

Cameron, Averil. *Byzantine Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. xviii + 164. ISBN 978-0-691-15763-4. £15.95.

Reviewing Averil Cameron's latest book is a challenge. Yes, it is impressively short (less than 120 pages of text – and small pages at that) and clearly written. It is exceptionally stimulating. But notwithstanding those subjects the author passes over, it remains dense; fully to grasp its arguments requires a depth of knowledge that few readers, if they are honest, are likely to possess.

So, first, what is this book about? Sadly, not 'warfare and military matters, law, administration, and economy and other aspects of social history' (p. 113), where Late Rome is easier to relate to the wider world. Cameron's text concentrates instead on the articulate elite culture of what she, like so many others, calls 'Byzantium', and its development, including its influence on other societies – Eastern and Western, Christian and Islamic – during its long life. Above all, it is a plea against relegating the later Empire to an arcane, marginal, and difficult academic specialism, which can too easily, when not simply ignored, be exploited in support of Gibbon's vision of a society where 'in the revolution of ten centuries, not a single discovery was made to exalt the dignity or promote the happiness of mankind.'¹ Two recent, and otherwise very distinguished, books by Peter Heather and Bryan Ward-Perkins, noted by Cameron, even advance the death of this Empire to 476 CE when the Goths deposed the last (Western) Emperor. Ward-Perkins can describe this event in his title, although he offers a more qualified analysis in his book, as 'the End of Civilisation!'² Others, with vastly more justice, see the Empire ending with the Turkish capture of its capital, Constantinople, in 1453; her last Emperor, Constantine XI, was in no doubt that he was, as he signed himself, the 'Emperor of the Romans.' To write off that Empire, which was a great power until Western Crusaders sacked the capital in 1205, and a major centre of European culture until 1453 is more than mere folly; it distorts more than a thousand years of European, Eurasian, and African history.

Second, how does Cameron organise her arguments? In five short chapters: the first, *Absence* (pp. 7-25) addresses the difficulty of seeking to accommodate the traditions of Byzantium – notably, but not exclusively, its highly rhetorical literary culture – within wider European literary culture. We should not continue to see it, as Yeats notoriously saw it in *Sailing to Byzantium* (1928), along with trend-setting upper-class young aesthetes from Oxford in the 1920s, as brilliant, exotic, novel, and almost literally out of this world. The impact of such culture, she insists, must be comprehended within the framework of the Byzantine *Empire*, her second chapter (pp. 26-45). Here Cameron has less difficulty in showing that the state was a 'real' and very long-lived empire for all its local peculiarities; the 'family resemblances', to use Wittgenstein's phrase, are just too great to succumb here to the charge of Byzantine exceptionalism. (She could, I believe, have drawn fruitful parallels and noted striking continuities between the Later Roman Empire and its Ottoman successor.³) But the question of what is *Hellenism*, the 'Greekness' of the Empire (Chapter 3, pp. 46-67), is harder to resolve. How should we approach a society whose inhabitants saw themselves, and were described by outsiders, as Roman; whose central Imperial political institution (and its law) was Roman, but which was (mainly) Greek-speaking; whose culture had its roots in earlier Greek culture, although this was itself by the fourth century heavily Romanised, yet for whom Hellenism (*Hellenismos*) denoted the damnable religion of the Pagans. What links this culture and that of the modern independent state of Greece, who even had 'the great idea' of reconstructing – and reconquering – the empire after the first World War?

How also are we to relate to the visual arts of the Empire, the *Realms of Gold* of Chapter 4 (pp. 68-86)? These are all too commonly seen as a specialist domain of art historians understandably intoxicated by a visual approach dominated by two-dimensional, primarily religious art of a lavishness and virtuosity, which sets it apart from Western art generally, and which rests to a remarkable extent on the concept of 'imitation' (*mimesis*) – when that is the last thing it seems to be to those not reared in the tradition? Finally, how does this art relate to the religious life of the Empire, the subject of Cameron's longest chapter, *The Very Model of Orthodoxy* (pp. 87-111), from which it was inseparable.

¹ *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Book 5, Ch. 10.

² P. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (London 2005); B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome & the End of Civilization* (London 2005).

³ See e.g. H. Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire, the Classical Age 1300-1600* (London 2000).

We have only to think of the centuries of bitter quarrels over the legitimacy and role of images in religious worship – the so-called Iconoclast Controversy which lasted, on and off, from roughly 720-843 CE; constant doctrinal controversy over matters of breathtaking obscurity, notwithstanding the efforts of Ecumenical Councils to resolve them; and the wrangling over closely related issues of doctrine and power between Emperors, Patriarchs, and lesser mortals. And we not have not even mentioned vicious quarrels with Rome. How are we to understand controversies, which are both like and unlike those in the medieval West?

Cameron makes her case, as one would expect, with eloquence, insight, erudition and power. There is a great deal in what she argues. Even if she is, perhaps out of concern for colleagues' sensitivities, too ready to pass over some human reasons why much Byzantine scholarship has retreated into a remote, exotic specialism: the facts that many Byzantinists come to their specialism either after training in the 'deeply conservative' methods of classical philology and other technical skills which 'tend to discourage conscious theorising and reflection',⁴ or have arrived from medieval history, lacking the linguistic skills and knowledge of, and empathy for classical civilisation, especially Greek.

Hence my more positive suggestions as to how Byzantine studies might escape from its ghetto. First, by recognising, as Cameron herself does at intervals throughout her polemic, that the situation may not be as gloomy as she fears. True, graduate students can be rebuffed because they want to apply literary approaches to the study of Late Antique history, while I have heard a graduate student complaining that, if only more knew what was meant by 'theory', they would explore it. Indeed a recent book of mine had, amongst its objectives, that of helping end the methodological virginity of too many ancient historians, including Byzantinists, still innocent of what contemporary social sciences can offer.⁵

Second, we must pay greater attention to the kind of ideas and approaches underlying the work of, for instance, Chris Wickham, who rightly sees the political, social and economic structures of Byzantium as an integral part of early medieval Europe,⁶ or of Nicholas Purcell and Peregrine Horden, ancient historians, whose focus on the Mediterranean,⁷ its complex inter-related ecologies and networks has the capacity to bring Byzantium back into the historical mainstream. If one wanted an introduction to insights from historical sociology that can help the student of East Rome, there is Johann Arnason, whose 'thoughtful essay', 'Byzantium and Historical Sociology', contains many ideas Cameron explains she would endorse (p. 112).⁸ Another (short) introduction, this time aimed primarily at beginning students, but which also addresses deeper issues raised by Cameron, might be D. Stathakopoulos's *The Byzantine Empire* (London 2014). However, if I robustly agree with Cameron on her recommendations and her corresponding need for more social and literary theory and models in our studies of the Eastern Empire that can help bring our subject back more securely into 'normal' medieval history, there is one approach that she passes over. We must emphasise that Byzantium was *not* some mysterious self-creation, about whose timing people still agonise – another 'successor state' perhaps to (Old) Rome, on the analogy, say, of the Kingdom of the Franks or the Visigoths, as one very distinguished English medievalist explained to me. It was, in fact, the Roman Empire in its later phases; and to call it 'Byzantine' after the name of the city renamed by Constantine, is a Renaissance innovation that is misleading, demeaning and alienating. Insisting on such continuity does not, of course, preclude major changes in a polity; we have no difficulty, for instance, in continuing to talk about Egypt or China, even when, as with the Hyksos in the former, or the Mongols and Manchus in the latter, these ancient and long-lived states fell for considerable periods under invaders who did not originally speak Egyptian or Chinese. Even England underwent the trauma and transformation of the Norman Conquest in the eleventh century but the earlier, ninth century Anglo-Saxon king, Alfred, remains a national hero. Simply because medieval Westerners had difficulty in coming to terms with the Empire now based on Constantinople, it does not mean *we* should. Especially when it means that,

⁴ E. Jeffreys, J.F. Haldon and R. Cormack (edd.), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford 2008) pp. 3 and 9 for quotations, but the whole chapter goes further than Cameron in criticising the frequent archaism of Byzantine Studies – and well repays reading.

⁵ P. Bell, *Social Conflict in the Age of Justinian* (Oxford 2013).

⁶ C. Wickham, *Framing the Middle Ages* (Oxford 2005).

⁷ P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: a Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000).

⁸ J.P. Arnason, in P. Stephenson (ed) *The Byzantine World* (London 2010) pp. 491-505.

if we forget this essential continuity, the 'New Rome which neighbours the sea'⁹ remains in danger of floating away beyond the horizon of dreams.

These are all large subjects; no one, not even Cameron, could do full justice to them in such a short book. I only hope that my reflections here suggest how well this little book nevertheless succeeds in making you think about them.

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⁹ Paul the Silentiary *Description of Hagia Sophia*, last line, in Bell, P. N. (tr.), *Three Political Voices from the Age of Justinian. Agapetus, Advice to the Emperor, Dialogue on Political Science, Paul the Silentiary, Description of Hagia Sophia* (Liverpool 2009).