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LATE BYZANTIUM RECONSIDERED

The Arts of the Palaiologan Era
in the Mediterranean

Edited by ANDREA MATTIELLO and
MARIA ALESSIA ROSSI

Late Byzantium Reconsidered

Late Byzantium Reconsidered offers a unique collection of essays analysing the artistic achievements of Mediterranean centres linked to the Byzantine Empire between 1261, when the Palaiologan dynasty re-conquered Constantinople, and the decades after 1453, when the Ottomans took the city, marking the end of the Empire. These centuries were characterised by the rising of socio-political elites, in regions such as Crete, Italy, Laconia, Serbia, and Trebizond, that, while sharing cultural and artistic values influenced by the Byzantine Empire, were also developing innovative and original visual and cultural standards.

The comparative and interdisciplinary framework offered by this volume aims to challenge established ideas concerning the late Byzantine period such as decline, renewal, and innovation. By examining specific case studies of cultural production from within and outside Byzantium, the chapters in this volume highlight the intrinsic innovative nature of the socio-cultural identities active in the late medieval and early modern Mediterranean vis-à-vis the rhetorical assumption of the cultural contraction of the Byzantine Empire.

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Late Byzantium Reconsidered

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Mediterranean

**Edited by Andrea Mattiello and
Maria Alessia Rossi**

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mattiello, Andrea, editor. | Rossi, Maria Alessia, editor.

Title: Late Byzantium reconsidered / [edited by] Andrea Mattiello, Maria Alessia Rossi.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2019. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018048185 | ISBN 9780815372868 (hardback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781351244831 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Arts and society—Mediterranean Region—History—To 1500. | Arts and society—Byzantine Empire. | Byzantine Empire—Civilization—1081-1453.

Classification: LCC NX180.S6 L38 2019 | DDC 700.1/0309495—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018048185>

ISBN: 978-0-8153-7286-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-351-24483-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Foreword</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
ANDREA MATTIELLO AND MARIA ALESSIA ROSSI	
1 ‘And the whole city cheered’: the poetics and politics of the miraculous in the Early Palaiologan period	7
NIELS GAUL	
2 Art in decline or art in the age of decline? Historiography and new approaches to Late Byzantine painting	31
IVANA JEVIĆ	
3 The timeliness of timelessness: reconsidering decline in the Palaiologan period	53
CECILY J. HILSDALE	
4 Reconsidering the Early Palaiologan period: anti-Latin propaganda, miracle accounts, and monumental art	71
MARIA ALESSIA ROSSI	
5 How to illustrate a scientific treatise in the Palaiologan period	85
ANDREW GRIEBELER	
6 Looking beyond the city walls of Mystras: the transformation of the religious landscape of Laconia	104
LUDOVIC BENDER	

7	Remnants of an era: monasteries and lay piety in Late Byzantine Sozopolis	118
	GEORGIOS MAKRIS	
8	Palaiologan art from regional Crete: artistic decline or social progress?	132
	ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU	
9	Liturgical and devotional artefacts in the Venetian churches of the Levant, thirteenth to fifteenth centuries	156
	LIVIA BEVILACQUA	
10	Who is that man? The perception of Byzantium in fifteenth-century Italy	177
	ANDREA MATTIELLO	
11	The story behind the image: the literary patronage of Tsar Ivan Alexander of Bulgaria between ostentation and decline	193
	LILYANA YORDANOVA	
12	Imperial portraits of the Grand Komnenoi of Trebizond (1204–1461)	207
	TATIANA BARDASHOVA	
	<i>Index</i>	217

Illustrations

Figures

2.1	Thessaloniki, the Church of the Holy Apostles, view of the interior	34
2.2	Istanbul, the Church of the Chora monastery, view of the <i>parakklesion</i>	35
2.3	Ohrid, the Church of the Virgin Peribleptos, the representation of Saint Procopius, detail: artist's signature	36
2.4	Thessaloniki, the Church of Saint Nikolaos Orphanos, the cycle of Passion	38
2.5	Ohrid, the Church of the Virgin Peribleptos, the Dormition of the Virgin	38
2.6	Istanbul, the monastery of the Virgin Pammakaristos, the <i>parakklesion</i> , the Baptism of Christ	40
2.7	Ohrid, the Church of the Virgin Peribleptos, the Lamentation of Christ	41
2.8	Mont Athos, Protaton Church, the Nativity of the Virgin	41
3.1	Table of Contents from E. Gibbon, <i>The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire</i>	56
3.2	<i>History</i> of John Zonoras, Modena, Bibl. Estense, ms. gr. 122 fol. 294v	60
3.3	Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos and Empress Helena crowned by the Virgin and Child with sons John, Theodore, and Andronikos, fol. 2r, works of Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite, made in Constantinople, 1403–5, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Objets d'Art, MR 416	62
3.4	Church of the Chora, Kariye Camii, Constantinople (Istanbul)	65
4.1	Church of the Chora, Kariye Camii, Constantinople (Istanbul), fourth bay of the inner narthex, western lunette, the Healing of the Multitude, mosaic (1316–21)	73
4.2	Church of the Chora, Kariye Camii, Constantinople (Istanbul), fourth bay of the inner narthex, western lunette, the Healing of the Multitude, detail, mosaic (1316–21)	75
4.3	<i>Katholikon</i> of the Monastery of Dečani, apse, fourth register from the top, the Healing of the Multitude, fresco (completed by 1335)	77

5.1	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, gr. 2243, copied in 1339, f. 10v. Frontispiece from the Paris manuscript of Nicholas Myrepsos's <i>Dynameron</i> with a scene of a patient consulting a physician, while Christ, John the Baptist, the Virgin, and Archangels appear above	88
5.2	Padua, Biblioteca del Seminario Vescovile, cod. 194, mid-fourteenth century, f. 143v. Illustration of squill (<i>skilla</i> , <i>Drimia maritima</i> (L.) Stearn) from an illustrated version of Dioscorides' <i>De materia medica</i>	90
5.3	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, gr. 36, late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, f. 163v. Cosmic <i>rota fortunae</i> with self-portrait of the monk Nikodemos	93
6.1	Number of building and decoration phases in Laconian chapels, churches and monasteries from the eleventh century to 1830. The black and dark grey bars correspond to the periods illustrated by the two maps of Laconia in Figures 6.2 and 6.3	105
6.2	Distribution of Laconian chapels, churches and monasteries built, decorated or restored between the beginning of the eleventh century and the middle of the thirteenth century	107
6.3	Distribution of Laconian chapels, churches and monasteries built, decorated or restored between the middle of the thirteenth century and the middle of the fifteenth century	108
6.4	Byzantine chapels, churches, and monasteries around Mystras	109
7.1	Panoramic view of Sozopol with Sveti Kirik in foreground and Sveti Ivan in background	119
7.2	Sveti Ivan, Monastery of Saint John Prodromos, <i>katholikon</i>	120
8.1	Map of Crete	137
8.2	Church of Saint Pelagia, Ano Viannos, Herakleion (Viannos area), Crete, 1360, wall painting detail from the north wall, Saints Bartholomew, Mamas and Anthony	137
8.3	Church of Saint Zosimas, Achladiakes, Chania (Selino area), Crete, fourteenth century, wall painting, detail from the west wall, a sinner identified as the usurer	138
8.4a	Painter Ioannis, church of the Archangel Michael, Kavalariana, Chania (Selino area), Crete, 1327/28, wall paintings, detail with the portraits of the donors depicted on the blind arch of the north wall	141
8.4b	Painter Ioannis, church of the Archangel Michael, Kavalariana, Chania (Selino area), Crete, 1327/28, wall paintings, detail with the portraits of the donors depicted on the blind arch of the south wall	142
8.5	Church of the Chora, Constantinople, 1321, mosaic (side-chapel) the donor, Theodore Metochites, presenting his sponsored church to Christ	143
8.6	Church of Saint John the Baptist, Axos, Rethymnon (Mylopotamos area), Crete, end of the fourteenth century, wall painting, detail from the south wall depicting the donor entering the gates of Paradise	145

8.7	Ioannis Pagomenos, church of Saint Nicholas, Maza, Chania (Apokoronas area), 1325/26, west wall, dedicatory inscription, which reads: ‘This holy and revered church of the saint and wonder-working and myroblytes (i.e. giving forth perfume) Nikolaos of Maza was painted with the contributions and labour of Demetrios Sarakinopoulos and Kostatinos Raptis for the half, Kostatinos Sarakinopoulos, Georgios Mavromatis, the priest Michael and of the whole of the village of Maza. The Lord knows their names. It was completed by the hand of the sinner Ioannis Pagomenos in the year 6834 [A.M.] [= AD 1325/26].’	146
10.1	Benozzo Gozzoli, Chapel, Medici Riccardi Palace, <i>Procession of the Magi</i> , fresco, east wall, c. 1459, Florence	178
10.2	Benozzo Gozzoli, Chapel, Medici Riccardi Palace, <i>Procession of the Magi</i> , fresco, south wall, c. 1459, Florence	179
10.3	Benozzo Gozzoli, Chapel, Medici Riccardi Palace, <i>Procession of the Magi</i> , fresco, west wall, c. 1459, Florence	180
10.4	Head of Augustus with radiant crown, sardonic cameo, 1.4 x 1.1 cm, Le gemme dei Medici e dei Lorena, Museo Archeologico (inv. N. 14524), Florence	184
10.5	Domenico Compagni detto Domenico de’ Cammei, Busts of Cosimo I de’ Medici and of Eleonora of Toledo, agate cameo, 1574, Le gemme dei Medici, Museo degli Argenti (gemme 1921, n. 115), Florence	185
11.1	Tsar Ivan Alexander with Christ and Manasses. Bulgarian edition of Constantine Manasses’ Chronicle, Vatican Library, Cod. Slavo 2, 1345–1349, fol. 1v	195
11.2	Family portrait of Tsar Ivan Alexander, Tsarina Theodora II, Tsar Ivan Shishman and Ivan Asen. London Tetraevangelion, British Library, 1355–1356	198
11.3	Family portrait of Tsar Ivan Alexander. Despot Constantine, Kera Thamara, Keratsa and Desislava, London Tetraevangelion, British Library, 1355–56	199
12.1	Trebizond. Palace of the Grand Komnenoi in the Citadel (south-west side)	208
12.2	Trebizond. Bell-tower by the Hagia Sophia	209
12.3	Trebizond. Panagia Theoskepastos Monastery. Portraits of Alexios III Grand Komnenos, his wife Theodora Kantakouzene (right) and mother Irene (left)	210
12.4	Trebizond. Gagarin’s copy of the portrait of Manuel I Grand Komnenos in the Hagia Sophia	211

Table

9.1	Liturgical equipment of the church of San Marco of Negroponte, 1270–1454	162
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Foreword

This edited volume is the product of an international conference entitled ‘Reconsidering the Concept of Decline and the Arts of the Palaiologan Era’, that took place on 24–25 February 2017 at the University of Birmingham in collaboration with the Courtauld Institute of Art. This event comprised both a symposium and a workshop. The symposium hosted a series of keynote lectures and papers presented by distinguished and early-career Byzantine art historians. The workshop was organised with the kind help of postgraduate students who gave short presentations on a selection of art-historical case studies, providing an opportunity for scholars and students to discuss the main topics of the symposium informally.

The aim of the conference was twofold: on one hand, it examined and contextualised the artistic and cultural production of geopolitical centres that were controlled by, or in contact with, the Late Byzantine Empire, in areas such as the Adriatic and Balkan regions, the major islands of Cyprus and Crete, and the regions surrounding the cities of Constantinople, Thessaloniki, and Mystras; on the other, it explored the many intellectual implications encoded in the innovative artistic production of the Palaiologan era often simplified by a rigid understanding of what is Byzantine and what is not.

Ultimately, the conference investigated cultural and artistic achievements that, once released by the Byzantine Empire during the last centuries of its existence, then migrated towards new frontiers of intellectual achievement. The aim of the conference and of its proceedings is to examine a selection of case studies counter-balancing the notion of decline and the narrative of decay frequently acknowledged for this period; and to encourage an understanding of transformation where the Byzantine cultural heritage was integrated into new socio-political orders or religious settings. Specifically, this volume promotes the view of the artistic production of the Palaiologan era as resourceful and innovative in light of the possibilities offered by the many interactions with a multitude of political and economic polities in an open and wide Mediterranean, which at the time was not perceived as either contracting or declining but rather as an opportunity for political and economic expansion. The establishment in the East of a strong Ottoman Empire during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was in part the reason for the end of the Byzantine Empire, but this was not recognised by contemporaries as a deterrent to artistic and cultural production. In contrast, the case studies gathered

here showcase cultural exchanges and interactions between political and cultural actors belonging to both the Palaiologan and the neighbouring courts where similarities were acknowledged, and differences were encoded in new formulations.

The aim of this volume is visually mirrored by the image we chose for our front cover. It shows a detail from the front panel of the cassone, or hope chest, attributed to the workshop of Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso and the workshop of Marco del Buono Giamberti (after ca. 1461), now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The scene shows the struggle and the defeat of the Ottoman armies of Sultan Bayezid I by the Mongol King Tamerlane (1336–1405) in 1402 at Ankara. The scene is depicted as if taking place in an imagined battlefield in front of the cities of Constantinople and Trebizond, which are rendered iconographically as they were thought to appear after 1453, when Constantinople had already been captured by the Ottomans – as indexed by the half-crescent on the top of Hagia Sophia –, and before 1461 when Trebizond was conquered by Sultan Mehmet II. The depiction of the defeat of the Ottoman armies on a Florentine wedding cassone dating to the second half of the fifteenth century should be read as an indication of good auspices in the context of Florentine wedding gift exchanges. Auspices are iconographically symbolised by the defeat of the most threatening force in the Mediterranean in an anachronistic battlefield demarcated by two of the most important Byzantine cities. The subject and the iconography adopted then epitomise the high esteem in which the Florentine aristocracy held the Byzantine Empire with its millennial history, its political centrality, its cultural heritage, and its recognisable and iconic importance. As mentioned earlier and discussed throughout this volume, these centuries were not perceived as a time of decline, and the rise of a strong Ottoman Empire was not seen as a deterrent to artistic production. In other words, in Florence, in the mid-fifteenth century, the idea of Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire, even though lost, was very much still present and alive.

Acknowledgements

We, as editors, wanted to thank our symposium speakers for sharing their expertise and their research. We are equally grateful to the enthusiastic MA and PhD students who presented at the workshop: Elisa Galardi, Oliver Pickford, Flavia Vanni, Jessica Varsallona, and Lauren Wainwright. This event would not have been possible without the generous funding and support of four institutions: the Mary Jaharis Center for Byzantine Art and Culture, the Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies, the Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies at the University of Birmingham, and the Courtauld Institute of Art. We are deeply grateful to each of them.

The success of the symposium led us to publish its proceedings in book form. Our thanks go to the A.G. Leventis Foundation for their financial contribution and to Michael Greenwood at Routledge for welcoming the idea of this project and producing the volume. We are very grateful to the authors and the reviewers for their hard work, for keeping on time, and for making this volume possible.

Finally, we wanted to thank all the colleagues, friends, and mentors who helped us throughout the symposium and the preparation of the edited volume for their enthusiasm, patience, and support: Leslie Brubaker, Francesca dell'Acqua, Antony Eastmond, Jonathan Harris, Kostis Kourelis, Angeliki Lymberopoulou, Ruth Macrides, Glenn Peers, Daniel Reynolds, Henry Schilb, and Foteini Spingou.

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Introduction

Andrea Mattiello and Maria Alessia Rossi

Slobodan Ćurčić, in his Introduction to *The Twilight of Byzantium*, writes, ‘Despite its [the Byzantine Empire’s] shrunken territory, its ailing economy and social turmoil, the world of Palaeologan Byzantium still had much to offer.’¹ The aim of this volume is to challenge this idea, arguing that it is precisely *because* of the political weakness and military defeats that the Palaiologan artistic production has *so much* to offer. The last centuries of the Byzantine Empire were characterised by the necessity for new and innovative strategies to guarantee its continuation, strategies negotiated with its neighbours by the offices of both the emperor and the patriarch, as well as by other relevant groups of Byzantine society.² It could be argued that, as a consequence of the 1204 conquest of Constantinople, and again after 1261, when the Palaiologoi took it back from the Latins, the notion of the existence of the Empire justified the need for political strategies aimed at the survival of a shrinking Empire that had to face external and internal, friendly and aggressive dynamics linked to three main groups that Nevra Necipoğlu has ‘labelled as pro-Latin/anti-Ottoman, pro-Ottoman/anti-Latin, and anti-Latin/anti-Ottoman’.³ And while this is true, and on many occasions the Byzantine Empire faced exogenous threats and its capital was besieged, there is a specificity to the Palaiologan period with its multiplicity of complex relations resulting from the presence both within and beyond its boundaries of large multi-cultural and multi-religious communities, as well as from the strong connections with a multitude of polities that originated from the Empire itself and that were interlinked across the Mediterranean.⁴ It is not the fall of Constantinople in 1453 that determined the peculiarity of this period, but rather the dialectic tension between the Byzantine Empire’s loss of control and the growing power of its neighbours that started after 1204 and was not tamed after 1261.⁵ This tension is at the heart of this volume because, while being the reason for the political decline of the Empire, it is analysed as a powerful source for the cultural and artistic production in Byzantium and in its neighbouring polities, during the centuries of Palaiologan rule.

Scholars have long dealt with the Late Byzantine period according to Edward Gibbon’s tightly intertwined concepts of decline and fall.⁶ By examining specific case studies within and outside the Byzantine Empire, this volume aims to show that decline in the Palaiologan period is not necessarily a synonym for fall, but rather for transformation. The art and the iconographic repertoire of the late period

were grounded on centennial stratifications and conventions that developed and were codified after the Iconoclast controversy but that, after the fall of the Empire to the Latins in 1204, increasingly showed awareness of the many instances, directions and solutions developed in the visual artistic production around the Mediterranean.⁷ The late period is a time of complexity in which the increase in diplomatic and trading exchanges, between different sections of society, offers the ground to promote culture as the result of a dialogue between different traditions and standards pertaining to a multiplicity of subjects.⁸

Transformation, tension, and survival were deeply intertwined both within the geographical borders of the Byzantine Empire and in the relationship between Byzantium and its neighbours. The dynamics need further explanation: the aim of the following chapters is not to define what is ‘Byzantine’ and what is ‘not-Byzantine’. On the contrary, it will be displayed how in the Late Byzantine period, due to political and economic circumstances, there is, on the one side, no rigorous definition of what constitutes the art of the Empire of the Romans while, on the other, there is a generalised process of cultural appropriation by political entities bordering the Empire of what was considered Byzantine, both imperial and religious. How can we explain this paradox? How can there be examples of cultural appropriation if it is not clear-cut what is Byzantine and what is not?

The Palaiologan period is characterised by fluidity in the manifold developments of the artistic production of both the Greek- and non-Greek-speaking communities active during the period in those different geographical regions connected with the Byzantine Empire. That is never straightforward. It takes into consideration instances of preservation as well as instances of transformation. And when discussing Byzantine art after 1204, it is always important to differentiate within the large and transformative world of the former territories of the Empire and start to look at the peculiarities of regional production and begin to address what can be considered the result of regional instances vis-à-vis what can be considered attempts at dialogue with established authorities such as the offices of the emperor or the patriarch or major monastic communities like those on Mount Athos. Regardless of the nature of each individual artistic product within this two-sided polarisation, the aim of this edited volume is to show that this polarisation was an inner generative force of the period which in several instances strengthened and fed the art of the Palaiologan era.

Each of the 12 chapters in this volume sheds light on a different instance of creative strength, originality and transformation as the outcome of the intricate mutability of this period, defined by the many socio-political entities confronting each other across the wider Mediterranean. While examining different subjects, these essays prove that the specificity of this period stems from the fact that this tension is not only within the Byzantine Empire.

The first seven chapters showcase survival within Byzantium, challenging the teleological narrative offered by decades of scholarship where decline precipitates the final fall of the Empire. Starting with Niels Gaul, Chapter 1, ‘“And the whole city cheered”’: the poetics and politics of the miraculous in the Early Palaiologan period’, offers an introduction to the complexity of the period under investigation. By examining two instances of the miraculous preserved in late Byzantine

historiography, this chapter attempts to illuminate how miracles could be exploited by politicians to achieve civic goals or steer the contemporary civic discourse.

In Chapter 2, 'Art in decline or art in the age of decline? Historiography and new approaches to Late Byzantine painting', Ivana Jevtić considers the parallelism between Late Antique and Late Byzantine artistic production in light of the marked discrepancies between political turbulence and economic weakening, on the one hand, and cultural strength and a rich and diverse artistic production, on the other. Furthermore, both periods present a comparable series of contrasts between reuse and originality, conservatism and innovation, naturalism and abstraction, decline and ascendancy. By focusing on thirteenth- and fourteenth-century painting, this chapter uses the concept of decline to discuss the retrospective attitude in iconography and style, the revival of the antique and classicism in Late Byzantine art.

Cecily Hilsdale in Chapter 3, 'The timeliness of timelessness: reconsidering decline in the Palaiologan period', challenges the historiography of Late Byzantium, arguing that Byzantines of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries may have understood their historical moment as one of decline, but not as leading inexorably towards fall. In the face of pronounced socio-economic exigencies, Palaiologan emperors actively sought to ameliorate their standing in the medieval world, and cultural production figured prominently in this agenda, promoting the artistic sphere as a diplomatic strategy.

Similarly, Chapter 4. 'Reconsidering the Early Palaiologan period: anti-Latin propaganda, miracle accounts, and monumental art', examines how Andronikos II's efforts to heal the divisions inside the Byzantine Empire, and specifically within the Orthodox Church, managed to create a less acrimonious atmosphere, ushering in the flourishing of the arts and letters. This contribution aims to suggest an innovative reading of this period through the examination of miracles in both monumental decoration and written accounts. Maria Alessia Rossi traces back the widespread interest in miracles to the cultural milieu surrounding Andronikos, and explains their proliferation in connection to the anti-Latin propaganda of the Orthodox Church.

Chapter 5, 'How to illustrate a scientific treatise in the Palaiologan period', focuses on the emergence of Byzantine illustrated botanical albums at the end of the thirteenth century, and their continued development over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Andrew Griebeler demonstrates, through the analysis of botanical albums, the increasing prominence of pictures in Late Byzantine scientific discourse and practice, and that especially in this period there was a fruitful dialogue taking place with Northern Italian and Islamic traditions of botanical inquiry and illustration.

Ludovic Bender, in Chapter 6, 'Looking beyond the city walls of Mystras: the transformation of the religious landscape of Laconia', shows how, in the region of Laconia during the Palaiologan period, we encounter a flourishing of the religious built environment. The chapter shows that the growth of religious foundations from the mid-thirteenth to the fifteenth century, rather than resulting only from the initiatives of higher political and religious entities, such as the imperial family and the patriarchate, was particularly dependent on acts of patronage by both the

local elites and the rural communities active in the region. These acts of patronage transformed and reshaped the religious and cultural landscape of Laconia during one of its most prosperous periods, despite the adverse historical conditions for the Byzantine Empire.

Similarly, Chapter 7, 'Remnants of an era: monasteries and lay piety in Late Byzantine Sozopolis', considers the transformative role of monastic communities on the coast of the Black Sea. Georgios Makris demonstrates how the city port of Sozopolis and its regional context changed during the Late Byzantine period as a result of building activities promoted by monasteries. By exploring the interactions between monastic and lay communities active in both the city and its surroundings, the chapter demonstrates the central role of the monastic landscape of Sozopolis in making the city a novel, dynamic and critical pole for the eastern Mediterranean.

The remaining five contributions shift the focus of attention to the wider Mediterranean, shedding light on the relationship between the Byzantine Empire and its neighbours.

Chapters 8 and 9 look at the negotiation between Orthodox identity and the wider Mediterranean. Specifically, Angeliki Lymberopoulou, in Chapter 8, 'Palaiologan art from regional Crete: artistic decline or social progress?', takes a different perspective, engaging with a comparison between well-known Palaiologan monumental art from main urban centres and that of tiny churches found in remote places in regional Crete. Despite the island being under Venetian rule when the Palaiologoi were emperors, the religious character of its art remained predominantly Byzantine, sponsored primarily by the native Greek Orthodox population. These contributions suggest a re-evaluation of the concept of decline from the angle offered by the lower and middle classes outside the capital.

In Chapter 9, 'Liturgical and devotional artefacts in the Venetian churches of the Levant, thirteenth to fifteenth centuries', Livia Bevilacqua discusses the work of artists, goldsmiths and silversmiths making liturgical vessels in the context of Venetian churches in the Levant during the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. The chapter offers an analysis of these vessels and demonstrates the degree of fluidity pertaining to these artefacts, which are witnesses of the circulation of new artistic ideas borrowed from Catholic and non-Catholic religious and cultural backgrounds. The chapter shows how diverse communities interacted with one another by experiencing a wide degree of creativity and freedom through the exchange of liturgical implements, small furniture and portable devotional objects: from books to silverware, from textiles to icons. These objects provide remarkable evidence of the fruitful circulation between diverse religious communities, throughout the wide Mediterranean basin.

In Chapter 10, 'Who's that man? The perception of Byzantium in fifteenth-century Italy', Andrea Mattiello considers the impact of the Byzantine imperial office on the Western understanding, definition, and perception of authority and rulership. He does so through a case study of the fifteenth-century fresco depiction of the *Procession of the Magi* by Benozzo Gozzoli in the chapel of the Medici Riccardi palace in Florence. The chapter analyses the political and cultural

implications and the perception in Italy of the imperial office of the Byzantine Empire, of its termination as well as its legacy, in relation to the dynastic aspirations and visual political promotion strategies of the Medici, one of the most influential families of the Italian peninsula, by associating themselves with the aura of the Palaiologoi, the last dynasty of the Empire of the Romaioi.

While sharing cultural and artistic values influenced by the Byzantine Empire, the late period also saw the development of innovative and original visual and cultural idioms by its neighbours, such as the Empire of Trebizond and the Bulgarian Kingdom. Specifically, in Chapter 11, ‘The story behind the image: the literary patronage of Tsar Ivan Alexander of Bulgaria between ostentation and decline’, Lyliana Yordanova reconsiders artistic production created during the reign and patronage of Tsar Ivan Alexander (1331–71). Were models of the Byzantine imperial image adopted and transformed in Ivan Alexander’s depictions in order to suit his specific political agenda? The aim of the chapter is to discuss the long-neglected agency of the Bulgarian Manasses and the London Gospels on the background of the dynastic, military and economic struggles during Ivan Alexander’s reign.

In Chapter 12, ‘Imperial portraits of the Grand Komnenoi of Trebizond (1204–1461)’, Tatiana Bardashova examines the dialectic between the emperors of Trebizond and the Byzantine emperors. Specifically, she looks at the negotiation of the visual representation of imperial power, by means of manuscripts, icons, coins, and seals, between their ancestors, the Byzantine emperors from the Komnenian dynasty and the Late Byzantine emperors of the Palaiologan dynasty, who were contemporaneous to them.

The essays collected in this volume are here presented as opportunities to reconsider and re-evaluate the artistic production of Late Byzantium. They offer a selection of case studies questioning any rigid understandings of rich, complex, and stratified cultural products and enterprises that were commissioned, executed and appreciated within ‘multiconfessional, multi-ethnic, and multilayered societies of the medieval Mediterranean’ that were linked to the Byzantine Empire.⁹ They challenge any unidirectional analytical approaches for the studying of the materials they discuss, while pursuing, in the words of Michele Bacci, ‘a deeper understanding of the social, religious, cultural, and even ‘technical’ dynamics underlying the blending and combination of forms’.¹⁰

Notes

1 Ćurčić and Mouriki (1991: 4).

2 Necipoğlu (2009: 285–9).

3 *Ibid.*: 4.

4 For a recent discussion of the nature of the cross-cultural interactions in areas such as Cyprus, Crete or the Peloponnese, see Lymberopoulou (2018: 3–5). See also Joubert and Caillet (2012). For an overview of Byzantium’s neighbours in the late period, see Brooks and Oresko (2006).

5 This tension is read as crucial for the decline of the Empire since the time of Michael VIII Palaiologos’ reign, see Nicol (1993: 107–21).

- 6 Gibbon (1827).
- 7 The secondary literature on this topic is quite extensive, see, among recent publications, Lymberopoulou (2018).
- 8 See Hilsdale (2014) and Evans (2004), with further bibliography.
- 9 Bacci (2013: 205). For a survey of these medieval Mediterranean societies, see also Bacci (2008: 339–54).
- 10 Ibid.

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Art in decline or art in the age of decline?

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The timeliness of timelessness

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Reconsidering the Early Palaiologan period

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Looking beyond the city walls of Mystras

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Remnants of an era

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Imperial portraits of the Grand Komnenoi of Trebizond (1204–1461)

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