Introduction

We think we know what Byzantium was—an eastern empire ruled for hundreds of years from the city of Constantinople (Istanbul), the victim, or the duplicitous ally, of the Crusaders, the transmitter of classical culture and classical manuscripts to the west, a people tragic in their final hours before the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, but already in a state of inexorable decline. Byzantium lies outside the standard western narrative of the formation of Europe. It is consigned to the twin spheres of exoticism and the east, and above all to the realms of ossification and pointless bureaucracy. One looks in vain for civil society in Byzantium, let alone democracy or the hallmarks of western liberalism. In the words of a distinguished Russian medievalist, “Can one imagine a Magna Carta in Byzantium or in Rus? Is it conceivable that a Byzantine emperor or a Russian tsar could view himself, or might be viewed by others, as primus inter pares?” The same writer continued, “However, none of this in any way lessens my admiration for scholars who are courageous enough to enter into the mysteries of Byzantine history: perhaps such people manage to overcome their own personal inclinations and sympathies.”
A clutch of recent publications by British and American scholars have sought to present a different, less prejudiced, and more positive view, and a series of important exhibitions has demonstrated the powerful appeal that Byzantium exerts on the wider public. Yet historians of Byzantium still struggle with the weight of a powerfully negative tradition that has also made its way into common English usage. A random cull over the past few months produced allusions to “the byzantine appointments procedure” and “the Byzantine world of sports governance” (in relation to the London Olympics of 2012). Capitalization seems to be optional.

Any interpretation can only be the interpretation of its own day, and this book is inevitably written from the perspective of its author—that is, from within the Anglo-Saxon, and indeed the British, context. Interpretations of Byzantium have been and still are heavily influenced by later cultural and national agendas. The idea (and indeed the ideal) of Byzantium has a powerful salience in the Orthodox world, and has acquired even more potency with the ending of the communist regimes in eastern Europe. In Vladimir Putin’s Russia a television documentary (or pseudo-documentary) with the title “The Destruction of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium” caused a sensation when it was shown in 2008. It had received considerable official support and went on to win a best documentary award. Its message, put crudely, was anti-western and nationalistic: Russia’s true identity is as the heir of Byzantium, and it must avoid the fate of Byzantium—namely, destruction by the west.
Religion is a central issue in relation to Byzantium. Few historians of the west feel confident when faced with the subject of Byzantine Orthodoxy and many prefer to relegate it to a separate sphere; at the same time in the Orthodox world the national Orthodox churches are experiencing both opportunities and problems. There are obvious tensions between the latter feature and the renewed emphasis on an exclusively western narrative of European history that has also been a recent development. The increased salience of the idea of a Christian Europe, or indeed a western world, confronted by radical Islam only adds to the discomfort surrounding Byzantium and the Orthodox sphere.

It does not help in resolving the uncertainty over Byzantium’s place in historical writing today that so much of the contemporary written source material is the work of a privileged elite, or that so much Byzantine art is religious in character. Byzantium is not merely medieval but also deeply unfamiliar. Valiant efforts are needed to recapture the world of Byzantine society as a whole, and to reveal and emphasize the secular element that also existed in Byzantium (chapter 4). Reading the contemporary sources against the grain is an essential requirement.

Traditional Byzantine scholarship has flourished in a number of European centers, especially perhaps Paris, Vienna, and Munich, though also elsewhere, as well as in Greece, prerevolutionary Russia, Belgrade, and Sofia. An active group is now based in Sweden. But Byzantine scholarship was slow to gain a foothold in the Anglo-Saxon context, where it is not seen as part of our own history and
needs hard-to-acquire language skills and technical expertise. It has depended in the past, moreover, on the existence of a well-established tradition of classical teaching in schools and universities, and most importantly on the teaching of classical Greek; to say that this can no longer be relied upon is an understatement. Furthermore, even today there are classicists who look down on Byzantium. A flood of English-language guides, general books, and translations is helping to change the situation, as are the well-attended annual conferences established since the 1960s: these include the Byzantine Studies Conference in North America and the annual British Byzantine Symposium in addition to the regular international congresses. One of the contributors to a recent handbook is confident enough to refer to “the triumph of Byzantium: Byzantine studies from the 1950s.” Yet the place of the subject in Anglo-Saxon universities is far from secure; it does not easily fit existing departmental structures, or feature among their priorities, and the few centers in Britain in which Byzantine studies has had an independent existence have all experienced difficulties in recent years.

To date Byzantium has only partly benefited from the enormous expansion that has taken place in the last generation in archaeological work on late antiquity, in comparison with which the archaeology of the Byzantine period proper remains at a relatively early stage. This too is changing rapidly, partly as a result of changing conceptions of the subject among Byzantinists, but also with the growth of diachronic approaches to archaeological sites and geographical areas in Greece and Turkey, which aim to trace their
settlement history from the earliest times to the modern period, the Byzantine period included.

But it is also a matter of defining the period covered by “Byzantium,” and here again, Byzantium as a subject finds itself in a quandary. Should it be seen as beginning with the foundation of Constantinople by Constantine I in 330, or only with the sixth or seventh century, as some Byzantinists currently prefer? French scholarship has been much less likely to see this as a problem, whether in relation to specialized publications or general introductions. This is also true of the economic history of Byzantium, in which French scholars have been prominent. In Greece, too, Byzantium starts early, and late antiquity is not well established as a period of study; I will return to the reasons for this in chapter 2. Finally, in academic literature on the history and archaeology of Israel, Jordan, and to a lesser extent Egypt, “Byzantine” has traditionally meant something entirely different: the period from (roughly) the reign of Constantine until the Arab conquests of the seventh century. In contrast, an “explosion of late antiquity,” as it has been called, has taken hold in recent decades in the world of Anglo-Saxon scholarship. Late antiquity is now held by some scholars to embrace the rise of Islam and extend as late as the end of the first millennium, and this expansion threatens to sideline Byzantium once again. Most scholars of late antiquity would not consider themselves as Byzantinists; in contrast, many Byzantinists assume that they have a claim on the early period, even if others prefer their subject to start around the seventh century.
My aim in the chapters that follow is to highlight some of the interesting questions that arise if one tries to understand Byzantium and its society. They do not provide a history, nor do they cover all the facets that need to be addressed. Rather, they concern questions and reflections that have preoccupied me and continue to do so. I am interested throughout in methodological issues, for Byzantium is an undertheorized field as well as an understudied one.

The book consists of five essays on particular themes. I have included references to some of the secondary literature, though obviously these are highly selective, and no doubt also personal. Some of the issues I consider in this book will be familiar to my fellow-Byzantinists, though perhaps less so to others. This is not another general history of Byzantium, of which there are many already, in addition to the excellent guides and handbooks already mentioned. In particular, it omits many aspects of Byzantine history and culture that would be essential to such a work. Nor is my aim to provide another apologia for Byzantium. Instead, this series of essays is designed to confront some of the issues that arise from the situation I have just outlined, and to address the question of where (if at all) Byzantium stands in relation to current historiographical trends and major historical themes, to which it often stands in a relation of tension. My hope is to explain why that should be so, and how the question can or should be tackled.
To begin with an absence may seem odd.

On the long (and more traditional) view, Byzantium lasted for over eleven hundred years, from Constantine’s decision in AD 324 to found a city named after himself on the site of the ancient Greek colony of Byzantion, or from Constantinople’s inauguration ceremonies in May, AD 330, to its siege and capture by the Ottomans, also in May, in 1453. That is remarkable in itself. Inevitably, however, there were major changes over such a long period, including a drastic break of nearly half a century after the sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204 until Byzantine rule was restored in Constantinople under Michael VIII Palaeologus in 1261. During that time the “empire” had transferred itself to Nicaea, on the opposite side of the Bosphorus, but several other Byzantine princedoms also developed elsewhere, in Epirus, in Greece, and at Trebizond on the northern coast of Turkey. The city of Thessalonike was also a serious rival to Constantinople in the later period, especially in cultural and intellectual terms. The restored Palaeologan “empire” after 1261 was not only territorially and economically weak but also fragmented; its history is full of attempts to stave off Ottoman threats by obtaining help from the west, even at the cost
of a religious union with the Roman church that few Byzantines actually wanted.

There had also been a difficult period in the seventh and eighth centuries, after the Arab conquests had deprived Byzantium of much of its eastern territory and its command of the Mediterranean. At the same time new threats had come from the north from a variety of peoples who included Slavs, Avars, Petschenigs, Khazars, and Bulgars. But Byzantium succeeded both in negotiating these dangers and in surviving an internal crisis that was at once religious and political; it also managed to reinvent itself politically, culturally, and militarily. By the tenth century the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus had the confidence to set out detailed guidance for his son on diplomatic relations with all Byzantium’s neighboring peoples, and to claim to head a family of nations. By the eleventh century the Bulgarians had been defeated and Bulgaria established as a Byzantine province. Contrary to earlier views, the Byzantine economy was flourishing. A new dynasty, the Comneni, again reinvented the higher offices of state, as well as the financial and military systems. The emperor Alexius I Comnenus had little choice but to cooperate with the First Crusade, and indeed entertained his own hopes of possible benefits. However, while the reasons for the sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204 remain debated, the period of Comnenian rule was characterized by worsening relations with the west. Even before Alexius I took the throne in 1081, a single year, 1071, had seen both the Norman capture of the important Byzantine base of Bari
in southern Italy and the Seljuk defeat and capture of a Byzantine emperor on the field at Manzikert in Asia Minor.

One thing on which all can agree is that in the end Byzantium fell to the Ottomans. How that happened is in itself a tragic story, made more so by the fact that the fate of Constantine XI, the last emperor, remains a mystery to this day.\textsuperscript{2} The assault began in the early hours; the substantial Venetian fleet that the Byzantines hoped for failed to materialize, and after fighting bravely the Genoese commander Giustiniani was badly wounded and had to be carried off the battlefield. Mehmet II entered the city in the afternoon. The victory of the youthful sultan and his entry into the city, and especially into the church of Hagia Sophia, are enough to catch one’s imagination—as is the last stand made by the small number of Byzantine inhabitants, who realized that their situation was hopeless, and the Orthodox liturgy attended by emperor and people together in Hagia Sophia on the night before the final attack.\textsuperscript{3} But the effect of the awareness among modern historians of the coming end of Byzantium has been to lock late Byzantium into an essentialist and inexorable rhetoric of decline and victimhood. In contrast with the Roman empire, where there is room for disagreement as to when, and even if, the empire “fell,” there can be no such hesitation in relation to Byzantium—the fateful date was 29 May 1453. As can be seen again and again in modern histories of Byzantium, the deeper explanation has seemed obvious: doomed to fall, Byzantium was in a state of irrevocable decline.\textsuperscript{4} In postcolonial terms, Byzantium is the subaltern.
Yet “absence” remains an appropriate term. Part of the reason for Byzantium’s absence from the wider historical discourse is that it has been relegated to the sphere of negativity. The very name that we use today—“Byzantium”—was a derogatory coinage of the early modern period, and Byzantium has traditionally been the subject of adverse comparisons with Rome and with everything classical. For Edward Gibbon, the reign of Justinian was followed by eight centuries of decline, which he compressed into a rapid survey on the grounds that the “patient reader” would find a detailed narrative intolerable. He chose instead to enliven his narrative by writing in some detail about the new peoples who came to the fore in these centuries, including his famous chapter on Muhammad and Arabia. Gibbon’s influence has been profound indeed, but negativity has also been shown toward Byzantium by more recent Byzantine scholars, including several recent holders of established chairs in the subject in British universities. High on the list of accusations against Byzantine culture have traditionally come its alleged lack of originality and the stress laid on imitation of the classical authors, on which more later. Scholarship in the present generation is well aware of this inheritance and is doing its best to set it aside; nevertheless its effects are still with us in countless standard works, and certainly in general perceptions of Byzantium. Autocracy, bureaucracy, deviousness, and a stultifying lack of originality—all still seem to go together with the word “Byzantium,” underpinned by the ever-present awareness that in the end Byzantium “fell.”
Some Byzantinists will argue that such ideas are happily behind us. I wish I could agree.

In general historiography, Byzantium is either nonexistent or in-between. In many Anglo-Saxon history departments Byzantium is regarded as a niche specialization, while among books intended for the general reader many of the most successful continue to emphasize court intrigue or a romanticized view of Orthodoxy. Byzantine art, and especially Byzantine icons, still exercise the same kind of fascination as they did for the American and British travelers and aesthetes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when an important role in the discovery of Byzantium was played by men like the American Thomas Whittemore and the British Robert Byron and David Talbot Rice (figure 1).

Talbot Rice went on to become a leading Byzantine art historian, but when he and two Oxford friends and contemporaries traveled to Mount Athos in the 1920s they did so with all the enthusiasm and curiosity of Oxford undergraduates. Robert Byron’s account of this journey in The Station was published in 1928 when the author was only 22. The places he visited on his travels in 1925 and 1926 included Mistra, Athens, Constantinople, and Smyrna, and can be vividly followed in his published correspondence with his mother. Byron was an Etonian who flourished in the social world of Oxford. Evelyn Waugh, another friend, but who later turned against him, described him as “short, fleshy and ugly,” which chimes in with the reaction of the novelist Anthony Powell, who had known Byron at Eton: Byron was “thoroughly out of the ordi-
Figure 1. Photograph of David Talbot Rice and Mark Ogilvie-Grant at the monastery of Docheiariou on their expedition to Mount Athos, taken by Robert Byron.  • Image from Robert Byron; The Station, Athos: Treasures and Men, reprinted by permission of Peters Fraser and Dunlop (www.petersfraserdunlop.com) on behalf of the estate of Robert Byron.
nary” to look at, with “his complexion of yellowish wax, popping pale blue eyes, a long sharp nose.”

Byron’s interest in Byzantium had been roused when he saw the Ravenna mosaics while traveling in Italy at the age of eighteen. He went on to become a journalist, but while still in his early twenties he also published both *The Byzantine Achievement* (1929), which he had begun before he was twenty-one, and *The Birth of Western Painting*, with David Talbot Rice (1930), which claimed that late Byzantine art had led directly to the art of western Europe. Byron was reacting against the contemporary English Philhellenism that identified itself only with the classical in his response to what seemed the undiscovered world of Byzantium, and he was overwhelmed and excited by its mystery. We may feel that Byzantium’s attraction for many of the visitors to the major Byzantine exhibitions today is not very different from what it was for Robert Byron and his Eton and Oxford friends in the early 1920s.

Indeed, the very fact that Byzantium does not fit easily into western historical schemas is also a source of its attraction, as we can see not only in Yeats’s often-quoted poem “Sailing to Byzantium” (1928), but also in the frequent appearances of Byzantine images in glossy advertisements today, where they are invariably associated with a glamorous world of jewelry, perfume (invariably heavy and oriental), and eastern intrigue. Byzantium has also had a powerful attraction for writers, dramatists, and composers. The empress Theodora is still a source of fascination and inspiration for novelists and even “biographers.” One of the latest in a long list,
is Stella Duffy’s *Theodora: Actress, Empress, Whore* (2011), which was described by reviewers as “exquisite,” “pulsingly vivid,” and “brilliant.” The cover illustration of its sequel, *The Purple Shroud* (2012) is reminiscent of the Parisian world of the late nineteenth century and the sensationally successful play *Theodora* by Victorien Sardou (1884), which had Sarah Bernhardt in the title role. Since hardly anything is known about Theodora except for the famous lines in Procopius’s *Secret History* that Edward Gibbon enjoyed so much, it is quite a feat to write about her yet again.

So Byzantium may be present, but from the historian’s point of view, it is not in the right place. It is conspicuously absent in the recent historiography of Europe, especially now, as Greece is seen as a “problem” by the powers in Brussels, and world interest is fading in the newly independent countries of southeast Europe and the Balkans. (Russia, of course, is not seen as European anyway.) Two significant contemporary phenomena have been evident: first, a shrinkage in some quarters of the concept of Europe to refer essentially to western Europe, also characterized as “Christian,” and sometimes explicitly “Catholic,” Europe, and second, a corresponding tendency among some historians to promote the concept of “Eurasian” over European history. “Western Eurasia” can be held to encompass Rome, and can and should encompass Byzantium; how far it does in practice, and the reasons behind the rise of the term, will be considered in the next chapter. As for understanding “Europe” as referring to western Europe, this is not new. It is further underpinned by the structure of the academic discipline of medi-
eval history in Anglo-Saxon universities, in which, as mentioned already, Byzantium usually occupies a marginal position, if any.

We can see the effects of this very clearly from some specific historiographical examples, prominent among them the history of the Crusades. Byzantine historians have long felt that the Byzantine perspective needed to be reflected in the huge secondary literature, and it found a sympathetic voice in the early 1950s in Steven Runciman’s three-volume *History of the Crusades*. In her history of the reign of her father, Alexius I Comnenus, the Byzantine historian Anna Comnena vividly conveys the impression made in Constantinople at the first encounter of the Byzantines by the seemingly uncouth westerners (who had so recently captured the Byzantine city of Bari in south Italy). However, Anna was writing with hindsight, and her father, Alexius I, did his best to manage this new challenge. Nevertheless, mutual hostility between Byzantines and Latins grew over the next century, and even led to the expulsion of Latins from Constantinople in the 1180s.

The defining moment came in 1204, when, for whatever reason, the Fourth Crusaders turned on Constantinople and sacked it. Latin rule was established with a Latin “emperor” and a Latin patriarch and the Byzantine court and administration driven into exile. Almost worse was the desecration of holy places and pillaging of what Byzantine believed to be the holiest objects in Christendom—the relics of the Passion of Christ. As a result the crown of thorns is now in Notre Dame in Paris, while other relics, including the miraculous image of Christ known as the Mandylion, taken
to Constantinople in 944 from Edessa (now Sanliurfa in the far east of Turkey), were housed in the specially built Sainte Chapelle, where they eventually fell victim to the French Revolution. Yet a western medievalist writing on the Crusades regards the lurid, but, we might think, justified, eyewitness accounts of the brutal sack of the city by Nicetas Choniates and Nicholas Mesarites as “hysterical.” There is plentiful evidence of actual coexistence between Latins and Orthodox in the Crusader kingdoms, but on the religious and political level the Byzantines felt threatened, even after the Byzantine court and government were reestablished in Constantinople in 1261. It is a commonplace in the voluminous Greek literature produced during the debates about the union of the churches that the Latin participants in the debates were arrogant and quick to score points.

A second example also involves east versus west, this time the split between eastern and western Christianity. Attempts had already been made to resolve the differences between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, especially after the heated interchanges in 1054 (no longer regarded by historians as a real “schism” but certainly presaging future problems). After the Byzantine return to Constantinople in 1261 these differences rose to a new level of urgency within both the ecclesiastical and secular elites in Byzantium, though always accompanied by deep disagreement. For urgent political reasons, the emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus drove through a divisive agreement at the Council of Lyons in 1274 that was never likely to last. Many papal delegations came and de-
bated in high-profile encounters with Byzantines. Countless treatises were composed on both sides. By the final days of Byzantium the need for western support was overwhelming, but it came at a high price, with recognition of papal supremacy at the top of the list. The Council of Ferrara/Florence in 1438–39 involved large delegations on both sides, and was held in complex circumstances. Its result was predictable, a declared union of the churches that provoked yet more opposition in Constantinople. Several prominent Byzantines converted to Catholicism and were rewarded by being made cardinals. The princely courts and towns of Italy were also no doubt more attractive than the dangerous situation at home. But the Byzantine side could have done better had they done more homework on the works by Latin theologians marshaled in evidence by the western speakers. In any case the vaunted union, despite its vast effort and expense, did not hold, and proved as deceptive as the hoped-for support against the Ottomans. Constantinople fell soon afterward, and an Orthodoxy even more strongly demarcated from Roman Catholicism became the badge of Greek identity within the Ottoman empire.

Dealing with these debates and divisions, which went on for several centuries, has proved difficult for historians of Byzantium. It may be unfair to speak of a western triumphalist perspective, yet many of the scholars who have engaged with the subject and the contemporary source material have indeed—consciously or not—written from a western, or indeed a Roman Catholic, standpoint. Some Byzantine historians are acutely aware of the problem, and
fueled by what is perceived as Orthodox failure, such Roman Catholic negativity toward Byzantium has also naturally led to an apologetic tendency among Orthodox theologians. Added to this, most guides and handbooks to the eastern church are written from within the Orthodox tradition, while many key contemporary texts still lack modern critical editions, or even remain unpublished. In a more extreme step, a few Orthodox scholars have argued that westerners are unable in principle to understand Orthodox theology or the Orthodox position. Nor is the bias only between Catholic and mainstream Orthodox: to quote one recent writer dealing with theological discussions between Byzantium and the Armenians in the twelfth century, “unfortunately from the point of view of objective scholarship those who have studied Nerses’ agenda [Nerses IV, head of the Armenian church, 1167–73] have tended to have their own particular Christological axe to grind and wish to prove him ‘orthodox’ in accordance with their individual notions of what constitutes orthodoxy.”

The pervasive role played by Orthodoxy in Byzantium is one of the features that have made the history of Byzantium so difficult to write (figure 2). Some historians have reacted by adopting reductionist agendas or writing theology out of the story as much as possible. In other cases, for authors from Arnold Toynbee to Samuel Huntington, “Orthodoxy” or “Orthodox civilization” has acquired a status of its own, not western, and not quite eastern, but also (like Islam in these scenarios) not European, and therefore not enlightened. The real or potential agendas behind such a view are
Figure 2. The watercolors of Mount Athos by Edward Lear (d. 1888) convey the romantic appeal it had for Byron. Talbot Rice’s purpose on their expedition in 1927 was to photograph the frescoes in the monasteries and where possible record their treasures, which were hardly known at the time.
obvious; they also complicate the place of Byzantium within current thinking about global, transnational, or comparative history. I will return to the subject in the next chapter and in chapter 5.

My third example concerns the late, Palaeologan, period, after Michael VIII Palaeologus had reestablished Byzantine rule in the capital (though indeed it was hardly his own achievement). Small and fragmented though Byzantium now was, as well as “decaying,” “feeble,” or even “doomed,” and although individuals still prized ancient authors and rhetorical display above such modernizing ideas as originality, intellectual life in Constantinople, Thessalonike, and Mistra reached an astonishingly high level. Byzantine scholars enthusiastically collected, copied, and edited classical texts and Latin classical authors were translated into Greek: in the theological sphere Augustine’s On the Trinity and the works of Aquinas also became available in Greek in Constantinople, while at the beginning of the fifteenth century Manuel Chrysoloras taught and translated Greek texts in several Italian cities, including Florence and Rome. Other Byzantines were also attracted by what seemed to be happening in Italy. Was this Byzantine intellectual activity a “renaissance,” or even the first stirring of “the” Renaissance? The end of Byzantium did indeed mean that the collections and libraries of Italy were filled with classical manuscripts, and some of the last Byzantines were themselves great collectors. But the privileging of Italian humanism and the western tradition has usually assigned to Byzantium the essentially passive role of transmitter.
Byzantinists point out that the classical tradition had never been lost in Byzantium, and that while the period from 1204 to 1261 certainly represented a “setback,” cultural and intellectual life was maintained or even strengthened during this period, and high-level education reestablished in Constantinople after 1261. However, while there was undoubtedly a revival of learning, calling it a renaissance confuses the issue. Earlier Byzantine “renaissances” have also been promoted: a “Macedonian renaissance” in the tenth century under the Macedonian dynasty, a twelfth-century renaissance, and an earlier revival of learning starting around AD 800. But the term “renaissance” is problematic in all these cases, while for late Byzantium the social framework of the Italian cities was a world away.²⁵ Like Byzantine philosophy, often simply subsumed in modern scholarship into theology (chapter 5), late Byzantine intellectuals and the integrity of their engagement with the Italian cities deserve to be given an autonomous voice. Younger Byzantinists already know this, but negative views can still be found within Byzantine scholarship. The great Byzantinist Ihor Ševčenko appreciated the learning of these intellectuals, whose number he put at 150 or 200, revised upward from his earlier estimate, but compared them adversely with Italian humanists of the fifteenth century (as merely “Christian” or “surface” humanists); others are far less generous.²⁶

I will end this chapter with a set of issues already well known to Byzantinists, but which are also germane to my theme.
When the city of Constantinople was founded, it was part of the eastern Roman empire, and the two parts, east and west, had yet to diverge. Latin was still in use in Constantinople in the sixth century, but the main language, and the language of intellectual culture, in the east was already Greek, and while Latin soon fell away, Greek remained the primary language throughout the long history of Byzantium. But the kind of Greek that was the language of Byzantine culture became more and more separate from the spoken language, and its acquisition depended on an educational system based on rhetorical accomplishment, with a very high premium placed on technical skill.\textsuperscript{27} Within the field of theological literature (of which there was a vast amount), a similar premium was placed on the works of the Fathers of the Church who wrote in Greek—authorities like Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom (known to modern Orthodoxy as “the three hierarchs”). If there seemed to be disagreements between these or others of the Fathers, they had to be explained away, for the Fathers could not be admitted to differ. In addition, Byzantine ecclesiastics and theologians had often received an excellent classical training themselves. They sometimes found it hard to combine the two influences, but many succeeded in doing so.

Nothing could be further from the value placed by our own society on originality and creativity, and these features of Byzantine intellectual life have given rise to many derogatory judgments from modern scholars.\textsuperscript{28} At the heart of the problem is the premium placed in Byzantium on \textit{mimesis} (“imitation”), generally
taken as referring to the value placed on the imitation of classical literary works. As far as Byzantine literature is concerned, the issue is only partially alleviated in the light of current debates about *mimesis* among literary theorists, who see the relation of one literary text to another in far more complex and shifting terms. Again, we can observe an apologetic note, as Byzantine literary scholars try to find ways of presenting their subject in a less derogatory light. This has at various times involved attempting to find actual signs of originality, looking for evidence of humor in this apparently highly serious society, or emphasizing its nonreligious sides. Equally modernizing are publications focusing on gender (eunuchs as well as women, and children as well as adults). The lower classes are less visible in the contemporary sources than the educated elite, but they too have been an object of attention recently, as has “daily life.” The language of one reviewer of the volume from which these examples are taken makes the size of the gap between these and more traditional approaches abundantly clear, referring to “almost incomprehensible oratory,” “unreadable epistolography,” and the need to “entertain the possibility that in some periods the level of artistic or literary achievement was higher or lower than in others”—that is, to admit that “some Byzantine art is poorly executed” and “some Byzantine literature is poorly written.”

Byzantine literature at present constitutes a particular point of tension, but also a *locus* of new approaches, as ways are sought of interpreting texts that seem on the surface to be intractable.
emphasis on performance and performativity—or oral performance, especially in private salons (*theatra*)—over reading is currently overtaking rhetoric as key to elite literary activity. However, actual evidence for *theatra* is very unevenly spread over the period, and an emphasis on performance suits certain kinds of writing more than others—oration, for example, or poetry, or indeed homilies, or literary epistolography or rhetorical display pieces. A close link always existed between literary production and patronage, and demonstrable rhetorical skill was essential in order to attract an influential patron and provide the route to a good career. The court, the administration, and the church all had interests in the educational “system” (in fact, a network of private schools built around particular teachers). These “schools” produced and supported this emphasis on competitive rhetorical skill, especially in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, at times holding interschool competitions of their own, and again in the Palaeologan period, both periods when high-level literary production was at its height.

But this may not be the whole story. Not surprisingly, perhaps, many “literary” discussions of Byzantine literature focus on the works that seem easier to manage for a modern critic: satirical texts in prose and verse—for example, the small corpus of Byzantine “novels” in the manner of earlier works of the same type—and increasingly, the writing of poetry. The twelfth century attracts special attention as a well-documented period that seems to have seen a new kind of literary activity with many surviving examples. Some have even seen in this the beginnings of modern Greek literature.
But despite the “linguistic turn” and the rise of literary theory there is still no comprehensive literary history of Byzantium to replace the classic handbook of Byzantine secular literature by Herbert Hunger, published in 1978. The missing element is always theological writing (and it is hard to imagine many theological treatises being “performed”), yet theologians were authors too, and the very people who wrote in a secular vein often also wrote theological treatises, dialogues, and other such works (chapter 5).

How can we make sense of this complex and in many ways unfamiliar society, which seems to need so much preliminary explanation? Does it need to be rescued, as some modern specialists evidently think, and if so, why?