



HIST359 *Biography of an Empire: The Surprising Life of 'Byzantium'.*

Fall Semester 2023

M/W 17:15-18:50

Instructor : Dimitra Kotoula, PhD.

Email : dimitra.kotoula@cyathens.org

Office hours: before or after class by appointment

Web URL: <https://courtauld.academia.edu/DimitraKotoula>

Course Description

The course explores the history and life of the Eastern Roman empire, the so-called 'Byzantium'. The empire encompassed and extended well beyond the Mediterranean region and survived for over a thousand of years: from its Christianization in the 4th century AD up to the fall of its capital, Constantinople, to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. By which means was an empire of this magnitude able to negotiate its survival over the course of a millennium? In examining the issue, particular attention will be paid to the investigation of the prevailing social, political, and economic conditions in the region, as well as the massive changes in culture, religion, demography, geography, and ideology that Byzantium first introduced to the Greco-Roman world that it had inherited. The empire, throughout its extraordinary life, promulgated and maintained a unique ideology that was, paradoxically, able to protect an image of timelessness and unchanging order, while at the same time accomplishing transformation and innovation that allowed the Byzantines to compete with and relate to their neighbours to the East and West at key moments in the empire's long history. Besides the narrative of main historical events, special emphasis will be given throughout this course, to the character and riches of this unique civilization identifying the fundamental questions about Byzantium - what it ultimately was, and what special significance, if any, it holds for us today.

Class sessions combine lectures, as well as discussion of primary texts and analysis of visual material, in order to provide a holistic introduction to the history and culture of the Eastern Mediterranean during the period. It could be described as 'an illustrated history of the Eastern Roman empire'.

Course Requirements

No previous knowledge of history is required. A midterm exam (15% of the final grade), a class assignment (i.e. critical summary of a book or article related to the course, 10% of the final grade), a final essay (around 2000 words, 30% of the final grade) and a final exam (35% of the final grade) are required. Alternatively, for a shorter final essay (up to 1000 words), a short (up to 12 minutes) class presentation could be scheduled in advance on any of the research topics relevant to this class. This could be an individual or group presentation on a source, book, object, site related to the course that could be done in class or at a museum/site.

Close supervision and guidance (bibliography, instructions on structure, content and style) will be provided for the essays and presentation.

This is a 300level course. If you wish to take this course at 400level, additional readings and assignments will be required, after consultation with the instructor.

Course books

The standard prescribed textbook for this course is:

W. Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Empire* (1997).

Dictionaries/Handbooks

The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium (ODB), Kazhdan, A. P., ed., Oxford (Oxford University Press) 1991.

The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies (OHBS), E. Jeffreys, R. Cormack, J. Haldon (eds), Oxford (Oxford University Press) 2008.

A Companion to Byzantium, L. James (ed.), London (Blackwell) 2010.

The Byzantine World, P. Stevenson (ed.), London (Routledge) 2010.

*****During the course of the semester**, you will be expected to become familiar with specific passages or chapters from other relevant books:

- D. Stathakopoulos, *The Byzantine Empire* (2014).
- J. Herrin, *Byzantium: the surprising life of a Medieval Empire* (2009).
- T. Gregory, *A history of Byzantium* (2005).
- C. Mango (ed.), *The Oxford history of Byzantium* (2002).
- C. Mango, *Byzantium. The empire of New Rome* (1980).

You might find it useful to consult the standard histories by:

Ostrogorsky (G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 2nd ed., 1968) and Vasiliev (A.A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire 324-1453*, 1952) throughout the semester.

*****Please note that for each class additional bibliography will be available online (through moodle)**

Class Schedule

September 2-3: Field Study to Delphi (3h). As part of the trip we are visiting Hossios Loukas, a functioning monastic establishment to date with lavish mosaic decoration that dates back to the 11th c. Besides studying a most representative example of middle-Byzantine art and architecture, we will discuss on site broader issues that defined the character of the Eastern Roman Empire during its transformation to Byzantium: patronage, eschatology, their socio-political and artistic impact, the relation between capital and periphery, the spirituality of Byzantine monasticism.

(Bibliography:

- Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art*, Oxford 2000, pp. 163-175.
- Carolyn L. Connor, *Saints and Spectacle. Byzantine Mosaics in their Cultural Setting*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- E. James, 'Monks, monastic art, the sanctoral cycle and the Middle Byzantine church', in M. Mullet, A. Kirby (eds), *The Theotokos Evergetis and 11th-c Monasticism*, Belfast 1994, pp. 169-75).

***September 4:** Orientation class. Discussion on the structure, requirements and parameters of this course. Introduction and discussion on the defining characteristics of the Eastern Roman Empire. What is Byzantium - who were the Byzantines? What is Byzantium for us today? Byzantine historians, later historians of Byzantium and other sources.

(Bibliography: Stathakopoulos 203-210/ Gregory 13-20/ Cameron 2011/ OHBS 778-783, 838-849, 957-961).

***September 6:** Where do we begin? Time, space and people in a millennium-long empire. Geography and chronology. The multi-cultural character of the Eastern Mediterranean and the material tokens of the Byzantine civilization. The political ideology of the Eastern Roman empire and its transformation. The Byzantine emperor: who rules the world?

(Bibliography: Stathakopoulos 1-10/ Gregory 3-13/ Mango ed. 1-16/ ODB 31-37, 220-231).

***September 11:** From crisis to reform. '*In hoc vinces*': Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus Augustus or St Constantine: the first Christian emperor. The military, economic and socio-political reforms that changed the face of an empire. A new religion for a new world, its spirituality and impact in the development of the world's first Christian empire. Better than Rome? The conflicting opinions of later historians.

(Bibliography: Treadgold 35-50/Stathakopoulos 10-26/ Mango ed. 19-59).

September 13-17: Field Study to Crete - Chania (2h). Tour of the Byzantine fortress of Kasteli, Old Town of Chania. The fortress, a typical sample of Byzantine military architecture, was built in the 7th c. to protect Kasteli, originally an island at the Chania old port, from the successive Arab invasions that threatened the existence of Byzantium during the so-called 'Dark Ages'. Its shape, features, building materials and techniques would become standard for Byzantine fortifications up until the 14th c.

(Bibliography:

-OHBS under Secular and Military Architecture.

-John Haldon, Byzantium at War: 600-1453, Oxford 2002).

***September 18:** The building of a Christian empire: the capital, cities and villages. From Byzantium to Constantinople: how Christian Constantine's city was? New wine on old bottles: new realities in the material culture and everyday life. The new spirituality that made these changes necessary, the people who materialized and supported them.

(Bibliography: Gregory 56-65/ Mango ed. 65-95/ James 1996/ ODB 316-325).

September 20: Visit to the Byzantine Museum, Athens or to a historical site in the Athens city center.

***September 25:** New Religion-Old Culture. The painstaking establishment of a Christian state and society. Moving backwards for a bit? The short-lived revival of paganism, Julian the Apostate and division, again, of the Empire. The existence of the new world at stake.

(Bibliography: Treadgold 69-101/ Stathakopoulos 26-42/ Gregory 67-118/Mango ed 69-114).

September 27: Visit to the Benaki Museum of Islamic Art.

***October 2:** The ultimate victory of Christianity. Emperor Justinian and his golden age, the buildings and the texts. Becoming Byzantine: Mediterranean, the sea of the new empire. International routes and roads in a multicultural world. Pilgrimage to holy loci.

(Bibliography: Treadgold 174-218/ Stathakopoulos 49-67, Gregory 119-148/ Mango ed. 115-120, OHBS 297-303).

***October 4:** Crisis again? The 'dark ages' and the rise of Islam. The Arabs and the Persians: new demographic, administrative and fiscal realities. The deep spiritual crisis of the 7th century. 'God save...the Empire!'

(Bibliography: Treadgold 287-323/ Stathakopoulos 68-86/ Gregory 149-182/ Mango ed. 121-128).

***October 9:** The Age of Iconoclasm I. Whose world is this; who has the ultimate authority to decide? Discussing the character of an era that marked the beginning of the 'Middle-Ages'. Byzantium, the world's first Christian empire, re-defined.

(Bibliography: Treadgold 346-371/ Stathakopoulos 87-108/ Gregory 184-216/ Mango ed. 153-162).

***October 11:** The Age of Iconoclasm II.

***October 16:** The Age of Iconoclasm III.

***October 18: Mid-Term Exams.**

***October 30:** Towards revival. The major reforms under the so-called 'Macedonian Dynasty' that changed and saved the empire, Byzantium in the world's scene. Looking back in order to move forward: Renaissance and renaissances in Byzantium: the case of the 'Macedonian Renaissance'.

(Bibliography: Stathakopoulos 108-118/Gregory 217-263/ Threadgold 471-498/Mango ed 214-229).

***November 1:** The glory of Byzantium I. Stability, power and prestige. The international impact of Byzantium. A peoples' culture or a culture for the crown? Periphery versus the capital, the major artistic centres of the Eastern Mediterranean during the Middle Byzantine period.

(Bibliography: Stathakopoulos 118-128/ Gregory 238-281/ Mango ed. 169-208/ OHBS 785-791, 523-526).

***November 6:** The glory of Byzantium II. 'As a ransom for my soul and a peaceful afterlife': the emperor as a founder. Art, politics and eschatology. The prosperous Byzantine provinces and their culture. Influences from the East and the West and vice versa: cultural exchanges in the Mediterranean basin.

(Bibliography: Treadgold 667-709/ Stathakopoulos 129-149/ OHBS 505-519).

***November 7-12: Field Study to the Peloponnese (Nauplion: 1h in the city; 2h Hagia Monh Areias / Mistras 4h).**

At Nauplion:

-The historical church of Hagios Georgios, St George, a most representative example of Venetian architecture, with Renaissance-style wall-paintings of the so-called 'Munich School' will be discussed in juxtaposition to the spirituality and main principles of Byzantine art.

-The Hagia Monh Areias (12th c.), is a most representative example of a predominant trend in Middle-Byzantine architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean that differs from those already discussed (i.e. Hossios Loukas, Daphni, the Byzantine Churches of Attica).

(Bibliography: R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, London 1986, pp. 379-94).

At Mistras:

Walking downwards through the Medieval city-castle of Mistras, contributes significantly to the better understanding of the culture of the Byzantines, issues of lay patronage, demography, topography, as well as the multi-cultural character of the empire, during its later years.

(Bibliography: The city-castle of Mistras, exh. cat. August 2001-January 2002, Athens 2001).

***November 13:** Byzantium and the West: what were really the Crusades? Extensive discussion on the nature of Crusades and the role of Byzantium. The new realities of the Crusader period. How did the Mediterranean change after the Crusader expeditions? How did this affect Byzantium?

(Bibliography: Treadgold 583-667 and handout with extensive additional bibliography).

***November 15:** 1204: the beginning of the end for Byzantium. Discussion on the causes and consequences of the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204. Whose fault was it? Could it have been avoided? And now what?

(Bibliography: handout)

November 20: Tour to Byzantine Churches, Athens- discussion on the spirituality/religion of the new Roman Empire.

***November 22:** After 1204. An empire of empires: preserving the political ideology and culture of Byzantium outside Byzantium. Could recovery come? Constantinople back in Byzantine hands.

(Bibliography: Treadgold 709-784/ Sthakopoulos 150-165/ Gregory 283-297/ Mango ed 248-263).

[*November 24???: Field Study to Daphni Monastery, Attica (3h). Visit to the monastery of Daphni, Attica. Besides the architecture and the art –the monastery preserves some of the most recognizable images of Byzantium, such as the Pantokrator mosaic in the dome- its history and the circumstances surrounding its establishment will be discussed, since these reflect the fate of the empire itself: the transition from paganism to Christianity, the period of stability and growth in the 10th/11th centuries, the Crusades and their impact, the last years of Byzantium, the period of the Ottoman Occupation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

(Bibliography:

- Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art*, Oxford 2000, pp. 163-175.

- Ernest Diez and Otto Demus, *Byzantine Mosaics in Greece. Hosios Lucas & Daphni*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931)]

***November 27:** The twilight of Byzantium. Cultural and artistic revival in a dying empire. Another renaissance? The thriving of the arts and letters under the Palaiologan Dynasty. The spirituality of the period before the end: redefining the Orthodox dogma and belief.

(Bibliography: Sthakopoulos 165-170/ Mango ed. 284-292/ OHBS 804-813).

November 29: Visit to the Byzantine Archives of the British School at Athens.

***December 4:** Just before the Fall. To change or not to change? Turning to the West, for what? The last gasp. Living with the memory of an empire. The allure and prestige of a dying culture. How far did the political ideology, art and culture of the Byzantines influence the new humanism of early-Renaissance Europe?

(Bibliography: Treadgold 784-804/ Sthakopoulos 171-190/ Gregory 326-358 and Treadgold 804-847/ Sthakopoulos 191-200/ Mango ed., 294-305).

***December 6:** Revision class.

