

Imaging Byzantium and Asia – an Introduction

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The participation of the Byzantine Empire in transcultural exchanges with Central Asia, China, and India has, until recently, not received sufficient attention. Past research mainly focused on Byzantium's cultural relations with the Latin West; the medieval states of Russia; the Balkans, and, during pre-Islamic and Islamic times, the Persian Empire and the Arabs. Today's global exchange processes that link even remote corners of the world have prompted questions about whether we witness a qualitative change, or an increase and acceleration of cultural interactions, which are deeply rooted in history. Taking up this challenge, we explore cultural flows that connect Byzantium with the eastern regions of Asia.

Only very little is known about the ways these far-flung regions interacted during the Middle Ages. Given the enormous distances that medieval travelers crossing the Asian continent had to cover, it seems at first sight a rather far-fetched idea to postulate continuous flows between Byzantium, Central Asia, China and India. Can one really expect to find substantial cultural exchanges linking Byzantium and these regions? And if so, at what pace did these happen? How intense could the interaction have been, and how could relations be maintained in an age of slow mobility? Which artistic techniques and media were used to record, distribute and save knowledge about the distant cultures? What precisely was it that people across Asia and the Byzantine Empire shared? Byzantium, heir to the ancient Greco-Roman world, which grew out of the Roman Empire as its eastern branch in the fourth century CE, could rely on older written information about Asia, produced by Greek historians and geographers. Likewise, it could draw upon old communication routes to the East, which had been established since antiquity. Emperor Constantine the Great deliberately moved his capital east, founding the city of Constantinople or "New Rome" at the very juncture of Europe and Asia. By doing so, he emphasized the importance of the Asian continent. Constantinople remained the cultural metropolis of the Byzantine Empire attracting numerous foreigners from the East as well as from the West until it fell in 1453 CE. Trade was one of its primary allures. By way of the "Silk Road" and the southeastern shipping routes, precious goods were constantly

exchanged between Byzantium and Asia. Trade goods and luxury items, such as spices, minerals, silk, glass, and pottery, were, however, not the only objects travelling between the Byzantine Empire and the East. Visual artifacts, along with oral and written information, reflecting a variety of cultural concepts, also travelled along these routes.

By taking a close look at these concepts and material objects we hope to gain a better understanding of the forces and the agents driving the process of transculturality. Images, in particular, helped convey, for example, spiritual concepts and made them easier to understand and adapt, even across multiple language boundaries. Visual artifacts were therefore used as principal conduits of cultural meaning connecting Byzantium and Asia in the Middle Ages.

In the course of the winter term of 2009/10, the Institute of Byzantine Archeology and Art History at the Ruprecht-Karls-University Heidelberg, Germany, generously supported by the University's Research Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context – Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows", organized the lecture-series *Byzantium beyond its Eastern Frontiers*.¹ The aim was to explore the mechanisms of transcultural visual communication between Byzantium and the Asian continent. The five lectures demonstrated the rich harvest that could be gathered by using an interdisciplinary approach to cultural entanglement in late antiquity and in the early Middle Ages. Scholars specializing in classical and medieval philology, Byzantine studies, East Asian art history, or comparative cultural studies, were invited to present relevant case studies from their own field of expertise. They were *Stephan Faller* (Albert-Ludwigs-University, Freiburg, Germany), *Zsuzsanna Gulacsi* (Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, U.S.A.), *Claudia Wenzel* (Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Heidelberg, Germany), *Robert Volk* (Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Munich, Germany) and *Tsai Sueyling* (Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Heidelberg, Germany). In their talks they highlighted the patterns of transcultural artistic interaction that reached across Asia and the Byzantine empire. Three of the five papers from this lecture-series are included in the current issue of *Transcultural Studies*.² Reflecting on the variety of the contributor's approaches to their individual topics, it seems appropriate to introduce the authors and their articles by highlighting some of their key ideas.

In his essay on the so-called *Christian Topography*, a work written by the monk and merchant Cosmas Indicopleustes, Stefan Faller addresses the problem of "transculturality" by asking whether this modern notion can

be applied to the past. Systematically scrutinizing the available sources, Faller explores the cultural identity and background of Cosmas, who, as his name *Indicopleustes* readily suggests, was a Byzantine sailor to India. Illustrated Byzantine manuscripts reveal a man who was well informed about China, India and the island of Taprobane (modern Sri Lanka), indicating that Cosmas had actually travelled there. Business seems to have been his main, but certainly not his only, concern in the East. Faller clearly demonstrates that Cosmas' cosmological views strikingly resemble specific features of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain cosmology. Examining the religious attitude of Cosmas as well as his worldly endeavors, Faller argues for the hybrid or "mixed" nature of ideas and concepts exhibited in the illustrated *Christian Topography*. Shedding new light on this Byzantine author and his Indian connections, Stefan Faller arrives at important conclusions about Cosmas and his underestimated treatise particularly in terms of transculturality and agency. We may never be able to answer the question of how Cosmas gathered his detailed information on Asia. But Faller rightly highlights Cosmas' close spiritual ties with fellow Nestorian Christians living and operating in Mesopotamia, the Eastern borderland of the Byzantine Empire. Were they his sources? It is a well-known fact that Nestorian Christians from Mesopotamia and Persia moved across the Asian continent for centuries, spreading their religion as far as India and China.

Mesopotamia, home to many religious communities, including Zoroastrians, Jews, Gnostics, Manicheans and Nestorian Christians, always played a crucial role in the history of transcultural processes across Asia and Europe. This becomes apparent also in Zsuzsanna Gulacsi's article on *Mani's Picture-Book*, which was created in mid-third-century Mesopotamia. Concentrating on the set of didactic images called the *eikon*, Gulacsi explores the impact of visual media in transcultural flows across Asia. Her article highlights the surprising ability of Manichean artists to adapt Mani's original body of paintings, produced initially for a West Asian public, to artistic traditions of the East. Gulacsi shows how the Manichean visual language gradually merged with non-Manichean picture conventions of rival religious groups. Manichean artifacts exhibit hybrid cultural features as a consequence of their adaptation to different cultural norms. While in this article Zsuzsanna Gulacsi explores mainly medieval Manichean image-making in a primarily Buddhist setting in Central Asia and China, she also points to possible links between mid-third-century Manichean, Jewish, and Early Christian art. Focusing on the physical remains of Dura-Europos in the Roman part of Mesopotamia, she shows that other groups in this region worked with similar methods of visual instruction. In Dura-Europos we discern a full-fledged transcultural

process not so much in specific content than in the use of methods and media to cross political, ethnic and religious boundaries. Future research will have to explore how the peculiar Greco-Manichean term *eikon* denoting the Western Asian visual body of paintings may be linked to the particular Byzantine cultural feature called the “icon” or *eikona*. Used in Eastern Christian rites of religious devotion since late antiquity and until today, Byzantine icons fulfill a human need that differ substantially from visual artifacts that were designed to instruct their spectators.

Using the term “icons” in her essay’s title, Claudia Wenzel deliberately inserts this term from genuinely Byzantine cultural and art history into the field of East Asian art history. Her detailed analysis of “iconic” and “non-iconic” visual modes in *Indian and Chinese Buddha-images*, connects Byzantine iconoclasm to recurring waves of iconophobia in India and China. Featuring similar theoretical attitudes to artistic problems, Byzantine doctrine—itself resulting from late antique and early medieval Christian debates about the appropriateness and function of images—can easily be compared to Indian and Chinese Buddhist spiritual teachings. Wenzel’s essay highlights close similarities and possibly connections between image-discourses in Eastern visual communities and in Byzantium at roughly the same time period. Her article is probably the first to trace parallel debates in Asia and Byzantium concerning the truthfulness of images and on the question whether superhuman spiritual beings could be presented in images in a ritual context or were beyond presentability. Wenzel shows how artists in Asia solved the problem of representing the “invisible” by means of delicate visual strategies. The case of the so-called “non-image” of the Buddha provides an inspired solution to this problem. One can conclude from her essay that common spiritual ideas, independent of their original cultural environment, were, in fact, communicated and shared across Byzantium and Asia.

The evidence that can be drawn from the papers assembled in this themed section of *Transcultural Studies* speaks strongly in favor of Byzantium and medieval societies across Asia interacting artistically and culturally to a much greater degree than has been hitherto assumed. By exploring visual flows across the Asian continent from a “Byzantine” perspective, we can conclude that for a very long period of time the Eastern Roman Empire played an important role in the production, processing and mediation of ideas and images connecting the East and the West. Byzantines not only continually embraced foreign artistic ideas and cultural concepts and adapted them to their own culture. They also seem to have been involved in a process of long-distance cultural communication, sharing genuine

Byzantine concepts with other visual communities and thus contributing to their cultural enrichment as much as Byzantium benefitted from the rich cultural input from Asia.

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2 Not included here are the papers by Tsai Sueyling, tracing early East Asiatic illustrations of the life of the Buddha and their impact on Byzantine and Western visual culture, and by Robert Volk, concerning the textual and visual transmission of the story of “Barlaam and Josaphat” (which is the Byzantine Christianized version of the life of Gautama Buddha) from the East to Byzantium, and from Byzantium to the Latin West. I am most grateful to the contributors for their stimulating talks and delivering their manuscripts so soon after the workshop.