

**Dionysios Stathakopoulos, *A Short History of The Byzantine Empire*. Short Histories series. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014. ISBN: 978-17-80-76194-7. Pp. xiii, 238. Hardcover: £56.00; Paperback: £12.99.**

IB Tauris' recently inaugurated 'Short Histories' series provides readers, be they lay people or practitioners, with detailed surveys combined with perspective-altering analysis. In the foreword to *A Short History of the Byzantine Empire* (hereafter referred to as *The Byzantine Empire*), the publishers set out a pithy goal for their series: to be 'introductions with an edge'. This is an apt description for Stathakopoulos' book; in nine chapters he takes the reader through more than one thousand years of history, dealing with issues of current and past scholarship as he goes. The author skilfully adds new relevance, detail and clarity to an important period of history.

*The Byzantine Empire* by Dionysios Stathakopoulos is a compelling survey of the history of the Byzantine Empire. The work takes the reader from the fourth Century AD when the Empire was still very much the sister of the Western Empire, through the fall of the West in the fifth Century and up to 1453, the year the Byzantine Empire fell. This period, spanning more than a century, contains within it a fascinating story of imperial fluctuation in territorial and ideological terms, European development and state formation.

Stathakopoulos sets out to challenge the popular western-centric perspective on this period. In so doing he challenges attitudes of historians such as Edward Gibbon, who afforded Byzantium little respect or spilled little ink in their works on this period. In the final chapter of his book, Stathakopoulos makes a prognosis for a bright future for Byzantine studies, highlighting the attendance of over one thousand scholars at the International Congress of Byzantine Studies in Sofia in 2011.

In order to achieve a marrying of two goals, to be a short history and to provide what is described in the publisher's foreword to the series as an 'edge', the author, in his nine

chapters containing a series of vignettes succeeds in combining synoptic analytical discussion and chronological survey. Each chapter has a vignette covering the basic chronology followed by a series of conceptual discussions on key facets of the given period. While this approach certainly helps the author achieve his aim of surveying the period, providing edge and adding clarity, sometimes the narrative is lost in the to-ing and fro-ing across several vignettes. This system does, however, facilitate the use of this work for period- or concept-specific research. One can easily locate sections pertaining to any aspect of Byzantine history and read it in isolation. In this sense, the work is a successful marriage of analysis and survey.

There are, however, a number of issues touched on by the author that are left, due to the work aiming to be a 'short history', unresolved. The medieval period, especially its earlier stages, is rife with semantic debate. The two primary issues are on the nature and identity of groups, particularly those on the move, and the nature of polities. The debate over how to define the Byzantine Empire is one that is touched on in this piece but are not fully resolved. Modern interpretations of the word 'Byzantine' meaning notwithstanding, this term carries a number of issues. Primarily, the challenge to the term is one of anachronism. The fact that contemporaries did not refer to themselves as 'Byzantines' but rather 'Romans', is a problematic one. Historians cannot rightly name this polity 'Roman' as Rome was not the capital of the Empire, nor was it a permanent fixture in its holdings. Stathakopoulos does not reveal a solution to these issues, but, one could argue, a degree of academic pragmatism is necessary. Choosing the lesser of two inaccuracies is often the nearest one can get to an ideal solution.

The author's use of sources is an important

yardstick in medieval history. The impressionistic attitude to contemporary scholarship creates a kaleidoscopic perspective of this period. However, as the survey progresses into the later stages of the empire, sources become increasingly rich in the reference to specific authors and individuals. The author, in spite of the issues of sources at certain points in the Empire's history manages to construct a highly vivid representation of characters and events. Yet, despite this excellent representation of fascinating character's and their schemes throughout this work's nine chapters, the historiographical angle to the use of sources is somewhat wanting. If this work were a dedicated piece of historiography, as opposed to a combination of survey and analysis, then there is no doubt that historiographical arguments would come to the fore. However, in this specific work, despite an excellent discussion of eschatology, the historiography plays a minor role. This is not to criticise, however, this piece is a 'short history' and, as such, is to be admired for marrying survey and excellent analysis.

This survey is, largely speaking, a total approach to the period. There are, for example, no chapters or sections dedicated to economics or politics. Rather, the author tackles each 'theme' as and when they are perceived to be important within a chronological structure. As a result, the survey aspect of this piece is all the more strengthened; the narrative is not lost in the winding roads of a thematic approach. On the other hand, some historical 'themes' come up less than others. Although certainly down to considerations of sources and approach, sociology, for instance, receives little attention. The discussions of demography, particularly in the early stages of the work, are centred on the scepticism one must take with contemporary records. Conversely, ideological and political elements are rich and fascinating. The discussions on iconoclasm, for instance, dispel many myths.

The definitional issue, one unresolved in early chapters, continues to be a problem throughout the work. One instance of a definitional shift that takes place is that of the 'Bulgars'. This group becomes identified as 'Bulgarian' with their polity defined as 'Bulgaria'. This is a

fundamental shift in definition which is not properly explained; there is no discussion of the reasons for a change in definition and the relative development of Bulgaria in this period is left un-established. This, whilst an issue for all of medieval scholarship, is one that should be set out in a historiographical manner; one can acknowledge the limitations of a definition while continuing to use it. Moreover the definitions in this work often interchange between 'new' and 'old' terms.

Stathakopoulos captures perfectly the atmosphere of an Empire besieged. Despite a relative lack of strategic or tactical detail, the geopolitical state of affairs is described so well that the reader gets a real sense that Byzantium was, at times, beleaguered. That said, there are some excellent discussions of the Empire's defensive measures. For instance, the explanation of the theme system of dividing up frontier regions into individual, semi-autonomous military commands is particularly strong. This general atmosphere fits in well with his discussions of iconoclasm and broader dogmatic dispute. The people of the Empire looked in on themselves for the divine reasons for their relative lack of military and political success. This, in turn, fed religious division within the Empire and in the broader Christian world. Stathakopoulos sets out the reasons for the division for the East and Western churches clearly. This, a particularly complicated issue that pervades to this day, is laid out in clear, engaging terms.

Dionysios Stathakopoulos' *A Short History of the Byzantine Empire* marries survey and analysis together to form an extremely engaging and informative piece of scholarship. The salient semantic and definitional issues of the period notwithstanding, Stathakopoulos has constructed an excellent survey whilst providing plenty of 'edge'. Reading this work of history has been a pleasure and one that has, I am pleased to say, increased my thirst for knowledge of all things Byzantine.

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