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Alexander Kazhdan and Simon Franklin

Excerpt

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## I

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*Approaches to the history of Byzantine  
civilization: from Krause to Beck and  
Mango*

Earlier generations of scholars have sought to understand the Byzantine empire primarily by turning to its political history. But the modern world has grown lukewarm to the history of events. It is surprising to note that the standard work on Byzantine political history, George Ostrogorsky's *History of the Byzantine State* ('the best handbook on Byzantine history', as Cyril Mango rightly calls it) was first issued in 1940, albeit with adjustments in 1952 and 1963. Ostrogorsky's book has survived for over forty years not because it is flawless: many aspects of his concept of Byzantium have since been challenged. The book's longevity is due, first and foremost, to the fact that our generation does not relish the history of wars, upheavals and religious disputes. We no longer believe that the core of the past can be reached through even the finest analysis of political events. Instead, the fashion is for the history of civilization, the history of man in a broader perspective. It is no accident that the first part of Alain Ducellier's *Le drame de Byzance* (Paris, 1976) is entitled 'A la recherche de l'homme quotidien'.

The first book specifically devoted to Byzantine culture was produced more than a century ago, by J. H. Krause.<sup>1</sup> As one would expect, Krause's sources are pitifully meagre by comparison with what is available today. For example, he writes about Byzantine trades without any knowledge of the *Book of the Eparch*; he discusses taxation unaided by the publications of Ashburner and Karayannopoulos; in 1869 very few items of Byzantine art were known or studied; and Krause's description of the administrative system piles

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Krause, *Die Byzantiner des Mittelalters in ihren Staats-, Hof- und Privatleben insbesondere vom Ende des zehnten bis gegen Endes des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts nach den byzantinischen Quellen* (Halle, 1869, repr. Leipzig, 1974).

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error upon error.<sup>2</sup> But such deficiencies should not lead us to become smug or patronizing about Krause's endeavour, nor should they blind us to the magnitude of his achievement. It is quite remarkable that a scholar in 1869 was able to produce such a comprehensive account of Byzantine life, while relying only on narrative sources and, wherever they left gaps, on his own common sense and intuition.<sup>3</sup>

Krause was visionary not only in his use of the available (or unavailable) facts, but also in his whole attitude towards Byzantium and its culture. He tried to 'rehabilitate' Byzantium, to rescue it from the contempt with which it was treated by his contemporaries and predecessors. The notion of 'decline and fall' still dominated opinion: Byzantium as the tediously drawn-out afterlife of antiquity, as the mummified corpse of classical culture. Krause turned this assessment on its head, and set out to show that Byzantium was in many respects greatly preferable to the corrupt present. Some of his observations are distinctly idiosyncratic: the Byzantine proletariat knew its place, and in Byzantium Lassallian 'workers' associations' would have been considered absurd (p. viii); the Byzantines and the Romans were not tainted by the lazy modern habit of hanging around in restaurants (pp. 84–5). In at least one respect, however, Krause anticipated the opinions of a significant proportion of Byzantinists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He, and many of his successors, idealized the Byzantine centralized state: the empire was a hive of economic activity; the capital was guaranteed an abundant supply of food; the emperor's powers were sensibly circumscribed; rulers made provision for the poor and the elderly; the armed forces were superb, and education was at a high level (pp. 73, 87, 93, 110, 134, 278, 284, 293, 305–6). At the same time, Krause was aware of Byzantine defects: successful careerism by mediocre bureaucrats, confiscation of private property, parasitic monasticism (pp. 75,

<sup>2</sup> e.g. his statements that the title *despotes* ranked next to the title of 'caesar', and was in use before the reign of Alexius I; that the title *proedros* was equivalent to 'senator'; that the grand logothete was a military commander; that the *mezas domestikos* was ranked close to the 'caesar'; that comment on a passage of Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De Cerimoniis* would be both arduous and otiose (pp. 210, 215, 228, 239, 254).

<sup>3</sup> e.g. Krause asserts that public buildings, and imperial and private palaces, were richly decorated with works of art, especially with bronzes, terracottas, marble statuettes and reliefs, 'about which no information survives' (p. 44). This kind of argument would nowadays be unacceptable.

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207–8, 281). But these, for Krause, are minor flaws which do not seriously mar the general impression of prosperity and stability.

However one might argue with Krause's judgement and conclusions, his presentation is sober, ordered and coherent. His chief concern is with material life. After a description of Constantinople, its palaces and churches (pp. 15–47) comes a section on various crafts and arts: mosaics and their preparation, pots, cult objects, ivories, machines, clocks, musical instruments, military technology, fabrics, painting and coinage (48–72). Krause does not look at rural or agricultural implements. He moves on, logically, to the lives and habits of the urban (mainly Constantinopolitan) population: its social composition and mobility, its clothes, its entertainments, and the position of women (72–93). Only then does Krause embark on his long discussion of the emperors and court life (93–206). Then comes administration, the army, diplomacy and finance (206–86). And finally Krause turns to education (286–308), the church and the monasteries (308–79), and astrology and magic (380–405). Such a structure lends the book a certain unity, as the author leads us from the forms of material existence, through administration and government, to the forms of spiritual pursuit. One must stress that in Krause's book these spiritual pursuits are only 'forms', for Krause does not attempt to penetrate the medieval consciousness. He does not hint at any specifically medieval way of thought. His Byzantines think and act according to the same logic as Romans, or indeed as Krause's own contemporaries.

Since the publication of Krause's *Die Byzantiner*, our knowledge of Byzantine life has been enriched with huge quantities of new and varied material. The fact-gathering perhaps reached its peak with Ph. Koukoules' monumental 'ethnographic' collation of written sources.<sup>4</sup> However, the accumulation of data led initially to some loss of coherence. The raw material was not integrated either conceptually or in the structure and manner of its presentation.

The standard textbook became Steven Runciman's *Byzantine Civilization*, first published in 1933, and since reproduced in various forms and languages. Runciman starts with an historical outline,

<sup>4</sup> Ph. Koukoules, *Byzantinōn bios kai politismos*, 6 vols. (Athens, 1948–57); then came briefer treatments of the subject by G. Walter, *La vie quotidienne à Byzance au siècle des Comnènes (1081–1180)* (Paris, 1966); T. Talbot Rice, *Everyday Life in Byzantium* (London, 1967).

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and then he describes, in separate chapters, imperial power, administration, religion and the church, the army, commerce, town and country life, education, literature and art, and, in the final chapter, the relationship of the empire to the world around it. Approximately the same structure is to be found in *Byzantium*, ed. N. H. Baynes and H. St. L. B. Moss (Oxford, 1948), and in the *Cambridge Medieval History*, IV, 2 (1967). Government and law, social life, church and monasticism, literature, science and art, and Byzantium's place in the medieval world – these were the independent sections of a multi-storey construction, where no staircase led from one floor to another.

Louis Bréhier's *Le monde byzantin* (3 vols., Paris, 1947–50) is differently labelled, but almost identically structured. Volume I (*Vie et mort de Byzance*) is a history of political events; volume II is on institutions, with chapters on imperial power, administration and the church; and the final volume is devoted to urban life, the countryside, trade, religion and superstition, literature, science and art. Only once does Bréhier stray from the traditional scheme, in his section entitled 'la vie privée', which includes the family and daily life. His book is traditional not only in its structure, but also in its approach: here too, as in Runciman, Baynes and Moss, and the *Cambridge Medieval History*, Byzantium is presented as a sum or list of separate items, rather than as a coherent, functioning model.

The first modern attempt to integrate, rather than merely to juxtapose, the various aspects of Byzantine culture, is Herbert Hunger's *Reich der neuen Mitte* (Graz, Vienna, Cologne, 1965). But by contrast with Krause's *Die Byzantiner*, Hunger pays no attention to the material conditions of Byzantine life. His theme is the Christianization of Byzantine society, politics and thought.

Then came André Guillou's *La civilisation byzantine* (Paris, 1974). Guillou adopted a new approach to the writing of Byzantine cultural history. Between Runciman and Guillou several scholars had produced works expressly concerned with Byzantine culture.<sup>5</sup> All of them, like Runciman, accompany their discussion of culture with a fair amount of political and ecclesiastical narrative history.

<sup>5</sup> e.g. H. W. Haussig, *Kulturgeschichte von Byzanz* (2nd ed., Stuttgart, 1966; Engl. transl.: *A History of Byzantine Civilization*, London, 1971); K. Wessel, *Die Kultur von Byzanz* (Frankfurt am Main, 1970); P. D. Arnott, *The Byzantines and their World* (London, 1973).

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One can take as an example the book by K. Wessel, which appeared in the influential series *Handbuch der Kulturgeschichte*. Wessel devotes seventy-five pages to the period from the mid ninth century to 1204, including twelve pages on church history and thirteen pages of political history – together precisely one-third of the total. And in the preceding section narrative history is yet more prominent, filling twenty-five pages out of a total of sixty-seven. Apart from politics and church history, Wessel discusses law (or rather, he lists judicial texts), military organization, crafts, trade, and daily life. Literature and learning are given fairly cursory treatment, and the visual arts are hardly dealt with at all.

Guillou's book differs from its predecessors fundamentally. It contains no narrative political history whatsoever. Instead it opens with a survey of Byzantine historical geography (chapters 1–2), a subject which had normally been ignored in previous studies of Byzantine history or culture.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, Guillou's account rather resembles a verbal map, a list of regions and towns, instead of an analysis of the geographical conditions, the nature and the climate. Yet the point of his innovation is surely valid: Byzantine civilization cannot fully be understood without an understanding of the Byzantines' natural environment. The drama of Byzantine history unfolded in a real and specific setting, not on a bare stage. Krause, too, had sensed this, but for him the setting was restricted to Constantinople, its topography and its cultural atmosphere (i.e. the sum of its noteworthy buildings). Guillou mainly discusses the provinces: from Italy (including Sicily and Sardinia) to Syria, Egypt and the Levant.

The geographical introduction is followed by four large chapters: on the state, society, the economy, and culture (spiritual and intellectual, rather than material). A glance at the chapter-headings of the *Cambridge Medieval History* is enough to show that Guillou's work is structured according to utterly different principles. Guillou's chapters are not self-contained entities, like articles in an encyclopedia. They deal with interdependent and interrelated aspects of a single phenomenon. Some might prefer Guillou to have arranged his chapters on the state, society and the economy in the

<sup>6</sup> Exceptions are: A. P. Kazhdan, G. G. Litavrin, *Ocherki po istorii Vizantii i yuzhnykh slavyan* (Moscow, 1958); and, in a particular sphere, D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth* (London, 1971).

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reverse sequence,<sup>7</sup> but the essential links between his 'four elements' are incomparably plainer and more coherent than the links between the adjacent chapters on, say, music, monasticism, literature and science in the *Cambridge Medieval History*.

Within each chapter also, Guillou's presentation is logical and harmonious. The chapter on the state starts with the position of the emperor, and with the imperial cult (pp. 103–8). Then comes a survey of the administration, its general characteristics, its role in the capital and in the provinces (108–33). From organization Guillou passes to function, and the five major administrative departments: financial, judicial, diplomatic, military, and ecclesiastical (133–93). By treating the church as a department of state, Guillou again departs from convention: the church is plucked from its mystical haze and dumped into the thick of administrative life.

The next two chapters, on society and the economy, are arranged with equal clarity. Guillou examines social classes and professions, and social ties (203–22); landed property, agriculture, and the position of peasants (243–63); urban life in Constantinople and in the provinces (263–304); crafts and trades (304–16). One might have minor reservations about individual points: for example, state ownership of land (243–4) and the position of the *paroikoi* (261–2) might perhaps have been discussed under the heading of 'society' rather than 'economy'. But overall these chapters convey a complex but fully coherent picture of the Byzantine social and economic structure, including aspects of it which were not treated at all by Krause and most of his successors.

Guillou not only integrates the separate strands of his subject. He also tries to present them in a conceptual framework appropriate to their time and place. He neither modernizes the Byzantines, as if they thought in twentieth-century terms; nor does he project them back into classical antiquity. Contrast his approach with that of Krause. Krause begins his chapter on imperial power with the statement that 'although one cannot speak of a constitution in the modern sense, nevertheless the power of the absolute autocrat was far more restricted and perilous than that of any monarch in our time' (p. 93). In the *Cambridge Medieval History* W. Ensslin commences his chapter on the administration with what seems like

<sup>7</sup> cf. A. P. Kazhdan, *Vizantiyskaya kul'tura* (Moscow, 1968; Germ. ed.: *Byzanz und seine Kultur* (Berlin, 1973)), ch. 1 on the economy, ch. 2 on society, ch. 3 on the state.

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an assertion of the opposite, and with a different point of comparison: 'In the Byzantine Empire the conception of the supremacy of monarchical power was more deeply rooted and less contested than anywhere else in medieval Europe' (p. 1). However, both Krause and Ensslin base their discussion on contemporary notions of the state. Guillou starts his chapter on the state not with a reference to monarchical supremacy, or to constitutions, but with a quotation from John of Damascus (p. 103). When he wants to examine social contrasts, he begins with Byzantine jurists' own definitions of the relationship of slavery to freedom (197). He opens his chapter on the economy by describing the Byzantines' own attitudes to land: the land, like the sun and the air, is the creation and the property of God, who entrusts it to His representative, the emperor (243). Unlike Krause, and unlike the compilers of the *Cambridge Medieval History*, Guillou aims to present Byzantium in Byzantine terms; to view Byzantine economic life, social conflict, moral and aesthetic problems, through Byzantine eyes.

Not that Guillou shuns all modern concepts. He uses the term 'ruling class' (203); he analyses ties of dependence (*liens de dépendance*), and concludes that social cohesion in Byzantium was based on the principle of individualism (212). These terms have no Byzantine equivalents, but Guillou injects them with Byzantine meaning. He explores the Byzantine idea of marriage and the family (213), and the particular Byzantine conditions which were responsible for the 'weakness of monastic communities' (220).

Since Guillou rejects anachronistic description of Byzantium, he also avoids anachronistic evaluation. His aim is neither to condemn the empire, nor to praise it, but to understand what it was, in its own time, on its own terms.

And since Guillou constructs his picture of Byzantium with Byzantine images, his presentation is vivid and tangible. Instead of general argument in the manner of Krause, he provides facts and illustration.

Guillou uses the full range of sources available to the modern historian. Besides the narrative sources (on which Krause had relied completely) he uses documents, letters, speeches and theology: all that is written is part of the culture, and must therefore be incorporated into the study of the culture. Guillou also cites the observations of foreigners who came into contact with Byzantium.

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Then there are the objects: the archeological finds, the coins, the art, through which life and work in the empire are visibly and tangibly communicated to us. All these varied kinds of sources are extensively used by Guillou. Nor does he present them only in 'predigested' form, already assimilated into his argument: the book is filled with quotations, archeological plans, manuscript illustrations. Thus Guillou's presentation complements his interpretation: Byzantium must be seen and understood from within.

There is, however, one important issue on which Guillou advances no further than Krause. The subtitle of Krause's book states that it deals 'mainly' with the period from the end of the tenth century to the end of the fourteenth. 'Mainly' is a convenient imprecision, for whenever Krause's sources from his 'main' period are inadequate for his purposes, he is quite happy to produce the necessary evidence from earlier centuries. In his introduction Krause divides Byzantine history into periods (pp. xix–xxi), but in his narrative he ignores them. To some extent Krause's practice is consistent and logical, for in his view historical changes in Byzantium were changes only of circumstance, not of substance: political life was fickle; success could become failure, and *vice versa*, but the Byzantines themselves remained essentially the same throughout, like the Romans, and like Krause's own contemporaries. Krause is thus free to use, for example, a sixth-century source to make a point about the eleventh century, not primarily because of the lack of adequate material available at the time when he wrote, but because he conceived Byzantium to be socially and culturally static.

The same conception remains dominant today. Wessel, for example, divides Byzantine history into several periods, but only in order to emphasize how little actually changed (pp. 314, 338, 366). Nowhere does he show how or whether his chronological periods have any coherence, any distinctive qualities in themselves. Arnold Toynbee has remarked that 'if one were to ask any educated modern westerner what was the first idea that associated itself in his mind with the word "Byzantine", his answer would probably be "conservatism"'.<sup>8</sup> Toynbee criticizes the traditional notion of Byzantine 'conservatism', but even he then discusses mainly the

<sup>8</sup> A. Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World* (London, 1973), p. 524.



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difference between Byzantium and classical antiquity, not internal change in Byzantium.<sup>9</sup>

Guillou does allow for certain changes in the character of Byzantine society, such as the gradual evolution of the bureaucracy, or the restructuring of the élite between the tenth and twelfth centuries (pp. 116, 204). But his 'periodization', like that of Krause, is based entirely on political geography: Byzantium as ruler of the Mediterranean, Byzantium confined to the northern Mediterranean, the empire in the Aegean, the empire of the Straits, and so on. Social and cultural change is assumed to be irrelevant, or non-existent.

One of the central questions of Byzantine history is that of whether or not the empire suffered serious economic decline in the seventh century. Over the last two or three decades support has grown for the hypothesis, based initially on archeological and numismatic evidence, that from the late seventh to the mid ninth centuries cities in the Byzantine empire were economically depressed, and that urban prosperity revived during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>10</sup> If one is to understand the development of Byzantine culture, and in particular the great flowering of literature and art in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, then surely one must take into account the vicissitudes of economic history, and not just the changing boundaries of empire. Yet Guillou, in his survey of towns, hardly mentions the problem, despite his auspicious opening statement to the effect that there was a 'close parallelism between the evolution of large land-holdings and the expansion of the urban economy' (p. 263). Guillou gives the impression that, with the exception of Gerasa, which disappeared in the mid eighth century (pp. 297–8), all Late Roman towns made the transition to the Middle Ages unscathed and unchanged; that the Byzantine urban environment remained classical. Guillou treats cities synchronically: he describes their forms, but he does not follow their development over time.

And he does the same with literature and art: no sense of change, merely a description of genres. He does not look at the

<sup>9</sup> Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus*, pp. 525–74.

<sup>10</sup> A. P. Kazhdan, 'Vizantiyskiye goroda v VII–XI vekakh', *Sovetskaya Arkheologiya*, XXI (1954), pp. 164–83; M. F. Hendy, 'Byzantium, 1081–1204. An Economic Reappraisal', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, XX (1970), pp. 31–53; Ch. Bouras, 'City and Village: Urban Design and Architecture', *JÖB*, XXXI, 2 (1981), pp. 611–53.

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development of artistic methods and devices, nor at changing attitudes towards the qualities and depiction of people (people both as the creators and as the main subjects of literature and art). His section on 'literary production' (the derogatory quotation marks are Guillou's) contains a list of forms, with no chronological connection: exegesis, ascetic instruction, novels, historiography, rhetoric, poetry, and so on (pp. 334–60). A catalogue of this sort does not help us to understand the Byzantines' perception of themselves and the world.

Guillou's lapse is all the more surprising because it seems to contradict his own general approach. Krause had ignored material and cultural change in accordance with his overall view of man in history. But Guillou's book is notable precisely because its author does, for the most part, insist that Byzantine life and culture must be understood in terms proper for their time. In other words, most of Guillou's argument is built on the assumption that cultures, values and concepts change with time and circumstances. Why, then, should he retain an entirely static view of Byzantium itself? Byzantium is indeed a particular cultural phenomenon, a particular civilization, which can as a whole be distinguished from other civilizations. But it was not in itself unchanging and homogeneous. It went through several stages, each of which has its own distinct characteristics. The empire of the Straits was not simply smaller than the empire of the Mediterranean: it faced different cultural problems, and it produced its own solutions to them.

Guillou's *La civilisation byzantine* was followed two years later by Ducellier's *Le drame de Byzance*. Ducellier's book has a rather more complex structure. Its first section deals with man in everyday life, and discusses attitudes towards the oecumene, society, morality, and aesthetic values. The second section is concerned with Byzantine self-consciousness: the imperial ideal as propounded by citizens and rulers of the empire; and Byzantine attitudes towards barbarians. The final section looks at the supernatural world: God, the devil, and the bounds of human reason.

Thus over the last couple of decades scholars have begun to present Byzantium in a fundamentally new way. In the first place, Byzantine life and culture is increasingly perceived as a coherent entity, rather than as an agglomeration of heterogeneous elements. Secondly, *homo byzantinus* is now discussed as an historical figure in