Γεωγραφικὴ Ὑφήγησις] was translated from the Latin back into Greek by Planudes’ (p. 489).<sup>10</sup>

6. GALINA FINGAROVA, *Die Baugeschichte der Sophienkirche in Sofia (Spätantike, frühes Christentum, Byzanz / Reihe B, Studien und Perspektiven 33)*. Wiesbaden 2011; rev. EFTHYMIOS RIZOS, *Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft* 16 (2013) pp. 1011–1019.

7. PETER IAN KUNIHOLM et al., *Of Harbors and Trees. The Marmaray Contribution to a 2367-year Oak-Tree-Ring Chronology from 97 Sites for the Aegean, East Mediterranean, and Black Seas*. In: PAUL MAGDALINO – NINA ERGIN (eds.), *Istanbul and Water (Ancient Near Eastern Studies. Supplement 47)*. Leuven 2015, pp. 47–90 at 59–60 (no. 41).

8. CATHERINE VANDERHEYDE, *La sculpture byzantine du IXe au XVe siècle. Contexte, mise en oeuvre, décors*. Paris 2020.

9. IRMGARD HUTTER, *Theodoros βιβλιογράφος und die Buchmalerei in Studiu*. *Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata* n.s. 51 (1997) pp. 177–208; FRANCESCO D’AIUTO, *Su alcuni copisti di codici miniati mediobizantini (I)*. *Byzantion* 67 (1997) pp. 5–59; ID., *Su alcuni copisti di codici miniati mediobizantini (II)*. *Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata* n.s. 53 (1999) pp. 119–150.

10. On the textual history of this work see RENATE BURRI, *Die “Geographie” des Ptolemaios im Spiegel der griechischen Handschriften (Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte 110)*. Berlin 2013.

The scholar who wrote the chapter on Byzantine ivories deems ‘constructing chronologies’ ‘a tricky business at best’ (p. 545). Nevertheless, a recent study of the beginnings of middle-Byzantine ivory carving would have been worth citing.<sup>11</sup> Important recent work on consular diptychs is also ignored.<sup>12</sup>

**Keywords**

Byzantine architecture; Byzantine art; handbook

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11. ANTHONY CUTLER – PHILIPP NIEWÖHNER, *Towards a History of Byzantine Ivory Carving from the Late 6th to the Late 9th Century*. *Travaux et Mémoires* 20/2 (2016), pp. 89–107.

12. CECILIA OLOVSDOTTER, *The Consular Image. An Iconological Study of the Consular Diptychs* (BAR International Series 1376). Oxford 2005; ALAN CAMERON, *The Origin, Context and Function of Consular Diptychs*. *Journal of Roman Studies* 103 (2013) pp. 174–207.