

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-08581-7 - *Imagining the Byzantine Past: The Perception of History in the Illustrated Manuscripts of Skylitzes and Manasses*

Elena N. Boeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

In Byzantium history was supposed to be endowed with permanence. It was expected to function as a common cultural currency with intrinsic worth and enduring value. But claims of truthful authority in Byzantine historical narratives often masked anxieties about a past perverted by historians. A thirteenth-century Byzantine author, George Akropolites, expressed his worries that historians who succumbed to bias, or did not gather information from all available sources, would “distort the truth like those who tamper with or counterfeit a coin.”<sup>1</sup> This example both illuminates the perceived, tangible positivist value of history and the danger that constantly confronts it. Like a metal unit of monetary exchange it can become debased, reshaped, devalued, and even completely recast.

The two medieval illustrated manuscripts analyzed in this study represent the malleability of all history. The two manuscripts are sophisticated intellectual endeavors that celebrate the value of history while simultaneously undermining its narrative permanence. They testify to the enduring and far-reaching importance of the Byzantine empire in shaping political discourses far beyond its borders, but they actively contest key aspects of Byzantine historical memory. Neither accepts Byzantine historiography at face value. For both it is merely a precious ore for fashioning new specie, creating new value, and recasting messages that Byzantines would consider counterfeit. Both in their distinct ways recast the Byzantine model of empire into new molds.

This book is the first comparative, cross-cultural study of medieval illustrated histories that engage in a direct dialogue with Byzantine historical memory and construction of the past. By exploring how medieval patrons and artists re-imagined and represented the past, this study significantly

<sup>1</sup> George Akropolites, *Georgii Acropolitae opera*, ed. A. Heisenberg I (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1978), 1.16–18. My translation presented here slightly diverges from that of Ruth Macrides, who translated that section as “do injustice to the truth, like those who falsify coins with small change or even set out to make counterfeits.” George Akropolites, *The History. Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, tr. R. Macrides (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 105. The main difference rests in the decision to translate *kermatiois* as a more general “tamper” as opposed to Macrides’ preference for the more specific “small change,” since *kermatizo* also characterizes other forms of tampering such as “cutting into pieces,” and “coining.”

reshapes scholarly understanding of cultural identity politics in an era best known for its religious expression. *Imagining the Byzantine Past* explores how illustrated histories exhibit an arsenal of ideological weapons actively wielded by medieval rulers in battles for pride, prestige, and political legitimacy. It analyzes the ways, both subtle and transparent, that Byzantine histories were manipulated by outsiders.

*Imagining the Byzantine Past* draws together two surviving illustrated histories which engaged in dialogue with the courtly Byzantine tradition. The first is the lavishly illustrated Skylitzes manuscript created during the reign of Roger II (1095–1154) in Sicily in the mid-twelfth century. I shall use the term “Madrid Skylitzes” to designate its visual narrative, since it is part of the collection of the National Library of Spain (Matritensis gr. vitr. 26-2). The second is the Bulgarian adaptation and illustration of the Manasses chronicle, produced for Ivan Alexander of Bulgaria (ruled 1331–1371) in the mid-fourteenth century. Its visual narrative will be termed the “Vatican Manasses” to indicate its current location in the Vatican library (Vat. Slav. 2). Although the two manuscripts are well known, their strategies for visualizing and valorizing history are poorly understood.

A comparative analysis of the two visual programs reveals that each manuscript selectively reframes and transforms Byzantine historical narratives: the Madrid Skylitzes consistently foregrounds the vicissitudes of Byzantine imperial fortunes, whereas the Vatican Manasses constructs a millennial imperial lineage for Ivan Alexander. It firmly embraces the Byzantine historical framework but displaces Constantinople from its hallowed place as center of eternal empire. Comparison of the two manuscripts also reveals new insights into the ways in which salient features of Byzantine politics and society were imagined and interpreted by outsiders.

### **Re-evaluating the distorting mirror**

In the expansive and growing scholarly literature devoted to Byzantine historiography, almost no studies have been devoted to critical uses or creative constructions of Byzantine history by outsiders. Scholars have overlooked these fascinating discursive framings of Byzantine history. But should we continue to dismiss narratives produced for consumption by non-Byzantines as fanciful or faulty? This book aims to both recover the value of such representations of Byzantium and foster a dialogue between scholars of the verbal and visual arts.

In recent decades, the branches of scholarship devoted to Byzantium's past have undergone important transformations. Although we have long confronted the "distorting mirror" of Byzantine culture, only recently have that mirror's characteristics started to fascinate as much as its distortions.<sup>2</sup> While positivist studies have made considerable gains in their quest to separate fact from invention, compare and cross-verify testimonies, and correct distortions in the historical record, they have not fully explored the narrative and discursive dimensions of the Byzantine past. The mining of Byzantine texts for verifiable facts continues, but rich veins of rhetoric, narrative fashioning, and discourse are no longer disposed of as dross.<sup>3</sup>

My study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that employs literary approaches to produce a new understanding of histories constructed in Byzantium and along its borders.<sup>4</sup> It is one of several new studies that explicitly address the issue of narrative in constructions of the Byzantine past. Catherine Holmes stressed the importance of "understanding how written culture was produced in Byzantium."<sup>5</sup> Ingela Nilsson has emphasized the centrality of narrative in history and stressed the "different ways in which an historian reads and understands previous history."<sup>6</sup> Stratis

<sup>2</sup> C. Mango, "Byzantine literature as a distorting mirror," in his *Byzantium and Its Image: History and Culture of the Byzantine Empire and Its Heritage* (London: Variorum, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Rhetoric was an exceptionally important cultural form in Byzantium. As a result, Byzantine descriptions of works of art (*ekphraseis*) have become indispensable to the study of Byzantine art history. For an introduction and bibliography see H. Maguire, "Art and text," in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, ed. E. Jeffreys with J. Haldon and R. Cormack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 721–30; L. James and R. Webb, "To understand ultimate things and enter secret places: ekphrasis and art in Byzantium," *Art History* 14 (1991): 1–17; R. Webb, "The aesthetics of sacred space: narrative, metaphor, and motion in *ekphraseis* of church buildings," *DOP* 53 (1999): 59–74. For a broader discussion of Byzantine rhetoric see E. Jeffreys, ed., *Rhetoric in Byzantium: Papers from the Thirty-Fifth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies Exeter College, University of Oxford, March 2001* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> See also P. Odorico, ed., *L'écriture de la mémoire. La Littérature de l'historiographie* (Paris: Centre d'études Byzantines, néo-helléniques et sud-est européennes, 2006); J. Burke et al., eds., *Byzantine Narrative: Papers in Honour of Roger Scott* (Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2006); R. Macrides, ed., *History as Literature in Byzantium: Papers from the Fortieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, April 2007* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); P. Agapitos and L. B. Mortensen, eds., *Medieval Narratives between History and Fiction: From the Centre to the Periphery of Europe, c. 1100–1400* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> C. Holmes, "The rhetorical structures of John Skylitzes' *Synopsis Historion*," in *Rhetoric in Byzantium. Papers from the Thirty-Fifth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Exeter College, University of Oxford, March 2001*, ed. E. Jeffreys (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 199.

<sup>6</sup> I. Nilsson, "To narrate the events of the past: on the Byzantine historians, and historians on Byzantium," in *Byzantine Narrative. Papers in Honour of Roger Scott*, ed. J. Burke et al. (Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2006), 49. Additional works by Nilsson are discussed in the next chapter.

Papaioannou explored the dynamic of “a culture’s ‘creation’ of its past” through tropes, ideological preoccupations, and literary aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, these questions are still emerging as a direction of inquiry, as noted by Ruth Macrides: “we have not yet been persuaded of the need to undertake literary analysis of the works that are the back bone and substance of our own narratives.”<sup>8</sup>

Dialogue between authors and the audiences, intended or actual, represents an emerging area in the study of Byzantine historiography. In the early 1980s two prominent scholars could lament that “[t]he problem of the audience for Byzantine literary works has hardly been touched.”<sup>9</sup> In an essay published in 2010, Brian Croke summarized the state of this question: “In recent years increasing attention has been paid to the Byzantine author and the construction of the narrative, but the nature and role of the audience, at least for history writing, deserve closer scrutiny.”<sup>10</sup> Although it can be remarkably difficult to recover audience reception, it is nonetheless productive to at least ponder why audiences valued history. In our case, why were two patrons outside of Byzantium predisposed to relish certain kinds of narratives about Byzantium? What meanings about Byzantium were they creating? Which meta-narrative modes made stories from the Byzantine past attractive to them?

Of particular importance for this study is Leslie Brubaker’s book *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Images as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus*, which addressed patronage, message, and audience in a way that brought history, literature, and art history into dialogue. Devoted to a spectacular ninth-century luxury manuscript, celebrated for its aesthetic, visual, and narrative sophistication, Brubaker’s monograph displays a nuanced and multi-faceted approach to its message. Her careful analysis of the relationship between text and images revealed a sophisticated and carefully planned production, in which images function as a parallel narrative to the text, serving to enhance its meaning. She writes: “the miniatures

<sup>7</sup> S. Papaioannou, “The aesthetics of history: from Theophanes to Eustathios,” in *History as Literature in Byzantium: Papers from the Fortieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, April 2007*, ed. R. Macrides (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 4.

<sup>8</sup> R. Macrides, “Editor’s preface,” in *History as Literature in Byzantium: Papers from the Fortieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, April 2007*, ed. R. Macrides (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p. X.

<sup>9</sup> A. Kazhdan and G. Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 102.

<sup>10</sup> B. Croke, “Uncovering Byzantium’s historiographical audience,” in *History as Literature in Byzantium: Papers from the Fortieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, April 2007*, ed. R. Macrides (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 27–8.

in Paris.gr.510 tell us one very important thing: not just that images can communicate differently from words, but that the people involved in the Paris Homilies knew and believed that images could and should do this.”<sup>11</sup> By analyzing how themes were prioritized or added, compositions manipulated or juxtaposed, Brubaker identified subjects of particular concern to the patron, whom she identified as patriarch Photios. By decoding its message as “the balance of power between church and state,” she proposed the Byzantine imperial family as the audience for the manuscript.<sup>12</sup>

Illuminated manuscripts can therefore be ideal vehicles for analyzing elite cultural and ideological constructions. Not only do they belong to the category of the most expensive (and therefore most prestigious and least numerous) commissions, but they also required extensive resources, cultural capital, complicated planning, and labor management between scribes and artists. The private, tactile possession of a unique object of intimate contemplation has a tremendous power to gratify a powerful collector and connoisseur. Luxurious formats reinforced their material value, while their narrative value could be individually crafted to address the concerns of a discerning or influential recipient. Thus they can serve as vehicles for innovative cultural production, intellectual engagement, and ideological sophistication.

## Valuing the medieval

Prior to the last decades of the twentieth century, scholars all too often devalued Byzantine culture in relation to its classical past. Since the Renaissance Byzantium’s cultural production was often judged to be no more than a warped reflection of its more appreciated classical heritage. But this view does not properly reflect Byzantium’s place in the imagination of medieval observers. The two manuscripts examined here demonstrate that Byzantium’s own past was viewed as valuable in the eyes of powerful outsiders.

Cyril Mango, one of the most accomplished Byzantinists of the twentieth century, noted the formerly prevailing view that Byzantine cultural achievements “lay not in the creation of original works, but in the preservation of classical heritage.”<sup>13</sup> This framework frequently dictated the

<sup>11</sup> L. Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 415–16.

<sup>12</sup> Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning*, 413.

<sup>13</sup> C. Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1980), 254.

kinds of questions that scholars asked of the evidence. Within a classics-centered approach it became imperative to ascertain how closely Byzantine authors adhered to or deviated from classical structure of history.<sup>14</sup> Prominent scholars once measured historians by how familiar they were with Herodotus and how closely they followed Thucydides or Polybius.<sup>15</sup> In recent decades, however, Byzantinists have explored the concept of originality in Byzantium and productively analyzed how the Byzantines perceived their own culture in their own terms.<sup>16</sup>

Byzantine art has been confined into a similar, subordinated framework in narratives of art history. In his essay “Living on the Byzantine borders of western art,” Robert Nelson insightfully analyzed how since the emergence of art history as a discipline Byzantium has been marginalized. One prominent textbook in use in the late twentieth century still categorized Byzantine art as “unchanging for a thousand years, preserving the [Early Christian] forms of its origin, oblivious to and isolated from the new.”<sup>17</sup> Mobilizing abundant examples from the German founders as well as more recent contributors to the canon, Nelson found a pervasive notion that Byzantine art is “ancient, not medieval and thus need not be taken seriously by students of Western medieval art.”<sup>18</sup> Although such sentiments are no longer pervasive in the field at large, synthetic narratives of art history still impose artificial boundaries between the categories of “western medieval” and “Byzantine.”<sup>19</sup>

In the field of manuscript studies the shadows of lost, but supposedly superior classical archetypes, still loom large. Recent scholarship dedicated to the two manuscripts still languishes in a series of methodological

<sup>14</sup> For a good discussion see R. Scott, “The classical tradition in Byzantine historiography,” in *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition*, ed. M. Mullett and R. Scott (Birmingham: Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1981), 61–74. For an excellent critique of this approach, see R. Macrides, “The historian in the history,” in *ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝ: Studies in Honor of Robert Browning* (Venice: Instituto Ellenico, 1996), 205–24.

<sup>15</sup> See S. Runciman, “Historiography,” in *Originality in Byzantine Literature, Art and Music*, ed. A. R. Littlewood (Oxford: Oxbow, 1995), 59.

<sup>16</sup> The bibliography on the topic is extensive. See H. Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); R. S. Nelson, “To say and to see: ekphrasis and vision in Byzantium,” in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance. Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. R. S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143–68; L. James, ed., *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); A. R. Littlewood, ed., *Originality in Byzantine Literature, Art and Music* (Oxford: Oxbow, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> R. S. Nelson, “Living on the Byzantine borders of western art,” *Gesta* 35 (1996): 6.

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, “Living on the Byzantine borders,” 12.

<sup>19</sup> See H. Luttikhuisen and D. Verkerk, *Snyder's Medieval Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006); M. Stokstad in collaboration with D. Cateforis, *Art History* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2005).

shackles imposed by the brilliant Princeton scholar Kurt Weitzmann, who contributed greatly to the field with his erudition, but constrained it by reducing medieval manuscript illustration to mechanical recycling of iconographic archetypes from late antiquity.<sup>20</sup> This approach devalued the messages of medieval visual narratives and downplayed the cultural context of their creation.

Over the course of the last few decades both Weitzmann's methodology and the philological approaches that underpinned it have been challenged. Contested in a prominent case study,<sup>21</sup> it has been dismantled in book reviews and studies by one of the most prominent scholars in the field.<sup>22</sup> Even textual scholars can no longer unequivocally accept key concepts (a single archetype, clear stemmatic/genealogical relationships, proliferation of lost originals that can be reconstructed) derived from nineteenth-century philology.<sup>23</sup> In spite of this overwhelming critical onslaught, recent studies of the two manuscripts continue to axiomatically adhere to the Weitzmann method as if it had never been challenged.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast this study shifts the scholarly focus away from classical antecedents and reconstruction of hypothetical models. Instead it prioritizes medieval contexts and messages. Rather than revisit considerations of style, iconography, and ancestry of images that have dominated art-historical discussions of this peculiar pair for decades, this book analyzes the strategies that shaped their visual narratives. It also engages with issues addressed in a range of major publications in the field of Byzantine art.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> K. Weitzmann, *Illustrations in Roll and Codex: A Study of the Origin and Method of Text Illustration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> M.-L. Dolezal, "Manuscript studies in the twentieth century: Kurt Weitzmann reconsidered," *BMGs* 22 (1998): 216–63.

<sup>22</sup> For bibliography, see J. Lowden, "The transmission of 'visual knowledge' in Byzantium through illuminated manuscripts: approaches and conjectures," in *Literacy, Education and Manuscript Transmission in Byzantium and Beyond*, ed. C. Holmes and J. Waring (Brill: Leiden, 2002), 59–80.

<sup>23</sup> See R. Bendix, "Diverging paths in the scientific search for authenticity," in *Folklore: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 1: *From Definition to Discipline*, ed. A. Dundes (London: Routledge, 2005), 290–318. See also D. C. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction* (New York: Garland, 1992).

<sup>24</sup> See V. Tsamakda, *The Illustrated Chronicle of Ioannes Skylitzes in Madrid* (Leiden: Alexandros Press, 2002), 22, 31, 37, 39–40, 263, 265, 267–8; A. Dzhurova, "The illustrated Middle Bulgarian translation of the chronicle of Constantine Manasses from 1344–1345 (Vat. Slavo 2)," in *Synopsis chroniki: Codex Vaticanus Slavo 2*, ed. A. Dzhurova and V. Velinova (Athens: Miletos, 2007), 242, 261.

<sup>25</sup> For example, R. S. Nelson, *Later Byzantine Painting: Art, Agency, and Appreciation* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2007); G. Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, tr. J. Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

## The politics of narration

For eleventh-century Byzantine historian John Skylitzes the existence of multiple competing historical narratives was both a source of anxiety and the justification for constructing his own “true” narrative. He writes:

For in composing a rambling account of his own times (and a little before) as though he was writing history, one of them writes a favourable account, another a critical one, while a third writes whatever he pleases and a fourth sets down what he is ordered to write. Each composes his own “history” and they differ so much from each other in describing the same events that they plunge their audience into dizziness and confusion.<sup>26</sup>

These verbalized fears testify to un verbalized anxieties that still resonate today in debates about authority in a world of competing narrative constructions of the past.

Rather than view competing narratives as obstacles that function as barriers between audiences and the past as it actually happened, we can productively explore how vanished realities were narratively reconfigured and politically contested. The kinds of contradictions that vexed Skylitzes draw our attention to political aspects of memory. Narration is never neutral and selection is always a political process. In analyzing the politics of visualization in the two manuscripts, I employ Hayden White’s approach to narrative: “the narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications.”<sup>27</sup>

Over the last four decades the narrative turn in history has produced a new appreciation of the roles of representation, authority, and narration. Every act of history writing involves a “situation of contestation” in which previous authorities or false accounts are rhetorically contested.<sup>28</sup> An innovative book by Ann Rigney analyzed the rhetoric of historical representation

Press, 2011); E. Dauterman Maguire and H. Maguire, *Other Icons: Art and Power in Byzantine Secular Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); James, ed., *Art and Text*; J. Lowden, *Illuminated Prophet Books: A Study of Byzantine Manuscripts of the Major and Minor Prophets* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988).

<sup>26</sup> J. Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Histories (811–1057)*, tr. J. Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>27</sup> H. White, *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), ix.

<sup>28</sup> A. Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 48.

and the strategies that are used to construct meaning and valorize collective subjects (positive/negative, hero/villain, prominent role/background role) in the unfolding of narratives.<sup>29</sup> The designers of the two manuscripts analyzed here appeared to have shared the malleable approach to history that one modern theorist attributes to the constructionist historians of the late twentieth century. Constructionists “view their own self-consciously made story space for what it is – an invention, a tool for doing things with the past that impacts back upon how we think about it and what we want out of it.”<sup>30</sup>

In art history the politics of visualization are no less acute. Gordon Fyfe and John Law have argued:

A depiction is never just an illustration. It is the material representation, the apparently stabilized product of a process of work. . . . To understand a visualisation is thus to inquire into its provenance and into the social work that it does. It is to note its principles of exclusion and inclusion, to detect the roles that it makes available, to understand the way in which they are distributed, and to decode the hierarchies and differences that it naturalises.<sup>31</sup>

This approach calls for systematic comparison and rigorous analysis before interpretation of any image can begin.

Comparative analysis shapes every facet of this study. By comparing texts to images and bringing the two manuscripts into productive dialogue, it becomes possible to measure the malleability of history and the variability of the concept “Byzantium.” Beyond their superficial similarities in style and certain iconographies, the two manuscripts share no common vision of Byzantium’s value. Their visual strategies for taking and remaking Byzantine history will become apparent as we analyze how they assign different meanings to the same historical episodes and draw diverging moral messages from similar events. Although in Akropolites’ view these visual histories might be considered counterfeit productions that do injustice to the “true” history of Byzantium, they reveal important insights into the “genuine” specie. Roger II’s counterfeit Byzantium countered key aspects of how Byzantines discursively constructed the legitimacy of their rulers. Ivan Alexander constructed a counterfactual Byzantine historical process that culminated in Bulgaria’s ascendancy to its rightful place as the eternal empire. The case studies presented in Chapters 5–7 demonstrate that both

<sup>29</sup> Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation*, passim.

<sup>30</sup> A. Munslow, *Narrative and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 19.

<sup>31</sup> G. Fyfe and J. Law, “Introduction: on the invisibility of the visual,” in *Picturing Power: Visual Depiction and Social Relations*, ed. G. Fyfe and J. Law (London: Routledge, 1988), 1.

manuscripts gave visual expression to aspects of Byzantine history that were never visualized in Byzantium.

Although both manuscripts engage in visualization of Byzantine history and draw to an extent on Byzantine artistic forms, each creates a partisan and outlandish vision of Byzantium. The Madrid Skylitzes transforms Byzantine history to suit Sicilian needs by subverting imperial ideology, ignoring Orthodox concerns, and denying Constantinople's providential favor and political preeminence. The Vatican Manasses appropriates the succession of empires that have existed since the creation of the world in order to create a platform of legitimacy for Ivan Alexander. The two visual narratives carefully respond to the concerns of each prince, and contribute to the mythology of their power. *Imagining the Byzantine Past* is the first interdisciplinary study that rigorously analyzes the intellectual construction of Byzantine history (and, through it, of Byzantium) in the visual cultures of neighboring societies and explores alternate visions of Byzantium.

### **Interlocking societies and strategies of engagement**

Although fourteenth-century Bulgaria does not at first glance appear to share much in common with twelfth-century Sicily, both Roger II and Ivan Alexander operated in a world that was deeply influenced by the Crusades and their impact on Byzantium and the eastern Mediterranean. Around the time of the Second Crusade Roger II contested Constantinople's preeminence as a center and site of empire in both word and deed. The despoliation and degradation suffered by Constantinople in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade made possible Ivan Alexander's imagined Third Rome, a restoration project that promised the rhetorical and real regeneration of eternal empire under Bulgarian stewardship.

The rise of multiple centers in the eastern Mediterranean as a result of the Crusades had profound consequences for the entire region. Roger II sought to profit from the Crusading adventure and his mother married the king of Jerusalem in the hopes of securing her son's royal title. He successfully managed to steer the armies of the Second Crusade away from Sicily. The ruler of Sicily saw this venture as an opportunity (as it is still often presented in the modern narratives of the Crusades), not the tragedy that it would become for the Byzantine empire. The Crusades also mark a decisive historical turning point for the Orthodox world, which was fundamentally reshaped in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade (1204). Ivan Alexander came of age at a time when it even seemed possible that the entire Balkan peninsula could be enticed to join the Catholic fold.