

Transformation of Byzantium Project

Three international workshops are proposed as the basis for an inter-disciplinary research project on law, literature and society in eleventh-century Byzantium. This research project will concentrate attention on a neglected but transformative century, when Byzantium reached its political apogee and its writers attained a high plane of excellence (where they were to stay for the remainder of the empire's existence). There are many texts of this period which are crying out for close study, above all the *Peira* of Eustathios Romaios, a collection of judgements and opinions of a high court judge. Although the *Peira* is quite unique, casting as it does a bright light on the justice system and the seamy side of real life in Byzantium, it has never been subjected to thorough legal analysis. It is therefore far from clear whether there is solid grounding for the influential view, originating with Dieter Simon, that legal argumentation was simply one rhetorical strategy among others and that the justice system was amenable to pressure from powerful interests, rather than striving to apply Roman law equitably to the manifold cases brought before the courts. This issue is intimately connected to the larger, and very live, question as to whether or not Byzantium underwent a feudal revolution akin to that of Latin Christendom in the same period. For we do not, as yet, know how much of the old social order, based ultimately on the peasant village, survived the land-grabbing by elites in the tenth and early eleventh centuries; nor has there been a full, systematic calibration of the similarities and differences in the structural features of the power formations of the Byzantine and Western aristocracies. At the same time as these changes in land ownership, there were also profound changes in the intellectual culture of Byzantium in the course of the eleventh century. Writers revealed their individuality for the first time, reason began to play a larger role as intellectuals looked at the world around them, and literary creativity was on the rise. The nature of these cultural changes remains, however, very imperfectly understood. Most of the specifics – of individual biographies, of the full corpora of authors' works, of contemporary literary expectations, and of authors' stylistic idiosyncracies – have yet to be grasped and evaluated, and much of the best writing awaits proper critical appraisal.

The eleventh-century project is intended to grapple with these issues and to do so in a co-ordinated fashion, bringing the three disciplines of Law, Philology and History together and drawing on the expertise available in different areas of Europe and the USA. The goals of the project will therefore be to gain a proper understanding of (1) Byzantine legal culture (the relationship between codified law and legal practice, genres of legal writing, the impact of law on fiscal processes, writers' attitudes to law etc.), (2) cultural change in a society at once fully engaged in the contemporary world (in the zone of interaction between Christianity and Islam) and looking back to late antiquity, and (3) interaction between east and west within Europe in a crucial era of change. In order to give each workshop a clear intellectual focus, each one will focus on specific, identified texts and topics which cry out for fresh, organised, collective study - namely (1) the *Peira* of Eustathios Romaios, (2) the letters of Michael Psellos, which are a rich source of data about the thinking and life of a highly politicised intellectual, and (3) social change in town and country in a monetised, bureaucratised and court-centred state.

The proceedings of each workshop will be published, both in digital and hard copy form, as edited, multi-authored volumes. The digital versions will be placed on the History Faculty website, under Late Antique and Byzantine Studies, as well as on the University of Oxford Research Archive (ORA). The publication dates for each volume will be early 2011, autumn 2011 and early 2012, following roughly nine months after each workshop.