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*Byzantium in the Ninth Century: Dead or Alive?:
Papers from the Thirtieth Spring Symposium of
Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 1996
(Review)*

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LESLIE BRUBAKER, ed., *Byzantium in the Ninth Century: Dead or Alive?* Papers from the Thirtieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 1996. (Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies, Publications, 5.) Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate, 1998. Pp. xii, 271; black-and-white figures. \$76.95.

Alive. For those who enjoy reading the last chapters of whodunits first, this is the near-unanimous opinion of the authors.

Byzantium in the Ninth Century is organized into three sections, "The Byzantine State," "Byzantine Culture," and "Byzantium and the Outside World." Each has a prefatory essay summarizing and highlighting common topics. Most of the authors are well aware of what the others in their section (and frequently in other parts of the book) are doing, and the book is laced with cross-references. Finally, there is a strong common theme: construction, symbolic and literal. I shall discuss most of the articles as they relate to this theme rather than as they occur in the book.

In the fashionable patois of current scholarship, "construction" has come to mean both self-perception and how one is perceived (or "constructed") by others. It can also mean adaptation (or "reconstruction") to new circumstances. I am suspicious of this trendy terminology, as are many of the contributors to this collection, who continue to use traditional language, but I shall employ it for this review.

Many of the authors maintain that the ninth century was pivotal to the Byzantines' perception of their identity. Externally, the old empire faced ideological, political, and military challenges from its eastern and western rivals (the caliphate, the Carolingian Empire). Internally, the final triumph of iconophilism in 843 and the rise of a new ruling house—the so-called Macedonian dynasty—in the late ninth century required adaptation (reconstruction) on the part of both church and state.

Several authors detect a renewed emphasis on political, legal, and cultural continuities with late antiquity—on Byzantine "Romanness"—to challenge Carolingian claims to the Roman imperial office. Marie Theres Fögen, "Reanimation of Roman Law in the Ninth Century," shows how Byzantines reconstructed Roman law to adapt it to a simpler social order. Scholars usually say that Greek had a larger and more flexible vocabulary than Latin, but in law the roles were reversed, and Medieval Greek was hard-pressed to come up with equivalents to the Latin of Justinian's Code. Shaun Tougher, "The Imperial Thought-World of Leo VI," observes that Leo "the Wise," an emperor who did not personally lead his armies on campaigns, nonetheless retained a lively interest in military affairs. Emulation of the late-antique emperor Justinian I, who also preferred to govern from the capital and leave campaigning to his generals, played a role in Leo's policy.

Another side to the Byzantines' reconstruction of their identity was adaptation to the victory of iconophilism after 843. Paul Speck, "Cultural Suicide," agrees that the challenges of the ninth century, especially the iconophile victory, demanded a greater emphasis on Byzantine continuity with the Roman Empire, but he notes that dependence on and imitation of essentially dead classical and late-antique models ultimately mummified Byzantine literary culture. Speck is thus a dissident from the overall thesis of the book, which is that Byzantium remained intellectually vigorous in the ninth century. Paul Magdalino, "The Road to Baghdad," shows how Byzantine reception of knowledge (especially in mathematics and astronomy/astrology) from the Abbasid caliphate was colored by its association with iconoclastic intellectuals. Marie-France Auzépy, "Manifestations de la propagande en faveur de l'orthodoxie," observes that while "propaganda" is a modern word, the concept was known centuries earlier. Even before the final fall of iconoclasm in 843, iconophiles could find little in patristic sources to justify their viewpoint. (Neither could the iconoclasts.) The question of whether religious art constituted idolatry simply did not occur to the early Christians. Iconophiles were obliged to harness new types of sources—not to

mention construction of an occasional forgery—in service to their propaganda. This theme is echoed by Robin Cormack, “Away from the Centre: ‘Provincial’ Art in the Ninth Century,” which advances Auzépy’s thesis by maintaining that with the triumph of the iconophiles in 843, there was a rush to uncover older icons as proof of the continuity of iconophilism from early Christian days. This trend occurred in the provinces as well as the capital. Evidently, the miracle-working power of icons was not limited by their proximity to the center of political power. Nancy Patterson Ševčenko, “Canon and Calendar: The Role of a Ninth-Century Hymnographer in Shaping the Celebration of the Saints,” describes the reconstruction of the liturgical calendar in the ninth century. “Byzantine” can also be used to designate Eastern Christians living outside the imperial frontiers; using the Christian writer Abū Quarrah as an example, Sidney Griffith, “Byzantine Orthodoxy in the World of Islam,” examines how Christian monastic intellectuals by the ninth century were reconstructing their religious polemics in response to a world where Islam, not iconoclasm, was the main enemy and where Arabic was gradually replacing Greek as the *lingua franca* of the Near East.

Religion and politics can at times be strange bedfellows. Historians have long known that sources favorable to the Macedonian dynasty disparaged Michael III (“the Drunkard”), who was murdered by Basil I, the first Macedonian emperor. But Athanasios Markopoulos, “The Rehabilitation of the Emperor Theophilus,” demonstrates that despite his iconoclasm, Michael’s father, Theophilus, was reconstructed by the Macedonians for ideological reasons.

Chris Wickham, “Ninth-Century Byzantium through Western Eyes,” shows how Byzantines were constructed (perceived) as “the Other” (p. 249) by Latins in this era. I might observe that “construction” was unnecessary. Byzantines *were* others—by the ninth century, Greek was as little known in the West as Latin was in the East, and there were many other cultural differences between the two halves of Christendom. There was also the matter of physical separation. The abysmal ignorance of the eastern and western Mediterranean worlds about each other is demonstrated in Eduardo Moreno’s discussion of the embassy of Theophilus to Spain in 839/40, “Byzantium and al-Andalus.” Theophilus proposed an alliance with the Umayyads of Spain against the Abbasid caliph of Baghdad (who had sacked Amorium, Theophilus’s hometown, in 838) and Spanish Muslim pirates who were troubling the eastern Mediterranean, ultimately seizing Crete. But Theophilus was ill informed. The Umayyads, a land power, could not even defend the Spanish coast against Viking raiders, let alone curb the activities of Muslim pirates hundreds of miles away. And while Theophilus possibly knew of prophetic rumors circulating in Egypt and Syria about the imminent restoration of Umayyad power, the Umayyads themselves were too realistic to think that they could any longer intervene in the eastern Mediterranean. Guislaine Noyé, “Byzance et Italie méridionale,” describes the changes in that troubled area, which jumped from the frying pan of the Lombards into the fire of Muslim attacks. Cities were fortified; new bishoprics sprang up; and an agricultural economy that in late antiquity had emphasized specialized crops for export now adapted to subsistence and self-sufficiency.

A number of archaeologists and art historians deal with construction of a more literal sort. Remains from the ninth century are scarce, especially in modern Istanbul and its vicinity. Consequently, Robert Ousterhout, “Reconstructing Ninth-Century Constantinople,” cautions against inferring (constructing?) too much from too little evidence by comparing several widely divergent scholarly restorations of the same building. Using one of the infrequent recent excavations in Istanbul, Alessandra Ricci, “The Road from Baghdad to Byzantium and the Case of the Bryas Palace in Istanbul,” observes that the palace in question—one of the rare ninth-century structures that have survived in part—may not have been modeled on similar Islamic structures, as many have assumed. (Magdalino is also suspicious of this point.)

There is one lapse from the otherwise high editorial standards of the collection. Speck's and Moreno's essays were apparently written in English by the authors themselves. This leads to a few misprints, imprecise usages ("trouble" for "annoyance" in Moreno's essay, p. 227), and one howler: Speck writes that "Constantine [IV] was discredited by [the rebel] Artabasdos in his propaganda . . . because he was a fiend [enemy] of Christ" (p. 79).

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GENE BRUCKER, *Florence: The Golden Age, 1138–1737*. First paperback ed. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1998. Pp. 278; color frontispiece, many black-and-white and color figures and facsimiles, maps, plans, tables, graphs, and diagrams. \$29.95. First published in Italian in 1983 under the title *Firenze, 1138–1737: L'impero del fiorino* by Arnaldo Mondadori, Milan; English-language version first published in 1984 by Abbeville Press, New York.

While the world of Anglo-American Italian Renaissance scholarship is replete with scholarly articles and monographs treating every aspect of Florentine art, history, and culture, from the marriage market and prostitution to the system of forced communal loans and the complexities of patronage networks, there are surprisingly few books that one might suggest to someone looking for an intelligent overview of the subject. Gene Brucker's *Florence: The Golden Age, 1138–1737* certainly fills this need. First published in Italian in 1983 and issued in English the following year, this handsomely illustrated book—I hesitate, for reasons all positive, to call it a survey—is now available in an edition easily available to students and teachers alike.

The history of Florence in the period we can broadly consider the Renaissance—from the establishment of communal government to the end of the Medici dynasty—is as popular as ever. As the author points out, one need only visit Florence virtually any time of the year and see crowds of tourists and groups of students gathered in Piazza Signoria or standing before Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise*. Yet the public, romantic fascination with Lorenzo de' Medici and Neoplatonism, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, or Michelangelo's *David* is not—nor should it be—enough to justify the central place in the history of Western civilization that the politics and culture of Florence have held. Indeed, many have called into question the relevance of the continued study of this small southern European city-state in a modern, multicultural world. Brucker's book, by its very structure and its initial focus upon his notion of the "uniqueness of the Florentine historical experience" (pp. 7–25), argues forcefully for the continued study of this field as an important, vital, and seminal chapter of world history.

So, why then study Florence? This is the substance of Brucker's first chapter and is perhaps the main question answered by the book as a whole. He begins by discussing the antiquity and character of the city's elevated reputation, both among its citizens and foreign visitors. Brucker separates out the main themes of this literature of praise, commenting first on "the aesthetic dimension, the physical beauty of the city and the surrounding countryside: the churches, palaces, squares, streets, villas." Then he refers to "the great wealth amassed by Florentine merchants, bankers, and industrialists . . . which had taken them to the four corners of the known world—from Scandinavia to Central Asia—and had inspired the comment by Pope Boniface VIII that the Florentines were the fifth element of the universe." Thereupon he discusses "the political achievements [by which Florence was able to] share, with Venice, the distinction of preserving her liberty and republican form of government longer than most other Italian city-states" (pp. 8–9).

Brucker notes Florence's reputation in the cultural realm as primary: "her libraries and archives, and above all, . . . her churches, palaces, and museums." He also makes specific