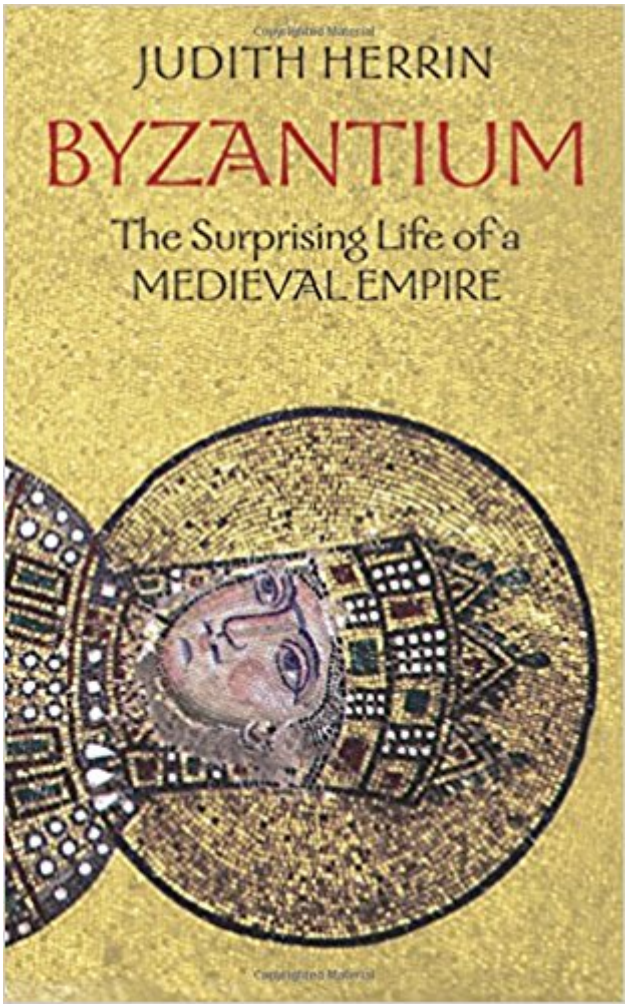
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Byzantium: The Surprising Life Of A Medieval Empire



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Synopsis

Byzantium. The name evokes grandeur and exoticism--gold, cunning, and complexity. In this unique book, Judith Herrin unveils the riches of a quite different civilization. Avoiding a standard chronological account of the Byzantine Empire's millennium--long history, she identifies the fundamental questions about Byzantium--what it was, and what special significance it holds for us today. Bringing the latest scholarship to a general audience in accessible prose, Herrin focuses each short chapter around a representative theme, event, monument, or historical figure, and examines it within the full sweep of Byzantine history--from the foundation of Constantinople, the magnificent capital city built by Constantine the Great, to its capture by the Ottoman Turks. She argues that Byzantium's crucial role as the eastern defender of Christendom against Muslim expansion during the early Middle Ages made Europe--and the modern Western world--possible. Herrin captivates us with her discussions of all facets of Byzantine culture and society. She walks us through the complex ceremonies of the imperial court. She describes the transcendent beauty and power of the church of Hagia Sophia, as well as chariot races, monastic spirituality, diplomacy, and literature. She reveals the fascinating worlds of military usurpers and ascetics, eunuchs and courtesans, and artisans who fashioned the silks, icons, ivories, and mosaics so readily associated with Byzantine art. An innovative history written by one of our foremost scholars, Byzantium reveals this great civilization's rise to military and cultural supremacy, its spectacular destruction by the Fourth Crusade, and its revival and final conquest in 1453.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Offering a brilliant study of the history of the Byzantine empire, HerrinÃ¢â ¬â •whose groundbreaking The Formation of Christendom challenged traditional views on the development of ChristianityÃ¢â ¬â •draws a similarly original portrait of a tradition-based yet dynamic empire that protected Christianity by checking the westward expansion of Islam. Herrin progresses in lively fashion, chronicling the 1,000-year history of Byzantium from its rise in A.D. 306 to its demise at the hands of the Ottomans. Along the way, Herrin, a professor at King's College, London, introduces an astonishing cast of characters, such as the empire's first leader, Constantine I; religious leaders such as Patriarch Photios; and Anna Komnene, the great 12th-century historian whose Odyssey-like epic, the Alexiad, celebrated the 37-year reign of her father, Alexios I. Drawing on letters, journals and other primary documents from both political figures and ordinary citizens, Herrin splendidly recreates an empire whose religious art, educational curriculum, tax and legal systems, and coronation rituals preserved the best of the empire's pre-Christian Greek past while at the same time passing along advances to the rest of the world. Herrin's history is hands-down the finest introduction to Byzantium and its continuing significance for world history. 8 color illus.; 16 b&w illus.; maps. (Feb.) Copyright Ã Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Judith Herrin, Winner of the 2016 Dr A.H. Heineken Prize, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences"The scope and shape of Herrin's survey of Byzantine history and culture are impressive. She moves from the foundation of Constantinople to its fall before the Turks in a series of twenty-eight short chapters. This allows the curious or impatient reader to sample, according to taste, such delectable topics as Greek fire, eunuchs, icons, and the Towers of Trebizond . . . "--G.W. Bowersock, New York Review of Books"Offering a brilliant study of the history of the Byzantine empire, Herrin...draws [an] original portrait of a tradition-based yet dynamic empire that protected Christianity by checking the westward expansion of Islam. Drawing on letters, journals and other primary documents from both political figures and ordinary citizens, Herrin splendidly recreates an empire whose religious art, educational curriculum, tax and legal systems, and coronation rituals preserved the best of the empire's pre-Christian Greek past while at the same time passing along advances to the rest of the world. Herrin's history is hands-down the finest introduction to Byzantium and its continuing significance for world history."--Publishers Weekly"The book is comprehensive, but the paragraphs are never dense and the prose retains throughout a lively quality."--J.W. Nesbitt, Choice"The big, standard histories contain a wearying succession of emperors, patriarchs, battles, and sieges...At the other end of the scale there are lightweight travelogues, or books that pick out

the juiciest moments (such as the final siege of 1453), leaving aside many things that are more important but less conducive to a good story. Judith Herrin has tried to find a middle ground between those two extremes, and has succeeded in a rather original way. Her book is a necklace of short chapters, each on a different topic, strung out in broadly chronological order. Some are devoted to places (Ravenna, Mount Athos and, of course, Constantinople itself); some are about people (Anna Comnena, Saints Cyril and Methodius, and the unforgettably named Basil the Bulgar-Slayer); and some are on general subjects, whether large (Greek Orthodoxy, the Byzantine economy, the Crusades) or small ('Greek Fire', and eunuchs)."--Noel Malcolm, The Daily Telegraph"Judith Herrin, a professor at King's College London, sets out to show that there are far better reasons to study and admire the civilisation that flourished for more than a millennium before the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, and whose legacy is still discernible all over south-east Europe and the Levant. She presents Byzantium as a vibrant, dynamic, cosmopolitan reality which somehow escaped the constraints of its official ideology."--The Economist"Others in recent years have made worthy efforts to interest us in the Byzantine achievement, but none has made it live in quite the way that Herrin does. She's been bold in foregrounding themes, concerned more with painting a panoramic picture of Byzantium's 'surprising life' than to establish a chronology--though the narrative's there to give the reader a sense of how it all progressed. Free from portentousness and pretentiousness, she doesn't insist on her subject's importance or relevance: the freshness and enthusiasm of her book is its real point. Not just an important work of scholarship but a delight to read, this study works a minor miracle in raising Byzantium, Lazarus-like, from its dusty grave."--Michael Kerrigan, The Scotsman"[A] remarkable new history...Herrin takes a fresh approach and focuses on manifold aspects of Byzantine culture, civilization, and religion. Herrin's scholarship is impeccable, yet she writes like the very best of travel writers. She paints vivid pictures of this prosperous and pious culture whose capital was a fortified city of sunlight glinting off the gilded church domes and spires, surrounded on three sides by the shimmering Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus.... From the first page, the author embraces the reader in the love of her subject. She entertains and captivates while throwing open the doors to her formidable treasury of knowledge."--M.M. Bennetts, Christian Science Monitor"Byzantium's history is presented chronologically, which helps explain why there's no simple description of its legacy. Herrin's emphasis on the empire's proudest achievement, its culture--separate chapters are devoted to religion, economy, warfare, art and literature--is an armchair delight."--Brett Popplewell, The Toronto Star"[Herrin] takes an innovative approach.... The scope is broad--religion, politics, art, war, gender--and the style lively and personal."--The Atlantic"Byzantium covers a huge period of space,

time, and cultural influence, which is now synthesized into bite-sized pieces in Judith Herrin’s new book Byzantium. . . . As a non-specialist, I can fully attest to her success in making her book appear friendly and imminently readable. . . . The eye-catching cover is a visual clue to the treasures within this book, which explores the intrigue of the imperial Byzantine court; describes the lavish clothing, administration, food, architecture, and art of Byzantium; reveals a fascinating cast of royals and ascetics; and captures the imagination about this era of the Eastern Roman Empire down to the 15th century, when Byzantium falls to the Ottoman Empire. . . . Herrin seeks to promote the positive and creative aspects of Byzantium and show the reader a Byzantium that is more than derivative of Greek and Roman culture, but rather itÃ Â s own culture. She excels at this."--E-History.com"Herrin’s hope is to dispel the aura of decadence that hangs over Byzantium so that we can see the empire for what it was: one of the great, creative civilizations. Herrin’s account shows that, indeed, Byzantium can’t be explained as a millennial slide downhill, the judgment propounded by Gibbon in The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire and often repeated since."--Roger Gathman, Austin American-Statesman"Here of course lies the strong contemporary resonance of Herrin’s argument. Her lively portrayal of a forgotten civilisation impacts on the revived Muslim awareness and expansion of today."--Tom Nairn, Open Democracy Blog (reprinted from Australian Journal, Arena)"It is only as one sees Byzantium for itself, and not simply in relation to Islam or Western Europe, that one can begin to appreciate its greatness. And that is what makes Herrin’s Byzantium so welcome. All the expected topics are here: the founding of Constantinople, the building of the great church of Agia Sophia, the rule of Justinian and the codification of Roman law, the shimmering mosaics of Ravenna, the harsh consequences of the rise of Islam, the place of icons in Byzantine life and the iconoclastic controversy, the conversion of the Slavs and the creation of an alphabet for the Slavic tongue, Mount Athos, the outstanding historian Anna Komnene, the arrival of the Crusaders, the siege of Constantinople. But the book contains much more."--Robert Louis Wilken, First Things"Herrin has produced an accessible, fascinating book that avoids the pitfalls of writing by scholars for scholars. She doesn’t dwell on the spectacular, although Byzantium has plenty of drama, but rather provides a surprisingly deep look into a lost world. Much to the point, as well, is that modern Europe and the rest of the Western world would have been a much different place had it not been for Byzantium and its thousand-year history from the sixth century to the 15th. It’s an amazing story, and well told, as Herrin traces a civilization that combined pagan, Christian, Greek, Roman and ancient and medieval influences. This is a terrific read."--Mark Horton, The Edmonton Journal"The information here is both solid and detailed--so much so that even a specialist will frequently encounter previously unknown facts. . . . Byzantium offers a solid

introduction to Byzantine history and culture, and the sheer depth of information it contains could repay multiple readings."--Richard Tada, The Weekly Standard"In this carefully researched, clearly written, and engaging book author Herrin opens up a neglected part of western history for the general reader."--Charles L. P. Silet, Magill Book Reviews"Judith Herrin's book provides a fine cultural backdrop to the study of Byzantine liturgy--and a good read for understanding this remarkable society on its own terms."--Frank C. Senn, Worship"At its best, the text is skillfully written, judiciously crafted, and lively."--Florin Curta, American Historical Review"With this work, Herrin provides an edifying, enjoyable read that will both capture the interest of the lay reader with the exciting aspects of Byzantium that she covers in each chapter and appeal to the student of Byzantine history as an interesting read and a concise look at some subjects that have been revised, and others that could use further revision."--David Mason, Digest of Middle East Studies

When I get tired of reading Greek and Roman books I super charge my batteries by turning to Byzantine history and simply put this is the best book I have read on the subject. It is arranged by topics rather than chronologically with that styles endless focus on emperors poking out one and others eyes for a thousand years. We learn in this book the life of Byzantium and all of its people which included Romans, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Russians, Serbs, Vikings and Venetians just to name a few groups. There was social mobility, education, trade, military action, sports, religion, art, literature and diplomacy. We learn of the horrendous impact of the Crusades and relations with Arabs and Turks. We learn of the war on icons. We see how Byzantium went from the eastern Roman Empire to a long lived city state that protected Europe and it's early beginnings. If you have room for just one book on Byzantium then this should be it.

Good overview of the forgotten Empire that saved Western civilization. To understand the ages old conflict between Islam and Christianity, one must study the Byzantine, or Eastern Roman, Empire. The Empire was the barrier that kept militant Islam out of southeastern Europe for nearly 500 years, until the sack of Constantinople by the 4th Crusade in 1204.

This is an absolutely excellent series of essays on the premier medieval empire, Byzantium. The writer expertly sketches the history, indicating what is important and what it meant, both in belief and of historical impact. What makes this book demanding and a great pleasure is that she respects the readers' intelligence and never over-simplifies for the sake of brevity; that being said, I would not recommend this to readers who are unfamiliar with the outlines of the history, to which she alludes

but doesn’t always explain.While not a historical narrative, the chapter progress more or less chronologically, from its origins in late antiquity, to its fall as a way to presage the Renaissance. Founded at the great trade routes from East to West by the first christian emperor, Byzantium evolved into the first purely autocratic power with the legitimation rituals of traditional Asian kings. It thus served as the model for the monarchies and petty despotisms that were rising to its West. Herrin describes this better than anywhere I have seen this, in wonderful perspective. Byzantium was also the first true christian state, mixing dogmatic monotheistic religion with the functions of government. The way that it evolved and split into sects is clearly delineated by Herrin, the seeds of cultures we can see today.Herrin also argues that Byzantium was not a mere preserver of classical tradition, but a synthesizer of old systems with the new, that is, Christianity. While I think she over-states her case - there is a genuine decadence to Eastern Rome’s obsession with old forms - she makes one of the best cases I know for Byzantium’s dynamism and creativity. Personally, I find its art, its attempts at consolidating and preserving (and updating) Roman law rather stilted and derivative, but she convinced me that my view is far too one-sided. In addition, she transmits the sense that Greek culture stayed very much alive in a more continuous and lively way than the Latin tradition did to the West.Finally, Herrin describes the legacy of Byzantium, both as the last-line defense against the Arabs and then the Turks, but also the impact of the exodus of Greek scholars to the West, providing many of the sources that flowered in the Renaissance. I learned the most about the military history in this section, that the Byzantines had become accustomed to fighting the Persians in large military formations, leaving them vulnerable to Arab cavalry with its mobility and lighter-armed warriors fighting in the spirit of jihad. Once the Turks appeared, the Byzantines had become famously decadent, squandering their energy in civil wars, doctrinal disputes, and preoccupation with Slavic pagans that they converted to Greek Orthodoxy. The fall of Constantinople, in so many ways, signals the end of the Middle Ages, expertly evoked by Herrin in splendid prose.Warmly recommended for any serious student of history.

Byzantium Judith HerrinWhile preparing for a trip to WWI sites in Alsace-Lorraine Wikipedia Verdun, France mentioned a 1,000 AD reference to castrating and selling orphans to the Arab world. What?! Follow-up on the reference brought me to this trip reading.What is the karma of place? If you emasculate and sell off your orphans in 1,000 AD, is there a price to pay in 1914-18? Or is the price ongoing and Verdun simply isn’t the place to reincarnate into, given a choice, especially if your karma involves being an orphan? Disturbing footnote: it wasn’t just orphans. Full Disclosure: That was my motive for reading about Byzantium, but I’m assuming it wasn’t yours.Perhaps your Italy trip

includes Ravenna. There is a concise, useful history of Ravenna and how it fit into the Arab, early Christian, Jewish and Byzantium world. Rulers, wheeling-dealing and treacheries are exposed. Icon art is explored in depth. You can potentially dazzle your bored children with insider gossip about the church builders as you view their not-even-disguised portraits in religious paintings.Herrin wrote this book to be of interest to non-scholars, so it is accessible without a dictionary. She loops through centuries in non-Chronological order, basically touching upon aspects of Byzantium that would be of interest to an assortment of contemporary readers, such as early law court rulings (to get a couple that hated each other to consummate their union, they were locked in a room together for a week. It works for horses. Didn't work for humans.), tax breaks bringing about financial peril of governments, Arian disbelief of early Christian lure of eternal salvation (very divisive issue at the time. I marvel why, if you are drawn to the possibility of Eternal Salvation, you would join the faction that says it can't be true), women rulers, slurs to people with snub noses, the new mathematical field of algebra, purple dye, and military methods that still have not been duplicated. I kept underlining, aware that if a paper were required there were 100 possible interesting topics provided.

I bought this book as a gift for my husband who is working on a History degree and specializing in Byzantine History. He loves it and has used it for papers in several of his classes. Great buy for anyone who is interested in medieval Byzantine history!!

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