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Herrin, Judith. *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. 392. \$19.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-14369-9.

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When Judith Herrin, one of the best known scholars on Byzantium, was asked by workmen in her office building what Byzantine History is, she decided it might be time to write a history of the Byzantine Empire which would explain to a broader audience what it is that makes the Byzantine world so exciting, lively, mysterious and above all, difficult to grasp. The result of her undertaking is the book under review.

The book is divided into four parts that together contain twenty- eight chapters, which have a chronological as well as a thematic approach. In the first part, *Foundations of Byzantium*, Herrin concentrates on the early history of the Byzantine Empire, in which she skillfully interweaves themes such as the foundation of the city of Constantinople, the rise of Christianity, or the mosaics of Ravenna with a chronological narrative.

When the emperor Constantine the Great had gained sole control in the empire in A.D. 324, he decided that the eastern half of his empire needed a capital as well where he could set up a stronghold against the Persian Empire, and where he could control the routes between Europe and Asia over land and sea. Due to its strategic location, its natural defenses, and ability for growth as an imperial capital, the site of the old Greek colony Byzantium proved to be an ideal location. Within a few years the city was beautified and gained the appearance worthy of a capital. As Herrin emphasizes, one of the advantages of Constantinople was that it had enough open space to be filled with new buildings by Constantine and his successors, contrary to what was left in Rome. As a new center of imperial administration, Constantinople attracted people of all sorts from all over the empire who gave a boost to the city's economic, intellectual and religious life.

Herrin dedicates several chapters to the role of Christianity (considered by scholars one of the most prominent characteristics of Late Antiquity) within the Byzantine Empire, the role of Constantinople as one of the most important cities for Christendom, the importance of the (oecumenical) councils, and the cult of the saints. In the centuries to come cooperation between the church and the Byzantine state proved to be very successful for the unity of the empire. Of course, a chapter on the famous Hagia Sophia is most appropriate in this book. Its form as a church must have been a new and exciting

phenomenon for the Byzantines. In addition, chapters on the mosaics in Ravenna and Roman law show how much art or the practice of Roman law was interwoven into society.

The second part, *The Transition from Ancient to Medieval*, focuses on the developments that proved to be a turning point in the history of Byzantium. Even though the Arab conquests of the early seventh century, which took about two-thirds of the empire's territory, nearly put an end to Byzantium, the empire managed to survive. This survival and subsequent developments have led Herrin to the conviction that Pirenne's thesis (1930s) about the importance of Islam for the development of Europe should be modified. Whereas Pirenne argued that Northern Europe was forced to re-invent itself because the Arabs had destroyed the old trading routes, and thus developed itself into the Europe of Medieval times, Herrin believes that for too long we have underestimated the importance of Byzantium as a shield between Western Europe and the Arab world (87). Without this shield the Arabs would have directed their attention to northern Europe, which would have led to quite a different outcome for Europe.

The importance of icons for Byzantine religious life and the conflicts over the dangers and powers of religious images that arose in the eighth and ninth centuries, which we call iconoclasm, characterize the Byzantine world in this transitional period as her leadership, both political and religious (with a particular role for the empresses Irene and Theodora), struggled to come to terms with the position of orthodox Christianity and its practices within Byzantine society. Modern scholarship has not quite come to a full understanding of the issues that were at the core of iconoclasm. Also, a chapter on Saints Cyril and Methodios, the so-called Apostles to the Slavs, demonstrates the importance of the Church's adoption of the vernacular, which unlocked the Church for many more adherents.

Part three, *Byzantium becomes a Medieval State*, contains eleven chapters that together offer a description of what Byzantine society in its fully developed stage represented. Even though Herrin is careful to present the historical order of events within these chapters, she has chosen a thematic approach. Chapters on topics such as Greek fire, the economy, eunuchs, Mount Athos or Anna Komnenos demonstrate the broad range of subjects treated. The reader obtains insights into the Byzantine world in which military victories and defeats were closely connected to the Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843, in which a direct link existed between commercial activities and religious festivals, in which the importance of the successors born in the purple (the so-called *Porphyrogennetoï*) cannot be stressed enough, in which life at the imperial court proved to be fascinating or repulsive (depending on the perspective of the spectator), and in which diplomatic relations with the West through the Venetians and with the East through the Turks gave Byzantium a bridge function between East and West. Furthermore, Constantinople represented an intellectual and cultural melting pot as she had come to be regarded as a safe haven for many refugees, but also for those who were in search of economic profit.

Byzantium's admiration for learning had led many scholars from everywhere to come to Constantinople and their work flourished and profited from an open intellectual climate.

For those who are trying to comprehend the spirit of Byzantine society, the eleventh century might offer a glimpse of that spirit. Although contemporaries perceived this age as a period of crisis, as a rapid turnover of emperors, military weakness causing internal revolts, and serious debasement of the gold solidus seemed to shake the empire to its core, this is similarly an age of cultural, legal, and medical innovation which all together must have made it an exciting and energetic period for many people as well.

In the final part, *Varieties of Byzantium*, Herrin explores the events leading to the sack of Constantinople in 1204 during the fourth crusade, and subsequently those of the definitive end of the empire in 1453. After the initial shock and destruction in 1204, many empires might not have recovered, but Byzantium, even though its territory had been confined now to merely the city, managed to come out of this disaster stronger, surprisingly so, as Herrin acknowledges. Besides, the rulers of, for instance, Trebizond, Arta and Nicaea, former territories of Byzantium, made a great effort in developing their kingdoms in Byzantine style, in order to represent Byzantium as worthy successors. Many Byzantine skills and manners thus continued to survive in the region. The final two centuries of the existence of the Byzantine Empire were characterized by the question if a union between the Church of Rome and that of Constantinople was achievable. The sack of Constantinople of 1204 and the subsequent taking of many Byzantine treasures to the West (think for instance of San Marco in Venice) were not an encouraging starting point for negotiations between the two churches. In the end, Byzantium could not accept subordination to the Church of Rome and its theology. They preferred their own theology, even under Ottoman rule, and thus opted rather for *the Turkish Turban than the Papal Tiara* (chapter 27).

In conclusion, Herrin wants her readers to realize that the stereotypical image of Byzantium as bureaucratic, inflexible, corrupt and monolithic is false as it might have been developed in part once Byzantine orthodoxy had separated from Rome and westerners needed to explain how this could have happened. Subsequently, their sack of Constantinople of 1204 similarly might have called for a justification, since it seemed so much against the principles of the crusades, at least of the first one. Men such as Montesquieu and Voltaire can be regarded as responsible for developing negative characteristics for Byzantium. In her book Herrin has clearly offered the opposite view, which seems to come closer to the historical truth. Her inspiring presentation of the Byzantine world in all its complexity and vitality must appeal to all of those interested in Byzantium, whereas it offers students an excellent overview of Byzantium's history, including a good sense of the broad range of available sources for Byzantine history and insights into many current scholarly debates. The illustrations that have been added

similarly help the visualization of the richness of the Byzantine world. In the end, Herrin rightly concludes that there would have been no Europe without Byzantium.