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Byzantium's Role in the Formation of Early Medieval Civilization: Approaches and Problems

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Until recently, Europe from the collapse of Roman power in the fifth century to the Carolingian achievement in the ninth—the early Middle Ages—has been the poor step-child of modern historical research. The reasons are not hard to find. Contemporary sources are few and difficult, their language is laced with obscurity, and lingering prejudice against the "dark ages" can still be perceived, especially in North America. But because a problem is difficult does not mean that it can be ignored. And it is increasingly difficult to deny that the long twilight period on the edges of Antiquity and the Middle Ages was fertile and even decisive for the destiny of medieval—and modern—civilization.

These centuries prepared the ground on which the high Middle Ages would build and out of which the modern world would grow. Not a few salient characteristics of contemporary western civilization appear there for the first time. It was then that Christianity conquered northern Europe and that the Germanic, Slavic and Arab peoples emerged as key players on the world stage. It is here that we find the direct ancestors of phenomena as diverse as Europe's modern nation states and today's "Roman" alphabet, a style of writing invented by the scribes of Charlemagne's kingdom in the eighth century.

While many factors which shaped early medieval Europe must be sought, of course, within that civilization's internal development, there is little reason to think that outside stimulus was less influential here than in other, comparable cultures.[1] And few would deny that the diffusion of a civilization's culture beyond its frontiers is of great significance to

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[1] See e.g. P. D. Curtin, *Cross-cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge 1984), p. 1.

understanding both that civilization and its beneficiaries. In the case before us, Byzantium's contribution beyond its boundaries has been detected in domains as diverse as the music, art, thought, political symbolism and language of the early medieval West. Thus, it was Byzantium that supplied the organs which Carolingian rulers first introduced into church services.[2] Early and middle Byzantine masterpieces inspired Carolingian and Ottonian book illuminators, while the court of Constantinople provided the very manuscript which stands at the beginning of western theology's neoplatonizing mysticism.[3] The extent to which the medieval West and its heirs have assimilated their Byzantine inheritance is suggested by the surprise one feels at discovering that this legacy includes state welcome ceremonies such as we now see at airports, or that Byzantium gave us words—and the realities behind them—like "ink," "pasta," "bronze," "boutique," and "diaper."[4]

Even this small sampling indicates the depth and duration of Byzantium's impact on the West. It would be an easy task to add to it.[5] But rather than lengthen a list which scholars have already made imposing, I would like to explore some of the historical complexities of Byzantium's role in shaping early medieval civilization. For it is remarkable that very little effort has been devoted to the deeper issues which underlie the phenomenon and how historians understand it. Was Byzantine influence a constant factor in the early Middle Ages or did it fluctuate, and if so, how and why? Is every parallel occurrence in East and West due to Byzantium's influence on the West—or vice versa—, or are there mirage influences? And what do we really know about the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange in the "dark ages"? Even if it proves impossible to resolve these questions, it is high time to raise them.

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[2] D. Schuberth, *Kaiserliche Liturgie. Die Einbeziehung von Musikinstrumenten, insbesondere der Orgel, in den frühmittelalterlichen Gottesdienst* (Göttingen 1968), pp. 114–34.

[3] For Byzantine art and the West, see, e.g., A. Grabar, "L'asymétrie des relations de Byzance et de l'Occident dans le domaine des arts au moyen âge," *Byzanz und der Westen*, ed. I. Hutter (Vienna 1984), pp. 9–24. On neoplatonizing mysticism, see below, pp. 217 ff. For a general survey of Byzantine thinkers and their western impact see M. V. Anastos, "Some Aspects of Byzantine Influence on Latin Thought," *Twelfth-Century Europe and the Foundations of Modern Society*, ed. M. Clagett *et al.* (Madison 1966), pp. 130–88.

[4] On the early Byzantine roots of medieval political welcomes, see E. H. Kantorowicz, "The 'King's Advent' and the Enigmatic Panels in the Doors of Santa Sabina," *Selected Studies* (Locust Valley 1965), pp. 37–75; cf. M. McCormick, "Clovis at Tours, Byzantine Public Ritual and the Origins of Medieval Ruler Symbolism," *Acts of the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium on Byzantium and the Barbarians* (Vienna, in press); for the linguistic legacy see the remarkable study of H. and R. Kahane, "Abendland und Byzanz: [Literatur und] Sprache," *Reallexikon der Byzantinistik*, 1 (Amsterdam 1976), 345–639, esp. 362, 364, 379–80 and 385–86.

[5] For systematic overviews, see O. Mazal, *Byzanz und das Abendland* (Graz 1981), and W. Ohnsorge *et al.*, "Abendland und Byzanz," *Reallexikon der Byzantinistik*, 1 (Amsterdam 1969–), 126 ff.

But, before these issues are attacked, it must be emphasized that modern scholarship's very positive appraisal of Byzantium's creative role in the formation of early medieval culture is a recent development. It reflects the remarkable achievement of modern Byzantine studies which have at last shaken off the old prejudices bequeathed by the competition and conflict between the upstart West and the legitimate eastern heir of Roman authority. It reflects no less the development of early medieval studies, at last relieved of the nineteenth century's romantic and nationalistic agendas.

By applying new methods and newer questions, today's Byzantinists are exploding the image of a culture frozen in time, crystallized by Yeats' famous poems—"Monuments of unageing intellect"—and perpetuated by the Byzantines themselves.[6] The results reveal a dynamic society, torn between the reality of change and its own ideology of continuity.[7] The upheavals of our own time have lent new legitimacy to what is without question the discipline's most flourishing sector, the early Byzantine period. It stretches from Diocletian's reform of the Roman state down to the shattering events of Heraclius' reign and the advent of Islam. Under its new name of "late antiquity," this era's disturbing features of modernity assert its relevance as it emerges from the sentence of "decadence" imposed by the eighteenth century's neoclassical revival.[8] At the same time that late antique specialists have begun to lay bare the hitherto disdained institutions and characteristics of the early Byzantine empire, medievalists have turned a skeptical eye to the presumed Germanic origins of many aspects of western society. Contemporaries of World War II and its aftermath find less appeal in the argument from silence and some curious assumptions about the nature of early Germanic society when they must explain early medieval phenomena not attested by the older handbooks of classical civilization.[9] At this point, their research increasingly encounters the splendid results of their Byzantinist colleagues and concludes, either that both Germanic and late Roman roots are possible, or indeed, that supposedly Germanic phenomena

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[6] M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory. Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge 1986), p. 395.

[7] Though the debate is not yet concluded: cf. G. Weiss, "Antike und Byzanz. Die Kontinuität der Gesellschaftsstruktur," *Historische Zeitschrift* 224 (1977), 529–60 with A. P. Kazhdan and A. Cutler, "Continuity and Discontinuity in Byzantine History," *Byzantion* 52 (1982), 429–78.

[8] See the excellent essay by H. I. Marrou, *Décadence romaine ou antiquité tardive? IIIᵉ–Vᵉ siècle* (Paris 1977), pp. 9–14.

[9] Anton Baumstark (1872–1948), the distinguished historian of early Christian liturgy, illustrates how tacit assumptions about primeval "Germanness" affected historical analysis. In his fundamental study *Vom geschichtlichen Werden der Liturgie* (Freiburg 1923), p. 85, Baumstark presumed that a military liturgical service attested in seventh-century Spain was a creation of the "germanische Blutart." In fact, the Visigothic ritual fits smoothly into the emerging picture of how the Byzantine army's liturgy of war developed from the sixth century on: McCormick, *Eternal Victory*, pp. 308–12; cf. pp. 245–49 and 394–95.

are actually protobyzantine in character.[10] In other words, the medievalist discovers continuity between his subject and late antiquity thanks to the Byzantinist's success at uncovering the change from classical to early Byzantine civilization!

However great Byzantium's impact on the West, it could scarcely have remained constant over some five centuries. The first task then is to gauge the relative importance of that phenomenon over time. Yet such efforts are exceedingly rare.[11] A tentative effort is therefore useful if only to indicate the complexity of the task and the reality it addresses. While a definitive appraisal must await extensive research on topics ranging from technology to cuisine, a practical alternative is to draw a provisional picture from one sector of the evidence and then distinguish the limitations of that picture.

A recent study has demonstrated how the early medieval West adopted and adapted one of late antiquity's most potent clusters of political belief and ritual, the myth of the eternal victory of the Romano-Byzantine state.[12] The result suggests a triple articulation over time. The first phase runs from the fifth century until sometime in the seventh; the second encompasses the later seventh and eighth centuries, while the third continues past the Carolingians. In the first, the impact of contemporary Byzantine civilization is massive, if not to say dominant. In the second, it seems very limited; in the third, Byzantium begins anew to make its influence felt.

The overwhelming impact of early Byzantium on western rulership is readily understandable: indeed, it is scarcely justifiable to speak of cross-cultural contacts in the fifth or sixth centuries when East and West, North and South bathed in a kind of *koine* Mediterranean culture.[13] The first fitful steps toward a distinctive western style of rulership were naturally guided by the prestigious models of late Roman governance that lay ready to hand, and Germanic rulers sought to anchor their new power in traditions both familiar to the vast majority of their new subjects and impressive to their non-

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[10] Thus P. D. King's excellent study of *Law and Society in the Visigothic Kingdom* (Cambridge 1972) repeatedly notes the possibility or conviction of both Germanic and late Roman roots for a number of Visigothic institutions: e.g. the beliefs behind oaths of allegiance (pp. 41–42) or dowries (p. 225). Another good example is the ongoing debate about the Germanic or protobyzantine origins of late antiquity's private military retainers, the *bucellarii*. Even W. Kienast, "Gefolgswesen und Patrocinium im spanischen Westgotenreich," *Historische Zeitschrift* 239 (1984), 23–75, esp. 26 ff. and 48 ff., the most recent defender of distant Germanic roots, acknowledges the evidence's slenderness, while O. Behrends, "Buccelarius [sic]," *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* 4 (Berlin 1981), 28–31, denies them outright. Neither knows J. Gascou's important contribution "L'institution des Bucellaires," *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 76 (1976), 143–56, in which the testimony of the early Byzantine papyri tends to strengthen Behrends' point of view.

[11] The most remarkable exception lies in the pioneering effort of H. and R. Kahane, "Abendland" (above, note 4), pp. 440–51.

[12] McCormick, *Eternal Victory*, pp. 392–94.

[13] P. Brown, "Eastern and Western Christendom in Late Antiquity: A Parting of the Ways," *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1982), pp. 166–95, here 173.

Roman followers.[14] By the second half of the seventh century, however, the situation had changed both inside and outside the so-called Germanic kingdoms. Within because, by this time, the new monarchies of Visigoths, Franks and even Lombards had grown old in their turn. They had developed the heterogeneous legacies of their founders along novel lines dictated by the unique circumstances and experience of each. Outside because, as Pirenne emphasized, the advent of Islam—and the Slavs—helped disrupt diminishing contacts between eastern and western Mediterranean centers. Intercourse on the crucial level of provincial civilization slackened too, as Constantinople's outlying Latin provinces of Spain, North Africa, Italy and the western Balkans were swept or nibbled away. From mid-eighth century on, much of western Europe came under Frankish dominion and entered an era of political, social, cultural and, it would appear, economic consolidation that fostered renewed contacts with Byzantium and the importation of elements of eastern civilization, not to mention traffic in the opposite direction.[15]

The pattern in contacts attested by state symbolism appears to find comfort in the best documented area of exchange: diplomatic missions between sovereigns. Thus a recent history of Byzantine diplomacy in the early medieval west shows that Constantinople dispatched 39 missions to rulers of Western states over the nearly 16 decades separating the collapse of the imperial government in Ravenna in 476 and 634 A.D., an average approaching two and one half per decade. The fifteen decades from the middle of the eighth century to 900 A.D. record 34 such embassies, slightly over two per decade. The eleven and one half decades between 634 and 750 stand in stark contrast: they show no embassies from Constantinople to the West.[16]

There is, moreover, a rough correlation between phases of western receptivity and the fortunes of Byzantine political and cultural power. The resurgence that began in the fifth century and endured into the seventh entailed extensive politico-military presence and intervention in the West, symbolized by Justinian's reconquest. The loss of the empire's wealthiest

[14] McCormick, "Clovis at Tours" (above, note 4).

[15] H. Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, tr. B. Miall (New York 1939). For a good selection of articles devoted to the "Pirenne Thesis," see P. E. Hübinger, *Bedeutung und Rolle des Islam beim Übergang vom Altertum zum Mittelalter*, Wege der Forschung 202 (Darmstadt 1968); R. Hodges and D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe: Archaeology and the Pirenne Thesis* (Ithaca 1983), offer a stimulating revision founded on recent archaeological work which should be read in conjunction with D. Claude's thorough reexamination of the written evidence: *Der Handel im westlichen Mittelmeer während des Frühmittelalters*, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philolog.-hist. Kl. 3, 144 (Göttingen 1985).

[16] Based on T. C. Lounghis, *Les ambassades byzantines en Occident depuis la fondation des États barbares jusqu'aux croisades (407–1096)* (Athens 1980), pp. 462–77. In no case have I counted emissaries to popes, nor, in the third period, to the Venetian doges, since Venice must still be reckoned as belonging to the Byzantine empire into the ninth century: F. C. Lane, *Venice, a Maritime Republic* (Baltimore 1973), p. 5.

provinces toward the middle of the seventh century forced on Constantinople a financial crisis of unparalleled proportions and inevitably undermined Byzantium's positions in the West. Finally, the eighth century brought renewed stability and rekindled the political and cultural ambitions of a significant but diminished imperial power, ambitions which peaked in the ninth and tenth centuries, precisely the time when Byzantine influence again becomes very apparent.[17]

Useful though this broad chronological pattern may appear as a provisional framework, it cannot stand without qualification for all facets and regions of medieval culture. Its concern with the symbolism of state slants its focus toward the monarchy, an institution whose development and prestige may not reflect developments at less exalted levels of society. The analysis of early medieval cross-cultural exchange must be socially differentiated, especially since archaeology hints that court milieux at opposite ends of the Mediterranean may have shared more material culture with each other than with the less privileged groups on their respective doorsteps.[18] That the broad chronology closely parallels the distribution of the surviving written sources raises the question of the value of the argument from silence. And the pattern suffers one important geographical exception: throughout this period and beyond, Italy's integration into the Byzantine world was so extensive that Peter Classen has reckoned Italy's forcible removal from the Byzantine to the northern sphere as the ninth century's most significant contribution to the birth of Europe.[19] What is more, the correlation between Byzantium's political power and the diffusion of its influence varies according to the aspect of civilization one examines. Thus the collapse of Byzantine rule in the near East was precisely the factor which triggered an important immigration of that region's Greek-speaking elite to Italy, especially Rome, and explains why the pope should send a Greek from Tarsus to revitalize Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons.[20] Nor does the reader need to be reminded of the connection between the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the arrival of Greek scholars in the West associated with the Renaissance. Nonetheless, the fact remains that these considerations affect only the middle period; the unclarity of the situation between the fourth decade of the seventh century and the middle of the eighth cannot obscure the great difference between the fifth and ninth centuries.

Byzantine influence in the field of political symbolism therefore fluctuated over time. The preceding considerations also suggest that its

[17] On the fiscal crisis of the seventh century, see the remarkable synthesis of M. Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c. 300–1450* (Cambridge 1985), pp. 613 ff.

[18] Cf. H. Vierck, "*Imitatio imperii* und *interpretatio Germanica* vor der Wikingerzeit," *Les pays du Nord et Byzance*, ed. R. Zeitler (Uppsala 1981), pp. 64–113, here pp. 81 ff.

[19] P. Classen, "Italien zwischen Byzanz und dem Frankenreich," *Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, Vorträge und Forschungen 28 (Sigmaringen 1983), pp. 85–115.

[20] J. M. Sansterre, *Les moines grecs et orientaux à Rome aux époques byzantine et carolingienne (milieu du VIe–fin du IXe s.)* 1 (Brussels 1982), pp. 123–24 and 190–91.

intensity varied geographically—frontier provinces enjoyed a privileged position—and according to social status.[21]

An accurate assessment of the changing patterns of Byzantium's role in the formation of early medieval civilization must pay close heed to what really constitutes evidence of cross-cultural exchange. Too frequently, the mere observation of parallels between East and West is reckoned sufficient proof that contemporaneous influence was at work. But the particular historical circumstances of Byzantium and the West can foster the mirage of cross-cultural exchange, particularly in the second and third periods. The mirage may only distort the moment and direction of exchange, or it may affect its reality.

First, the surviving evidence's distribution over time and space is very uneven. In sheer volume, the evidence of almost all kinds—narrative and documentary sources, images, buildings, manuscripts—which survives from the western kingdoms between 600 and 750 far surpasses what has come down to us from contemporary Byzantium. It therefore stands to reason that if there were indeed contacts between these two cultures, institutions or customs which originated in Byzantium might crop up first in the better documented medieval West. And in fact, penal practice, the liturgy and royal insignia have all revealed cases which confirm this pattern.[22]

Further precision in defining the moment of exchange may well result from Byzantinists' increasing success at stripping from their subject the veil of continuity Byzantium has thrown over its evolution. There are in any case numerous parallels between the two civilizations which reflect residual, rather than recent exchange. Two examples chosen from different layers of reality illustrate and clarify this point.

Specialists in Byzantine manuscripts know well a conventional jingle with which Greek scribes often concluded the arduous labor of copying a text:

> ὡς ἡδὺ τοῖς πλέουσιν εὔδιος λιμήν,
> οὕτως καὶ τοῖς γράφουσιν ὁ ὕστατος στίχος.
>
> A calm port is no sweeter for sailors,
> Than the last line for scribes.

The most recent study of the poem's history observed that a nearly identical Latin colophon occurs in a manuscript copied in Merovingian France, some

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[21] On the first point, cf. D. Obolensky, "Byzantine Frontier Zones and Cultural Exchanges," *Actes du XIVᵉ Congrès international des études byzantines* 1 (Bucharest 1974), 302–14; concerning the second, I Ševčenko has noted a similar social stratification of Byzantine influence among the Slavs: "Byzanz und die Slaven," *Anzeiger der phil.-hist. Klasse der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 122 (1985), 97–115, here 110–11.

[22] Penal practice: R. S. Lopez, "Byzantine Law and Its Reception by the Germans and the Arabs," *Byzantion* 16 (1942–43), 445–61; liturgy: McCormick, *Eternal Victory*, pp. 394–95; insignia: Vierck, "*Imitatio*" (above, note 18), pp. 83 ff.

two centuries before the earliest attested Greek version. Does this imply that Merovingian copyists influenced their Byzantine counterparts? The uneven geographical distribution of surviving MSS combines with scant seventh-century evidence of cross-cultural exchange to caution against a hasty conclusion. That seventh-century book production saw little innovation points to an earlier origin. In fact, a closely related *topos* occurs in Cassiodorus, one of the sixth century's most outstanding intermediaries between East and West, and indicates that the medieval Greek and Latin texts both derived from a common ancestor in the bilingual book culture of late antiquity.[23]

A second case comes from the realm of costume which, in the early Middle Ages, emblematized ethnic identity. Einhard's famous sketch of Charlemagne's life-style emphasizes that he steadfastly avoided "foreign" clothes (*peregrina . . . indumenta*), preferring "native" Frankish dress. He says that in summertime Charlemagne wore a short cloak called a *sagum*. Now Byzantine officials of the ninth century also wore similar garments called *sagia*, but this parallel demonstrates neither Frankish influence on Byzantium nor vice versa. In fact, it is easy to establish that the word and the garment appeared in the classical world long before the Franks. The Franks adopted this kind of cloak along with many other elements of the pan-Mediterranean material culture into which they settled, even as the Byzantines remained faithful to the same traditions.[24]

In both instances, eastern and western societies show close parallels which do not correspond to recent cross-cultural exchange. The historical link is indirect, in that both derive from the late antique matrix which spawned the two cultures. The cloak and the jingle tell us nothing, however, about Byzantium's relations with the Franks in the ninth century. Here at least the common ancient origin explains the parallels, and rules out recent influence. A final, enigmatic set of phenomena admits no such explanation and underscores the limits of current historical understanding. They might be called structural parallels.

It is a remarkable yet little commented fact that, in their individual developments, both eastern and western halves of Christendom display some striking parallels for which satisfying residual or recent cross-cultural causes

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[23] K. Treu, "Der Schreiber am Ziel. Zu den Versen Ὥσπερ ξένοι χαίρουσιν . . . und ähnlichen," *Studia codicologica*, Texte und Untersuchungen 124 (Berlin 1977), pp. 473–92; cf. M. McCormick, *Scriptorium* 34 (1980), 191*, no. 960 and, for a new example, M. Manfredini, "Ancora un codice con la formula Ὥσπερ ξένοι . . . ," *Codices manuscripti* 10 (1984), 72. Cassiodorus plays with this metaphor when he introduces his treatise on the soul as an additional thirteenth book added to the twelve of *Variae*: *De Anima*, 1, ed. J. W. Halporn, *Corpus Christianorum, series latina* 96 (1972), 534. 1–2.

[24] Charlemagne's dress: Einhard, *Vita Karoli magni*, 23, ed. O. Holder-Egger, *Monumenta Germaniae historica*, Scriptores rerum germanicarum (Hanover and Leipzig 1911), pp. 27. 22–28. 12; Byzantine dignitaries: N. Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IXᵉ et Xᵉ siècles* (Paris 1972), p. 170, n. 154.

have not yet emerged. Their detailed analysis and explanation must await the birth of a comparative approach to early medieval history, but the existence of such parallels can no longer be denied. It is, for instance, quite clear that between 750 and 850 both the Greek and Latin-speaking worlds perfected new, smaller, more economical book calligraphies called minuscule scripts. The new scripts marked a cultural epoch in more than one respect. They broke decisively with the old majuscule book-hands which had dominated classical Graeco-Roman literary culture and ensured its transmission. For this reason the emergence of minuscule necessitated the transliteration of each culture's classical heritage into the new script if it was to remain easily intelligible to later readers. And it is well known that what was not transliterated by western or Byzantine scribes has mostly disappeared.[25] The new minuscules also happen to be the archetypes of our modern Greek and "Roman" scripts.

The history of political ceremonial furnishes another example. Both eastern and western monarchies of the ninth century share a common shift in the main audience of the sovereign's ceremonial away from the emphasis on a mass audience obvious in their common early Byzantine matrix. While neither Byzantine emperors nor Frankish kings completely neglected the general public in their ceremonial display, it is safe to say that they paid more attention to an elite audience recruited from each society's aristocracy. I at least have uncovered no evidence to suggest that this parallel development was due to cross-cultural cause and effect or some form of imitation. It seems to reflect independent responses to similar but independent developments in each polity's social and political structure.[26]

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[25] On the emergence of the Latin (Carolingian) minuscule, see B. Bischoff, *Paläographie des römischen Altertums und des abendländischen Mittelalters* (Berlin 1979), pp. 137–39 and 143–47. C. Mango ("La culture grecque et l'Occident au VIII° siècle," *I problemi dell'Occidente nel secolo VIII*, Settimane di studio del centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo 20 [Spoleto 1973], pp. 683–721, here pp. 716–21) boldly suggested that the use of Latin minuscule at Rome may have inspired the Greek phenomenon. Although this view has failed to gain acceptance (cf. G. Cavallo and O. Kresten, *ibid.*, pp. 845–57; Sansterre, *Moines grecs*, 2, p. 219, n. 315), and Professor Mango has himself acknowledged the difficulty of identifying a precise link, it has clarified the issues. Cf. C. Mango, "L'origine de la minuscule," *La paléographie grecque et byzantine* (Paris 1977), pp. 175–79, esp. 177–78. A further element which merits exploration is the roughly contemporaneous adoption of a minuscule in Georgian, the oldest *dated* example of which seems to be a book copied at St. Sabas near Jerusalem in 864 A.D.: Sinai, St. Catherine's, Georg. 32, 57 and 33 (three volumes of the same book); cf. G. Garitte, *Catalogue des manuscrits géorgiens littéraires du Mont Sinaï*, Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium, Subsidia 9 (Louvain 1956), pp. 72–97, esp. 93–95; illustrated in I. Abuladze, *K'art'uli Ceris Nimušebi* (Tbilisi 1973), p. 83. I owe this last information to the kindness of my colleague Robert W. Thomson, Director of Dumbarton Oaks.

[26] See McCormick, *Eternal Victory*, p. 395. Another possible example has been noted by P. Speck, "Ikonoklasmus und die Anfänge der Makedonischen Renaissance," *Varia* 1, Poikila byzantina 4 (Bonn 1984), pp. 175–210, esp. 195–97, who emphasizes the near contemporaneous development of Renaissance-like movements in Byzantium, the Frankish West and the Abbasid

A third illustration comes from just beyond the period under discussion here and testifies to yet another field of human activity: at roughly the same time, family names became a familiar feature of both Byzantine and western aristocratic kinships. So far not a shred of evidence has come forth to suggest a causal link between the two cultures.[27]

Transformations in script, political ceremonial and personal names stem from three very different layers of reality. Neither the shared experience of Byzantium and the West in late antiquity nor cross-cultural influence seems to offer sufficient explanation for any of these striking parallels. In other words, one must begin to explore the possibility that in two sibling cultures which issued from a common matrix, similar processes developed independently around the same time for reasons that so far escape us. Again, mere parallelism of the evidence does not suffice to show influence.

If we turn from the mirage of Byzantine influence back to the reality, to organs, manuscripts, theological treatises and political symbolism, we are forced to observe that historians' success at uncovering examples of Byzantine influence has not been matched by advances in understanding how and why it occurred. One pressing task must be to clarify the nature of Byzantine influence in the West. The first obstacle is the word influence itself. It implies that the society which "receives" the foreign "influence" plays a passive role, inertly absorbing the output of another society. In reality, the process is usually quite the opposite: the borrower takes the initiative in appropriating from the "donor" society an element which it deems useful.[28] A few established cases of Byzantium's contribution to western society develop and clarify some key issues behind the process.

It has been observed that Charlemagne's writing office adopted from Constantinople the custom of authenticating certain documents by hanging lead seals from them. Hitherto, Frankish kings had used only seals made of wax. However, Charlemagne's clerks adapted the borrowed custom to the new, "archaeological" taste prevalent at his court by rejecting contemporary Byzantine standards of facing portraiture, and resurrecting profile views associated with early Byzantium.[29] The borrowing milieu reflected its own internal requirements and fashioned the borrowed element to its own

West and the Abbasid Caliphate. He suspects that the Byzantine revival may have been spurred by rivalry with the Arabs.

[27] Although Byzantium seems to have had something of a head start over the West, aristocratic family names spread through both societies in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: A. P. Kazhdan, Социальный состав господствующего класса Византии XI–XII вв.(= *The Social Structure of Byzantium's Ruling Class in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*) (Moscow 1974), pp. 223–26 and K. Schmid, *Gebetsgedenken und adliges Selbstverständnis im Mittelalter. Ausgewählte Beiträge* (Sigmaringen 1983), pp. 212–18.

[28] P. E. Schramm, *Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik*, Schriften der *Monumenta Germaniae historica*, 13. 3 (Stuttgart 1956), pp. 1068–1072; cf. P. Brown, "Eastern and Western Christendom" (above, note 13), pp. 171–72.

[29] P. E. Schramm, *Die deutschen Kaiser und Könige in Bildern ihrer Zeit, 751–1190*, ed. F. Mütherich (Munich[2] 1983), pp. 35–36.

distinctive cultural context.   In other words, this appropriation of a Byzantine custom tells us as much about the differences between the two civilizations as their similarities.

Yet even so clear an example of cross-cultural borrowing merely demonstrates the facts of contact and appropriation: it does not explain them. In part, the need to explain has fallen victim to the misleading connotations of the notion of influence. Once we recognize that the impulse to borrow from a foreign culture arises in the borrower, we perceive the necessity of determining what factors beyond mere availability induced the borrowing culture to do so. In part, Byzantium's ideology of continuity combined with historians' love of their subject to foster the assumption of Byzantine civilization's unchanging superiority over the contemporary West at all times and in all respects, with the further implication that medieval westerners shared that appreciation.[30] But the new Byzantinism has cancelled this approach, as eminent specialists have underscored that the seventh century's drastic upheavals produced a Byzantium which, however fascinating, cut a relatively impoverished and perhaps even backward character in the eighth century.[31] This compels renewed efforts to explain why and how contemporary western societies were moved to borrow from Constantinople.

In the early Middle Ages, the inquiry can rarely proceed beyond factors of a rather general nature, but even these illuminate why borrowing occurred and clarify what Byzantium represented for the borrowing society. For example, Visigothic Spain's elite seems to have followed closely developments in the Byzantine capital and provinces. This explains that they knew and were able to appropriate significant elements of imperial ritual. But only a careful study of the conditions of Visigothic rulership and comparison with other innovations in the Spanish symbolism of power reveals that the struggle between ambitious kings and a powerful aristocracy coalesced with their shared admiration for Constantinopolitan culture to spur the court to borrow and adapt the Byzantine ceremonies marking the defeat of usurpers. The unique conditions of Visigothic society explain the power of one kind of Byzantine "influence" there.[32]

A hundred years later and a little to the North, the volume of preserved source materials swells dramatically and it at last becomes possible to go beyond the general factors which fostered Byzantine "influence" and examine the details of this process.   Yet even under these more favorable circumstances, the historian soon finds more questions than answers.

[30] E.g. *ibid.*, p. 35, where the eighth-century Byzantine court and its international prestige is compared to that of Versailles under Louis XIV.

[31] Mango, "La culture grecque" (above, note 25), pp. 720–21; cf. Kazhdan and Cutler, "Continuity" (above, note 7), pp. 437 ff.

[32] McCormick, *Eternal Victory*, pp. 315–23.

Western assimilation of the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus was a decisive step in medieval intellectual development. This Byzantine neoplatonist theologian's Latin after-life has been linked with the genesis of Gothic architecture and influenced thinkers as diverse as Abelard, Thomas Aquinas and Wyclif.[33] An extraordinarily favorable source situation allows scholars to map in some detail the earliest stage of Pseudo-Dionysius' entry into the mainstream of western thought. The favorable situation affords insight into the dynamics of early medieval cultural exchange.

In September 827, the Greek text of the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus arrived at the court of Charlemagne's son and successor, Louis the Pious, in the baggage of an embassy from Byzantium. The legation was headed by a high dignitary of the church of Constantinople and had been sent to Compiègne by Emperors Michael II and Theophilus in connection with a treaty between the two empires. The book, which scholars believe has survived to this day in Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale, grec 437), may well have been calculated to win favor with Hilduin—one of Louis' chief advisers. Hilduin just happened to head the royal abbey of St. Denis (that is, Dionysius) in Paris and maintained against all opponents that his house's patron saint was none other than the Dionysius whom St. Paul converted in Athens, and the presumed author of the Areopagite corpus. Within weeks of the presentation, the Frankish emperor turned the book over to Hilduin, immediately triggering a series of miraculous healings at the Parisian abbey, which miracles, of course, demonstrated the identity of the two Dionysii.[34] As part of the campaign to glorify his abbey's patron saint, Hilduin sponsored the first—mediocre—Latin translation of the works. A few years later, the mysterious Irishman John Scot Eriugena, the greatest intellect of the Latin ninth century, would try to improve the translation and grapple with its content, launching the Areopagite's western diffusion.

Even this brief account illuminates the complexity of the historical processes by which Byzantium worked its way into the fabric of early medieval civilization. The concept of "influence" is sadly inadequate to explain the unique constellation of factors which converged to cause one of the most pregnant instances of cross-cultural transfer in the Middle Ages. What does the case of Pseudo-Dionysius tell us about these factors?

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[33] Pseudo-Dionysius and Gothic architecture: O. von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of the Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order* (New York 1956), pp. 106–07; for a succinct systematic survey of the Areopagite's enduring impact in the West, see R. Roques *et al.*, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 3 (Paris 1954), 244–429, esp. 318–429; cf. the update in G. O'Daly, "Dionysius Areopagita," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 7 (Berlin 1981), 772–80, here 777–78.

[34] G. Théry, *Études dionysiennes* 1 (Paris 1932), pp. 1–100; R. Loenertz, "Le panégyrique de S. Denys l'Aréopagite par S. Michel le syncelle," *Analecta bollandiana* 68 (1950), 94–107 and "La légende parisienne de S. Denys l'Aréopagite. Sa genèse et son premier témoin," *ibid.*, 69 (1951), 217–37.

The first element is availability, no small consideration in a world of significant but limited cross-cultural contacts. In this case, someone in the Byzantine government actually took the initiative of making Pseudo-Dionysius available to a foreign elite, quite possibly in order to further precise diplomatic goals.[35] The ambassador was in any case one vector in this transfer; his intention had of course little to do with the distant results.

Another essential factor was the existence of someone on the receiving end who was interested in and capable of using Pseudo-Dionysius. Let us not forget that a century earlier, the pope himself seems to have sent another copy of Pseudo-Dionysius to Louis the Pious' grandfather: that copy vanished without a trace.[36] The powerful abbot of St. Denis was therefore a second indispensable vector in the process of the Byzantine thinker's entry into western theology.

Yet Hilduin's first use of the book had nothing to do with Pseudo-Dionysius' theology: he exploited it as a *relic*, whose presence at his abbey proved his point and cured the sick. It was only later, when the emperor urged him to compile a *devotional* work, that the abbot got around to dealing with the content. While Byzantium's place in the early medieval world may explain why an embassy came to Compiègne seeking to influence a Frankish ruler and therefore made the book available to Frankish society, it cannot explain what the book meant to Hilduin. For whatever Hilduin's attitudes toward Byzantine civilization may have been, they do not suffice to explain his energetic appropriation of the works of Pseudo-Dionysius. As his own testimony makes abundantly clear, the book from Byzantium was first and foremost a weapon in the struggle to enhance the prestige and power of his own house via an apostolic connection.[37] And of course, so far as Hilduin knew, there was nothing Byzantine about the Dionysian corpus itself, since the demonstration of its sixth-century origin lay more than a thousand years in the future.

Hilduin's promotion of Pseudo-Dionysius' writings also illustrates the present limits of our knowledge. For all that is known of this case, scholars are reduced to hypotheses when it comes to the crucial question of the linguistic intermediary. Who actually did the translating for Hilduin? The leading theory is that Hilduin used unknown Greeks.[38] But what Byzantines did Hilduin know? Aside from ambassadors, were any Greeks associated with the Carolingian elite? How many and where were they? And with whom were they associated? Or was most knowledge of Byzantium mediated not by the Byzantines themselves, but by northern

[35] On this point, *ibid.*, 232.

[36] Théry, *Études*, 1, pp. 1–3; cf. Sansterre, *Moines*, 1, pp.182–83.

[37] Hilduin of St. Denis, *Epistolae variorum*, 20, c. 4, ed. E. Dümmler, *Monumenta Germaniae historica, Epistolae* 5 (1899), 330. 3–11; cf. c. 8, 331. 10–14 etc.

[38] Théry, *Études*, 1, p. 134 and 142; cf. B. Bischoff, *Mittelalterliche Studien* 2 (Stuttgart 1967), pp. 256 ff.

scholars like Eriugena, Sedulius Scotus, and Martin of Laon who struggled to acquire some elements of Greek with the miserable research instruments available to them?[39] Or by Italians like the remarkable Anastasius Bibliothecarius who, like some Franks, actually sailed to Byzantium? In other words, the analysis of the dynamics of Byzantine-Western cultural exchange in the early Middle Ages must begin to take into account the essential characteristic of early medieval society. In a world in which personal and family relations were everything, in which kings ruled peoples, not countries, personal—rather than institutional—networks stand a good chance of having channeled and conditioned the diffusion and appropriation of Byzantine civilization and it is to them that future research must turn.

The sampling of borrowings adduced at the outset indicated Byzantium's extensive role in the formation of early medieval civilization. But the study of this historical process must learn to differentiate the Byzantine contribution in time, space, social strata and content, to shun everywhere the misleading notion of influence and in some places the mirage of cross-cultural causality. It must explore the dynamics of this process and then identify the vectors of cross-cultural transfers. As ongoing research uncovers new instances of Byzantium's impact on the West—and vice versa—, the very success of that inquiry urges the historian to begin to contemplate the how and why of that phenomenon. The historical understanding of both societies stands only to gain.

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[39] The best account of the resources of western would-be intermediaries is E. Jeauneau, "Jean Scot Érigène et le grec," *Archivum latinitatis medii aevi* 41 (1977–1978; printed 1979), 5–50.