

MICHAEL EDWARD STEWART – DAVID ALAN PARNELL – CONOR WHATELY (eds), *The Routledge Handbook on Identity in Byzantium*. Abingdon – New York: Routledge 2022. xiv, 453 pp. – ISBN 978-0-367-14341-1

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‘Identity’ has long been hardwired into the study of Byzantium. Particularly pervasive among earlier generations of scholars was a metanarrative that pitted ‘Byzantines’ (whoever they were) against a series of essentialised ‘others’, including ‘barbarians’, ‘Latins’, ‘Franks’, ‘Persians’, ‘Saracens’, ‘Turks’, and ‘heretics’, a binary approach that reflected often uncritical acceptance of the ethno-religious discourses of elite Byzantine writers themselves. But in recent decades, apparently self-evident truths about the nature and scope of Byzantine identity have been widely questioned, and ‘identity’ itself has become one of the most significant talking points in research about Byzantium. Inspired by the scholarship of ANTHONY KALDELLIS and IOANNIS STOURAITIS, scholars have debated the appellation ‘Roman’. Was Byzantium (always, sometimes?) a multi-ethnic empire with a small elite who adopted a political identity termed ‘Roman’, or was it a quasi-nation state with a ‘Roman’ identity that was more widely shared across a broad social spectrum? A variety of societal and academic backdrops have also been relevant to thinking about identity in Byzantium and neighbouring regions, including the post-Cold War re-emergence of exclusivist ethnic nationalisms, especially in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union, as well as the rise of politico-religious fundamentalism and the prominence of identity politics in public and popular discourses. Changes in contemporary social and geo-political landscapes have not only led to an increased interest in the nature and function of identities in many premodern societies, including Byzantium; they have also required scholars to become far more sensitive to the purpose and significance of expressions of identity in premodern texts, images and material culture, and to the complex relationship between lived reality and rhetorical representation. Seen in this light, the provision of this handbook on identity in Byzantium is an encouraging development for Byzantinists themselves and for scholars in adjacent disciplinary fields.

In their preface, the editors draw attention to the immense geographical and chronological reach of Byzantium, and the ‘myriad of identities’ within the Byzantine world. While noting that it would be impossible to cover all possible identities, the editors nonetheless have aimed for breadth in terms of methodology, geography and authorship. The result is a volume of twenty-four chapters written by authors at very different career stages, in which diverse approaches, evidence bases and societal formations are corralled into four main sections: ‘Imperial Identities’; ‘*Romanitas* in the Late Antique Mediterranean’; ‘Macro and Micro Identities: Religious, Regional and Ethnic Identities and Internal Others’ (a section which focuses on the seventh to early thirteenth centuries); and ‘Gendered Identities: Literature, Memory and Self in Early and Middle Byzantium’. Useful summaries of the individual chapter contributions appear in the editors’ introduction, where issues of periodisation and terminology are also discussed. While recognising that other scholars would make different choices, the editors have elected to stick with a traditional point of chronological departure for the study of Byzantium: the fourth century and the reign of Constantine I. With some caveats, they see utility in the term ‘Byzantium’, despite current scholarly scepticism about the distortions that this early modern, western European designation creates for understanding a society whose inhabitants (or at least some of them) self-identified as ‘Roman’. The introduction also emphasises the need to be as alert to the identities of premodern authors and modern scholars as to those of the historical subjects in the written and material record (p. 6). And, indeed, it is encouraging to see how many of the chapters in this volume integrate extensive consideration of literary contexts and authorial lenses into their analyses. Nor is this sensitivity to context limited to written texts: GRACE STAFFORD’s article on depictions of female nudity, such as the so-called ‘Bikini Girls’ at Piazza Armerina in Sicily, demonstrates how the gender assumptions of modern scholars have been integral to shifting interpretations of the representations of women in the material culture of the late antique past. The volume concludes with a thought-provoking analysis by ADAM GOLDWYN of attempts by extreme right-wing thinkers in contemporary North America to harness Byzantium to toxic political agendas, such as advocacy for the ‘manosphere’.

If one of the liveliest areas of identity studies among Byzantinists in recent years has been the empire’s Roman heritage, then this theme receives plentiful airtime here, especially in the six contributions (in the book’s second section) which are devoted to a discussion of *Romanitas* in the late antique Mediterranean. For all that Rome mattered to Byzantium, how-

ever, there are many other ways of approaching identity; and, in a diversity sense, the editors have striven to include some coverage of family, gender, class, status, occupational (especially military) and imperial identities, as well as sustained consideration of provincial perspectives (e.g. ANTHONY KALDELLIS on provincial identities; IOANNIS SMARNAKIS on thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century Epiros; ANDY MERRILLS on sixth-century north Africa; plus three contributions on late antique and early medieval southern Italy: by JONATHAN ARNOLD, CHRISTOPHER HEATH, and JOSEPH WESTERN). Across the volume there is sensitivity to the identity implications of wider historical contexts and changes, such as shifts in religious orthodoxies and large-scale migrations. Authors are prepared to think in terms of pluralities, fluidities and ‘nested’ (KALDELLIS) identities. A static and monolithic Byzantium this is not (p. 4).

That said, there are limits to the breadth of the volume. This is a collection which is focused chronologically on the Early and Middle Byzantine empires, with the chapters by SMARNAKIS on Epiros and ANNE-LAURENCE CAUDANO on orthodoxy, heresy and cosmology in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries being rare forays into the later period. This early to mid-Byzantine temporal concentration reflects the research interests and academic networks of the editors, but it means that important work on ethno-cultural identities by significant scholars of later Byzantium, such as GILL PAGE, TERESA SHAWCROSS, TIA KOLBABA and NEVRA NECIPOGLU, as well as significant collections of articles on late Byzantine identity, e.g. those edited by JUDITH HERRIN – GUILLAUME SAINT-GUILLAIN, *Identities and Allegiances in the Eastern Mediterranean after 1204* (Farnham 2011), and SAINT-GUILLAIN – DIONYSIOS STATHAKOPOULOS, *Liquid & Multiple: Individuals & Identities in the Thirteenth-Century Aegean* (Paris 2012), are discussed relatively rarely. Geographically the focus is largely on identities within the territories governed directly by the Byzantine emperors and their officials rather than on those of outsiders in the rather looser halo of societies directly influenced by, or in regular communication with, Byzantium (an exception is ROBERT KASPERSKI’s discussion of barbarian ethnicity in late antiquity which focuses on the Goths, Visigoths and Lombards). Meanwhile, although the editors have looked to explore identities beyond the ethno-religious, those members of society usually regarded as marginal (women, children, slaves, peasants) receive relatively brief treatment, even as their foundational contribution to Byzantine society is acknowledged (p. 5). Such figures tend to emerge strongly in only a handful of chapters: NATHAN LEIDHOLM on slavery and the

family; CAHIT METE OGUZ on the complexities of elite attitudes to the peasantry; and STAFFORD, DAVID PARNELL, and PENELOPE BUCKLEY on women. There is no sustained treatment of eunuchs, which, given the wealth of scholarship in this field, particularly by SHAUN TOUGHER and KATHRYN RINGROSE, seems odd. ‘Gender’ as a category of analysis perhaps fares better, albeit with a strong emphasis on masculinities (for instance in the chapters by CHRISTOPHER MALONE, MICHAEL EDWARD STEWART, LEONORA NEVILLE and JONATHAN ARNOLD). Equally, as far as scope is concerned, it is important to recognise that the contributors to the volume are primarily based in universities in North America, Australia and the United Kingdom, and are overwhelmingly male. This gender imbalance was clearly not intentional; but for the pressures of the pandemic, more chapters by women would have made it into the collection. Nonetheless the relative lack of women scholars is striking as is the principally anglophone scholarly context from which contributions originate.

It seems churlish, however, to focus on limitations. All collections of essays tend to some unevenness in coverage, and to produce a volume of this size during the pandemic years is a considerable achievement. Rather than quibbling about inclusivity, it is more productive to think about the ways in which readers can benefit from this volume as a whole and in individual chapter terms. What are the themes, foci and insights that prove most illuminating across this host of chapters? The answer to this question depends to some extent on readers’ needs and interests.

For readers keen to engage with methodology, scholarly framing and conceptual underpinning, it is worth noting that while most contributors take ‘identity’ to be a self-evident category of analysis and eschew much theoretical meditation, some authors do incorporate wider debates about ‘identity’: for instance, KASPERSKI, MERRILLS, WESTERN and SMARNAKIS. In addition, a number of contributors enlist scholarly literatures from other disciplines or historical periods as gateways into understanding identity in Byzantium: as with RYAN STRICKLER’s use of sociology and social psychology (in particular MARGARET SOMERS’ sub-category of ‘ontological identity’) to chart evolving notions of the Byzantines as the chosen people during the existential crisis of the seventh century; LEIDHOLM’s engagement with PATTERSON’s *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) to make sense of the ubiquity of the language of the family in Byzantine slavery; and Smarnakis’s harnessing of research in the social sciences on the cultural construction of space to reveal a short-lived ‘western’ identity at play in Epiros after 1204. Meanwhile, many of the contributions to the second

section of the volume (especially STEWART, KASPERSKI, and ARNOLD) bring out strongly the degree to which recent scholarship on *Romanitas* in late antiquity has focused on the intersection between ethnicity and gender. For readers interested in the interwoven complexities of identity and imperial governance, there is a wealth of choice. I particularly enjoyed MALONE's wide-ranging article on the nuances of the evolving relationship between emperors, war and violence, which argues that even as militarism gradually became more associated with imperial propaganda in the middle and later periods, it was never as 'hard-edged' as in the late Roman and early Byzantine periods. If anything, it was the military saints rather than the emperor who were the locus of ideas about and representations of martial success by the final Byzantine centuries. Meanwhile, MERRILLS' contribution on sixth-century Byzantine north Africa provides a very thought-provoking meditation on how textual and material evidence can be integrated to analyse identity in zones of conquest. Strikingly, MERRILLS argues that while texts by authors such as Prokopios and Corippus certainly caricature conquered peoples, they also offer significant insights into local socio-political complexity. In this analysis an 'ideological iron curtain' separating Roman and barbarian in the terms identified by PETER BROWN is recast as something like a complex latticework, with Byzantine authors recognising that there were degrees of 'otherness' in the 'penumbra' of Roman imperial rule. If MERRILLS' analysis points to some level of Romanisation accompanying the Justinianic conquest of north Africa, Western's probing of identity in southern Italy suggests that by the ninth century efforts on the part of imperial authorities to impose some sort of metropolitan Byzantine identity on provincials were far more minimal. Perhaps this explains why communities and individuals in this region were willing to collaborate with the empire when it was to their advantage, regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliations. One needs to ask whether similar conclusions can be reached for other frontier regions during the period of Middle Byzantine territorial expansion.

A relatively short review cannot do justice to all the contributions in this wide-ranging collection. However, when I reached the end of the book, I must own that for all that I found the scale of the volume impressive and the determination to embrace breadth and multiplicity admirable, I also wondered how far 'identity' can be stretched as an analytical category before it begins to lose forensic power. In 'Beyond "Identity"?', a seminal article published in *History and Theory* in 2000, ROGERS BRUBAKER and FREDERICK COOPER argued against an approach to identity which head-

lines fluidity, multiplicity and constructivism: ‘If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere’. Their case against overly expansive interpretations of identity was that too much elasticity left historians ill equipped to consider the significance of clearly delineated self-perceptions by historical subjects or to understand the coercive forces by which hard-edged identities could be imposed by the powerful on the powerless. They suggested that over-use of the concept ‘identity’ in examining all social bonds, ties of loyalty and senses of self ‘saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary’.

How useful is a critique like that of BRUBAKER and COOPER for assessing this volume? Any jury is likely to be split. Certainly, the dexterity with which the authors and creators of so many of the texts and artefacts analysed in this volume used the discourses and terminologies associated with identity suggest that any arguments against constructivism, plurality and multiplicity are themselves likely to be too blunt and reductive. On the other hand, there may be grounds for arguing that this collection of essays is in danger of spreading ‘identity’ too thin. For instance, while the first section of this volume on ‘Imperial Identities’ (with articles by SVIATOSLAV DMITRIEV on the philosophy of John Lydos, NICOLA ROSE ERNST on Emperor Julian, MALONE on soldier emperors and violence, and ANNA MUTHESIUS on imperial silks) includes some fascinating material on the textual and material cultures associated with imperial regime-making, it is not clear that the concept of ‘identity’ is particularly apposite. Indeed, at times the imposition of ‘identity’ seems to inhibit or misdirect analysis. Frequent reference in these chapters to ‘ideology’, ‘image’, ‘norms’, ‘expectations’ and ‘self-fashioning’ suggests that these are somewhat more helpful terms for apprehending the political culture and promotional activities of emperors and their propagandists than ‘identity’.

This volume represents a snapshot of identity in Byzantium as that term was understood by many scholars around the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly as far as the political, ethnic and religious identities of the late antique and Middle Byzantine empires were concerned. Any future work on identity in Byzantium will need to continue to probe at the utility and scope of the category of identity itself, building on the wide-ranging and incisive discussion in the introduction to KORAY DURAK – IVANA JEVTIĆ (eds), *Identity and the Other in Byzantium* (Istanbul 2019). Future research will also need to continue to integrate concepts and evidence connected to gender, race and empire, and to take inspiration from recent cutting-edge scholarship such as ROLAND BETANCOURT’s *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton

2020) (referenced in this volume in NEVILLE's exploration of the significance of Greco-Roman gender ideals in Byzantium), and BENJAMIN ANDERSON – MIRELA IVANOVA (eds), *Is Byzantine Studies a Colonialist Discipline?* (University Park PA 2023).

Keywords

historical methodology; Eastern Roman Empire