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Introduction: Byzantium, its neighbours and its cultures

Byzantium was one of the longest lasting empires in history.¹ Throughout the millenium of its existence, the empire showed its capability to change and develop under very different historical circumstances. Formed in Late Antiquity, it survived the transitions of the late antique world and severe territorial contraction in the seventh century to return in a few centuries as a supreme political power in southeastern Europe. This remarkable resilience would have been impossible to achieve without the formation of a lasting imperial culture and a strong imperial infrastructure, both ideological and geo-political. The Byzantines needed functioning imperial culture and ideology in order to enable the continuing reproduction of imperial social structures. Imperial ideology required, among other things, to sort out who was 'insider' and who was 'outsider', and develop ways to define and describe ones neighbours.² No empire, including the Byzantine, could function and survive without a working relationship of the imperial centre with the periphery and frontier zones.³ Frequent contractions and expansions of the empire shifted these zones significantly through the centuries, changing who the Byzantine provincials and neighbours were. Consequentially, the nature of the Byzantine interaction with their neighbours evolved in different directions. A peculiar geo-strategic position connected the Byzantines with the post-Roman and early Medieval West, the South Slavic polities in the Balkans, the Pannonian, Ukrainian and Russian steppes, the Caucasus mountains and the world of Islam. The empire witnessed the rise (and fall) of different competing empires and states: the Sassanids, Avars, Bulgars, Arab caliphates, the Carolingian empire, Venice, Serbia, the Ottomans, and the Rus, making their relationship with their neighbours diverse and perpetually changing.

Our understanding of Byzantium's external and internal interactions has changed as a result of recent scholarship. The significance of this empire to a millennium of developments throughout Eurasia has been examined through the nature of contacts between Byzantium and its Eurasian

¹ Recently on Byzantium as an empire - Cameron 2014, 26-45.

² See Smythe 2000; 2010 for the insiders and outsiders in Byzantium; Kaldellis 2013 for ethnography.

³ The scholarship on the creation and role of imperial cultures is perpetually growing, e.g. Colás 2007, 116-57; Münkler 2007, 80-107; see also Haldon 2009, 236-40 for Byzantium.

neighbours.⁴ Models for understanding Byzantium's interactions with its neighbours have moved from imperial centre and periphery, to the concepts of 'commonwealth,' to 'overlapping circles,' depicting parallel and mutual developments in political and cultural identity.⁵ The Byzantine millennium now seems more connected, by commerce, diplomacy, and common cultural heritage, than before. Artefacts and ideologies were acquired, appropriated, or mediated between Byzantium and its neighbours, and even prolonged conflict did not preclude exchanges, and indeed sometimes sprang from shared developments. At the same time, what we think of as the distinctively Byzantine milieu of Constantinople also interacted with regional cultures that at various times formed part of its empire. The Coptic and Syriac cultures in Late Antiquity, the Latin and Arabic regions in later periods, displayed both ambivalence and engagement with Constantinople and its imperial and ecclesiastical leaders.⁶ As with Byzantium's external connections, 'centre and periphery' models of intra-imperial networks are giving way to more dynamic models seeing metropolis and provinces as parts of broader, common developments.⁷ In addition, our knowledge of the ways the Byzantines perceived and described their neighbours has become more sophisticated and diverse, recognizing different literary and discursive ethnographic strategies used for their depiction.⁸

There is an indefinite number of possibilities for the exploration of relationships between Byzantium and its neighbours. The essays in this collection focus on several interconnected clusters of topics and shared research interests. Shepard, Davenport and Ančić look into the place of neighbours in the context of the empire and imperial ideology. The paper of Dzino sits in between that cluster and the following one, which is the transfer of knowledge with neighbours, explored by Anagnostou-Laoutides and Westbrook. The next cluster of topics focuses on the Byzantine perception of their neighbours, which is the interest connecting the papers by Briscoe, Kepreotes and Perry. Another field of shared interest in this volume is the political relationship and/or the conflict with neighbours, which inspired the papers of Viana Boy, Topalilov and McEvoy. In addition, there is the paper of Wade, which looks into maritime cults and sub-cultures of merchants and sailors, neighbours and 'outsiders' visiting Byzantium.

⁴ E.g. Shepard & Franklin 1992; Pevny 2001; Stephenson 2004; Pagès *et al.* 2005; Howard-Johnston 2008; Shepard 2010; 2011; Laiou 2012, to mention just a few.

⁵ Obolenski 1971; Shepard 1992. Obolenski's thesis of a multi-national 'Byzantine Commonwealth' throughout the Balkans in the middle ages has been criticised recently, e.g. Kaldellis 2007.

⁶ Magdalino 2000.

⁷ Holmes 2010.

⁸ Kaldellis 2013.