



Davies, E. & Saxby, M. (2011) 'Review: Elizabeth Jeffreys, John Haldon and Robin Cormack (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*. Oxford University Press, Oxford Handbooks in Classics and Ancient History Series, 2008' *Rosetta* 9: 58-62.  
[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue\\_09/reviews/davies\\_saxby\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_09/reviews/davies_saxby_handbook.pdf)

---

**Elizabeth Jeffreys, John Haldon and Robin Cormack (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*. Oxford University Press, Oxford  
Handbooks in Classics and Ancient History Series, 2008. Pp. 1056. £98.  
ISBN: 978-0-19-925246-6 (Hbk).**

Reviewed by Eve Davies and Mike Saxby

*University of Birmingham*

*The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies (OHBS)* is the most recent (2008) contribution to the study of the 4<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century East Roman Empire. Since its publication nearly twenty years ago in 1991, *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium (ODB)* has deservedly become the first point of call for any Byzantine scholar wishing to accumulate bibliography and a short overview of key people, places and topics in the Byzantine world. The *OHBS* aims to supplement the pre-existing encyclopaedic source with a set of themed essays, over-viewing key primary source types, advantages and limitations of evidences, methodological approaches to evidences, and the history of the discipline. It is written in a style that provides a first port of call for any undergraduate or novice analysing the period, while supplying enough detail to keep experienced scholars stimulated with an impression of their contemporaries' methods and approaches; it enables anyone to expand their horizons.

Part I, entitled 'The Discipline', looks at core source types including archaeology, documents, iconography and numismatics. A concise but detailed overview of the limitations and advantages of the source types is provided. The authors engage with the quantity of attention that historians – past and present – have paid to specific types of evidence; this enables anyone to appreciate the historical research context of evidence groups. In this monumental volume, scholars take the opportunity to lay the foundations for innovative approaches to research, such as Leslie Brubaker's assertion

Rosetta 9.

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue\\_09/reviews/davies\\_saxby\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_09/reviews/davies_saxby_handbook.pdf)

that 'words describe, images show. This is likely to be a recurrent theme in future work.' (p.63). Dion Smythe addresses common misconceptions and defines prosopography as a list of biographical notes, not the study of names (p.176).

Since most primary source types are addressed in 'Part I', it is surprising that material culture is not featured in its own right. Perhaps the absence of material culture *per se* is a result of its comparatively recent emergence as a discipline. Nevertheless, in this introductory section, a whole chapter is devoted to the evidence of brickstamps. In subsequent chapters, other facets of material culture (such as fabrics and clothing) are studied as an adjunct to topics including production, manufacture and technology. It is an oversight to look at tactile evidence without first considering the broader research framework within which they sit. We feel that the individual examples of material culture would have benefited from an overriding chapter that contextualised how this new discipline is defined and approaches to exploiting it.

It is of particular interest to new scholars that directions of future study are noted, such as the long-required textual commentaries on fundamental literary works including Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* and Psellos' *Chronographia* (p.14). In terms of theoretical approaches, Panagiotis Agapitos points out that a detailed study of genre, contrasting techniques and innovations, will enable us to refine our analytical approaches and gain enriched insights into the texts (p.78). Eurydike Georganteli excites readers with the prospect of combining coin finds with maps and written sources to generate a greater understanding of the context within which they belong (p.170). It is clear throughout that the impact of information technology on research into Byzantium has barely been felt, in comparison to its potential.

Part II, entitled 'The Physical World: Landscape, Land Use, and The Environment' moves on from dealing with source types to addressing specific topics, some of which are broken down into smaller chronological chunks.

*Rosetta 9.*

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue\\_09/reviews/davies\\_saxby\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_09/reviews/davies_saxby_handbook.pdf)

Topography and archaeology are clearly informants on roads and bridges, towns and cities, and building types such as churches. These topics are linked to 'Population and Demography' and 'Technology and Production'. John Haldon summarises: 'the empire's political presence in the central Mediterranean and in Italy had markedly worsened from the 750s.'(p.261). Interestingly, Dionysios Stathakopoulos points out that the Justinianic plague (541-750) did not necessarily determine urban decline, but simultaneous with the plague there was a 'rise in the importance of village communities.' (p. 311). It may have been useful to provide a short summary at the end of these papers, as the independent chapters all reiterate the notion of a seventh century 'dark age' and some commonalities and discrepancies may have been expanded upon here.

Part III (which constitutes nearly half the entire book) is entitled 'Institutions and Relationships'. Its eleven chapters cover the broad themes of hierarchies, the state, the church, the economy, society, justice, legal literature, the spiritual world, the symbolic world, language, education and literacy, literature and music. Most chapters are subdivided into more specific themes; thus chapter 10, 'The State', comprises three sections, on structures and administration; the army (both by John Haldon, pp.539, 554); and revenues and expenditure (Wolfram Brandes and John Haldon, p.562). Chapter 18, 'Literature', is particularly wide-ranging, and covers rhetoric (Elizabeth Jeffreys, p.827); historiography (Michael Angold and Michael Whitby, p.838); theological literature (Andrew Louth, p.853); hagiography (Alice-Mary Talbot, p.862); homilies (Mary Cunningham, p.872); epistolography (Margaret Mullett, p.882); poetry and romances (Wolfram Horandner, p.894); and military texts (Eric McGeer, p.907).

Part III contains a number of individual highlights. Jean-Claude Cheynet's 'Bureaucracy and Aristocracies' contains much information in a short space and is distinguished by its logical approach (p.518). John Haldon on 'Structures and Administration' provides much detail, supplemented by diagrams of power structures (p.539). One valuable function of a book as

*Rosetta 9.*

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue\\_09/reviews/davies\\_saxby\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_09/reviews/davies_saxby_handbook.pdf)

wide-ranging as this is to remind us that while there are areas where we can believe that we know a considerable amount, there are other areas where we know much less. Thus Peregrine Horden, writing eloquently on health, hygiene, and healing reminds us of the gaps in our knowledge, and of the difficulties of insufficient evidence (p.685). Horden points out that to understand the evidence we have requires us to take a wide view. In trying to understand how the Byzantines tried to protect themselves against falling ill we must examine the use of prophylactic amulets and magic. Further, if a disease was felt to be demonic in origin, the Church would have had a role in prevention and treatment. Similarly, if washing was felt to be important in disease prevention, Horden reminds us that the best indication that washing remained important in Byzantine civic life is that the Church took control of it and gave it a charitable emphasis.

Part IV, 'The World Around Byzantium', provides a marked contrast to Part III in that it consists of some twenty pages only. It has two chapters: 'Byzantium and its Neighbours' (James Howard-Johnston, p.939) and 'Byzantium's Role in World History' (Cyril Mango, p.957). Mango provides a persuasive and concise summary of the Byzantine achievement, and in particular its role as a bulwark of Europe against Asiatic aggression. To read this short chapter is to realise the overall imbalance of the book. Against the background of the present day and clashes between differing religions it can be argued that Byzantine studies are worthwhile because of the Byzantine experience in this field. If this is accepted, it is disappointing to see the world around Byzantium allocated so little space in the book; a valuable opportunity to emphasise the continuing importance of Byzantine studies has been lost. And in terms of the overall balance of the book, a good case could be made for putting an expanded Part IV first; if Byzantium had not been able to defend itself for so long, would the other aspects of Byzantine civilisation covered by the book have achieved such development?

The regimented structure of the book is both to its advantage and disadvantage. It enables the reader to identify key sections and the papers

Rosetta 9.

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue\\_09/reviews/davies\\_saxby\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/Issue_09/reviews/davies_saxby_handbook.pdf)

flow coherently from one author to another, which we imagine is not easily achieved in such a voluminous compendium. Yet, this structured approach inhibits comparisons across source types and disciplines. In her keynote address at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, celebrating the 2008-9 'Byzantium' exhibition at the Royal Academy, Averil Cameron aired concerns about the 'comparatively slow modernization of the discipline.' There are, in fact, no references to the linguistic turn, a theoretical approach that exploits commonalities across media and genre types, in order to both understand the constructions and moreover enable the researcher to access the meanings underlying the *topoi* and *formulae*. This theoretical approach has revolutionised historical study.

Comparison of the *OHBS* with the *ODB* is inevitable. The *ODB* is over twice as long, and has a far greater range of entries. The *OHBS* scores in having greater depth of coverage in its selected topics. Prices vary according to the retailer, but expect to pay between £250 to £350 for the *ODB* and between £90 to £160 for the *OHBS*. These are not prices which will be possible for many students to pay; they are likely to have to rely on institutional purchase.