Cyril Mango, ed. *The Oxford History of Byzantium.*

W. Reed Smith

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I recommend Cyril Mango’s edition of the history of the Byzantine Empire. As one might expect, I will allow myself a reservation or two, but all in all, *The Oxford History of Byzantium* (hereinafter, the “*History*”) is a very well-done book.

The *History* is actually a collection of articles on various time periods and aspects of the roughly eleven hundred year history of the empire founded somewhat unintentionally by Constantine the Great. It is 334 pages long, with 305 pages of text. The book is set up in twelve chapters written by several different contributors, which follow a general chronological order, starting with “The Eastern Empire from Constantine to Heraclius (306-641) and ending with “Towards a Franco-Greek Culture,” which last chapter discusses the fact that Constantinople was *not* the last outpost of Byzantium to fall to the Ottomans (For example, Crete did not fall until between 1645 and 1669 A.D., and the Ionian Islands were never subjected to Turkish occupation).

Indeed, Mango expressly notes that one might, as Toynbee did, consider Byzantium not just a state, but rather a civilization, in which case according to Mango such Byzantine Civilization extended geographically and chronologically “if not to the present, at any rate until about 1800, when the spread of European Enlightenment and European-inspired nationalism finally undermined what was still a recognizably Byzantine way of life.” (p. 5-6).

There are also seven “Special Features,” which are short articles or mini-chapters on various aspects of Byzantium, such as “Faces of Constantine,” “Icons,” and “Commerce.” The book also contains numerous color plates, illustrations, and maps, all of which make for a beautiful presentation.

The *History* is interesting for the student of civilizations because, as noted above, editor Mango clearly understands that Byzantium can be viewed as a civilization and not just an empire. Thus, if one is willing to notice them when they occur, throughout the book one will find numerous references which are fascinating to the civilizationist. For example, Peter Sarris in Chapter 1 notes that the last pagan Emperor of Rome, Julian the Apostate, not only attempted to re-institute paganism, he also attempted “to roll back the Diocletianic and Constantinian revolution” (p. 30), which “conservative ambitions” brought him into direct conflict with the new imperial aristocracy which made its fortunes on the bureaucracy. The unfortunate Julian might have some pointers for various Western conservatives today.
Another example is Mango’s explanation for the “rise of the holy man” in about the later fourth century: “The short answer seems to be that after the Constantinian settlement the Church lost its glamour. It became part of the civil administration...” (p. 110). Monks were different. Unlike the salaried bishops handling large sums of money, monks still captured the public imagination as holy men, as incarnate versions of Christ Himself. However, the fact that all this was giving rise to a new civilization distinct from the Hellenic may have been lost on Mango, who entitled his chapter, “New Religion, Old Culture.”

However, probably the most important section of the book for the civilizationist is the latter part, not the beginning, which deals with the period of the disintegration of Hellenic Civilization. The latter part of the book necessarily treats the age of the disintegration of Byzantine Civilization. The History does not dwell on the fall of Constantinople. Rather, it discusses in some detail the attempts at accommodation that the Byzantines, and particularly the late emperors, made with both the Latin West and the Turks, and the lengths to which they were willing to go.

Also discussed are the influences that Western-style art and literature had on the Byzantines. Civilizationists will immediately recognize these trends as Toynbee’s increasing promiscuity, which is the willingness of the dominant minority to accept influences and practices of foreigners and the lower classes.

My reservations about the History are relatively minor. I would have preferred a more linear politico-military chronology. However, that type of work would by necessity have been much longer, probably several volumes, and it would preclude the detailed treatment that various aspects of Byzantine life receive in this book.

Furthermore, the History is a book for the educated public, not for Byzantine specialists in the academy. It does not contain traditional, numbered academic footnotes. However, while this is not a book for specialists, they may benefit from it because of the depth of treatment of the various subjects in the chapters and “Special Features.”

Finally, I would re-emphasize that the History of Byzantium is truly a beautiful book and is very well-written. I recommend it.

W. Reed Smith