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Review of Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs by Nadia Maria El-Cheikh

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In this valuable and wide-ranging study, Nadia El-Cheikh sets out to investigate Islamic–Byzantine relations from the inception of Islam in the seventh century until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. To be more precise, employing a literary-critical approach, she seeks ‘to trace the Arabic-Islamic view of Byzantium as it evolved through centuries of warfare, contact, and exchanges in the context of regional historical developments’ (3). The book’s thesis is ‘that the Arabic-Islamic texts and the representations found within them have helped shape reality and that the emerging civilization’s attempt to construct and produce a distinctive identity defined Islam’s view of Byzantium to a considerable extent’ (5). El-Cheikh uses a wide range of Islamic sources, including religious literature, geographical works, biographical dictionaries, and universal histories, and an impressive array of secondary sources.

The book is organized into four chapters. The first, which covers the period from the inception of Islam until the end of Umayyad rule, begins with a discussion of the terminology used by Muslim writers to refer to the Byzantines, among them *Rum* and *Banu al-Asfar*, and goes on to examine the first reference to the Byzantines in Islamic sources (Qur’an 30:1–5). An important subsection of this part is an examination of the image of Heraclius (r. 610–41) in the early Islamic sources. Whereas other Byzantine leaders are portrayed in a negative light, Islamic sources depict Heraclius as a paragon of excellence and justice whose ideal rule was perfected by his acknowledgement of the prophethood of Muhammad. The examination of these sources leads El-Cheikh to conclude that the ‘first encounter between Islam and Byzantium was coloured by the positive perception of Byzantine’s monotheism and of its upright ruler, Heraclius’ (54). Under the Umayyads, the Islamic portrayal of Byzantium shows great interest in state administration and in the building of imperial religious monuments. The image of the Byzantines as administrators, artists, and craftsmen was idealized in these sources. Islamic depictions of the Byzantine capital were largely influenced by the Muslims’ failure to conquer it. Against this background, Constantinople figures prominently in Islamic apocalyptic traditions predicting its fall. ‘By adopting an apocalyptic vision, the Muslims were giving way to realism and pragmatism, after they attempted to conquer the city several times and failed’ (70).

The second chapter deals with Islamic–Byzantine relations under the early ‘Abbasid caliphs. At this stage, besides the traditional military confrontation between the two rivals, the Islamic sources contain substantial cultural and polemical discourses. Geographers and historians in particular increasingly turned their attention to the history of the Byzantines and their lands. Referring to the military confrontation between the two rivals, they emphasized the relations of the celebrated caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809) with contemporaneous Byzantine rulers such as Irene I (r. 797–802). El-Cheikh argues that the representations of these rulers ‘are revealing of a particular period in which the political and military relations between the Byzantines and Muslim states affected the respective images of these Byzantine rulers’ (93). During the ninth century there was, she argues, a change in the military balance in favour of the Byzantines, and this shift led Muslim scholars to seek new sources of knowledge in an attempt to demonstrate that Islam was culturally the true heir to the legacy of the Greeks. This cultural challenge was,

she maintains, among the main reasons that Muslim rulers sponsored translations of Greek works, largely obtained from Byzantium, into Arabic. The Muslim writers of the ninth and tenth centuries not only attempted to portray the Byzantines as culturally unrelated to the Greeks but also 'blamed the decline of science and philosophy on the Christianization of the Roman empire' (106). Yet Islamic reports show confusion and ambivalence about the knowledge and wisdom of the Byzantines. El-Cheikh convincingly argues that the literary controversy between Arabs and Persians known as the *shu'ubiyya* motivated Muslim scholars to seek new materials about pre-Islamic nations and their civilizational hierarchy, in which Islam and Arabs occupied the most prominent place. She points out that Arab-Christian sources played a crucial role in the preservation of materials about pre-Islamic Roman history, though she fails to offer a detailed examination of these sources or to consider the possibility that there were others. Muslim scholars were harshly critical of Byzantine ethics, morality, and cultural characteristics, largely on the basis of stereotypes and exaggeration. They depicted the Byzantines as treacherous, immoral, and miserly and viewed Byzantine women 'as symbols of the eternal female — constantly a potential threat, particularly due to blatant exaggeration of their sexual promiscuity' (125). They considered 'the moral and ethical system of Byzantines as inferior, reinforcing their own adherence to what they saw as a superior moral system' (129).

In the third chapter El-Cheikh focuses on Byzantine–Muslim relations during the tenth and eleventh centuries, a period characterized by the political fragmentation of the Islamic world and weakness in the struggle against Byzantium. From the representation of Constantinople in early Islamic geographical works, based on the descriptions of a Muslim named Harun b. Yahya who was in Byzantine captivity during the ninth century, one cannot but notice that Muslim writers admired the imperial grandeur of Constantinople, represented by its monuments and buildings, but 'failed to include the human experience, both individual and collective, contained in the city' (149). Likewise, they emphasized the ostentatious Byzantine imperial court ceremonies and lavish spending in contrast to the simplicity of Islamic society. According to El-Cheikh, by comparing themselves with the Byzantines 'Muslims were attempting to raise the authority and the prominence of their own various states to the same lofty level as their worthy rivals' (162). As the Islamic caliphate suffered political fragmentation and economic decline, the Byzantines were, from the end of the ninth century, increasingly successful in battle against the Muslims. Nicephorus Phocas (r. 963–69) is portrayed negatively; El-Cheikh emphasizes his denigration of Islam, his injustice as a ruler, and his aggressive policy which wreaked havoc on Islamic territories. However, the Byzantines' military superiority ended with their defeat by the Turks, in the battle of Manzikert in 1071, which accelerated the decline of Constantinople.

In the final chapter, El-Cheikh discusses the last phase of Byzantine–Islamic relations, from the end of the eleventh century until the fall of Constantinople. In this period the Muslims and the Byzantines confronted a common enemy, the crusaders. This new phase was characterized by a high level of interaction and trust between Muslims (especially the Mamluks) and Byzantines. Muslim writers continued to repeat the traditional image of Byzantium found in the early Islamic sources, but later (especially twelfth-century) ones introduced new features. For example, while the early sources abound in negative examples regarding the morals of the Byzantines, the later sources show an 'absence of deprecatory comments and criticism' (212).

The book has three main limitations. First, the fact that it deals with Islamic–Byzantine contacts over more than seven centuries makes it almost impossible to examine all of the Islamic sources fully. Thus, it discusses certain stages, such as the seventh to the eleventh century, at length, whereas other phases are treated briefly. Second, in many cases the presentation needs to be fleshed out. Specifically, in the discussion of Islamic portrayals of Byzantium, there is insufficient information about the background against which the Muslims wrote — their prosopographical backgrounds, literary approaches, and historical context. For example, it is reported that al-Ya‘qubi (d. 898) and al-Mas‘udi (d. 956) wrote more about the Byzantines than al-Tabari (d. 923) leaving the reader wondering why this distinction is made (114 ff.). Internal Islamic debates and theological discussions are mentioned as an explanation for an ambivalent attitude towards Byzantine knowledge and wisdom without much information about these debates and discussions. The Qur’anic concept of *ummatan wasatan*, which introduces Muslims as the community of the centre is said to have been ‘inspired by the Greek geographical division of the world into seven climes’ (139), but without further details this statement remains nebulous if not anachronistic. Finally, there is no discussion of the sources upon which Muslim scholars relied in their portrayals of Byzantium. El-Cheikh rightly highlights the contribution of the Arab-Christian authors to the introduction of materials about Byzantine history into Islamic scholarly circles, but she rarely invokes Byzantine sources, and even when she does so there is no comprehensive comparison with the Islamic ones. Despite these weaknesses, her book is an indispensable study of the relations between Islam and its ‘other’.

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