



Sailing from Byzantium: How a Lost Empire Shaped the World

Colin Wells

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A gripping intellectual adventure story, *Sailing from Byzantium* sweeps you from the deserts of Arabia to the dark forests of northern Russia, from the colorful towns of Renaissance Italy to the final moments of a millennial city under siege....

Byzantium: the successor of Greece and Rome, this magnificent empire bridged the ancient and modern worlds for more than a thousand years. Without Byzantium, the works of Homer and Herodotus, Plato and Aristotle, Sophocles and Aeschylus, would never have survived. Yet very few of us have any idea of the enormous debt we owe them.

The story of Byzantium is a real-life adventure of electrifying ideas, high drama, colorful characters, and inspiring feats of daring. In *Sailing from Byzantium*, Colin Wells tells of the missionaries, mystics, philosophers, and artists who against great odds and often at peril of their own lives spread Greek ideas to the Italians, the Arabs, and the Slavs.

Their heroic efforts inspired the Renaissance, the golden age of Islamic learning, and Russian Orthodox Christianity, which came complete with a new alphabet, architecture, and one of the world's greatest artistic traditions.

The story's central reference point is an arcane squabble called the Hesychast controversy that pitted humanist scholars led by the brilliant, acerbic intellectual Barlaam against the powerful monks of Mount Athos led by the stern Gregory Palamas, who denounced "pagan" rationalism in favor of Christian mysticism.

Within a few decades, the light of Byzantium would be extinguished forever by the invading Turks, but not before the humanists found a safe haven for Greek literature. The controversy of rationalism versus faith would continue to be argued by some of history's greatest minds.

Fast-paced, compulsively readable, and filled with fascinating insights, *Sailing from Byzantium* is one of the great historical dramas-the gripping story of how the flame of civilization was saved and passed on.

Sailing from Byzantium: How a Lost Empire Shaped the World Details

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Mike says

Byzantium's cultural legacy, as it affected societies arising in Western European, Islamic, and Slavic/Russian lands. The Byzantine Empire was not brief, and its decline was long and resisted to the end. Much in the way one may fashion a drinking cup from the skull of a favorite enemy, this empire did not simply vanish.

Part one shows how the intellectual capital of ancient Greece was preserved by the Byzantines. As their empire weakened they retreated into a mysticism at odds with Greek rationalism. Unwelcome at home, many scholars found a more appreciative clime in nearby Italy. Those cultural refugees, their numbers bolstered by the mass exodus of eggheads precipitated by the fall of Constantinople, helped forge the humanism of the Italian Renaissance.

This part relies pretty heavily on biographical detail to substantiate its premise; I wasn't so keen on that.

Part two focuses on the bits borrowed by the Islamic societies that contested with, and eventually overwhelmed, Byzantium. The Dome of the Rock captures in architecture the pomp borrowed by an upstart imperialism from an older one. As the Arabs unified under their great God, and fused together into a great people, they needed to dispense with their early disdain for the trappings of wealth and cloak their new-found power in earthly majesty. Later on they would forget the Byzantines and borrow from the Persians, or make their own way.

Also in part two is an examination of how Greek rationalism (translated into Arabic from Byzantine sources) co-existed or conflicted with Islamic mysticism. Things came to a head in the 9th century. With the backing of many *faṭṭasufs* (philosophers), one al-Mamun undertook a rationalist inquisition called the Mihna. One of those imprisoned and tortured during that time was Ahmad ibn Hanbal. During the brief time after his release and before his death he went on to found the Hanbali school of *sharia* law, the main source of today's Wahabi Islam and the ideological substrate of al-Qaeda. Torturing people is bad, okay?

Part three covers the Byzantine-sponsored conversion of the then relatively undeveloped peoples of Eastern Europe and Russia to Orthodox Christianity. As the pagans converted to Christianity the Latin church of Rome competed with the Orthodox church based in Constantinople for the hearts, minds, souls, and, ultimately, the armies of the Slavic world.

I have a friend whose heart is full of murder. Something a long time ago killed his soul. He reads histories like these looking for the echoes of an adversary, some malignant outline that he might conjure into reality and punish. Poor fool.

Birgitta Hoffmann says

Three linked essays about the links between Byzantine culture and the influence on its neighbours: Renaissance Europe, Umayyad and Abbasid Kalifate and the Bulgarian, Serb and Russian Orthodox churches.

Well written and accessible, but laden with information and names, great way into the topic.

Jane says

This book was fantastic!! The subtitle says it all. No, it's not a political history of the Byzantine Empire, but one narrowly focused on the valuable culture and Greek classical learning Byzantium has passed on to three major civilizations:

Western Europe, beginning with Italy and eventually spreading to the rest of Europe;
Arabs and their successor, the Ottoman Empire;
Slavic nations, from Bulgaria to Russia.

There are few of the "famous" people you would expect. For that you would need a more general Byzantine history. In this book, there are only a few words on the Fall of Constantinople, although the Sack of Constantinople [the 4th Crusade] is covered fairly extensively. Most of the historical figures discussed were esoteric scholars, religious figures, and some statesmen.

Each of the three sections into which the book was divided, was of interest. Yes, there were boring sections and at times I felt too many names and details were thrown at me all at once. There were some nuggets of information I did learn.

I learned the first time the word *translation* used in the sense of expressing the sense of a word in one language and rendering it into another, was coined by the Byzantines. Many Latin works they rendered into Greek. They passed on their knowledge of Greek to all three civilizations. Many religious concepts, such as the Great Schism, the *filioque* controversy, differences between Arians/Nestorians, Hesychasm were made clear for the layperson. As a result of Ptolemy's *The Geography* translated into Latin by a Byzantine scholar, a young Genoese sailor tried to find the riches of Cathay by sailing west. A "scriptorium" was first used in a Byzantine monastery and in the homes of rich, educated Byzantines; the idea of such a room spread quickly into Western monasteries. With the invention of the printing press and Aldus Manutius' Press, Greek texts were widely distributed in Europe.

First for the Arabs, then under the Ottomans, the Byzantines translated Greek medical texts into Arabic. The Ottomans went on to write their own original texts, when they felt they had learned everything the Byzantines had to offer. In architecture, the Dome of the Rock, which is a shrine, not a mosque, was built in Jerusalem, copying the nearby Byzantine Church of the Anastasis [Resurrection]. Then the Ottomans developed their own style.

The last part delineated the origin and spread of Slavs. Bulgaria transmitted Byzantine learning. Then followed much on the early history and on the conversion to Orthodoxy of the Slavs. For much of the early history, we rely on the Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text. The "Cyrillic" alphabet was developed for the Russians, we do not know by whom, but not by Cyril and Methodius. The Russian story of their conversion is well-known. The Byzantine version is more mundane, but probably more accurate. Russian art [icons] reached a peak under the Byzantine, Theophanes the Greek and his pupil, Andrei Rublev.

I appreciated the "Major Characters" list in the front, to keep track of who was who. Sources for quotes in the text and footnotes were given in 'Notes' There was also an extensive bibliography; the index was adequate, but not terribly extensive. I could not find several things I wanted to check on. The book was perfect for a non-scholar.

Enthusiastically recommended!

Glyn Longden says

Rating: 6/10. The author's intended purpose was to write a book which was accessible to the general reader. The problem is that the history of the Byzantine Empire is full of obscure religious and philosophical issues which, did, in fact, have an important role to play in its history. You wonder how an Empire, which seemed so incapable of defending itself and constantly refused to make important security decisions actually lasted for a thousand years. The three main issues in the book are Byzantium's relationships with the West, the Islamic world, and the Slavic speaking countries. I did learn a lot from reading Wells' book and it does make we want to read and learn more about Byzantium. I don't really think I would recommend this book for the 'general' reader though. P.S: for those of you who are map readers there are some excellent maps in this book.

Ryan Patrick says

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Kevin says

A great primer dealing with the role of the Eastern Roman Empire, otherwise known as Byzantium. This is one area and period of History that I knew so little about (never covered it at Uni, or at least only briefly touching the edges), basically just knowing about the schism between the East and Western Churches - the Orthodox and Catholic. However, the book is not really a history of Byzantium *per se*, but rather details the influence it held over the religious and educational development in Europe and the Middle East, covering the West, the effect on the rise of the Islamic Middle East and, for what I think is the most long standing legacy, the rise of the Slavic Rus, helping and actively encouraging the development of Russia as a unified nation (carrying on the legacy and being known in time as the 'Third Rome'). Without the Eastern Roman Empire surviving when Rome was sacked (and it survived for almost a millennia longer, till 1453), then we would not have many early books and texts surviving from Ancient Greece and much important learning would have been lost forever.

The book is more or less a cultural and religious study, explaining the divide between Western and Eastern religious thought (explaining the Hesychast debate for instance) and the most important historical figures involved throughout Byzantine's history. It held and incorporated the legacy of the Greeks, and its teachers became widely recognised and sought after for their translations, both amongst the Latin Christians and the Islamic Scholars. Islam became such a progressive movement in its early stage of growth with developments in science, expanding and developing what the early Greek Scholars started, and without the Byzantine translators then this could not have happened. Likewise amongst the Catholics in Florence and Rome, Byzantine Scholars were often invited to teach, to impart their knowledge such was the respect they held. However, Colin Wells' book is short and contains no great depth into certain periods and events - hardly mentioning the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 and what happened afterwards, but does discuss the Fourth Crusade and the sacking in 1204 (the beginning of the end of such a powerful, grandiose and dare I say, beautiful city); it must be seen as a primer and I suppose it succeeds in this task.

There is a considerable bibliography however which is always useful and much needed here. The book has whetted my inquisitive appetite to read more regarding this almost 'mystical' and exotic Empire.

Lyn says

Cool book, I realized how little I knew about the Byzantine Empire.

Scholarly yet approachable and at times entertaining, it can also be pedantic and thick. Segmented into Constantinople's influence on Western Europe, Islam and Russia.

A refreshingly erudite work that was also fun to read.

James says

An interesting little book about the influence of the Byzantine empire on Western Europe, Islam, and the Slavs. Each is addressed chronologically in its own section. I found the sections of the book about Islam and the Slavs very compelling. Each section, however, suffers from an annoying characteristic: devolution into a flood of names of obscure historical personalities by its conclusion. But other than that, a great book.

(And on a personal note, this book did a great job of depicting the beginnings of Eastern Slavic states, dispelling a number of "facts" that I've heard numerous times about the Kyiv Rus.)

Jacob Aitken says

This was an attempt to shed light on a forgotten aspect of history. Most westerners, when they think of Rome, think of the Western empire. In terms of religion, the debate is between Protestants and Catholics. Wells (and others) open a new page of history for us.

Wells divides his work into three sections. He shows how Byzantium influenced and was influenced by the Romans, The Muslims, and the Slavs. And at the end of each epoch of Byzantine history, Wells shows how causes that led to Byzantium's fall opened another dimension of its survival.

The pros of the book is the section on the Slavs. He made Slavo-Russian history dazzling

Evan Hays says

This book brought many different pieces that have been bouncing around in my head for the last decade or two into the same historical narrative, and it is a book I will return to again in the future I am sure. Sure, it covers a vast swath of history, and therefore could be probably fairly criticized for generalizing too often, but I would say in return that it should rather be praised for being so bold as to weave the different strains of time and place together the way that it did.

The book is broken down into three parts, each focusing on the influence of the Byzantine Empire and its Greek (Athens, metaphorically) and Orthodox (Jerusalem, metaphorically) cultures. The first part is about the influence of Byzantium on the Renaissance in Italy, and this section is the closest thing I have found so far to answer my question about how exactly ancient greek texts like the Odyssey were preserved up to modern times. The second part, about which I knew the most from my own scholarship in grad school, is about the influence of Byzantium on the Arab and Muslim worlds. The argument here was nothing new to me, but I had much more to possibly criticize here based on my own experience and reading, but didn't find much to criticize. And then the third part was about the influence of especially the Orthodox element of Byzantium on the Slavic world. I know a good bit about this from an ecclesiastical and theological perspective, but not from a historical perspective, so this was probably the most interesting part of the book to me. I enjoyed learning about the context for Rublev's iconography (he is the favorite iconographer in our household, and I spent time looking at his icons every day). This third section was also particularly timely because of the recent news that the head of the Orthodox Church in Moscow has severed ties with the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople. For a few days there, it almost seemed like what I was reading in the news and what I was reading in the book about the history of the Orthodox world in the late 1300s could have easily been swapped.

I often found myself thinking, "will he leave this or that out?" Every time I thought about something like this, he did discuss what I thought was missing. A few examples of this include the influence of Alexandria on spreading Hellenism (not just Constantinople), the role of Mt. Athos, or the importance of non-Chalcedonian Christianity (Arianism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism in particular).

Because I had a pretty decent background for each section (even Hesychasm-Orthodox mysticism which is an important theme through the whole book-is something I have read about in some detail), this book meant a lot to me. If you don't have that background already, you would likely find this book frustrating for how it touched on subjects but then didn't explain them in much detail. But to be fair, if it had, the book would have been like 2,000 pages long.

In a lot of ways this book for me is sort of like how you bookmark websites or favorite tweets that you want to come back and read later. I know I can return to this book to remind me of topics that I still don't know much about but want to delve into later, like the Council of Florence for example, which sort of weakly rejoined Eastern and Western Christianity in the context of the last couple of decades leading up to the fall of Constantinople. You sure would think that after the Latins destroyed Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade in the early 13th century that the Byzantines would have abandoned ever looking west for political and military support, but such were the intrigues of Byzantine dynastic succession conflicts and such were the threats from various Slavic and Muslim invaders, that the Byzantines never really seemed to learn that lesson.

smboro says

I think it's an interesting book that should have been titled "Sailing from Byzantium, How a Lost Empire Shaped the 19th and 20th centuries Briths fancy for Greece." This book is a difficult read and the fact that (for some unknown the reader reason) the historical timeline is scrambled (if not confused) makes it even more difficult.

Tim says

A short book summarizing Byzantium's influence on Western Europe, Islam, and Slavic countries. Fairly easy to read, it works reasonably as a summary and reference book.

James Murphy says

I hadn't known Byzantium was so important. Wells's book relates how, in the centuries following the end of the Roman Empire, Byzantium, the surviving portion in the east, continued to influence the Mediterranean world and the Middle East, as well as Russia and the Balkans. By preserving Greek culture and transporting it to those areas, Byzantium made possible the philosophic, religious, and artistic movements behind the Renaissance, the era of Arabic science and learning, and the rise of Russian Orthodoxy. Despite pressures from neighboring peoples, Byzantium was able to remain intact during the dark years following Rome's demise and was able to preserve the twin values of Greek culture and Christianity which were responsible for its own flowering and to pass them along, thereby exporting science and learning to the Arabic world and Christianity to the north. It's not so much a history of Byzantium as it is the story of how it was the fertile seed ground for the ideas and values of the ancient Aegean and how it used its influence to sow them in the surrounding regions, to finally come to us.

The book isn't a big one. I suspect the story's huge and much more complex than Wells's account, but his clear demarcations of the benchmarks of the region's cultural history and influence make for comprehension while laying the foundation for broader reading.

Stephen says

Isaac Asimov referred to Byzantium as a forgotten empire, lost and dismissed to the western mind as a decayed remnant of a once-great power. But Byzantium had a greatness of its own that inspired civilizations around it, even its enemies. Sailing from Byzantium examines the literary, political, scientific, and other influences the Eastern empire had on the western Renaissance, Eastern Europe, and even the nascent Islamic civilization. Though somewhat impaired by being name-dense and not giving sketch of the Byzantines in brief, Sailing does deliver a sense of the eastern empire as an inspirational fount during the long millennium that followed its western antecedent's demise. The three civilizations drinking from its waters took different elements of the Empire home with them, with some sharing; to the Italians, Byzantium was the temple of Greek civilization, its scholars the teachers of the first medieval humanists, including by extension Erasmus. Islam cut its imperial teeth when it seized some of the East's richest provinces, and Byzantine notions about politics, law, and the aesthetics of royalty became incorporated into the Islamic civilization as it came of age.

This lessened somewhat after the conquest of Persia, pursued after Constantinople proved too tough to crack. The Russians, too, were initially rivals of their southern neighbors, making their introduction with a good old-fashioned Black Sea raid; having common enemies and rivals, however, pushed the two together, and as the tribe of Russians matured into a state of their own, their religion was that of Byzantium's. Later, once Constantinople had fallen to the Turks, Russia would even claim to be the inheritors of the Empire; just as it moved from Rome to Constantinople, so it now had moved to the third Rome, Moscow. The marriage of a Russian potentate to a Byzantine princess even attempted to give such a claim practical validation. In examining the Byzantine influence on these three powers in turn, Wells not only demonstrates the richness of its culture, but pries open worlds probably mysterious to western readers, connecting exotic history with some slightly more familiar. It's quite fascinating, though readers would be better served reading an overview of Byzantine history before launching in.

David Berry says

I enjoyed this book but would have liked it much more if it did not claim to do something it doesn't.

It was fascinating to learn how Plato's dialogues wound their way to Florence through immigrant and exiled Byzantine scholars. And it was equally fascinating to learn how the Umayyad scholars preserved Greek philosophy even after the Byzantines banned or suppressed it. This is a tale of scholars, and a good one, but it is not really a chronicle of the Byzantine Empire's historical influence. It never does more than touch on politics or social matters.

The last section, on the Russia, is perhaps the most true to the promise of the title. Legend has it that a trip to the Hagia Sophia turned Russia's princes to Orthodox Christianity. Undoubtedly, Byzantium gave Russia and Eastern Europe its alphabet and church traditions. I left feeling that Byzantium's most important direct historical influence was in Eastern Europe and Russia.
