

Paul Magdalino: *Roman Constantinople in Byzantine Perspective. The Memorial and Aesthetic Rediscovery of Constantine's Beautiful City, from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance.* Leiden / Boston: Brill 2024 (Brill Research Perspectives in Byzantine Studies). 177 p. € 74.90 / \$ 84.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-69889-5.

In this lively and compelling volume, Paul Magdalino charts the shifting perception of Constantinople in the imaginations of Byzantine writers over a millennium of the city's history. Scholarly approaches to the question of how Constantinople and its history were imagined and described by its contemporaries are not, of course, new. Publications over the past few decades have witnessed important reassessment of Byzantine literary traditions of ekphrasis and contemporary descriptions of Constantinople's most important buildings and spaces of civic and political expression – many no longer extant, and others not unaffected by the renovations and changes implemented by their post-Byzantine custodians and users in later centuries.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, scholars of medieval western Europe have eagerly charted the fluctuating impression of the imperial city in the minds of Latin audiences, as they looked on from a far, and sought to situate the city within their own developing worldview. Far less attention however, had been devoted to examining how Constantinople's past, and sense of history, was imagined and understood by those whose lives played out within in the city; whether in familial, political, or intellectual terms. In this regard, Magdalino's study is an important contribution to our understanding of Constantinople from the perspective of its inhabitants and intellectual milieu, and one which (all importantly) recognises the city as a place possessing its own internal dynamics and traditions which were concurrent with, but not contingent upon, the city's status as the Roman imperial centre.

The strength of Magdalino's book lies in its diachronic approach to the theme, spanning the fourth to fifteenth centuries, and in its erudite weaving together of multiple genres and authors to chart the shifting value of Constantinople's past and cityscape in the minds of Byzantine writers. The result

1 In English this includes F. Spingou (ed.): *Sources for Byzantine Art History. Vol. 3: The Visual Culture of Later Byzantium (c. 1081–c. 1350).* Cambridge/New York 2022, H. Maguire: *Nectar and Illusion. Nature in Byzantine Art and Literature.* Oxford/New York 2012 (Onassis Series in Hellenic Culture), L. James (ed.): *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture.* Cambridge/New York 2007.

is not only a powerful testament to the importance of cross-disciplinarity and a remedy to the intellectual silos imposed by periodisation. Through careful analysis of individual authors, their sources, and intellectual context, Magdalino offers a nuanced and textured study which draws attention to the inner tensions which existed concerning Constantinople's sense of its own urban history, and how memories of its buildings, its landscape, and its 'origin myths', were reworked over a thousand years.

The book is organised into five sections in a broad chronological arrangement, which resemble the structure of chapters but lack the signposting and narrative framing that are more traditionally associated with monographs. While evidently a stylistic framework of the "Brill Research Perspectives" series, the format has the positive effect of encouraging readers to engage with all sections of the work, rather than focus on their specific area of interest. What readers will find, as a result, is a study rich in opportunities for comparison (comparing how individual writers and periods differed in their approach and why), and one which enables readers to explore the subsequent reception of classical and late antique writings in the works of later medieval writers.

Section 1 ("Historical Research on Constantinople, 330–600", pp. 7–38) sets out the intellectual schema of the book, as well as the intellectual justification for the work. Taking aim at the tendency of past scholarship to conflate the history of the city with that of wider Byzantine state (in its varying shapes), Magdalino establishes the importance of understanding how the Byzantines themselves conceptualised and made sense of the history and aesthetic beauty of their principal city. Magdalino (p. 6) defines these in terms of two modes of operation, the *memorial* and the *aesthetic*, which serve as the structuring themes of the remainder of the book.

Section 1 then proceeds to address the narratives concerning the foundation of Constantinople as a city and their development over the course of Late Antiquity (broadly defined here as 300–600). Addressing the context of the *Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitanae*, the now lost traditions of *Patria* literature, and the writings of Hesychios of Miletos, John Lydos, Sozomen and John Malalas, the chapter lucidly demonstrates the formative nature of this three-hundred-year period in establishing some of the core foundational stories of the city's origins: its relationship with 'old' Rome, the complexity of its 'pagan' past, and the city's status as a Christian city. The importance of Magdalino's discussion here is twofold. One, by demonstrating the contested and

incremental nature of those traditions, the section carefully deconstructs teleological histories of the city which view Constantinople's later reputation as the Christian 'new Rome' as predetermined and inevitable. Second, it highlights how negotiations of the city's past and urban topography, remained intertwined with efforts to codify the memory of Constantine as emperor and the status of the Theotokos as guardian of the city. These are recurrent themes throughout the discussions addressed by the volume and serve as useful points of comparison for scholars willing to engage in sections of the book beyond their own period of specialism or interest.

Section 2 ("Memorial Literature and Research Culture, 6th–10th Centuries", pp. 38–66) continues discussion of the theme into the seventh to tenth centuries (termed the Dark Ages), focussing principally on the *Parastaseis Synptomoi Chronikai* and the revival of *Patria* literature in the form of the tenth-century *Patria Constantinoupoleos*. The nature of the surviving evidence invariably skews the balance of the section towards the tenth century, although Magdalino's treatment of the *Parastaseis* provides clear proof of the continued interest writers took in the history of Constantinople's material past. Readers may quibble with Magdalino's assessment of 'research culture' during the period of Iconomachy as not primarily antiquarian (p. 42), in view of the importance that copies of older books and accusations of tampering with ancient texts were to play throughout the disputes over images between the eighth and ninth centuries. These represent a different form of antiquarianism, one not concerned with material space but nonetheless originating in similar efforts by Constantinopolitan writers to negotiate the role of images within their collective past. Reference to Constantinople's topography within the works of Theophanes and Nikephoros, some evoking the memories of past emperors, may also nuance this position, but are not examined within the work.

This is not intended as a criticism of the section – the limits of word length and breadth of coverage mean that one cannot have everything – but serves as a testament to the thought-provoking nature of Magdalino's writing, and its ability to encourage us to return to long-familiar material with new questions. The latter half of Section 2 covers more familiar ground with the revival of traditions in the *Patria Constantinoupoleos*. Here, Magdalino convincingly situates the re-emergence of interest in Constantinople alongside the production of the *Souda* and *Synaxarion* of Constantinople, in its efforts to

negotiate and systematise Constantinople's relationship to its ancient and more recent past.

Section 3 ("Cultural Heritage and Tourist Disinformation 1000–1453: From Bureaucratic to Scientific Antiquarianism", pp. 66–91) of the book shifts focus to examine the emergence of popular reception of city's history through what Magdalino describes as "tourist literature" (p. 67), and the construction of Constantinople as a destination of Christian pilgrimage. Here, the discussion draws attention to the blending of popular and elite narrative in tenth-century accounts, which Magdalino views as having emerged from a tradition of tourist guides. Such a discussion draws attention to one of the essential tensions which run throughout the work: whether scholars are wise to view such testimonies in empirical terms (i.e. what information they might supply about the physical city and its monuments), or view them as entirely rhetorical and literary constructs. Magdalino treads a fine balance between these positions throughout most of the volume, although is perhaps more accepting of the premise that monument lists and itineraries represent straightforward iterations of local information, as opposed to literary devices with their own agendas. Comparison with examples from Jerusalem, where scholars have long noted the rhetorical and exegetical inflections enshrined within such works, may prove a useful trajectory for future Byzantine scholarship (pp. 68–70) in addressing this question.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the idea that western visitors to the city simply reiterated information supplied to them, devoid of their own intellectual and literary frameworks, may not meet with universal accord from other scholars. These are minor points, however, which do not detract from the richness of discussion. Elsewhere in Section 3, Magdalino once more reflects upon the codification of Constantine's memory and attempts by Byzantine writers (among them Manuel Chrysolaras), to affirm Constantinople's status in relation to Rome, in the wake of western expansionism and counterclaims to the Roman legacy beyond the eleventh century.

Section 4 ("The Rhetorical Rediscovery of Constantinople, 10th–13th Centuries", pp. 91–109) and Section 5 ("The *Byzantios* of Theodore Metochites

2 See, for example, T. O'Loughlin: *Adomnán and the Holy Places. The Perceptions of an Insular Monk on the Locations of the Biblical Drama*. London/New York 2007, and my own D. Reynolds: *History and Exegesis in the Itinerarium of Bernard the Monk (c. 867)*. In: *Medieval Worlds* 10, 2019, pp. 252–296, URL: [https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds\\_no10\\_2019s252](https://doi.org/10.1553/medievalworlds_no10_2019s252), with further references.

and Its Legacy”, pp. 109–143), form a much tighter chronological and thematic pairing. Isolated from the imperial capital after 1204, and subsequently negotiating the city’s diminished political position beyond the thirteenth century, Byzantine writers turned to new modes of expression to celebrate and explore the city’s past. Structured around an analysis of the works of Theodore Prodromos, Manuel Holobolos, and Theodore Metochites, Magdalino explores how the exile of imperial power from the city encouraged renewed emphasis both on the physical beauty of the city and its natural surroundings, and on its status as an orthodox city. In addressing these themes, Magdalino takes great care to situate these discussions within the broader themes of Hellenism and revisionist approaches to late Byzantine literary production which have long-sought to rescue it from the much-maligned assessments imposed by Classicists and western medievalists. What emerges is not simply the impression of a vibrant and responsive culture of interest in Constantinople’s past, but an intellectual culture which was to have lasting influence over the trajectory of the European Renaissance. While Magdalino’s work offers areas unresolved – the question of a ‘Dark Age’ antiquarianism and the contributions of Constantinople to the antiquarian interests of the Renaissance are two areas in need of further scrutiny – it is to be commended for its capacity to energise and provoke renewed interest in the theme, and for the rigour in which it draws together such a rich and expansive body of material. One hopes that it will engender the ‘explorations of the depths’ of the subject (p. 149) among future generations of scholars that its conclusions highlight. It is, as a result, an important step on resituating the urban history of Constantinople, as understood by its contemporaries, alongside studies of medieval Rome and the Renaissance city states in whose shadow it has too long resided.

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