

James Howard-Johnston: *Byzantium in a Changing World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2025. XII, 280 pp., 26 ill., 12 maps. £ 25.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-889789-7.

Since his retirement from the University of Oxford in 2009, James Howard-Johnston has published no less than five single-authored books on aspects of the Byzantine world, with the end of antiquity and the institutions and administration of the mid-Byzantine state the subject of much of this work. The book under review here, “*Byzantium in a Changing World*”, provides a breezy history of Byzantium from Late Antiquity to its fall to the Ottomans, with an especial focus on geopolitics. Howard-Johnston sees the economy, institutions, the natural environment, and the Byzantine worldview all as contributors to how it interacted with the wider world. Those neighbours, from the Avars and the Pechenegs on to the Crusaders also take up a significant portion of the work. The book has six chapters as well as several maps and figures. Although it covers a huge amount of material in a relatively small number of pages (by contrast Anthony Kaldellis’ book tips the scales at 1160¹), it provides a good account of the myriad ways that the Byzantines interacted with friend and foe over the course of its long history.

The first chapter covers Late Antiquity (pp. 12–38) and begins with the third century crisis. The Sasanians and Huns both feature, with Howard-Johnston aiming to explain how the Romans survived in the east. This was down in large part to its greater wealth and so ability to fund armies that could meet invaders. He touches on some of the manifold building work, though so too the spread of Christianity, which he argues gave the empire trouble in three ways: its lack of pure monothetism, the desire for consensus among churchmen, and the continued role played by the emperor in the empire’s religious practices. The chapter is rounded out with a discussion of the wars that beset the empire in the last century and a half (sixth and seventh centuries), as well as a brief discussion of the plague.

In chapter two, Howard-Johnston turns to the so-called Dark Ages (pp. 39–73) where he notes the rather limited number of sources and texts, though he does, from the beginning, draw attention to a now lost early eighth cen-

1 A. Kaldellis: *The New Roman Empire. A History of Byzantium*. New York/Oxford 2024.

tury memoir as well as Nikephoros' *Short History*.² Unsurprisingly the rise of Islam features prominently (chapter one ends with Persia), and Howard-Johnston ranges widely discussing the role of faith both among the general public and among combatants; the impact of raids versus open battles; and the need for access for pilgrims in the Hijaz. Strategy, both Byzantine and Arab, is discussed, with *jihad* and the *haji* given as the explanations for the caliphate's longevity. As noted, while Byzantium is the focus, Howard-Johnston also regularly features its neighbours. So, besides the Byzantine response to Arab attacks, we also read about the civil wars among the Arabs, beginning with the assassination of 'Ali in 658. In the aftermath of all this internal unrest, the Umayyads and then the Abbasids went on the offensive into Asia Minor and beyond, though the Byzantines held off the siege of Constantinople in 717–718, and used guerrilla warfare to effectively stymie their attacks throughout the eighth century, especially after the Abbasid ascendancy. The Byzantines engaged in some military reform, with Constantine V introducing *tagmata* to the military. The emperors of the Isaurian dynasty are probably best known for their role in Iconoclasm, which for Howard-Johnston did not create the kinds of social and political divisions that might have been expected. By the 820s, the economic fortunes of the empire had started to turn, though Howard-Johnston concludes that the 'unfashionable' label 'Dark Ages' was, in fact, apposite.

Chapter three turns to the Byzantine revival in the ninth century (pp. 74–118), when the state moved from an emphasis on guerrilla warfare and tactics with the army based within the empire to armies now based on the frontiers. Howard-Johnston includes a discussion of the fragmentation of the caliphate in the ninth and tenth centuries, which was brought about by political and religious division. He also provides an interesting overview of the Byzantine worldview at this time, which includes a closer look at the works of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. He concludes that you can get a good sense for how the Byzantines saw its neighbouring states and peoples by looking more closely at such texts as the *De admimistrando imperio* and the *De ceremoniis*. One of his takeaways is that the Byzantines had a somewhat inflated view of themselves as having the central role in western Eurasian af-

2 For the news of recently discovered eighth century chronicle found in the Sinai, see: A. C. Pirtea: A Hitherto Unknown Universal History of the Early Eighth Century: Preliminary Notes on the *Maronite Chronicle of 713*. In: *Medieval Worlds* 23, 2025, pp. 155–167, 2025/11/27; DOI: 10.1553/medievalworlds_no23_2025s155.

fairs. Constantine VII aside, there were plenty of other valuable sources, assorted handbooks and even a landholding document from Thebes, though there is a real lack of contemporary histories before the eleventh century. Wars in the Balkans, against the Pechenegs, and problems with the Hamdanid emirate of Aleppo all play a part in this chapter. We see the Byzantines employing a mixture of offensive and defensive tactics, and Howard-Johnston covers the military manuals that treat some of this material. In general, much of the pattern was more direct, open warfare against foes in western Asia, with more guerrilla tactics used in the Balkans. By the end of the chapter, Byzantium was in good shape, geopolitically, with the only serious potential threat provided by the Fatimids in Egypt.

The focus of chapter four is Byzantium at its apogee in the eleventh century (pp. 119–147). Howard-Johnston opens with a consideration of the different social and political levels and groups then operating in the empire, from the imperial court to the empire's aristocrats, military elites, and even peasants. Here, Howard-Johnston notes the invaluable insight provided by the relatively abundant poetry and epistolography. This sets up a section on the empire's other assorted literary outputs, which were spurred, in large part, by the centralization of intellectuals in the capital, Constantinople. In all this, the classical world loomed large, but so too did the intellectual rivalry with the Abbasids. This return to classical forms had an impact on art too, which was manifest in media as diverse as ivory carvings and verse poetry in hexameters. In the realm of architecture, however, there was a clear break with the classical past, with smaller and less grandiose churches (and decoration) the preference. After this discussion of the Byzantine worldview, Howard-Johnston finishes the chapter with internal and external affairs. Two of the most dangerous foes, introduced here, are the Oghuz Turks and the Normans. The chapter ends with the various defeats and setbacks that beset the empire in the 1070s, with Manzikert the best known, though, also in 1071, Italy itself was all but lost.

The Komnenian Age is the subject of the penultimate chapter, five (pp. 148–196). For Howard-Johnston, this was a state that still had many of the trappings of its much older late Roman predecessor, though at this point, from the twelfth century on, its Greekness took on an even greater role. Among the many issues that plagued the Byzantines, the Bulgars and Serbs pushed for greater independence from 1180. Howard-Johnston touches on Alexios I and his daughter's magnum opus, the *Alexiad*, as well as its main characters,

Bohemond and Robert Guiscard. But we also read about the troubles with the Cumans and the Turks, before discussion shifts to the Crusades. Unsurprisingly, much of the discussion focuses on Alexios and the Byzantine role, particularly their desire for western manpower to regain some of their losses in Asia Minor, but also their reluctance to get too involved directly save in special circumstances, like during the Siege of Antioch from 1097 to 1098. We read about the efforts of assorted Komnenian emperors to get the upper hand in Asia Minor and against the Turks, either through direct operations or through the construction of fortifications. Besides Alexios, John II and Manuel play important roles, and the action focuses not just on the east, but also on the west, with problems in Italy and involving the Hungarians just two of the manifold issues. Howard-Johnston also looks at, among other things, the seemingly growing Byzantine economy and the zenith of literary patronage. In the end, however, matters took a turn, with Isaac especially running into all sorts of trouble, and Howard-Johnston finishes with the sack of Constantinople in 1204, which left the Byzantine Empire as a fraction of its former self.

In the final chapter, six, Howard-Johnston turns to Byzantium's demise (pp. 197–244). Three statelets held out at first, Trebizond, Nikaia, and Epiros, though the appearance of the Mongols in the 1240s led to significant changes, as did the arrival of the Black Death a century later. Although the latter's impact is assured, we have little in the written record on what this meant, specifically, for Byzantium. Howard-Johnston now cycles through these Byzantine holdouts, the Nikaian 'empire' in particular, before turning to Michael Palaeologus' successful efforts to retake Constantinople. By this point, however, its territory had been reduced even further and its reliance on diplomacy was essential. The Byzantines established all sorts of treaties, defensive in nature, which gave the state some measure of security. That being said, for all of Michael's success, his son Andronikos II was a different man entirely, and for Howard-Johnston ill-equipped for the plethora of problems assailing the empire. He outlines his problems with many people, from assorted allies like the Genoese and Catalans to foes like the Mongols and Turks. The dissolution of the state accelerates in the middle of the fourteenth century, with the Ottomans one of the clear winners of these developments. By the time they made their advances on Byzantine territory, the empire was little more than a collection of city states. Unsurprisingly, the Ottomans feature prominently in the final pages, with Howard-Johnston

highlighting their power, rivalled only in western Asia by the Mamluks in Egypt. When Mehmed II takes the throne in 1451, Constantinople becomes his primary target. The final attack came not much later, and the book ends with its capture in 1453.

Twelve hundred years is a lot of history to fit into less than two hundred and fifty pages of text, even if that history is concentrated on one state/empire/people, with or without discussion of its neighbours, both friend and foe. By limiting his focus more squarely on geopolitics and related issues like worldview, Howard-Johnston has made the task more manageable. The array of sources that he uses is vast, and while texts feature prominently, other materials are deployed here and there, like the *Katholikon* of Hosios Loukas, the multitudinous lead seals, or the archaeological remains of rural settlements in Laconia, which grew in number during the Komnenian age. The bibliography is concise, as suits a book of this size, though it contains many of the most important works of scholarship from the past few decades. The prose too, as with his other work, is very readable, and so far as I can tell the text is free of errors. In sum, this book offers an invaluable introduction to Byzantium's relations with its neighbours, and while it can, at times, be a bit slow-going, owing in large part to the density of material, it offers a great deal in a relatively compact form replete, even, with some good maps and several colour photos. Ultimately, owing to Howard-Johnston's focus on geopolitics, it is hard not to leave the book impressed with the Byzantines' ability to withstand so many diverse challenges over such a long period of time.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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