

Sailing Away from Byzantium toward East Roman History

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1 Introduction: Names Matter

The history and culture of the later Roman Empire is surprising, thought-provoking, and disruptive. It is rich and rewarding on its own, and marvelously instructive for those facing the many global political and cultural challenges of the twenty-first century. Eastern Roman cultural products, full of wit, literary playfulness, stunning expressiveness, and beauty, provide aesthetic delights and moving reminders of the myriad manifestations of human creativity.

Given all this richness and utility in the subject matter, why is it that later eastern Roman culture is so rarely studied? One obvious answer is that it is called “Byzantine,” a term that commonly means obscure, convoluted, malicious, and devious. This derogatory discourse is not grounded in historical reality but serves to silence and occlude a culture that disrupts paradigms of Western supremacy. The disparaging meaning of the word “byzantine” developed in tandem with the negative evaluation of the society so named.

This Element contends that “Byzantium” is not a harmless technical term but an ongoing way to nullify the radical disruptiveness of later Rome. The academic discipline of “Byzantine Studies” addresses a culture and society so disturbing to western European self-conception that its identity and existence needed to be erased. The term “Byzantine Empire” is deployed as a way of denying that the Roman Empire of the Middle Ages was *really* the Roman Empire, hence clearing the way for standard narratives of Western Civilization.

As names, “Byzantium” and “Byzantine” are both inaccurate and insulting. It is inaccurate in that there never was a Byzantine Empire and only a scattering of people ever answered to that name. Byzantium was the name of the ancient city that Constantine refounded in 330 as New Rome, and commonly called Constantinople. Citizens of this town were known in antiquity as Byzantines and that term was occasionally used for people who lived in Constantinople from the fourth century on. It could distinguish citizens of Constantinople from the other Romans. A seventh-century attestation of the term indicates that in some contexts it could also be used to describe eastern Romans as opposed to western Romans.¹ After the Ottoman conquest in 1453, exiles in the West sometimes called themselves “Byzantines,” meaning that they were from Constantinople. These occasional premodern usages of “Byzantine” refer to people who in other contexts would be called Romans; it was a rare affectation rather than a common name.² The city Constantine founded was the new capital of the Roman state.

¹ Theodoropoulos, “Did the Byzantines Call Themselves Byzantines? Elements of Eastern Roman Identity in the Imperial Discourse of the Seventh Century.”

² The textual evidence from this culture is unanimous and unambiguous in naming its political identity as Roman. Objections to using this culture’s own vocabulary for themselves, which will be discussed in Section 3, provoked a full illustration of this basic point in Kaldellis, *Romanland*:

That “Byzantium” was really the continuation of the Roman Empire has never been in dispute. It is usually the first thing one learns about “Byzantium.” Similarly, “Byzantine” is nearly always glossed, in introductory uses, with the explanation that the “Byzantines” *thought* they were Roman or *called themselves* Roman, with the strong implication that their belief was mistaken. The choice to use “Byzantine” and “Byzantium” is a rejection of the emic terminology of the society and people being named. It is a fundamental inaccuracy equivalent to calling Louis XIV a Lutetian who thought he was French.³

That “Byzantine” is inaccurate terminology is not a new revelation. One of the leading researchers in later Roman history, John Bagnell Bury, called for the term “Byzantine” to be dropped from academic discourse in the late nineteenth century, declaring: “No ‘Byzantine Empire’ ever began to exist; the Roman Empire did not come to an end until 1453.”⁴ As he explained:

Every century of the Roman Empire differed from the preceding and from the succeeding, but the development was continuous; the Empire was still the Roman Empire, and I am not aware that it is usual to give a man a new name when he enters upon a new decade of life. We designate a man as young and old; and so we may speak of the earlier and later ages of a kingdom or an empire. But *Byzantine* is a proper adjective and is too apparently precise not to be misleading.⁵

It is not the case, therefore, that scholars since the turn of the millennium have discovered suddenly that “Byzantine” is an inaccurate term. We have known this all along, but we have chosen to use it anyway.

Calling people by the name that they want to use for themselves is a fundamental aspect of respect. If I tell you my name is Leonora, and you insist on calling me Lorraine, it indicates a lack of respect for me as a person and

Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium. On the role of cultural memory in maintaining Roman identity, see Neville, *Heroes and Romans in Twelfth-Century Byzantium*, 1–7, 195–206. On the construction of east Roman loyalty, see Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*. On shifting conceptions of Hellenism, see Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*. While Kaldellis has been the field’s most vocal defender of our subject’s Roman identity, he has not been alone. See, for example, Whalin, *Roman Identity from the Arab Conquests to the Triumph of Orthodoxy*; Aschenbrenner and Ransohoff, eds., *The Invention of Byzantium in Early Modern Europe*; Stewart, Parnell, and Whately, eds., *The Routledge Handbook on Identity in Byzantium*. I have urged my colleagues to take the logical step of abandoning the terminology of “Byzantium”: *Is it Time to De-Colonize the Terms Byzantine & Byzantium*, video discussion, Fordham University, October 4, 2021, www.medievalists.net/2021/10/decolonize-terms-byzantine-byzantium; *Byzantium and Friends*, Anthony Kaldellis, host, “Is it time to abandon the rubric ‘Byzantium’? with Leonora Neville,” episode 43, February 11, 2021, www.medievalists.net/2021/02/abandon-rubric-byzantium-leonora-neville/; Kaldellis, *The Case for East Roman Studies*, 8.

³ Paris was once Lutetia Parisiorum. ⁴ Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, v.

⁵ Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, vi.

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negates a part of my self-determination.⁶ Likewise, if someone tells you she is a Ho-Chunk Indian, insisting that she is really a Winnebago Native American is condescending and insulting.

Beyond the lack of civility in rejecting a society's own naming practices, the term "Byzantine" is pejorative because that word has negative meanings deriving from prejudicial and derogatory interpretations of later Roman society. In English, "byzantine" is an adjective used to describe convoluted, impenetrable impediments to progress and action. The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains explicitly that the negative meaning of the word arises out of perceptions of eastern Rome: "Byzantine: Reminiscent of the manner, style, or spirit of Byzantine politics; intricate, complicated; inflexible, rigid, unyielding."⁷ "Byzantine" is used to describe things that thwart progress and dreams. Newspaper headlines proclaim: "Byzantine water laws will leave Californians high and dry"⁸ or "Byzantine Boston makes it next to impossible to open a restaurant."⁹ Lapses in appropriate medical care are attributed to California's "byzantine system for allocating care."¹⁰ The president of the American Medical Association criticized health insurance plans' "byzantine system of authorization controls."¹¹ People are frustrated by "byzantine and elaborate regulations."¹²

As well as causing headaches, "byzantine" systems prevent the fair exercise of justice. An inmate abused in a prison was thwarted by "restrictive grievance procedures" that "created these Byzantine administrative processes that are just designed to eventually make a prisoner fail to take one of the steps so they give up and can't bring a lawsuit."¹³ The story of a family forced to great misfortune by Medicaid rules shows "just how Byzantine this system is for people and how draining it could be both emotionally and financially." A commentator on this

⁶ Saying that Lorraine thinks she's Leonora doesn't make it better.

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Byzantine (*adj.*), sense 2," September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1060543963>.

⁸ Frank and Domus, "Byzantine Water Laws Will Leave Californians High and Dry."

⁹ "Byzantine Boston Makes It Next to Impossible to Open a Restaurant," *Boston Globe*.

¹⁰ Sharp, "Gaps in Care for Eating Disorders; Cases Have Surged, but Long Waits and Byzantine Medi-Cal Rules Stymie the State's Poorest Patients."

¹¹ Solomon, "Prior Authorization Increases Use of Health Care Resources, Physicians Say."

¹² "One Part of British Culture That Didn't Cross the Ocean to America; I'm Amazed How Compliant the Brits Are with Byzantine Regulations Imposed by Their Leaders," *Wall Street Journal (Online)*. Mellow, "Disaster Insurance Gets Lift in Emerging Markets." Quite apart from the historical issue at hand, the derogatory "byzantine" discourse denigrates the work of government itself. Like a slowly dripping acid, the laments over the "byzantine" evils of government administration erode trust in the public institutions that ameliorate the viciousness of raw capitalism and discourage support for large-scale collective infrastructures that work toward a more humane society.

¹³ Mealins, "Lawsuit Claims Correctional Officers Stabbed, Beat Inmate: TDOC: Wounds Were Self-Inflicted, Accidental."

story concurred: “Byzantine is such a good word for it.”¹⁴ Brittney Griner survived the “byzantine Russian legal system.”¹⁵ NCAA student athletes are unable to receive compensation because the NCAA has “a byzantine set of rules.”¹⁶ Special education students fight “a byzantine puzzle of laws.”¹⁷ “Byzantine” is also used of dangerous, clandestine, unclear situations. Yevgeny Prigozhin’s abortive coup attempt against Valdimir Putin was described by the journalist Christiane Amanpour as “very byzantine. These are two . . . essential gangsters fighting for supremacy and money and power.”¹⁸ A national security analyst said of trying to understand contemporary Russian politics: “You know, it’s a very byzantine situation whenever you’re trying to figure out what’s going on . . . inside the Kremlin.”¹⁹

While this Element focuses on the English language traditions, other European languages also use “byzantine” as a derogatory term, albeit with different implications. As Przemysław Marciniak explains: “The definitions in other languages are similar, describing Byzantinism as a tendency for hair-splitting (Dutch), excessively ceremonial and slavish behaviour (German), for endless and purposeless debates (French, Italian) and even for hypocrisy and the presentation of the bad as good (Polish), therefore mostly focusing on the Byzantine (mis-)behaviour.”²⁰ While traditions differ on what precisely is wrong with “byzantine,” there is a remarkable international consensus that it is deplorable.

Like the inaccuracy of the term, the derogatory meaning of “byzantine” has been known and acknowledged by scholars for well over a century. Bury argued that discarding the term Byzantine is advantageous because “[s]o many prejudicial associations have grown up round this inauspicious word that it almost involves a *petitio principii*, like the phrase *Bas-Empire* in French.”²¹ Bury’s case against “Byzantine” was not so much refuted as ignored. His history was widely cited as authoritative for decades after its publication, so this is not a case of a brilliant but obscure outlier who never found widespread recognition. Rather he was among the most prominent scholarly voices in an international field.

¹⁴ Brown et al., “PBS NewsHour for December 26, 2023.”

¹⁵ Field Level Media, “Brittney Griner Plans ‘intimate, Moving’ Memoir on Imprisonment in Russia.”

¹⁶ Berkowitz, “NCAA Facing New ‘pay-for-Play’ Challenges in Lawsuit.”

¹⁷ Fritze, “Special Ed Student Can Sue School: Supreme Court Ruling Could Empower Parents.”

¹⁸ Amanpour and Isaacson, “Interview with Former U.S. Ambassador to NATO and Former U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations Kurt Volker. Aired 1-2p ET.”

¹⁹ After explaining that the question posed could not be answered, the interviewer summarized: “Yes. Byzantine, as you said.” Steve Hall, interviewed by Michael Holmes: Holmes et al., “Pro-War Russian Blogger Killed in Explosion.”

²⁰ Marciniak, “Oriental Like Byzantium”, 48.

²¹ Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire*, viii.

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The communities of scholars who were becoming known as “Byzantinists” chose to ignore Bury’s case and persisted in using the term “Byzantine” while knowing that it was inaccurate and derogatory. In 1900, Fredrick Harrison acknowledged both the mistakenness and pejorative nature of “byzantine,” saying: “the only accurate name for this [state] is the ‘Empire of New Rome,’” and “prejudice remains so strong it may be as well to avoid the term “Byzantine Empire.”²² Yet rather than follow through with his own suggestion to drop the term, he pivots without explanation to say “it is inevitable to speak of Byzantine history, or art, or civilization, when we refer to that which had its seat on the Bosphorus.”²³ What is the source of this inevitability? What prompted Harrison, and subsequent generations of scholars, to continue using a terminology that they knew was false and insulting? The following section attempts to provide some answers to this question.

2 Work Done by “Byzantium”

Nearly all scholars would agree that they share a fundamental obligation to be as truthful, accurate, and fair-minded as possible. Methodologies for achieving these goals can vary widely in different eras and fields, but it’s fair to say that people who dedicate their lives to learning are motivated to clarify rather than obfuscate their subjects of study. Using the inaccurate and derogatory term “Byzantine,” therefore, must have provided some benefits or advantages to scholars that outweighed its problems. To understand what motivated scholars to use it, we need to examine the various kinds of work the term has done, and in some cases, continues to do.

The interests and agendas discussed in the following pages had varying levels of value and significance for scholars working in different eras and cultures. A good many scholars cared not at all for some of these projects, and a great deal about others. Many now think of these agendas as things of the past that no longer impact our scholarship. Yet, before we can debate the degree of our independence from the histories of our field, we need to confront and reflect on those histories.

There is considerable variety in the major functions that have made the “Byzantine” usage appealing. A commonality is a preference to see the history of the distant past as having “Byzantines” in it rather than Romans. Scholars over the centuries were variously engaged in the process of creating a usable past that would inform their present society and culture with the proper lessons of history. The history that was desired for these projects contained a “Byzantine” Empire,

²² Harrison, *Byzantine History*, 47. ²³ Harrison, *Byzantine History*, 47.

implying that something about a history with a longer Roman Empire was undesirable.

I see the work done by “Byzantine” as falling into three broad categories, each with a number of different subsets. One category has to do with making later Roman history fit within a broad theory of human difference based in race and blood-borne nationality. The idea that Greek people could have descendants who were Romans is difficult to accommodate within a racial understanding of humanity, which motivates denial of Roman identity. Within this category, “Byzantine” functions largely as something to call these people other than “Roman.” Another category is the use of “Byzantine” as precedents for communism and Orthodox Imperialism. The final category comprises ways that “Byzantium” helped support ideas of western European superiority. “Byzantium” is essential for getting eastern Roman history out of the way and allowing traditional narratives of the rise of the “West” to be plausible. Here “Byzantium” is a denial of Roman institutional and cultural continuity that separates West from the East and gives primacy to the turning points of Western progress. “Byzantium” has also served as a foil for the construction and teaching of a dominating, active, and western masculinity that helped make western domination of the world seem natural.

Myths of Racial Continuity

Abundant evidence shows, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the vast majority of people living in the territory of the Roman Empire in the Middle Ages were, in their own self-conception, Romans. This means that somehow over fifteen centuries the people who had identified as Hellenes, Phrygians, Macedonians, among others, had descendants who were Romans. If one holds that communities are constituted by shared ideas about who they are, this was more than enough time for a group identity to shift. It is interesting, but hardly impossible, that after multiple generations, the lineal descendants of Greeks could be Romans. After all, the United States is full of people who are Americans whose ancestors were not. Within only a few generations many people move from being foreign immigrants to hyphenated Polish-Americans, for example, to people with only vague familial memories of other past identities. In this process, the self-definition of individuals and communities makes those identities true and accurate descriptions of who they are. While commonplace now, this understanding of the constitutive power of community self-conception marks a significant departure from theories of human difference that were prevalent in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries.

The idea that all humans were members of different races, or a mixture of races, took hold in the late eighteenth century and became increasingly