



Byzantium: The Early Centuries

John Julius Norwich

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"This book tells the story of the Byzantine Empire from its beginnings to the emergence of its only European rival, the Holy Roman Empire, with the coronation of Charlemagne on Christmas Day AD 800.

Byzantium: The Early Centuries Details

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From Reader Review Byzantium: The Early Centuries for online ebook

Patrick says

A beautifully written account of the Roman Empire after the fall of the west. The book is peppered with memorable and witty pen portraits of historical figures.

Not a work of original research, but a highly readable condensation of contemporary and more recent histories of the era.

This book and its two sequels, Byzantium: The Apogee and Byzantium: Decline and fall take the reader from the time of Constantine I, the Roman emperor who moved the capital of the Roman empire from Rome to Constantinople in the early 4th century, right up to the death of his final namesake, Constantine XI and the final fall of the Roman empire in 1453 (and a little beyond).

I can't recommend it highly enough.

Justin says

Starts with the division of the Empire in the 300's and goes from there. Along with The Apogee and The Decline and Fall, makes a great continuation of the history of the Roman Empire given in schools. Without a very good understanding of the 'Byzantine' (actually Roman) Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Hapsburg Empire, and Elizabethan England one does not understand Europe's rise to power.

Mark Rossiter says

John Julius Norwich, author of this history of the Eastern Roman Empire from the founding of Constantinople in 330 until the coronation in 800 in Rome by the Pope of Charlemagne as rival Emperor of the West, is a jolly entertaining English upper class sort of storyteller. He has all the credentials: son of Duff and Diana Cooper, he went to Eton, then joined the diplomatic corps before retiring at 35 to write history books; he is the father of Artemis Cooper, herself married to the historian Anthony Beevor and currently biographer of the dashing English upper class travel writer and proto-Bond Patrick Leigh Fermor. And it must be said, his stories are pithy and colourful, designed to extract the last ounce of entertainment value from that previous aristocracy, the Roman-cum-Byzantine. He plucks a juicy summary from the sources, eliminates any tedious ingredients, enlivens it with crisp judgments, peppers it with anecdotal footnotes, and moves on. No sins of commission to complain about; though as he admits, he finds people more interesting than trends. The common people carry on, popping up occasionally to rise in support of or against this or that emperor, regent, patriarch, powerbroker. Yah boo hiss hooray they go, and the pantomime continues, within the hippodrome and without, but mostly beyond the heavily guarded end of the passage that connects to the imperial quarters.

Chase Parsley says

THIS IS HISTORY AT ITS FINEST. Infinity plus one out of infinity stars...Norwich triumphs! The Byzantines brim with Roman pride, brainwashed Christianity, brutal violence, and a near constant struggle for power. Norwich breathes life into the "Dark Ages" like never before. This first of three books covers the late 200s to the early 800s, and I was shocked at the fantastic stories and vital historical connections made throughout. Any professional or amateur historian ought to read this; I know I will read it again decades from now with just as much pleasure. I devoured it in about 2 weeks at the expense of my job and social life.

My top five parts (although we could have a field day with a much longer list):

- 5) The Persian-Byzantine War involving Chosroes II and Heraclius which battered both sides so bad that it allowed the Muslims to rise
- 4) The EPIC conquest between Belisarius and Totila to get the Western Roman Empire back
- 3) All of the religious councils to settle early religious disputes...for the Byzantines it was one Emperor, one faith, and they took this very seriously
- 2) Justinian II's horrific rise, fall, rise, fall roller coaster ride as Emperor. A movie needs to be made here!
- 1) The Nika Riots - Justinian I brutally suppresses a revolt...really all of Justinian's reign is superb

Again, awesome book, I highly recommend it!

Pierre Verwey says

*The history of the [Byzantine] Empire is a **monotonous** story of the intrigues of priests, eunuchs and women, of poisonings, of conspiracies, of uniform ingratitude, of perpetual fratricides.*

So opens John Norwich's meticulously detailed account of the first 500 years of Byzantine history, when he quotes Lecky's History of European Morals, published in 1869.

Norwich wastes little time to rescue this unflattering summary of Byzantine history, when he says that this sounds not so much monotonous a story, as one destined to be *entertaining*.

And thoroughly entertaining it is.

Over the next few hundred pages he expertly tells a behemoth of a tale, riddled with conquests, betrayals, imperial power plots and intrigues, where one is instantly reminded how this is the story of an Empire created as a continuation of the, by now, fading Roman Empire, though admittedly one where its populous are culturally less sophisticated, its emperors a great deal more shady, its justice unspeakably more brutal, and its orgies, regrettably less frequent.

Over the course of some 18 Chapters in which most of the main characters are repeatedly named /Constantin/ Justin / Theodosius/Anesthasia /John / or a some derivative of it, it become at times utterly daunting to keep track of how they are all interrelated, intertwined and interbred. To add to the confusion, the motives and underlying storylines of intrigues and struggles remain largely unchanged throughout early Byzantine history, as the story whizzes past several emperors losing their heads, either literally or figuratively, get their noses misplaced, again literally and figuratively, or in some cases, allowing to be remembered in history for

being neither saint nor sadist and in other, more extreme cases, for being both.

So it is not long before one is reminded of the damning opening paragraph of the book in which Byzantine history is reduced to being 'a monotonous story of conspiracies, intrigues, poisoning and perpetual fratricides.'

However, the breathtaking scope and volume of stories within stories, plots within subplots which weave the threads binding characters to events to make up the mosaic of Early history of Byzantine, is, if anything, simply, mind numbing.

By the time Norwich draws the 8th century to a close in an outrageously scandalous final chapter, Constantinople has emerged, kicking and screaming, as a towering bastion of Orthodox faith, its transformation complete and its identity so unique, that any comparison to Ancient Rome or the old Roman Empire would certainly seem absurd.

Expect a story filled with a dazzling amount of betrayals, betrothals and beheadings with facts and events peppered non stop over the course of five centuries. So it becomes almost impossible to be left with anything other than a rough impression of those early Byzantine centuries. Trying, after its initial reading, to recall exactly where what happened or whether it happened to Constance, Constantine, Constantia or Constantinius, becomes somewhat rhetorical , once the initial dust settles on this epic tale.

There is simply so much happening inside this initial volume that it is quite astounding that a mere 400 pages can account for it all. Perhaps if the brothers Grimm told their fairytales in the style of the old Testament, Id have something to compare.

On a slightly less upbeat note, I can forgive Norwich for failing to explain exactly how issues around the theological debates could have been so delicate, so sensitive, as to spur an entire city into unstoppable riot, or how an emperor could be loved or loathed depending on whether he thought Christ and God was one and the same, or not, and loose a head, tongue, nose or more intimate protrusion in the process. However, for failing to mention, even one, imperial orgy behind palace walls, I find myself being a little less forgiving.

Just kidding. This is a monster read, being the first of three volumes. And yes, in the initial mix there is at least one orgy, (albeit sketchy in its sordid detail), a great many tales of glittering conquest and ones of undignified homosexual out-ing, outrageous fortunes, breathtaking heroism and brilliant triumph. But alas, as is the case when tales are told of a mighty empire - a great many quietly reveal a secret history of unspeakable tragedy.

David says

I love the way Norwich delves into the labyrinthine politics of the time. I haven't read the other two books in the series, but some day I will, perhaps when I'm old and grey and good for nothing else. So that hopefully will be a while yet. Norwich writes wittily and knowledgeably as one of the leading experts. I think I have a problem with time and change. I watched a BBC documentary series about Turkey in 1971 called The Gates of Asia. I remembered him having a healthy virility about him, sunburnt and muscular as he crouched over carvings in the scorching sun of Eastern Turkey in the summer, and yet when he came on TV a few months ago in connection with an art series I was shocked to see a stooped old man, forgetting that 38 years

separated the two. I've noticed a few lines in my own face, but must confess that on balance I feel I am wiser, more confident and knowledgeable, and better looking, than I was even thirty years ago. What has all this to do with Byzantium. Byzantium, the fabulous city of gold, the city of the world's desire, is also a state of mind, I feel, a throwback, a yearning, for a time when anything was possible. A lost golden age, like youth and love. Something radiant in the heart.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Voss says

La magnificenza, nella bellezza e nell'orrore, dell'Impero Romano d'Oriente non cessa di affascinarmi. La cultura, la forza, gli intrighi, la violenza, la religiosità, la teologia ... nulla è piccolo qui.

Pbwritr says

This book starts out in the early 200s of the Roman Empire, with Emperor Diocletian deciding to share his power with a co-emperor, and each of them then divides their responsibility for their respective regions with a Caesar who is supposed to succeed them. Four men with lusts for power. Doesn't turn out so amicably. Byzantium becomes the power center of the eastern part of the Empire, and Rome's luster is fading. Constantine the Great isn't just baptized into Christianity, he is a fundamental force in its continuance, exaltation, and definition of orthodoxy. The book spans more than 5 centuries, from the date that the Roman Empire is divided in two until 802 when Charlemagne reunites the Empire again for the first time under one emperor. The author, John Julius Norwich, is astounding at being able to make these historical figures, some large, some small, and some inconsequential, come alive as human beings. What this book primarily did for me is explain in comprehensible detail (although I often had to re-read things, keep checking on maps, and keep looking up the family trees) how the Roman Empire came to be divided and why it stayed that way, what happened to Christianity along the way and what was decided at each of the Ecumenical Councils (I'm quite versed now in the Nicene Creed and its many versions and why they are the way they are), who exactly the "barbarians" were and why they insisted on invading the empire's frontiers (they were running from even worse barbarians and wanted protection or better places to live), and more. The empire's wars with Persia, the rise of Islam and what that meant, the losses and gains of territories. All extremely fascinating. Considering that in some cases there were too few sources, Norwich has done a remarkable job of showing how people thought, warred, lived, and traveled in those days. I only hope I can remember some of what I read.

Barry says

This is a finely told history of the early part of the Byzantine Empire. With colorful stories, in depth research, and a seeming fairness, Mr. Norwich has done justice to the history of Byzantium. Though the history is convoluted and filled with scores of names and important details, there is an order here that makes the story easy enough to follow. Along the journey fascinating anecdotes and personalities emerge, along with occasional analysis which seems even-handed and balanced in an effort to tell it like it really was.

At times the thread of the story became hard to discern with the jumble of places and people that blend together in one's mind. This is not the fault of Mr. Norwich, though it would have been nice to have him step back periodically to give an overview of the key points of that segment of the history, or to let us know what was going on in the big picture at that time. Some of the most refreshing and interesting parts of the book are when Mr. Norwich gives a brief sketch of Europe, Africa, or the Middle East. These contrasts help the reader better fit the history of Byzantium in with the world at large.

Though the book would benefit from more of these breaks, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* is still a very good book and well worth the read.

AskHistorians says

Don't get the shortened version, it'll seem too rushed. Norwich is a master storyteller with an eye for details, and livens up the thousand plus year history of the Byzantine Empire as the entertaining soap opera that it really was. Also goes into the fall of the west in his first book with sufficient detail to be a solid book on the fall of the western Roman Empire as well.

Elliott Bignell says

I am already keen on Norwich due to his work on Venice, and I got this whole three-volume work in one buy based on trust, so I am delighted to say that it does not disappoint. Norwich is his usual erudite self, witty and enjoyable to read. The book is a bit kings-and-battles, like most history, but the author supplies enough philosophical and other context to render this a burden easily borne.

The period covered spans the early reasons for interest in a different site for the seat of Empire to Rome, up to the rise of Islam and the Byzantines' first great effort to win back control of areas lost to the Muslims. The period is crucially important to the history of the Western and Islamic worlds, as it covers the decline of the Western Roman Empire, Christianisation, the Arian controversy and rise of monophysite and Nestorian branches, the early rupture and balancing of power between Emperor and Pope, the rise of Charlemagne and of course the collapse of the Persian Empire and loss of much of the Roman to Islam.

Norwich sets out to rebalance the rather negative view of the Byzantines with which Gibbon left us, but I must say they remain desperately unappealing. It used to be claimed that one could not buy bread without having some point of meaningless theological dispute thrown in, and that the people would riot in the streets over the spelling of "homoiousios" while caring not a jot about the weightiest economic concerns. This appears to be true even given Norwich's rebalancing. It certainly seems the case, as I have suspected for some time, that a major cause for the sudden triumph of Islam was not merely the Persian wars and the Black

Death which had hollowed out the Empire, but the Empire's sheer unpopularity. Its murderous intolerance of the most obscure differences of opinion about empty theological arcana and increasingly genocidal attitude to non-Christians left the tolerant, if austere, early Muslims a comparatively attractive prospect.

At any rate this is a wonderful read. I am looking forward to the next volume already.

Luis A. says

"Our civilization has never adequately acknowledged the debt it owes to the Empire of the East", writes John Julius Norwich in the introduction of this magnificent book. In very rare occasions, historians rise to the level of the history they are narrating. This is one of those occasions. We jump on the glorious vessel captained by Norwich and he takes us to the eastern Mediterranean, the Sea of Marmara, then up the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus. The journey is the reward as I never really wanted the book to end. Fortunately, this was just the first volume of three: The Early Centuries (1988), The Apogee (1991) and The Decline and Fall (1995).

For the last 200 years, the Byzantine Empire had been the victim of a conspiracy of silence. Norwich recalls that he hadn't heard or read anything about it until he went to Oxford. What little was known of the Empire of the East had been filtered through the opaque lens of Edward Gibbon who saw Byzantium as the decadence of all that was noble in Ancient Greece and Rome. And it wasn't until the middle of the 20th century when travel to the Levant became more accessible that the Byzantine Empire was recognized for what it had been: a worthy and mighty successor and carrier of the Greek and Roman traditions.

The quote from Norwich at the beginning of this post is important. Byzantium was the stronghold of Christendom and Greek and Latin culture that kept great empires from the East from invading Europe. What chance would the smaller kingdoms and tribes of Europe have had against the Persians in the seventh century or the Saracens in the eighth? Constantinople, though sieged several times by the forces of the East or barbarians from the north or west, resisted and ultimately prevailed due to the strength of its emperor and the unity of its people, who drew strength from "a single, unshakeable article of faith: that the Roman Empire was one and indivisible, its ruler chosen by God as His Vice-Gerent on earth."

Culturally, too, we owe much to the Empire. After the fall of Rome, cultural progress stalled in Western Europe, and it was in Constantinople that the classical heritage was preserved. Greek and Latin literature, philosophy, Roman Law, would have been lost forever if it had not been for the scholars and copyists of Byzantium.

Jby says

JJ Norwich has probably forgotten more about Byzantium than half the world knows. Very interesting, but a bit tedious. This history is very (too?) centered on the byzantine emperors, their court and their actions. IMO the wider context is missing too often.

Silash Ruparell says

This review also appears on my blog www.silashruparell.com

My one liner: Fratricide, Patricide, Matricide, Infanticide, Blood, Guts, Gore, Pillage, Murder, Incest, Intrigue, Betrayal, Incompetence, Brilliance, Genius, Aggression, Passion, Fervour, Docility, Stupidity, Hubris. In other words the first five hundred years of the Byzantine Empire as described by John Julius Norwich in this classic account.

“After over half a century of contact with the Romans, his people had become perhaps one degree less bestial than at their first arrival; but the vast majority still lived and slept in the open, disdaining all agriculture and even cooked foods – though they would often soften raw meat by putting it between their thighs and their horses’ flanks as they rode. For clothing they favoured tunics made, rather surprisingly, from the skins of fieldmice, crudely stitched together; this they wore continuously, without ever removing them, until they dropped off of their own accord. And as they had always done, they still practically lived on their horses, eating, trading, holding their councils, even sleeping in the saddle.”

The Huns were a savage tribe which smashed their way out of the Central Asian steppes around 376AD. Attila the Hun, “the scourge of God”, led a series of attacks on the Byzantine Empire and built up a vast dominion stretching from Constantinople to the Balkans in the East to Italy and France in the West. He came within a whisker of invading Rome itself.

The Hun invasion is just one example of the incursions and travails that beset the Byzantine Empire during the period covered in this book, 300 to 800AD.

This colourful account by John Julius Norwich tells the story of the early Byzantine Empire, established by Emperor Constantine I (“Constantine the Great”) in 311 AD in the new city of Constantinople on the banks of the River Bosphorus. The New Rome.

Whilst the Pope, and hence the religious centre, of the Roman Empire continued to be seated in Rome, the political centre had now gravitated towards the East.

It was not a smooth and unambiguous transition, and often there were Co-Emperors, one for Byzantium and one for the West of the Roman Empire.

However, throughout the period of this volume, there was one inalienable and unargued article of faith for every Byzantine (and from which they drew strength of unity in times of turmoil), namely that the Emperor (or Co-Emperor) was the sole Vice-Gerent of God on earth. This volume ends with the shattering of that practice in the most remarkable way in the year 800AD. Pope Leo III produces a document (proved to be fraudulent only several centuries later) entitled the “Donation of Constantine”, pursuant to which Constantine the Great had allegedly, 500 years earlier, “retired” to the “province” of Byzantium, having bestowed on the Pope the right to confer the title of Emperor.

By this document the Frankish ruler Charles (“Charlemagne”) was crowned Emperor by Pope Leo and despatched to Byzantium to replace the supposed Empress Irene whose reign over Byzantium had been an economic and political disaster.

Of course, the transition was helped by another factor: “That the Empress was notorious for having blinded

and murdered her own son was, in the minds of both Leo and Charles, immaterial: it was enough that she was a woman. The female sex was known to be incapable of governing, and by the old Salic tradition was debarred from doing so.”

In between the bookends of Constantine the Great and Charlemagne, we read of a fascinating period of Christian history. Of Emperors who were disastrous. Of others who ruled Byzantium with skill, care and competence.

For example Heraclius came to the throne in 610 AD. He introduced a new structure into the eastern side of Byzantium, organising it along military lines:

- The part of Asia Minor (the northeast coastline running from Selifke in the Mediterranean to Rize on the Black Sea) which had recently been recaptured from the Persians was divided into four “Themes”, or regions. The choice of word was significant, because tema was the Greek word for a division of troops, thus underlining the warlike division of the region.
- Each tema was put under the governorship of a “strategos”, or military governor.
- A reserve army was maintained by providing potential soldiers with inalienable grants of land, in return for hereditary military service if called up.
- The net result was that Heraclius did not have to rely on ad hoc recruiting or on doing deals with dodgy barbarians in order to raise an army.

On the economic front he fixed the parlous fiscal position of the Imperial economy through:

- Taxation and government borrowing
- Restitution from supporters of the previous corrupt regime
- Subsidies from “friends and family” in Africa
- Most importantly however, he persuaded Patriarch Sergius, the Archbishop of Constantinople, to declare that the coming war would be a religious war. Hence all of the Church assets and treasure would be at the disposal of the Emperor.

Leadership 101 for aspiring modern warmongerer.

You will need to read the book to find out what became of Heraclius.

Every Emperor was confronted by tribes trying to nick territory. The Gauls and Franks perennially switching their loyalties to and from Rome. The Lombards (from modern Germany and Austria) settling in Northern Italy. The Slavs trying to take the Balkans. The Goths, the Vandals and Huns having to be bought off or fought off.

But, there are two stand-out foes of Byzantine Christendom over this period.

First, the Persian Empire, whose rulers always seemed to have the knack for knowing when they had the upper hand. As an example, in 359AD Emperor Constantius II receives a letter from the Persian King:

“Shapur, King of Kings, brother of the Sun and the Moon, sends salutation...

Your own authors are witness that the entire territory within the river Strymon and the borders of Macedon was once held by my forefathers; were I to require you to restore all of this, it would not ill-become me...but because I take delight in moderation I shall be content to receive Mesopotamia and Armenia which were fraudulently extorted from my grandfather. I give you warning that if my ambassador returns empty-handed,

I shall take the field against you, with all my armies, as soon as the winter is past.”

I guess a lawyer would call that a Letter Before Action.

And of course the other formidable challenge to Byzantium was the rise of Islam.

In 633 AD, shortly after the foundation of the religion, it suddenly “burst out of Arabia.” First Damascus, then Jerusalem. Next, the whole of Syria. Egypt and Armenia fell within the decade. The whole Persian Empire was subsumed within 20 years. And then Afghanistan and Punjab within another 10 years. To the West, North Africa and Spain. Across the Pyrenees and finally checked at the banks of the Loire.

The rest, as they say, is history.

The various Emperors acceded and reigned using diverse styles of governance and deployed some interesting procedural instruments.

The Emperor Maurice, though fundamentally a good man, faced financial pressures as a result of the extravagance and incompetence of his predecessor. Around 602AD he introduced austerity measures, but went too far, at one point cutting military rations by 25%, refusing to ransom 12,000 captives of the Avars (leading to them being put to death), and decreeing that the army should not return to base for winter but should sit it out in inhospitable territory beyond the Danube. Eventually he became so unpopular that he took the decision to flee to Persia (with whose king he had previously concluded a truce), taking his family with him.

His successor Phocas, embarked on a brutal purge of all his enemies.

“Debauched, drunk, and almost pathologically cruel, he loved, we are told, nothing so much as the sight of blood..; it was Phocas who introduced the gallows and the rack, the bindings and mutilation which were to cast a sinister shadow over the centuries to come.”

First, Phocas despatched troops to Asia and killed Maurice and family. Then he exterminated his own brother and nephew. Plus a whole bunch of military men. He even managed to kill Narses, his best general in the East. Unsurprisingly, the Persians took their chance, invaded, and took significant chunks of territory, including Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia, Cappadocia, Paphlagonia, and Galatia.

Other examples abound.

Julian the Apostate, who eventually became Emperor in 361 AD, had to bide his time (indeed he didn’t really have imperial designs, and in fact was a sort of travelling scholar, and by all accounts a little bit of a geek).

His cousin Constantius II preceded him as Emperor. He had had Julian’s father and stepbrother killed when Julian was a young child. Constantius made the error of elevating Julian, appointing him as the Caesar of Gaul. Julian must have had a festering hatred for Constantius II. He bided his time, and then led an army against Constantius.

This book has some other useful features. The tables of lineages, emperors and family trees, the maps and illustration all add to understanding. Moreover there is a tourist guide, providing a list of the Byzantine monuments still surviving in Istanbul today.

I agree with the author in his Introduction that Byzantium is an era of history under-taught in schools, yet it has more than enough material to capture the imagination of a schoolchild.

The narrative of this book is tight, so it leads you swiftly from one reign to another quite seamlessly.

And that perhaps, is a clue to the central message of the book.

Dynasties come and go. Some leaders are good people, some are bad, most a bit of both. They are able to wield huge power. And yet they are all merely human beings powerless against the passage of time and events.

Bookwraiths says

Very enjoyable and enlightening history of Byzantium. Highly recommended for anyone with an interest in this time period.

Onur Özler says

Hayat?mda okudu?um en iyi anlat?lm?? tarih eserlerinden olabilir. Sir Norwich'in amac? bu gizemli ve herkesin çok ?ey bilmedi?i imparatorluk hakk?nda hikaye tad?nda tarihi olaylar? anlatarak, okuyucuya Do?u Roma hakk?nda bilgiler vermektedir, ve inan?n bunu çok iyi yap?yor.

?lk kitap da Büyük Constantine den ba?lay?p, Roma ?mparatorlu?unun ba?kentini Konstantinopolis'e ta??mas?, iç isyanlar ve Roma ?mparatorlu?unun ayr?lmamas?ndan bahsediliyor. Özellikle Jüstinyen ve kar?s? Theodora n?n k?s?mlar? inan?lmaz.

Dünyan?n en büyük ve inan?lmaz kilisesi olan Kutsal Bilgelik Kilisesi(Ayasofya) çok k?s?sa bir süre içinde yap?ld?, I. Jüstinyen kilisenin kap?s?ndan girdi?inde ise bir ?eyler m?r?ld?yordu: "Seni geçtim Süleyman."

Filip says

This is a great overview of the first centuries of the Byzantine empire. The writing is clear (unlike other history books, this one never had me mixing up emperors), smooth and insightful. Having always been exposed to the Western-centric view of the alleged end of the Roman empire, I found this view from Constantinople very refreshing; I now think it's the only view that truly sheds a light on the barbarian-vs-empire dynamics of these centuries.

The author doesn't shy away from passing moral judgment on the various protagonists. He does it so well that this doesn't disturb at all; in fact I found myself agreeing with him.

I can't wait to read the other volumes of his history of Byzantium.

John Robertson says

Superb account but a long read, I found myself having to go back over previous chapters as I had forgotten certain details, certainly for the Byzantiphiles :) Got the other two volumes on my shelf- not sure when I'll tackle them!

Christopher says

The English history and travel writer John Julius Norwich has long had a thing for the East. With Reresby Sitwell he wrote an introduction to the world of Mount Athos and subsequently, over three large volumes, produced a large history of Byzantium for popular audiences. **BYZANTIUM: The Early Centuries** is the first volume, going from the rise of St Constantine the Great in the early fourth century to the end of the Empress Irene's era in 802. I had mixed reactions to it.

When it comes to political history, i.e. who reigned when and who fought who, Norwich's history is quite detailed. Many palace intrigues are spicily recounted, and various hypotheses for some of the more mysterious turns of fate are collected. However, beyond the political history there is no real coverage of Byzantium culture. As other reviews have already pointed out, the goings-on of the elite are usually quite distant from the day to day life of the masses. There's no discussion of the developments of the arts or the flux of the economy. Some discussion of Byzantine culture can be had from Joan Mervyn Hussey's **THE BYZANTINE WORLD**, but she tries to pack an entire millennium in just a few pages.

While Norwich enjoys the culture of Eastern Christianity, he clearly is not faithful to the Eastern Orthodox Church. Quite often he questions the actions of rulers that the Church has glorified as saints, suggests that the outcome of the Ecumenical Councils was random, and insinuates that certain relics are fakes. I should think that Orthodox Christians are a fairly large market for a popular history of Byzantium, but they regrettably still await a book that sticks to Church teaching.

Since three full volumes of just political history is quite tedious, I'd recommend reading Norwich's abridgement **A SHORT HISTORY OF BYZANTIUM** instead.

Antigone says

A pleasant, if exhaustive, introduction to the history of this critical civilization. The book is rich in detail and atmosphere, its author keeping as true as possible to a straight course through the founding emperors, their politics, their wars. Eminently accessible; it reads like a fable.
