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Review of Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium*

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Arietta Papaconstantinou, Alice-Mary Talbot (ed.), *Becoming Byzantine: Children and Childhood in Byzantium. Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Symposia and Colloquia.* Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2009. Pp. 330. ISBN 9780884023562. \$55.00.

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In defiance of the adage, "children should be seen and not heard," young people have been popping up all over the late antique and Byzantine scholarly landscapes. Recent books on orphans, children in art, and late antique children have added to our understanding of pre-modern childhood while simultaneously reminding us of how much we do not know about the lives of minors in these time periods.¹ In 2006, in the midst of this birth of a new subfield, Dumbarton Oaks hosted a symposium on children in Byzantium. The fruit of this labor is the current volume, edited by the original "symposiarchs" Arietta Papaconstantinou and Alice-Mary Talbot. The book presents a welcome array of studies on material culture as well as texts. All of the articles make important contributions to the field. A few enticing entries from the original program, however, do not appear, as some participants published their own monographs on these topics.²

Papaconstantinou's introduction, "*Homo Byzantinus* in the Making", reviews recent literature on the topic and highlights methodological difficulties in studying children. She examines dominant narratives in recent scholarship on childhood. The "positive" view of childhood past and present posits that medieval children were somewhat like modern ones in their development and emotional bonds with their parents. It emerged in reaction to P. Ariès's seminal book *Centuries of Childhood*, which argued for the modern "invention" of childhood as a concept and a phase of life.³ As Papaconstantinou notes, the more recent historical frame makes necessary correctives to previous assertions about premodern children but sometimes elides crucial differences between past and present. Papaconstantinou also critiques the scholarly narrative of a modern decline from a previous "golden age" of childhood. Finally, she questions the merits of O. M. Bakke's argument that Christianity brought about the valuation of children as people in and of themselves.⁴ This contextualization is important, because the subsequent articles engage with these perspectives, especially Ariès's work.

The meat of the book appropriately begins with Günter Prinzing's "Observations on the Legal Status of Children and the Stages of Childhood in Byzantium." The essay provides an excellent overview of the terminology used for the stages of childhood and then evaluates the legal implications for each stage. His sources include church canons through the eighth century and legal documents from the eighth through thirteenth centuries. Although childhood in Roman law officially ended at 25, the major dividing line then and in Byzantium occurred at 12 for girls and 14 for boys. The 12/14 mark usually indicated the age at which people could marry and compose legal wills. Parents who claimed an ascetic calling as the reason for abandoning or failing to educate children under this age were anathematized at the Synod of Gangra. Children younger than seven were often exempt from punishment for crimes and certainly could not be executed. The age for entrance to a monastery was somewhat fluid, with some agreement that the boy must

at least have reached an "age of reason" (at least ten), but with Leo VI arguing for the older age of 16 or 17, when boys could dispense of their own property. Basil urged girls not to join women's communities until 16. Legal obligations between parent and child usually remained firm until the age of 25, although guardians could petition for children to be considered mature at 18 or 20. Parents could discipline but not abandon adolescent children. Children of all ages had years after maturing to pursue legal remedies against their guardians if cheated out of their property as minors.

Two articles on the medicine and science of childhood studies appear next: Marie-Hélène Congourdeau's essay on the desire to have children and Chryssi Bourbou and Sandra J. Garvie-Lok's study of breastfeeding and weaning. Congourdeau examines literary and medical texts to present Byzantine attitudes toward fertility, particularly from the perspectives of women--a difficult task, considering the sources. Despite the ascetic movement, most women wished to become pregnant and have children; they used prayer, drugs, and amulets to ensure fertility, a safe childbirth, and a healthy infant. Usually only women without a spouse (widows, military wives with husbands at war, prostitutes, and so forth) wished to remain childless and sought drugs for sterility or abortifacients. Congourdeau also concludes that doctors were women's strongest allies and demonstrated the most concerns for women's health and needs, in contrast to legislators and the church. New laws against drugs and abortions positioned women as murderers (not just deniers of their husbands' posterity, as under Roman law), and demanded stricter punishments. Church fathers extended sympathy to women who sought to have children but condemned women who used contraception as well as abortion. In a shift, however, religious writers began characterizing such women not as criminals but as victims whose own lives were endangered by these medical practices or as sinners who must be healed. Bourbou and Garvie-Lok study Byzantine bones to determine when children were weaned. By examining the levels of the nitrogen isotope ¹⁵N in women's and children's remains--an isotope known to be higher in infants than adults due to higher levels in breast milk--they conclude that children continued to be nursed until approximately age three. They conclude that this age is consistent with Byzantine hagiography and other texts that mention nursing but differs from the late Medieval West, where weaning occurred by the age of two.

Dimitar G. Angelov and Béatrice Chevallier Caseau explore literary representations of prominent adults as children. Angelov examines idealized motifs in the literary childhoods of emperors and patriarchs. Divine omens and miracles accompanied both figures' births and youth. Rulers were often represented as children with the adult traits of wisdom and bravery (or as *pueri senes*); texts also paid attention to the education that trained them for their future roles. Accounts of childhood mentioned playful attitudes and moments of play, but often in a propagandistic context (e.g., the revelation of Constantine's paternity while the boy is at play). Patriarchs exhibited the adult values of meekness, humility, and religious devotion as children and reportedly received secular educations in logic, rhetoric, and other subjects that would allow them to defend church doctrine. Both sets of literature recount parental affection for the remarkable children, often as a way to underscore the subject's devotion to a higher calling; the child separates from family to pursue his calling despite familial bonds. Angelov concludes that "literary conventions," "propagandist goals of legitimating power," and "practical concerns about effective leadership" (123-124) all led to standard representations of childhood, but that we also can conclude that some elements of childhood were viewed positively in this culture, especially play and the

parent-child bond. Caseau's essay on childhood in hagiography also addresses typical literary motifs: the "stereotypical *topoi*" of a noble or miraculous birth, signs and omens, fasting and asceticism practiced during youth, prophetic wisdom (especially during play), and a remarkable ability to learn. This latter element stands in contrast to earlier hagiography (e.g., *Life of Antony*), in which education was deemed unnecessary for holiness. Literature emphasizes that saints are born, not made; although holy children can be mentored and nurtured, their destiny is due to God, not to the efforts of their parents.

Brigitte Pitarakis's article on material culture examines clothing, adornment, food, and toys. Her sources are textual and archeological. In addition to thoroughly documenting the objects of Byzantine childhood, she concludes that from the necessities of life to the delicacies, material culture testifies to the love and affection shared between parents and children. Items were created for children's specific needs and joys.

Children in monastic settings are the subject of Richard Greenfield's article. The provocative subtitle, "Innocent Hearts or Vessels in the Harbor of the Devil?" previews the divisive debate over the presence of minors in monasteries and convents from the ninth through fifteenth centuries. Although children legally could join such communities at the age of ten, some monastic leaders opposed their presence on the grounds that they presented a source of sexual temptation, or that as reminders of familial attachments, they would prevent monks and nuns from breaking with their own families. Sources provide a few gruesome accounts of monks committing crimes against children (including sexualized murder), but the rules limiting children's presence were uniformly designed to protect the reputation and purity of the adults, not the well-being of the youth. Greenfield addresses children in training to become monastics themselves as well as orphans, ill children, or students who lived in these communities more temporarily. He concludes that despite reservations, prohibitions against children were not widely enforced. Moreover, he asserts, "an ideal of preserved innocence lies behind stories of monastic inmates raised within the walls of the community who have thus never known, and therefore have never been corrupted by, the outside world." (264) This last point is the least supported of the claims in an otherwise persuasive article; the concept of childlike "innocence" deserves more scrutiny as a potentially modern frame being imposed upon Byzantine sources, especially given the competing narrative of children as tempters.

The book concludes appropriately with death, with Talbot's essay on funerary practices for Byzantine children and adult attitudes toward children's deaths. High rates of childhood and infant mortality are indicated by both archaeological and literary evidence. Yet they did not inure parents to the grief for a lost son or daughter. Parents' "keen anguish" is expressed or described in historical narratives, funeral orations, and letters of consolation. (292) Talbot also examines burials, funerals, and monuments for dead children.

The volume is strong and vastly expands our understanding of Byzantine childhood. There are only two minor disappointments. First, a concern in many essays with the question of whether parents loved their children is limiting at times. Some chapters could have spent less time asserting that Byzantines felt affection for their offspring and more time pursuing what that love did and meant for children and society and how those demonstrations of affection intersected with other social mores. True, the inclination to paint Byzantine parents as more emotive is itself

a response to shortcomings in previous scholarship (particularly Ariès's influential work), but in places the book stops short, ending the analysis with a reassertion of the truth of Byzantine parental affection instead of providing a deeper and more nuanced analysis of the implications of that emotional bond.

Second, more dialogue between the papers would have been appreciated. At times, different authors refer to similar evidence or questions but without substantial engagement with each others' work. For example, Talbot contends, "Grave goods are rarely associated with subadult burials," and states that the placement of jewelry on children's bodies is only "occasional." (300) This claim contrasts with Pitarakis's argument that jewelry and adornment was common in children's graves, and even more frequent than in adult graves. (191) Talbot footnotes Pitarakis only to direct the reader to the other article. Each chapter could address the claims of the other more substantively. In another case, Pitarakis argues that "pleas for maternal breastfeeding" instead of wet nursing should be understood as a sign of the desirability of affection between mother and child in the Byzantine period. This conclusion, however, needs to be tempered by Bourbou's and Garvie-Lok's analysis of nursing as well as Caseau's examination of saints' lives: medical texts advocated wet nurses over biological mothers, and literary references to children who refused milk from other women served to emphasize the importance of the lineage and heritage of the saint (not simply the emotions in the maternal bond with an infant). (72, 141)

Overall, however, the book provides significant contributions to Byzantine studies as well as the history of childhood. Scholars of late antiquity or medieval Christianity should find much to value here, as well.

Notes:

1. Among others, see C. Hennessy, *Images of Children in Byzantium*, Aldershot, 2008; T. S. Heller *Orphans of Byzantium: Child Welfare in the Christian Empire*, Washington, D. C., 2003; C. B. Horn and J. W. Martens *"Let the Little Children Come to Me": Childhood and Children in Early Christianity*, Washington, D. C., 2009; C. B. Horn and R. R. Phenix, ed., *Children in Late Ancient Christianity*, Studies and Texts in Antiquity, Tübingen, 2009.

2. See the program at http://www.doaks.org/research/byzantine/byz_2006_symposium_program.html.

3. P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. R. Baldick, New York, 1962.

4. O. M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, trans. B. McNeil, Minneapolis, 2005; see also Horn's review in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 14 (2006) 539-41.