

Costly Diversity: Transformations, Networks, and Minorities in Byzantium, 976-1118

Dissertation Abstract / Lee Mordechai

This dissertation unearths the social revolution in elite Byzantine society over the eleventh century. It demonstrates that the dissolution of the old regime stems from a centralized decision to adopt an ad hoc style of imperial succession by election. The subsequent series of atypical emperors introduced novel ideals and practices, stimulating social diversity and cultural fermentation that transformed elite society. Subaltern groups – eunuchs, foreigners, and women – developed novel parameters of interaction with the elite and acted as catalysts. Each eroded the fossilized boundaries within which it had operated and redefined its position in elite society through prolonged negotiation. This resulted in a period of burgeoning cultural creativity and political instability that was resolved only by the establishment of a new social model during the Crusades.

The argument builds upon the inter-connectivity of medieval sources from Iceland to Iran to illuminate contemporary Byzantine society. Disparate genres such as histories, travelogs, and poetry preserve information about contemporary social developments. Material culture, including coins and works of fine art, is employed to learn about imperial propaganda and cultural patronage. Digital tools such as relational databases reveal the social networks connecting thousands of individuals over time.

Chapters address in order: the development of imperial succession over the century; the increasing diversity as manifested in socio-cultural ideals of kingship; the changing nature of elite social networks over the century; the transformations of eunuch fortunes over the century's second quarter; the proliferation and decline of foreign elites in Byzantine service; and finally, the evolution of women into power brokers and patrons of culture. I provide network graphs of Byzantium's elite in Chapter 3 and a database of eunuchs as an appendix. Updated interactive versions are available online.