

Aims and Structure of the Conference

The International Conference entitled 'Material Culture and Well-Being in Byzantium' (Cambridge University, 8-10 September, 2001) explored some key aspects of the relationship between material conditions and states of being in Byzantium between the fourth and the fifteenth centuries. Studies on Material culture so far have concentrated upon the exploration of living conditions, occupations, nutrition, clothing, health and housing in Byzantium. The body/mind debate about physical and spiritual needs and desires, resulting, if accomplished, in Well-Being, has not previously been aired in the context of material culture. By relating the two branches of thought (material and philosophical), the conference probed the idea that 'Well-Being' was a largely 'unspoken' aspect of existence in Byzantium, one that the texts would not necessarily highlight.

The five part thematic divisions of the Conference

- Living Conditions and Work
- Byzantine Medicine
- Byzantine Diet
- Material Culture and Identity
- The Cultural Artefact

were intended to broadly cover key areas of debate in material culture studies. The sections incorporated material artefacts, and/or examined processes and use bases, whilst also exploring philosophical and theological issues related to 'Well-Being' as the situation demanded. Individual topics within these five themes included architecture and city planning; home building regulations and issues of neighbourliness; nutrition and diet, issues of supply and rural economy; health, hospitals, surgery, medicine and medical saints; gender; textiles and dress, and identity; ecclesiastical ritual in urban space; ceremonial display; mass spectacle, and the belief in the supernatural; monastic life and dedication; pilgrimage and its impacts abroad and remnants of the 'hidden' cultural, diplomatic and trade exchanges between Byzantium and the West.

The conference looked at the relationship of the material and the immaterial within states of being, and to do so it advocated the amalgamation of object / picture / text based analysis through application of cross-disciplinary approaches. It was clear too, that the skills of different types of researchers were relevant. Some speakers were professional practitioners (doctors, town planners, senior clergy, senior churchmen and brothers of monastic foundations). Other speakers came from the world of the theoretically based academics (including historians, art historians, history of law specialists, archaeologists, philologists and literary scholars). Yet other speakers represented those trained to house and interpret the cultural artefacts of Byzantine civilisation (Museum Directors and Keepers, Church leaders and the Greek Orthodox monastic community). The conference emphasised that the study of Byzantine material culture depends upon close co-operation between these different elements.

A list of Institutions represented at the Conference is given below:

- Archbishopric of Sinai
- Greek and Russian Orthodox Church, Cambridge
- Orthodox Archbishopric of Great Britain
- Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church, Athens
- Israeli Exploration Society, Jerusalem
- Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens
- Museum of London
- Bulgarian Academy of Arts and Sciences, Sofia
- Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine, University of London, University College, London
- Surrey Institute of Art and Design, University College
- Universities of: Athens, Birmingham, Cambridge, Cyprus, London, Madrid, Moscow, Munich, Naples, Newcastle, Oxford, Patras, Paris, Sussex, Stuttgart, Vienna, Zurich.

Methods and approaches were wide-ranging and they reflected the different background occupations of the speakers. The professions (town planning and surgery) demanded a combination of textual and empirical approaches. Those who were practitioners could lend their practical knowledge to the interpretation of the textual evidence. They also made use of pictorial sources and of surviving artefacts to reference historical continuity in processes within their own professions.

In a related way, the ‘practising’ theologians, (senior clergy or monks) expressed living Orthodox beliefs in the light of textual evidence, and where appropriate they used pictorial evidence too. The Byzantinists tended to combine textual analysis with visual analysis and to consider the historical context of their source materials. Of those scholars reliant solely upon documentary sources, a number made significant strides. By giving special thought to how ‘Well-Being’ might have played a part in the creation of those sources, in the context of Byzantine domestic building laws and their impact on neighbourliness, for example, some fascinating details emerged. This kind of much closer and applied reading of textual sources also yielded unexpected new knowledge about attitudes to food and drink and valuable re-assessment of text based production and market analysis techniques. All the speakers, who adopted the medium of textual analysis in the context of material culture studies, appreciated this need for deeper and more broadly contextual interpretation, and there were important new insights into areas not traditionally approached. These areas included questions of perception, aesthetic experience, sensory response, language as communication across cultures with problems inherent in translation, and issues of creation of popular vocabularies.

The possible benefits and pitfalls of using pictorial sources were demonstrated by different speakers. Here it was clear that where an established religious iconography existed, iconological interpretation was possible. However, where secular artefacts were illustrated in miniatures or in paintings there were no ways of assessing accuracy, other than through cross-referencing these illustrations with the evidence found on dated and securely documented surviving Byzantine objects.

Some of those speakers charged with the archiving and exhibition of Byzantine material culture, indicated the role of typology and the need for analysis of materials and techniques. In the context of academic research, which involves the assignment of date and provenance to material objects, as also in the context of conservation within museums, the scientific analysis of the objects of Byzantine material culture also plays an important part.

Thus, empirical and non-empirical approaches, textual and non-textual analysis are important in material culture studies. Visual analysis and object based research fall on the empirical side of the divide, whilst textual interpretation remains a valuable non-empirical tool.

The Cambridge meeting contributed to the field on the level of trying to understand both physical and symbolic identities of a variety of objects and social structures central to daily life as experienced at different social levels. The chosen themes threw light on the quality of life (element of Well-Being) that might have been enjoyed at any one social level. Some of the papers also dispelled earlier set ideas about disadvantages suffered by lower social ranks in Byzantium. The conference illustrated that first hand knowledge of geographical terrain, processes of healing, processes of manufacture, systems of city planning, etc. could act as useful tools for assessing the physical reality of Byzantine living. The conference equally showed the importance of the understanding of the symbolic function of elements of material culture, for lending identity to individuals and institutions, meaning to their actions, and value to the contexts and situations in which they found themselves: all key aspects of Byzantine daily existence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are numerous institutions and individuals who need to be mentioned in connection with the success of the conference at different levels. I would like to thank Prof. Kislinger from the Vienna “Institut für Byzantinistik und Neogräzistik” for his debates on the organisation of the conference and for suggestions for key speakers, in particular across the sections “Living Conditions and Work” and “Byzantine Diet”. The director of the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens, Prof. Konstantios and the keeper of textiles at that Museum, Dr. H. Papastavrou joined us in the presentation of the section devoted to the “Cultural Artefact”. Prof. Hohlweg (University of Munich) organized the section on “Byzantine Medicine” and provided inspira-

tion on the theme of Well-Being as a physical concept in the context of Byzantine “Dasein”, itself the theme for a future conference.

Many thanks are due to the following individuals who provided funds: Professor Thomas (Director of the Surrey Institute of Art and Design); Alpha Bank; the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of London; Dr. E. Constantinides (for student bursaries). Directors of those International Universities, Institutes and Museums, who covered some travel expenses of certain speakers, must also be acknowledged here. A debt of gratitude falls also, to the Dean and Chapter of Ely Cathedral, for hosting the conference delegates to a tour of the Cathedral and to participation in the choral celebration of the Founders day memorial service.

The opening address was graciously prepared by his reverence Archbishop Damianos. He has done much to communicate across the world, the nature of and the role of the rich Byzantine cultural heritage at Sinai, by exhibition and publication of the monastery’s incomparable treasures (Father Justin kindly read out the paper of Archbishop Damianos).

I wish to sincerely thank all the speakers, who so generously gave of their time not only to prepare papers for the conference itself, but also later to further enhance these papers for publication in many ways.

Last but not least, I would also like to thank my Ph.D. student M.J. House and her husband for their great assistance in running the slide projection element of the Conference and for their general helpful advice to the speakers on related matters. To the bursars of the two Cambridge Colleges, (Lucy Cavendish and St. Catharine’s), who ensured the domestic comfort of the delegates, I offer my sincere thanks.

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