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**PAUL MAGDALINO, *Roman Constantinople in Byzantine Perspective. The Memorial and Aesthetic Rediscovery of Constantine's Beautiful City, from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2024**  
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Paul Magdalino's study of Constantinople has been published as the first volume of a new publishing series: Brill Research Perspectives in Byzantine Studies. However, it is not another book on the City's history and monuments. It is an attempt to present a new method of dealing with Byzantine source texts on Constantinople because the author believes that they should be treated not just as sources from which we can glean hard facts about buildings and other monuments but texts whose authors had their own goals and assumptions and who were the first to create Constantinople as a subject of research. Magdalino also emphasises that he is keen for the study to show what the people who had to do with the City thought about it: how they prepared the ground for contemporary research on Constantinople.

Thus, he examines Constantinople as a literary construct on which numerous authors have worked. The researcher divides these contributions into two main groups, which he distinguishes by taking the purpose of the text as the main distinctive feature. Thus, he indicates the "memorial mode" and the "aesthetic mode". The first mainly contains inquiries about the City's origins and explanations of the history of the ancient statues still there. On the other hand, the second focuses on explaining the sensory aspects of perceiving Constantinople – above all, its beauty and grandeur. The texts

of the first group were mainly intended to satisfy curiosity, and according to Magdalino, they represent a research attitude – mostly dominated by the period from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Those of the second, on the other hand, satisfy aesthetic needs and are associated with rhetoric – they predominate between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, when, the researcher believes, the demand to rediscover the qualities of Constantinople increased.

The book has a clear layout – broadly chronological but also aligned with the two modes of writing about the City discussed above – and is divided into five main parts. A brief abstract, keywords (p. 1), and an introduction precede these (p. 1–7). At the end of the book, there is also a short summary in which the researcher recapitulates his main conclusions (p. 143–150). This is followed by a bibliography divided into primary sources and secondary literature (p. 150–169), as well as an index of persons and places (p. 171–177).

Part One (*Historical Research on Constantinople, 330–600*) covers historical research on Constantinople from the founding of the City to the year 600 (p. 7–38). In this section, Magdalino pays close attention to the differences in the narratives of Christian and non-Christian authors. In doing so, he shows distinct perspectives on writing about the City, with the non-Christian one somewhat on the sidelines.

It is only clearly revealed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, with earlier accounts of it not surviving. Magdalino proposes that including non-Christian narratives can be seen as a response to the decline of the empire in the West. Since there was a need to identify a new capital, the image of Constantinople also had to be adjusted and made more similar to that of Rome.

As a result, on the one hand, we can read Zosimus (fl. ca. 500), who would see salvation in a reversal of Constantine's revolution and, therefore, in a return to traditional cults. On the other hand, some authors proposed less radical solutions. In practice, they undertook the task of preparing a worthy lineage for the people of Constantinople, no worse than the Roman one. Thus, we have an adaptation of the Roman past by copying institutions and monuments, the most famous example of which are the statues of Constantine brought from all over the Empire. In addition, it also revealed the peculiarities of the City and its ancient Greek origins. In this way, it was possible to show that, by going back to Greek tradition itself, Constantinople's origins may be even more ancient than those of Rome.

For authors such as Hesychius (5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>), John Lydus (ca. 490 – ca. 565), and John Malalas (ca. 491–578), a genuine city had to have mythological roots, heroes, and ancient prophecies concerning its fate, its Tyche, and her statue. From this point of view, Constantinople could not be reduced to the city of Christ if it was to deserve to be called a true city. Instead, from the perspective of these authors, such a city would be some novelty without context, without being rooted in history. It would, therefore, be difficult for such a city to claim the status of imperial capital. In short, without its ancient – including mythological – origins, Constantinople would not have been a city worthy of such a high position.

As Magdalino states, the literary response to these needs was literary genre of *patria* dedicated to inquiring into the ancient origins of cities. Thanks to the *Souda Lexicon*, we know of the twelve-book *Patria* of Constantinople written in hexameter by Christodorus of Coptos (fl. 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup>). It seems that they were intended to satisfy the intellectual needs of the elite

– accustomed to this kind of literature on other great cities. In this case, however, the poet certainly had to reconcile the genre's requirements with the city's Christian status – the mythological references were probably somewhat relegated to the background or presented as allegories. There may have been some explicitly non-Christian *Patria*, for example, those associated with the brief reign of Julian the Apostate. Nevertheless, as Magdalino makes clear, there is no hard evidence for the existence of 4<sup>th</sup>-century *Patria*: his vision is plausible, but with the current state of knowledge, it is impossible to prove. In any case, the *Patria* disappeared at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Magdalino sensibly assumes that this most likely had to do with the recognition of Christianity as the only possible context for the functioning of the state.

An important insight is that Magdalino treats the discussed authors of the 6<sup>th</sup> century as researchers. For him, they formed a research culture (developed from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> century), the essence of which was accumulating knowledge and information, prioritised over the cultivation of sophisticated literary forms. The researcher sees this as a significant *novum* in Byzantine writing about Constantinople. As he indicates, this trend continued at the imperial court, where the encyclopaedist community was active. Part two (*Memorial Literature and Research Culture, 6<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> Centuries*) is primarily devoted to texts produced in this milieu (p. 38–66).

Magdalino points out that from the late 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards, we observe a rash of scholarly texts written from the court's perspective at the behest and use of the state. At that time, extensive research was carried out, sources were collected and copied, and extracts were made. Their authors used to write about state institutions, the City's history, and the liturgy. The researcher suggests that other texts, such as the *Parastaseis syntomoi chronikai* and the *Patria of Constantinople (Scriptores originum Constantinopolitarum)*, may have been produced on the sidelines of those official encyclopaedic works. As for the first of the texts, *Parastaseis* seems somewhat bizarre. One can notice the manipulation of evidence, impossible chronologies, fantastic information, and gross simplifications of historical explanations. Hence, Magdalino

asks if it is a parody or a satire. He recognises it is a collection of diverse stories and a pamphlet of ancient families linked to the imperial bureaucracy at the same time. These people had proper knowledge, were connoisseurs of the arts and could not accept the ignorance of the nouveaux riches at the court. They considered themselves the guardians of oral traditions and histories concerning the City. And the *Parastaseis* was a way of perpetuating them.

Another work is the *Patria of Constantinople*; Magdalino indicates that the author may have been Pseudo-Symeon. In general, he believes it is another trace, like the *Souda*, of collateral research carried out at the court in Constantinople. The text may have been written in the milieu of Basil Lekapenos (the Parakoimomenos). Aesthetic issues are not addressed in this work. What matters is the commemoration of antiquity, especially of ancient statues. They were valued at the time not so much as sources that spoke of the past but as sources containing knowledge of the present and the future, for it was assumed that they concealed encoded prophecies. Thus, they began to acquire apocalyptic significance in the 10<sup>th</sup> century: the world's end was expected as the year 1000 approached.

Notably, the scholar emphasises that statues were essentially one element of urban identity. A decent city boasting an ancient origin had to have statues. They were a source of pride and could not be disposed of because they were part of the cultural heritage. Interpreting them in this way, in a sense, safeguarded their existence – ancestral heirlooms should not be destroyed, even if the religion has changed. Here, the author also introduces the term “antiquarian aesthetics”; the manifestations of which are both texts and works of art, referring to antiquity, indicating its value and cultural validity.

Returning to the *Patria*, it is a text that is like a historical work. As Magdalino demonstrates, its audience was concerned with metahistory (drawing on contemporary terminology) rather than *stricte* historical research. Hence, the text accumulates anecdotes, unusual stories, riddles, prophecies, etc. The text was intended to teach, amuse, and provide entertainment. The *Patria* undoubtedly fulfilled this kind of intellectual need.

Part Three (*Cultural Heritage and Tourist Disinformation 1000–1453: from Bureaucratic to Scientific Antiquarianism*) deals with texts on cultural heritage and tourist (dis)information from 1000 to 1453 (p. 66–91). Magdalino points out that there were professional guides for those arriving in Constantinople. In addition, from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, more exclusive guided tours were offered for the most important visitors. These had a political purpose – to make a particular impression on significant guests. They also included a visit to the Great Palace, which was treated like a museum then. However, not all visitors were enamoured by Constantinople. Some, like Liutprand of Cremona (ca. 920–972) and Odo of Deuil (1110–1162), were more critical and did not hesitate to voice their discontent. Though only sometimes positive, their perspectives provide a valuable insight into the City's functioning. Over time, visitors from Italy, lovers of antiquity, also used to tour the City. But for them, Constantinople was just one of many Greek cities.

The following significant phase of writing about Constantinople is the letter of Manuel Chrysoloras (ca. 1350–1415), in which he juxtaposes Old and New Rome. As the first Byzantine author, he made this kind of comparison in a single coherent text. His attitude was that of a diligent researcher. He used to observe and interpret the monuments without resorting to legendary stories. Chrysoloras also taught his Italian pupils this scholarly attitude. He was a historian, but he paid attention to aesthetic issues, referring to the elements that determined the beauty of a city. His interest in antiquity found fertile ground in Italy and influenced the intellectuals in his circle. Significantly, Chrysoloras also adapted some elements of Latin writing about cities in his text.

As far as strictly panegyric literature is concerned, Constantinople waited a long time for a work of this kind: the work of Constantine of Rhodes (10<sup>th</sup> century) is, as Magdalino writes, more a poem composed of ekphraseis dedicated to the various “wonders” of Constantinople than a single and consistent encomium of the City; the work of Theodore Prodromos (died ca. 1170), on the other hand, is more a praise of the emperor; the City also appears there, but

it is a relatively “romantic” vision of it. On the other hand, Nicholas Mesarites (ca. 1163 – after 1216) gave an ekphrasis of the Church of the Holy Apostles. Among other things, these texts are addressed in Part Four (*The Rhetorical Rediscovery of Constantinople, 10<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> Centuries*; p. 91–109).

An important caesura is 1204. The Fourth Crusade also influenced literature about Constantinople. Hellenism becomes the centre of identity: understood as a state of moral and aesthetic perfection, synonymous with true civilisation. This notion is particularly evident in the Choniates brothers. Michael (ca. 1140–1220) writes about Athens; Niketas (ca. 1155–1217) contrasts Hellenistic art with Latin barbarians, greedy and primitive. They preferred to melt the beautiful statues, the heritage of their culture, into coins; they were incapable of appreciating them, and thus, they mindlessly destroyed part of their own heritage. So, after Niketas Choniates, Byzantine Hellenism was in opposition to Latin barbarism. It is another valuable observation of Magdalino.

As the researcher points out, the culmination of Byzantine writing about Constantinople is the *Byzantios* of Theodore Metochites (1270–1332). The last fifth part of the book (*The “Byzantios” of Theodore Metochites and Its Legacy*) is devoted mainly to this work (p. 109–143). It is an encomium of Constantinople in the style of the late antique praises given to Athens, Antioch and Rome. In Metochites’ work, Constantinople becomes an ancient Greek polis. It appears as an ideal city, a beautiful city – full of statues and bustling marketplaces; he focuses entirely on the civic character of Constantinople, not the imperial one. According to Metochites, Constantinople’s success was determined by Nature because it flourished due to favourable natural conditions. Notably, he sees Constantinople as a fully mature form of Byzantion. The city grew up like a living organism. On the other hand, the violation of natural laws was the Latin occupation. Constantinople is also the home of the Muses – they had to leave other vital ancient centres and can now only be active there – a centre of education, of all knowledge at the highest level.


Significantly, Metochites was the first author to write about Constantinople’s most ancient past without mentioning its mythology. He

tried to present the City and its history in opposition to mythical stories. Moreover, for Metochites, Constantinople was entirely the work of Constantine. Hence, he did not address the question of the *translatio imperii* at all, and he did not mention Rome. Moreover, for him, Constantine was a Christian ruler, and Constantinople was a city that had always been orthodox, the only one of its kind among the important ancient urban centres.

Magdalino’s book is valuable and interesting. On the one hand, it provides a handy guide to Byzantine texts on Constantinople. Significantly, the author has not limited himself to only the best-known sources but has successfully presented a comprehensive panorama of texts devoted to the City without omitting those we know only from fragments or mentions made by other authors (e.g. the *Patria* of Christodorus of Coptos). One must admit that such an overview is valuable in itself, all the more so because the author has provided it with information on studies, including the most recent ones. The work also abounds in numerous quotations from the source texts discussed. One drawback is that these are always only translations. Versions in the original languages are missing. Only essential terms and concepts are referred to in their original languages.

What primarily determines the value of this book, however, is the author’s approach to the source texts under discussion. As I mentioned, he explains his assumptions in the introduction, emphasising that he is analysing these texts not because of the historical facts described in them but because of their authors’ specific assumptions and objectives. From such a perspective, it becomes apparent that the texts can differ considerably, even if they share a common genre framework. Another vital aspect of Magdalino’s book is that the author outlines the problem and poses many questions – only some of which he carefully answers. As a result, he encourages detailed research, developing barely hinted threads. Thus, it can also be hoped that the work will provoke further lively and in-depth discussion of Constantinople.

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