

Kyle Harper's book covers an interesting facet of Roman antiquity by demonstrating the vitality of slavery into the later Roman empire.

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LESLIE BRUBAKER – JOHN HALDON: *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680–850: A History*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011. ISBN 978-0-521-43093-7. XXIV, 918 pp, 70 figures, 7 maps. GBP 110, USD 165.

Review of this notable study has unfortunately been delayed. I received the book only in spring 2016, apparently because the first reviewer had given up the task. I do not wonder at that, for the book is massive and at some points tedious. I actually took up the task believing that it would only be some kind of an update of an earlier work by the same authors, namely *Byzantium in the Era of Iconoclasm: The Sources* (2001).

Haldon and Brubaker are both eminent Byzantinists (Haldon was actually elected as the head of *The International Association of Byzantine Studies* [AIEB] in August 2016). The book reviewed here combines a synthesis of previous studies concerning the era with new original research. Works by Chris Wickham and Michael McCormick have evidently been inspirations. As with these, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680–850* makes extensive use of archaeological material, especially concerning economy and settlement patterns. This is one of the major strengths of this book. For long, archaeologists neglected Byzantine times, but things have started to change and we begin to see the fruits of this.

The major problem with studying the iconoclast era, when there was hostility towards religious images in Byzantium, is the scarcity of sources and the fact that these were written by those who supported the veneration of holy images (i.e. the iconophiles). In much of modern historical writing, their narrative is more or less accepted. Haldon and Brubaker are, however, among those who are skeptical towards the iconophile tradition. Without straightforwardly dismissing the iconophile accounts, they meticulously examine the available sources and their worth as testimonies, accepting versions fitting with traditional narration only grudgingly, if at all.

The authors describe iconoclast policies as far more moderate than traditionally imagined. This is not a novelty in current research. It has, for example, been noted that the production of images continued and that the destruction of old religious pictures was not complete. The harsh treatment of people holding views contrary to official policy is claimed to have been rare. Haldon and Brubaker note that the number of persons who ardently took part in the controversy was not great. Most people, even in church and among those belonging to the secular elite, continued with their business as usual and those who played a significant part in the controversy may have had other than theological motives.

The writers also deny the claims made in modern historiography that certain groups in Byzantine society, such as monks or soldiers, would, in general, have been particularly iconophile or iconoclast. The evidence for this view is in fact weak, especially after closer examination. Haldon and Brubaker also suggest that proper veneration of holy images in eastern Christianity was really

introduced only as the result of the iconoclast controversy and the iconophiles were innovators in dogmatic matters.

In my opinion, it is probably true that the role of theological controversies in Byzantine history has been exaggerated because the controversies were most important for those who have left writings. In spite of the controversies, the state and society continued to function and the theological issues were not at the center of power struggles.

However, it is difficult to establish the motives of individuals. Haldon and Brubaker, for example, claim that the empress Eirene (regent 780–790, co-ruler 792–797, sole ruler 797–802) was not originally a convinced iconophile but adopted such a policy in the mid-780s in order to improve relations with Christians in western Europe. I am not convinced that this is a better explanation for her actions than the conventional one according to which up to this point she had considered her own position too weak to undertake an iconophile policy. Moreover, after the iconophile Seventh Ecumenical Church Council held in Nicaea in 787, the relations with the West were quickly allowed to worsen. It is also interesting to note that while the authors of *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680–850* so painstakingly problematize the accounts of Byzantine sources on the iconoclastic controversy, they tend to adopt the narration of those regarding secular events in a fairly straightforward manner.

*Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680–850* is not simply about the iconoclast controversy, but also about the Byzantine state and society of the time. The point of view of the authors is above all that of the state and its institutions rather than of questions such as how people lived and how the army was organized (rather than how it fought). Considering the source material we have at our disposal, this is sensible and it may be too much to ask anything else.

The book emphasizes the importance of patronage and the flexibility in Byzantine administration instead of rigorous structures and well defined institutions. I found it a bit surprising that eunuchs, who played such a strong role in the administration of Byzantium during this era, get relatively little attention in the book.

One of the major questions in Byzantine history is the emergence of the *themata*, the system by which the Byzantine territory was divided into military districts where a *strategos* (general) had supreme military and civilian authority and in which his soldiers held parcels of land. When and how this system was created has been debated and is very difficult to answer due to the scarcity and the problems of our sources. Haldon has been active in this debate and *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680–850* argues that the period of Nicephoros I (802–811) was the decisive one. Among other options put forward in scholarship is, for example, the proposition that the system was introduced in the latter half of the seventh century when the loss of territories resulted in a serious crisis concerning the upkeep of the army, when the sources (although ones compiled later) use the term *thema*, and when the amount of bronze coinage declined, phenomena which could indicate a change in the way soldiers were maintained.

As mentioned above, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680–850: A History* is a monumental book. So is naturally its subject as well, but I find that the book could have been written in a more compact manner. This would also have made it more suitable for use as a manual and would perhaps have left room for dealing with even more issues. As the book actually starts from the era preceding official iconoclasm, it might also have been worthwhile to continue the narrative for a

couple of decades after the so-called Triumph of Orthodoxy in order to examine the establishment and strengthening of iconophile doctrines. There are also many long sentences and paragraphs, which affect the reading experience. Nevertheless, it is clear that *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era c. 680–850: A History* has set the point of departure for all future studies of Byzantium in the iconoclastic era. One does not have to agree with everything in this book, but it has to be taken into account.

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VERITY PLATT: *Facing the Gods. Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature, and Religion*. Greek Culture in the Roman World Series. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge – New York 2011. ISBN 978-0-521-86171-7 (hb). XVIII, 482 pp. USD 130.

The subject of this book is divine epiphany and its complex and manifold relation to its representation in Graeco-Roman art and literature. The work developed from Platt's PhD dissertation on the same subject.

The author gives proof of her wide knowledge of the subject and the different approaches with which this can be addressed by analysing the representation of the gods and its reception among viewers or readers over a long period of time, from the archaic period in Greece to the Roman Imperial period. Different means of representation are discussed both in the visual arts and in literature.

Throughout the work, Platt stresses the cognitive tension inherent in the representation of the epiphanic experience in ancient art and literature. This problematic relation derives partly from the fact that in Antiquity images of the gods, or even the images of them evoked in the human mind by literary works, were often equated with the divinity itself. As stressed by Platt, this aspect is of great importance if one considers the difficult mediation in representing a supernatural entity, the godhead, in an anthropomorphic form, whether this might be in the form of a statue or, perhaps even more often, in the literary *ekphrasis* of a work of art portraying a divinity. Moreover, aspects such as the contribution of the skills and imagination of single human agents, such as sculptors or painters, were felt even in ancient sources to be problematic issues when determining the degree of human influence behind the truthfulness of epiphanic experience generated by the contact with Graeco-Roman art and literature.

The book begins with an introductory chapter which analyses an *ekphrasis* by Philostratus in his *Imagines* (2,1–3). The *ekphrasis* here is a description of a painting portraying an ivory statue of Aphrodite being worshipped by a group of maidens. In this chapter, Platt discusses the problematic relation between the actual divinity and its representation through a human agent. In what follows, the book is divided into three parts, following a chronological pattern, and these are then further subdivided into chapters concerned with different aspects of the representation of the gods. The first part focuses on the Archaic and Hellenistic periods in Greece. The second part concentrates on the period of the Second Sophistic. The third part is concerned with the representation of epiphanies on Roman sarcophagi of the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century. CE.