

Byzantium 330–1453, London, Royal Academy of Arts

JAMES KORANYI **A Commentary on Europe**

What makes this exhibition particularly interesting, however, is what it reveals of the new understanding of the Byzantine Empire, and by extension of Europe.

THE ROYAL Academy of Arts in London is currently hosting (25th October 2008–22nd March 2009) a comprehensive exhibition on over one thousand years of Byzantine art.¹ As ambitious as the exhibition is, it still manages to impress on several levels. The Royal Academy has assembled the most important and wide-reaching collection of artifacts from the Byzantine period in Britain in the last fifty years. The exhibition is revealing not merely because of the objects on display but also because of what it says about a contemporary understanding of what Europe means. This commentary will suggest that the exhibition is indicative of a shift in the images of East and West. This is not to say that we are witnessing an end to the intra-European divide between East and West, but rather that the current geopolitical context has accentuated the notion of a division between Europe and Islam. As such, images of what constitutes the East and Europe have changed slightly. The end of an ideological schism within Europe, the enlargement of the European Union,

James Koranyi

Student, Department of History, University of Exeter.

and the so-called 'War on Terror' have all contributed towards a hardening of (West) European images of Islam as Europe's negative counterpart and a renewed yet problematic interest in East-Central Europe. The exhibition at the Royal Academy acts as a commentary on these developments.

The exhibition is set up chronologically and is divided into eight rooms. It is a full collection yet not 'overloaded' with exhibits, and thus manages to maintain the importance and uniqueness of individual objects. Alongside impressive artifacts such as Emperor Constantine's bronze head and the Chalice of the Patriarchs, the exhibition also illustrates more generally the sheer beauty, quality, and range of Byzantine art and artistry.

Indeed, the exhibition takes the visitor on a fascinating journey through more than a millennium in the life of 'Eastern Rome.' While the art of the late antiquity still clearly reveals intriguing continuities with the collapsing Western Roman Empire, the boom in religious art that followed the period of iconoclasm marked the emergence of a distinct Byzantine culture.² Particularly striking are the diptychs and triptychs from the last imperial age of Byzantium. Visitors are thus introduced to a little-known aspect of European history, remarketed for a twenty-first century audience.

The final two rooms of the exhibition are concerned with the cultural heritage of Byzantium. The exhibits from the late and post-Byzantine period, which range from Armenia to Moscow, to Romania, to Saint Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai, illustrate quite poignantly to visitors who know history that the Byzantine Empire did not simply end in 1453, but rather that it firmly imprinted its lasting legacy on Europe, Asia, and Africa. More discerning visitors to the exhibition may well recognize Nicolae Iorga's work on the post-Byzantine world in his book *Byzantium after Byzantium* (*Byzance après Byzance*) in these last two rooms.³ Byzantium's reach was much larger in both geographical and temporal terms than merely its ever-shrinking empire. Christian Orthodoxy and Byzantine art spanned across much of Eastern Europe and beyond. The exhibition thus concludes its tour by looking beyond Byzantium and in so doing hints at what Iorga detailed in his study on the cultural legacy of the Byzantine Empire.

Yet herein lays also an ironic twist of this exhibition: the danger exists of actually leaving visitors with the impression that European culture in Southeast Europe came to an end in 1453—bar a few enclaves—as the Ottoman Empire spread into this region. The public are inadvertently presented with the false yet dominant idea that Islam represented and still represents the end or at the very least a caesura of European culture. A deeper insight into history, however, reveals a very different picture. The persistence and legacy of Byzantine art and religious life was more or less guaranteed under Ottoman

rule. The relatively liberal attitudes and policies towards local religious traditions enabled the survival of Orthodoxy in its various guises throughout the Ottoman period.⁴ Turkish rule did not simply result in the end of or a break in European culture in Southeast Europe. Yet visitors to the exhibition are implicitly told precisely such a story. Byzantium—as presented at the Royal Academy—more or less ends with the arrival of Islam. Perhaps this is indeed a necessary narrative for this exhibition. In one sense, Byzantium does of course end, as the city of Byzantium was renamed Constantinople. This did not, however, mean that the cultural life and diversity ceased to exist thereafter. Yet the two rooms on ‘post-Byzantium’ seem to omit this link between Byzantium and post-Byzantium and instead portray the continued existence of Orthodoxy as an almost fortuitous detail. The absence of a strong guiding story to explain the basis of post-Byzantium Europe renders exactly this impression.

However, one of the strengths of this exhibition appears to be the fact that it appeals to both specialist and non-specialist knowledge. Visitors with no real expertise on the period or any specific aspect of Byzantium and the Eastern Roman Empire will still be able to appreciate the vast range of exhibits. There is a brief historical synopsis in each room, which allows visitors to place the artifacts into a very broad historical framework, though they are also given the choice of an optional audio guide for much more detailed information. In general, however, it is important to stress that, apart from these short pointers, there is simply very little context on offer. This is in fact also one of the main criticisms of the exhibition, and yet one may regard this *in itself* as not that problematic. However, as mentioned above, this does mean that visitors are in fact told a particular historical narrative concerning the end of Byzantium. Yet the exhibition does not intend to offer a comprehensive historical guide to Byzantium’s art, its religious life, and its legacy. Instead it is rather designed to make an impact on visitors by showing the quality, scope, and beauty of more than a thousand years of Byzantine art.

What makes this exhibition particularly interesting, however, is what it reveals of the new understanding of the Byzantine Empire, and by extension of Europe. Especially since the early modern period, the word ‘Byzantine’ has been associated with a rejection of any claims to being the true successor to the Roman Empire. Instead, the Roman heritage has firmly been placed in the West, from Charlemagne right through to the Holy Roman Empire. It was “Latin Christendom” which was regarded as “the core of ‘Europe.’”⁵ The Byzantine Empire has thus been regarded as peripheral to Europe and in fact as not quite part of the true European cultural heritage. It was thus also placed on a par with the Islamic world as a non-European entity.⁶ Yet the word Byzantine has also meant more: It came to denote deviousness and underhanded-

ness. Both these notions have underpinned many of the East-West discourses that have shaped more recent understandings of Europe. The West has frequently been portrayed as the true beacon of culture whilst East-Central Europe has been depicted as a cultural and political backwater. Regions that were formerly part of the Byzantine Empire—and in particular the Balkans—have thus come to represent the dark side of Europe against which enlightened, ‘progressive’ Europeans have been able to position themselves. It has been seen as cultural borderland, an in-between area on the periphery of Europe. Travel literature from the nineteenth century onwards began to ‘invent’ Eastern Europe as an exotic, semi-oriental region of Europe. This then framed the political and ideological terminology that described the East-West divide for most of the twentieth century right up until the present day. So while this concept was born out of a nineteenth century romantic curiosity toward exotic places on the periphery of Europe,⁷ over the course of the twentieth century it became an ideological tool for the West to identify a region that was deemed inherently un-European.⁸

Yet the meaning of Byzantium is being reassessed. In light of current geopolitical issues the boundaries of ‘Europeanness’ are being reviewed and have indeed shifted eastwards. The Byzantine Empire is being reinterpreted as the last European bastion of Christianity and culture. The exhibition is thus not merely a collection of great art and artifacts, but it is also a telling commentary on the changes in current perceptions of Europe and European heritage in the West. This is also of interest to Transylvanianists: For western onlookers, Transylvania has represented a borderland of Europe in which the ‘western’ Germanic and indeed Hungarian culture and heritage intermixed with the ‘backward’ Romanian and otherwise Orthodox culture. Byzantium and its legacy are being transformed in the consciousness of (Western) Europe into a similar borderland, namely one that stood in opposition to Islam and its westward expansion. Whilst the fault lines of Europe had previously been drawn roughly along the Slavic-Orthodox border within Europe, in the geopolitical framework of contemporary Europe this border has become far more blurred. In light of the ‘War on Terror’ and the identification of Islam as politically oppositional to ‘European ideals,’ Byzantium, once purely labeled un-European and untrustworthy, now enjoys a far more complex standing. To be sure, it still represents an exotic and semi-European ‘other.’ Yet on the other hand, it also fits in with a narrative of a European defense against Islam. Byzantium and its end also serve as a warning of defeat. The parallels with Transylvania as a borderland of Europe are thus striking. Both its ‘Byzantine’ nature and Christian culture identify it as an in-between region of Europe, which is marked out as different from and yet similar to the West. Eric Hobsbawm referred to this East Euro-

pean condition as a “status [which] is doubly uncertain.”⁹ Byzantium as well as Transylvania are therefore both “outside and inside history.”¹⁰ In his book *Între Orient și Occident: Țările române la începutul epocii moderne* (Between East and West: Romanian countries at the beginning of the modern era), Neagu Djuvara deals with Romania’s own ‘demi-orientalism’ in precisely this way, and this can certainly be applied to the erstwhile Byzantine Empire.¹¹ When looking at its European credentials, the Byzantine legacy in Southeast Europe is seen as politically opportune yet culturally suspect.

This exhibition thus also reflects the changing mood in Europe following the process of European integration. EU enlargement has been hailed as a ‘return to Europe’ for post-communist East-Central Europe. Notwithstanding the obvious disconnect between this political rhetoric and the problems manifest during and since enlargement, the notion of shifting the European boundaries to the Bosphorus have been crucial for the image of the European Union. To be sure, there have been debates about the compatibility of European Union with Orthodoxy in the East. These notions have been very much in the vein of Samuel Huntington’s thesis on the clash of civilizations and have restated the belief that Orthodoxy and the Western Churches are fundamentally mismatched.¹² However, the reality of Bulgaria and Romania—and to a less relevant extent Greece—now being members of the EU has also meant that the same European traditionalists who previously opposed Orthodoxy as ‘un-European’ have now been able to use the Byzantine legacy as a way of affirming a hard definition of European Union on its southeastern border: Europe ends where Christianity ends. This has been a particularly important point for ‘hard’ views on the European Union and on Turkey’s potential membership.¹³ So while the alleged softening of the West-Orthodox relationship tallies with the recent political developments of European enlargement, this development has also entailed a hardening of borderlines vis-à-vis Islam.

The exhibition at the Royal Academy can also be placed in a broader framework of cultural initiatives and interest—certainly in Britain—in exploring Europe’s ‘other.’ While the Royal Academy has been hosting the Byzantium exhibition, the British Museum has put on its own ‘oriental’ exhibition on Babylon.¹⁴ Similar to Byzantium, the exhibition attempts to integrate Babylon into a western discourse. The Cyrus Cylinder is portrayed rather anachronistically as a forerunner of human rights enshrined in law.¹⁵ The difficult aspects of Babylonian history—such its legacy as a harlot, the persecution of the Jews, or King Belshazzar’s decadence before the famous writing on the wall—are thus depicted as Babylon’s true (western) path gone awry. This notion has particular poignancy as many exhibits are in fact western depictions of Babylon rather than actual artifacts from the Babylonian period. The denouement of

this exhibition is the depiction of Saddam Hussein's regime and its end. Here, too, the idea of being 'returned' to its rightful, western path is at the heart of such a narrative. The Babylon exhibition and the Byzantium exhibition are therefore both concerned with exploring the 'other' while trying to include it into a western framework. Whilst the Babylon exhibition explicitly incorporates geopolitical issues by mentioning the Iraq war and its aftermath,¹⁶ these issues also impinge on the way the Byzantium exhibition is understood and read. Both Babylon and Byzantium are therefore associated with both non-European and European characteristics to suit current geopolitical concerns.

TO BE sure, it would be farfetched to suggest that geopolitical issues such as the 'War on Terror,' the new importance of political Islam versus 'European ideals,' or indeed the recent EU enlargement have shaped exhibitions such as Byzantium at the Royal Academy. Yet it is nonetheless important to bear in mind the context above. Both the exhibitors and the visitors are able to read the story of Byzantium through the prism of contemporary society and politics. The newly discovered interest in the Byzantine Empire certainly reflects, in part, a reevaluation of the concept of a European borderland as a Christian-cultural frontier. Following the exhibition's historical narrative and the historical synopses in each room, the visitors are guided, to a certain extent, through a story of a Christian battle against Islam. The Byzantine Empire's semi-oriental, semi-European position thus pitches this history as a European struggle against an oriental, Muslim other while maintaining its image as a curiously un-European entity. While the exhibition does indeed trace the legacy of Byzantium, it does not explain satisfactorily the way in which Byzantine culture was subsequently allowed to survive in an Ottoman context. So despite hosting this prolific collection of Byzantine artifacts, the Royal Academy's exhibition ultimately does not resolve the tension between Byzantium and the rise of Islam, as it fails to explain the cultural and religious continuities of the Byzantine cultural heritage under Ottoman rule. □

Notes

1. See *Byzantium 330–1453* at <<http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibitions/byzantium/>> [accessed: 10th January 2009].
2. For further reading see, for example, Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 105–144.
3. Nicolae Iorga, *Byzantium after Byzantium* (Iași: The Center for Romanian Studies, 2000).

4. See Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: From the End of Byzantium to the Present Day* (London: Phoenix, 2000), in particular chapters two and three.
5. Björn Hettne, "The Europeanisation of Europe: Endogenous and Exogenous Dimensions," *The Journal of European Integration* 24, 4 (2002): 331.
6. See *ibid.*
7. See Mazower, 85–115 and Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1998).
8. See Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilisation on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other "The East" in European Identity Formation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), Philip Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) and Venelin I. Ganev, "The Balkans: Different, but why and how?" *The Romanian Journal of Political Science*, no. 2 (2002): 33–37.
9. Eric Hobsbawm, "Outside and Inside History," in Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 1997), 3.
10. See *ibid.*, 1–13.
11. Neagu Djuvara, *Între Orient și Occident: Țările române la începutul epocii moderne* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2002).
12. This idea is has often been (rightly) criticized extensively for its self-fulfilling thesis. Nevertheless, the idea of a borderland of Europe has been used in scholarship to interpret identity discourses in Southeast Europe, albeit in a different manner to the way this concept was used by Huntington. See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisation and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). For a good overview of the use of this concept rather than theorising the 'truth' of this concept see Edgar Hösch, "Kulturgrenzen in Südosteuropa," *Südosteuropa: Zeitschrift für Gegenwartforschung* 47, 12 (1998): 601–623 and Karl Kaser, *Südosteuropäische Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2002), 98–107, 114–118.
13. Claes H. de Vreese, Hajo G. Boomgaarden, and Holli A. Semetko, "Hard and Soft: Public Support for Turkish Membership in the EU," *European Union Politics* 9, 4 (December 2008): 511–530.
14. See *Babylon: Myth and Reality* (13th November 2008–15th March 2009) at <http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/all_current_exhibitions/babylon.aspx> [accessed: 20th January 2009].
15. As the exhibition notes, a replica of the cylinder is kept at the UN headquarters in New York. The idea to present this artifact as the first human rights bill is thus not a novel notion.
16. The exhibition also mentions the mistreatment of the ancient site of Babylon by Saddam Hussein and the US Army.

Abstract

Byzantium 330–1453, London, Royal Academy of Arts: A Commentary on Europe

The paper discusses an exhibition currently hosted by the Royal Academy of Arts and devoted to over one thousand years of Byzantine art, featuring the most important and wide-reaching collection of artifacts from the Byzantine period displayed in Britain over the last fifty years. The exhibition is revealing not merely because of the objects on display, but also because of what it says in connection to our contemporary understanding of Europe itself. The study suggests that the exhibition is indicative of a shift in the images of East and West. This is not to say that we are witnessing an end to the intra-European divide between East and West, but rather that the current geopolitical context has accentuated the notion of a division between Europe and Islam. Thus, the public are inadvertently presented with the false yet dominant idea that Islam represented and still represents the end or at the very least a caesura of European culture. A deeper insight into history, however, reveals a very different picture, as the persistence and legacy of Byzantine art and religious life were more or less guaranteed under Ottoman rule.

Keywords

Royal Academy of Arts, exhibition, Byzantium, Orthodoxy, image of the other