Introduction

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Eurasian Studies is the perfect venue for a thematic volume on Istanbul, a city that bridges the continents of Europe and Asia. In the medieval period, which is the focus of all the articles collected here, the city was the capital of the East Roman Empire, and was called either Byzantion (from which the modern scholarly designation of the East Roman Empire as Byzantium derives) or Constantinople, after its re-founder (in 330) Constantine the Great (Constantinople means Constantine’s city / polis).

The heart of the volume consists of papers delivered at the International Congress of Byzantine Studies held in Nicosia, Cyprus, in January 2020, just before the global Covid pandemic shut down the world for over a year and a half. The session was organised by Jessica Varsallona, who was then completing her PhD under my supervision at the Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies (University of Birmingham), and has since been awarded her doctorate. She arranged the papers as if they were stratified layers in an archaeological excavation, with the most recent material (her own contribution – which won the prize for best post-graduate paper at the conference) first, followed by topics that dealt with increasingly more ancient themes. Here, for the Journal of Eurasian Studies, the chronology has been reversed, and we begin with the oldest evidence and move into examinations of more and more recent aspects of the material culture Constantinople.

The volume opens with the mystery of absent ninth-century coins, then rehabilitates an often-ignored church plan before relocating the development of ecclesiastical side-buildings (parekklesia) from the period after the Byzantines recaptured Constantinople from the Crusaders in 1261 to the middle Byzantine period (10th–12th century). Absences and restorations continue in articles about a lost mosaic from the main church of the city, the Great Church or the Church of Holy Wisdom, Hagia Sophia, and the often ignored (and thus effectively rendered invisible) stucco decoration of middle Byzantine churches. We then wander the streets of the city, exploring first...
monastic and then aristocratic and imperial patronage (though the three systems of patronage frequently overlapped), and evaluating the messages that the patrons apparently hoped to convey to their audiences from the 11th to the 15th centuries, but with an emphasis on the 13th.

In many respects, then, this is a volume about making the invisible visible, and the authors do this by reconsidering material that has been frequently overlooked in previous scholarship. It is clear from the subtitle of this volume – Strolling through the Unbeaten Paths of Constantinople (itself a play on the wonderful Strolling through Istanbul by Hilary Sumner Boyd) – that this was Varsallona’s aim from the start, and, with the able collaboration of her co-editors Alessandro Taddei and Maria Vrij, she has succeeded in achieving it very well indeed.

The contributions here are particularly important for two reasons. First, the Byzantine impact on the medieval world was, and the Byzantine legacy is, far more significant than is often realised. The East Roman Empire straddled the great cultures of Europe and Asia, and, at its height, of the global north and the global south of both continents. Chronologically and geographically it linked the ancient to the medieval, and the medieval to the early modern world. Whether we like it or not, our knowledge of the classical Greek literary past is almost entirely dependent on what Byzantine scribes believed was worth preserving and copying. And in terms of material culture, the core of modern Istanbul still retains Byzantine street patterns; the extraordinary domed mosques of the 16th century depend on the centralised domed basilica that was once the great church of Hagia Sophia, was until recently the Ayasofia Museum, and is now itself a mosque. There are reasons why, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, French kings and Russian tzars alike self-identified as the direct successors of the Byzantine emperors. This volume will, I hope, allow a new audience to understand at least some facets of the East Roman impact and legacy on the Eurasian world of today.

But the second reason why the essays collected in this volume are important leads us a bit away from the core impact of the East Roman Empire on the modern world. Within Byzantine Studies itself (as indeed in most disciplines), there are fashions in scholarship that decree – without anyone ever saying so – what topics are important and deserve press space, and what topics are irrelevant and can be readily by-passed. The authors invited to contribute to this collection were specifically directed to fight against current assumptions and fashions, and to look at old monuments in new ways. As Maria Vrij writes in the first article, some (most) scholars tend to ignore questions to which there is no obvious answer. These scholars do not. The end result is a series of slightly
edgy, slightly spiky chapters that participate in the ongoing re-evaluation of the East Roman Empire from scholars who ask new questions and look in new places, in new ways to find more nuanced (and often more local) explanations for the phenomena they evaluate. If this is your first exposure to the Byzantine world, it is not the usual bland introduction to a long-dead civilisation. The chapters in the volume will not prepare you to win any pub quizzes on the Byzantines. But they will lead you into what may be a new world for you, and into interesting and productive by-ways for those of you who are already familiar with the East Romans. Enjoy!