

BYZANTIUM – Cultural History

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

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Part I : SCIENCE

Overview In one sense the chief contribution of Byzantine culture to human development was its transmission of Greco-Roman culture to the Renaissance, and beyond. The scientific heritage of Aristotle, Ptolemy, and Pliny made its way through the mediaeval Byzantine period via the compendia and encyclopedias of which mediaeval scholarship was fond, and into the curiosity and forward thinking of Italian Renaissance Humanists. There were, however, significant achievements within Byzantine science itself--in ballistic science, in mathematics, and in medicine.

Mediaeval cultural transmission Mediaeval Byzantine scholarship was strong on compendia and encyclopedias. The exemplar par excellence is the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville (560-636 C.E.), the activist polymath Archbishop of Seville. We might today consider his huge encyclopedia a grab bag of the scientific curiosities available at his time, some of which were in fact precious didascalia upon work of Aristotle and Plato, and yet his pages are full of material eagerly consumed, in his time, by privileged readers for whom antiquity was a basket of wonders. The same contribution was provided, in subsequent Byzantine centuries, by updated encyclopedias like the seven volume compendium of Paul of Aegina, whose particular interest is medical lore. The 13th century compendium of pharmaceuticals, compiled by Nicholas Myrepsis, was the principal pharmaceutical codex for the Faculty of Medicine in Paris, until 1651.

Achievements in Science

Greek Fire Greek Fire was a napalm like substance, whose essential ingredients were kept secret by the Byzantine State, but which served as a powerful naval weapon. The combustible brew of sulphur, bitumen, and petroleum, when lighted, maintained its fury when projected onto the water against the prow of an enemy vessel. The fiery assault would continue, unaffected by the water on which it was burning. On several occasions the Byzantines attributed their salvation to this experiment in destructive ballistics.

Mathematics Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles, mathematicians and architects of great genius, were chosen by the Emperor Justinian to draw the plans and supervise the work for his ambitious Cathedral of Hagia Sophia, Sacred Wisdom. The challenge was great, due to the vast size of the structure; the central dome, 182 ft. tall, rested on a cradle of forty arched windows; twenty four buttresses were added to the sides of the building. Higher geometry was demanded at every stage in the planning of the structure.

Medicine Byzantine medicine developed early, and largely in the context of the hospital. The first Byzantine Hospital appears to have been built between 344-358 C.E., and to have heralded a spread of such institutions across the Empire--East and West--to the point where 160 hospitals, chiefly in Constantinople, were active during Byzantine times. Many of these hospitals were appendages to Churches, and played their part in the movement of early Christianity to feed and care for the ill and homeless. It should be added that the medical procedures, which took place in these hospitals, included subtle research into such maladies as gout and urinary tract issues, as well as highly developed surgical techniques for procedures like hernia operations.

Reading

Miller, Timothy, *The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire*, Baltimore, 1997.

Mainstone, Rowland, *Hagia Sophia: Architecture, Structure, and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church*, New York, 1997.

Discussion questions

What was the role of the Academy of Athens, which was still flourishing in the 4th and 5th centuries C.E., in preserving Greek scientific thought for the Byzantine East?

What role did Arabic culture and scholarship play in the transmission of Greco Roman science to Byzantium? Where were the relevant students of Arabic located, and what role did they play as translators?

In the 13th and 14th centuries C.E. there was extraordinary scientific activity in Byzantium, say in the work of scholar-scientists like Thomas Magister and Maximus Planudes. What was the nature of these men's scientific work; in particular what were their achievements in astronomy?

Part II : ART

Overview Byzantine art was not motivated by desire for innovation or change, and though there was abundant conflict within Byzantine intellectual circles--cf. the two major Iconoclastic Movements of the 8th and 9th centuries--the working traditions of Byzantine art were static from its inception until the 14th century. However within that traditionalism lay a respect for careful and profound work, which was unsurpassed in its vein, and which played its role in making Byzantium the wealthiest and most sophisticated world city of its time.

Architecture

San Vitale From 540-750 C.E., Ravenna, in north eastern Italy, was the capital of the Ravenna Exarchate of the Byzantine Empire, and the site of much imperial patronage and major artistic undertakings. The church of San Vitale in Ravenna, dating from 546 C.E., shares with much early Christian architecture (the Romanesque, in the West) a polygonal structure with four auxiliary domes, surrounding a central dome which, because there is no longitudinally axial nave, becomes the center of light and spirituality for the entire church. Effects of unusual subtlety are scattered throughout the church, as in the surfaces of the capitals and impost blocks, covered with what seems a fine lacy surface, a visual conflict with the heavy solidity of the construction in the dome.

Hagia Sophia This master cathedral, the supreme self-assertion of the Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora, brought together the architectural genius of two of Byzantium's finest artists--thinkers--and geometricians, Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus. They worked, as did the makers of San Vitale, around the centrality of the dome, which was the primary light source for the huge temple; they worked with particular genius on the construction of the triangular pendentives, which descend from the central dome and gradually displace its weight onto the subsidiary domes, which carried the energy of the pendentives all the way to the floor of the cathedral.

St. Mark's in Venice Saint Mark's Cathedral was begun in 1063, on a main piazza in the Venice of high commerce and high art, one of the richest allies of Byzantium itself. The building is in the form of a Greek cross--arms of equal lengths--with each of the five domes--one central, four over the arms--covered with wood and gilded copper, a brilliant formula to the observer from below.

Mosaic

San Vitale On either side of the altar at San Vitale extend splendid mosaics of the Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora. A famed mosaic, of Theodora and her attendants, displays the queen with nine attendants, all created

from subtly dyed mosaics--some in brilliant gold tesserae--aligned with their trademark Byzantine faces, huge eyes and tiny mouths, a long thin nose. What rivets our eyes is not exactly bodies depicted, but stylized spirits.

St. Mark's In the so-called Creation dome, above the narthex of the Cathedral, we follow concentric mosaic circles depicting the Creation Story from the Book of *Genesis*. One panel concentrates on the creation of Eve from Adam's rib. The pictorial formulae are stylized--no pretense of realism--and vivid, so that a worshipper without ability to read--the case of most--would instantly recognize the material depicted.

Painting

Madonna and Child Elongated forms, lengthy draped clothing, stylized faces--the long noses, wide eyes, small mouths mentioned above--these are trademarks of Byzantine painting, most of it thematically inspired from Christian sources, much of the best of it depicting the glorious sorrows of The Lady Mother of the Church. A splendid example, of this regal sadness, is the *Madonna and Child Enthroned* from 1270 C.E. Sadness, delicacy, loss and glory are compacted into one object of contemplation.

Reading

Beckwith, John, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, Harmondsworth, 1973.

Cormack, Robin, *Byzantine Art*, Oxford, 2000.

Discussion questions

Taking a wide view, what connections do you see between ancient Greco-Roman visual art, and that of Byzantium?

What kind of presence does Christianity exert on Byzantine art? Does it appear in particular themes or visual procedures?

What are Byzantine icons? Did the finest Byzantine artists turn their attention toward that form? Were the themes of some of those icons 'secular'?

Part III : RELIGION

Overview In 330 C.E. the Roman Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Byzantium, a thriving Greek colony out of range of the disastrous break downs impending in the Latin West, was to be chosen as the seat of Eastern Christianity, a position it retained until the Fall of the Byzantine Empire--the secular power in which Byzantine Christianity was embedded--to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

Getting started Like the Christian Church in the Latin West, the Byzantine Church needed first to come to an agreement about beliefs. On the official level this agreement was achieved through Councils, at which the leading figures in the Church convened to hammer out doctrine. There were seven such councils in the Byzantine East, dating from 325 C.E. (The Council of Nicaea, in Asia Minor) to 787 C.E., by which time it was felt that Byzantine theology had consolidated, for the time being. (The fact is that Byzantine theology continues to evolve, having been enriched in several dimensions within the past century.)

The character of the Byzantine Orthodox religion The fundamental tenets of the Orthodox Church are close to those of the Roman Catholic Church. For the Orthodox believer God the creator is presumed to have acted prior to time to create a world in which human beings occupy a central value-giving position. Jesus Christ is recognized as the God-sent Savior of Mankind, who through his death on the cross vicariously reprieved mankind from its sins. The supreme act of Reconciliation, between God and man, is the communion mass, in which the worshipper obeys Jesus' command to eat his body (wafer) and drink his blood (wine) 'in remembrance of Me.'

The points of conflict between Byzantine and Western Christianity.

Governance From the 'Western Christian' view point the chief conflictual element concerns the primacy of the Roman Papacy. The legal mind which has always dominated in the Roman Church, descended as it is from the organized legal structures of the Roman Empire, has never been happy with the pluralistic, multi structural format of the Byzantine Church--which is in fact the Eastern Churches, for in fact there are many widely separate Churches gathered under the Eastern Orthodox heading--Greek, Russian, Polish, Syrian, etc. To the papacy in Rome centrality and unique governance, over all the Roman Catholic domain, has been and remains essential, while to the Byzantine Church this insistence on primacy has been of less importance.

A basic issue It will illustrate the (so it may seem to us) fussily theological character, of the issues separating Byzantine Orthodox from Roman Christianity, if we mention the long-broiling conflict over the *filioque clause*. That Latin formula--first allowed to harden in the Nicene Creed, where early Christianity set down its essential doctrines--refers to an addition which the Byzantine Church wanted to make to the Latin formula which declares that the Holy Spirit is born of the Father (excluding the Son, the Christ), which addition states that the Holy Spirit is also born of the Son, The Christ, *filioque (and from the Son.)* The gist of this consequence laden dispute--internal struggles of every sort were at stake--was that the Eastern Church wanted to affirm the full and equal personhood/presence of each of the three members of the trinity, while the Latin Church was (often) less insistent on the equality between Father and Son, and frequently privileged the importance of the Holy Spirit, the bearer of intelligibility, within the Trinity.

Reading

Binns, John, *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Church*, Cambridge, 2014.

Fitzgerald, Thomas, *The Orthodox Church*, Westport, 2014.

Discussion questions

We mentioned one basic issue, between Byzantine Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity. That issue overlays a wider rift between the two branches of Christianity. For the Eastern Church mystical apprehension of God is widely admired, while for The Western Catholic Church much more stress (as in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas) is placed on rational analysis and logical conclusions. Review the Byzantine text, *The Philokalia*, composed of devotional materials written between the 4th and 14th centuries, C.E., to see how the Byzantine Church oversees the direct experience of God.

Constantine, who set up the Christian Empire in Byzantium, was of course a Roman and a Latin speaker. How did Greek become the working language of the Byzantine Orthodox Church?

The development of Byzantine Orthodox Christianity is studded with heresies. One of the most powerful was Arianism, which involved a highly contentious view of the nature of Jesus Christ. What was that heresy and how was it resolved?

Part IV : PHILOSOPHY

Overview Eastern European philosophy, in the postclassical period, is here understood as the philosophy elaborated in Byzantium, presently Istanbul, between 330 C.E. and 1453 C.E., when the Byzantine Empire fell to the Ottoman Turks. The Byzantine Empire, established as it was on the foundations both of Christianity, to which the Roman Empire Constantine had converted, and of Greco-Roman culture, which was inherited from the Roman Empire, generated a unique philosophy, preserved til this day within the framework of the Greek Orthodox Church, and among our chief living bonds, today, to the philosophies of the early Christian and pre-Christian worlds.

The tenor of Byzantine philosophy Higher education, under the Byzantine Empire, was largely devoted to preparing educated employees of the vast bureaucracy of the Byzantine Empire. Thus there was a ready job market for the students of the educational system, which was widespread and highly developed. From the villages and townships of the Empire to the mundane and sophisticated halls of the University of Constantinople, which was founded by the Roman Emperor Theodosius in 425 C.E., prospective functionaries from all over the Empire--Antioch and Alexandria rivalled Constantinople itself for cultural development--prepared for careers in the labyrinthine halls of bureaucracy. The cultural homogeneity suggested by this state of affairs was assured by the common use of Greek throughout the Empire, a lingua franca of thought and communication.

The challenge facing Byzantine philosophy Aristotle and Plato may be said to have dominated the philosophical thinking of Byzantine philosophy, as they dominated the high period of Scholastic thinking in the West, the thought of Aquinas and Bonaventure. The most influential thinkers of the Greek East--Photios (810-after 893 C.E.), Michael Psellos (1018-after 1081 C.E.), Gregory Palamas (1296-1359 C.E.), Gemisthos Plethon (1360-1452 C.E.)--all studied Greco-Roman philosophy, in Greek, and made the thinking of Aristotle and Plato the axis of their positions. The assignment facing them was to harmonize their positions, on the relative values of the thought of Plato and Aristotle, with the fundamental principles of what became distinctively to be known as Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the dominant religion of the Byzantine Empire. The complexities of this assignment, orienting oneself both within the religious parameters of Orthodoxy and within the intricate interrelations between Plato and Aristotle, led to responses of great subtlety, which have made Byzantine philosophy, especially in light of its longevity, difficult to access from the outside.

Typical issues dealt with in Byzantine philosophy: the soul Central issues of Byzantine philosophy are the questions of the immortality of the soul and the nature of universals. Mediaeval philosophy, east and west, dwelt on the thorny Aristotelian issue of the nature of the soul. By some interpretations Aristotle believed that the soul and the body were indissolubly one, and that therefore when the body dies the soul is gone for good. Others disputed that this was Aristotle's meaning, insisting that for him the soul was a deathless principle of intelligibility that pervades the individual, and that the soul cannot perish. Both of these positions necessarily took into account the position of Plato--in the *Phaedrus*, for example--that the soul is the immortal dignity of the human person.

Typical issues dealt with in Byzantine philosophy: universals Like their fellow Scholastic philosophers in the West, Byzantine philosophers took up Aristotle's logic, and his preoccupation with whether and how universals exist. One example might be the universal, beauty. Many individuals have the property of being beautiful. Beauty therefore can be called a universal, a property applying to many individuals at the same time. But what kind of a thing is beauty itself? Is it 'real'? Has it independent existence? Arid though a non-philosopher might consider this issue, when it is attached to issues like the nature of love, or justice, or faith--which are embedded in Christian theology--the existential importance of the philosophical issue is immediately apparent.

Readings

Wilson, N., *Scholars of Byzantium*, London, 1983.

Ierodiakonou, K., ed., *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, Oxford, 2002.

Discussion questions

How did Greek become the lingua franca of the culture of Byzantium? What were the origins of the city of Byzantium?

What were the chief stages of the development of philosophy in Byzantium? You will need to do some research on this question, which will deepen your understanding of the wide variety of positions available within a seemingly monolithic tradition.

Gemisthos Plethon was the Byzantine philosopher with (arguably) the greatest influence on thought in the west. What did he think, and what was his influence?

Part V : LITERATURE

Overview Byzantine post classical literature in Greek is an archaizing body of work, largely written in versions of ancient Greek, the Greek of 5th century Attica, and often concerned with versions of or takes on ancient Greek literature. While we call this literature Byzantine, and properly so because its inspirational center remained Byzantium, ninety percent of Byzantine literary production took place outside the imperial capital, in the dominating cultural centers of the Empire, in Antioch and Alexandria, and as far away as Palestine and Syria. The unifying trait of this huge body of texts, created until the fall of Byzantium, was that it was written in Greek, that was largely imitative, and that its themes included generous representations of Christian, Greek, and Roman cultures.

The range of literary types As we know from Byzantine philosophy and theology, the thought-world of the Byzantine Empire--with its many imperial schools, religious infighting, theological distinction-making, and highly sophisticated aesthetic perspectives--was hermetic and refined. The sixth century C.E. historian Procopius, chronicler of the times and even amours of the Emperor Justinian, is considered the last of the great tradition of ancient historians. Working from the classical inspiration of such as Lucian the satirist (125-180 C.E.), generations of satirists thrived on the news of the Rialto, as it played out in the socially cool, and often debauched, milieu of the capital, Constantinople. Refined poetries--didactic, panegyric, romantic, epigrammatic-- sharpened wits and stirred emulation throughout the Empire. In the last five centuries of Byzantium popular poetry flourished on the fringes of the Empire, and was at its best reminiscent of the epic of classical times or of the profound religious perspectives inherent to Byzantine mysticism.

Three brief excerpts from Byzantine literature may leave a taste in the mouth.

Romanos, the Melodist Romanos (490-556 C.E.) was one of a number of legendary hymn composers, whose powerful poetry and strong sense of poetic rhythm earned him a perennial place in the Orthodox liturgy. He is said to have composed a thousand hymns, after an unpropitious early life as a Jewish kid from Syria, who was widely thought to be a slow learner and a poor prospect for the priesthood. His gifts were revealed to him one night in dream, by the Virgin Mary; she appeared to him holding a scroll, the proof that he was destined to be a great poet and cantor. And the rest was history.

*Why thus faint-hearted?
Why veil ye your faces?
Lift up your hearts!
Christ is arisen!
Join in the dances,
And with us proclaim it:
The Lord is ascended,
Gleaming and gloried,
He who was born
Of the giver of light.
Cease then your mourning,
Rejoice in blessedness:
Springtime has come.
So bloom now, ye lilies,
Bloom and be fruitful!
Naught bringeth destruction.
Clap we our hands
And shout: Risen is He
Who helpeth the fallen ones
To rise again.*

Digenes Akritas The Byzantine folk epic by this name, *Digenes Akritas*, rises from the fund of highly popular story material under creation in Greek Byzantium from the 7th to the 12th centuries B.C.E. The narrative concerns an Arab convert to Christianity, who becomes an outstanding fighter for the Christian faith, living and overcoming all manner of enemies on the wild distant eastern margins of the Byzantine Empire. The following excerpt is from a manuscript dating from the 12th century C.E.

*They mounted at once and they came to the battlefield.
They hissed like dragons, they roared like lions,
they soared like eagles, and the two clashed.
And then you could see a fight between fine brave youths.
In the heat of the battle they struck continuously,
and from the great clashing and the cut and thrust
the plains grew fearful and the mountains re-echoed,
trees were uprooted and the sun was darkened.
Blood flowed down over their horse-trappings
and their sweat ran out over their breastplates.*

Michael Psellos Psellos (1017-1078) was an outstanding Byzantine monk and academic, a chronicler, a theorist of history writing, and an unparalleled observer of the society of his times. He is a perfect example of the fruit of sophisticated Byzantine culture; a trace of his narrative skill persists in the translation below, from his *Chronographia*, a record of the political infighting (and more) of the age.

As for the common mob, it was already on the move, greatly stirred at the prospect of exercising tyranny over him who had himself played the tyrant. And the women -- but how can I explain this to people who do not know them? I myself saw some of them, whom nobody till then had seen outside the women's quarters, appearing in public and shouting and beating their breasts and lamenting terribly at the empress's misfortune, but the rest were borne along like Maenads, and they formed no small band to oppose the offender. 'Where can she be?' they cried. 'She who alone is noble of heart and alone is beautiful. Where can she be, she who alone of all women is free, the mistress of all the imperial family, the rightful heir to the Empire, whose father was emperor, whose grandfather was monarch before him -- yes, and great-grandfather too? How was it this low-born fellow dared to raise a hand against a woman of such lineage? How could he conceive so vile a thought against her? No other soul on earth would dream of it.' Thus they spoke and hurried together as though they intended to fire the palace. As there was no longer anything to stop them, for all men had already rebelled against the tyrant, they took up their positions ready for battle, at first in small groups, as if they were divided by companies. Later, with all the citizen army, they marched in one body to the attack.

Reading

Benton, R., *The Mediaeval Greek Romance*, Cambridge, 1989.

Jeffrys, Elizabeth, *Digenis Akritis*, Cambridge, 1998.

Kazhdan, A.P., *A history of Byzantine Literature, 650-850*, Athens, 1999.

Discussion questions

In what ways, or at what points, does Byzantine literature seem to you to take its inspiration from the classics of Greco Roman Literature? How familiar were educated Byzantines with Greco Roman literature?

What was the state of literacy in the Byzantine Empire? Where would people go to find texts to read? What was the role of the monasteries in educating 'the people'?

What was the condition of Universities in Byzantium? Was there a surge in university foundings in 12th and 13th centuries C.E. Byzantium, as there was at that time in the West?