The stream of time irresistible: Byzantine civilization in the modern popular imagination

Abstract

Spanning a 1,123 year period between Late Antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, the Byzantine Empire was the legitimate continuation of the imperium Romanum. Although the main defender of Christianity against the encroachments of Islam in the 8th- and 9th-centuries and the bulwark of Western Europe until 1204, knowledge of Byzantine civilization among the general educated public remains vague, prompting the historian John Julius Norwich to refer to a “conspiracy of silence” regarding the teaching of Byzantine history in university curricula. The reasons why the memory of Byzantine civilization has not remained prominent in the popular imagination are complex involving historical, cultural and religious factors. Hellenistic culture, and Roman legal and bureaucratic traditions within the framework of Christianity formed the unique character of Eastern Roman society. One peculiar aspect of the Byzantine religious, mystical world conceptualization which has confounded commentators since the Middle Ages is here termed as non-standard gender practices. Without an understanding of how integral these practices were to the order and functioning of the society, it is impossible to approximate an accurate rendering of Byzantine civilization. In Byzantium, these non-standard gender practices refer specifically to the influence of castrated males or eunuchs, and high-status women in governance and public life. Since Antiquity female presence in society was believed to exert an enervating effect on masculine vigor. With Christianity certain gendered states, sexual behaviors and practices came to be viewed as vitiated with a female anima, and this anima was cast by non-Byzantine chroniclers onto the whole of Byzantine civilization. Much of our current understanding of Byzantine civilization comes from works researched since the late 18th-century European Enlightenment. Enlightenment intellectuals carried largely antithetical views of clericalism and held the religiosity of the Byzantines in low regard. With the development of historiography as an academic discipline in the 19th- and 20th-centuries, historians have developed a more thorough understanding of Byzantine religious mysticism. This study finds that while the centrality of religion in Byzantine society is now better understood, the subject of non-standard gender practices remains problematic for scholars and colors the perception of Byzantium in the modern popular imagination.
Streams of wealth flowed into Constantinople, making possible unprecedented wonders of art and architecture, from fabulous jeweled mosaics and other iconography to the great church known as the Hagia Sophia that was a vision of heaven on earth. The dome of the Great Palace stood nearly two hundred feet high and stretched over four acres, and the city’s population was more than twenty times that of London’s. From Constantine, who founded his eponymous city in the year 330, to Constantine XI, who valiantly fought the empire’s final battle more than a thousand years later, the emperors who ruled Byzantium The stream of time irresistible: Byzantine civilization in the modern popular imagination. Title The reasons why the memory of Byzantine civilization has not remained prominent in the popular imagination are complex involving historical, cultural and religious factors. Hellenistic culture, and Roman legal and bureaucratic traditions within the framework of Christianity formed the unique character of Eastern Roman society. Much of our current understanding of Byzantine civilization comes from works researched since the late 18th-century European Enlightenment. Enlightenment intellectuals carried largely antithetical of views of clericalism and held the religiosity of the Byzantines in low regard.