TEXTBOOKS AND TEMPLATES IN BYZANTINE STUDIES

Abstract: Though the modern study of Byzantine civilisation and history dates back to the late 19th century, the establishment of a definitive introductory textbook in the English language would be a slow process that would not culminate until the 1950’s. Due in part to the enormous chronological terminus of Byzantine History, and major primary sources in at least five different languages, the number of introductory works is much smaller than in other historical disciplines. As a result, Byzantine history textbooks are still very closely welded to two initial templates established in 1892 and 1925. This article will briefly examine the initial templates laid down by the early authors of Byzantine textbooks. Following the examination of these templates, we will move chronologically through some of the main publications of the long 20th century, concluding in the present day, gauging the impact of these works through scholarly reaction and publication information.

Keywords: Byzantine Historiography, Byzantine History, Byzantine Studies, Bibliography, 20th Century Historians.

In many ways, modern Byzantine studies came of age in the late 19th century as historians in Greece, Germany, Russia, France, and Britain worked to establish centres of research for Byzantine Studies throughout Europe. While the United States initially lagged behind Europe, Byzantine Studies in America would slowly begin to grow in the early 20th century. Through a combination of efforts: such as the work of Arthur E. R. Boak at the University of Michigan; the arrival of Michael Rostovtzeff and A. A. Vasiliev from Russia in the 1920’s; and the establishment of Dumbarton Oaks in the early 1940’s, Byzantine Studies would be firmly established in the United States by the mid-20th century. In the Anglophone world, while upper level and graduate students would be sent directly into the available sources, the need for an introductory handbook/textbook for students lacking the requisite Latin or Greek slowly become apparent. It would take several decades for publication of a definite work and, while the number of works available for students has slowly increased, that number is still limited, especially in comparison to other disciplines. In: addition, the small number of handbooks/textbooks means that, for all intents and purposes, writers are still highly welded to the organisational structures established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In: order to gain an understanding of the field, first this article will briefly examine the initial templates laid down by the early authors of Byzantine textbooks. Following the examination of these templates, we will move chronologically through some of the main publications of the long 20th century, concluding in the present day, gauging the impact of these works.

1 SHLOSSER 2004 108-110. Boak was responsible for training at least two generations of Byzantine Administrative historians, J. E. Dunlap & W. E. Sinnigen, and was comfortable in the early and middle Byzantine Periods. Vasiliev only trained one student, Peter Charanis (who rather made up the lack by building the Rutgers Byzantine Studies program practically by hand), but was highly active in Dumbarton Oaks during the 1940’s and early 1950’s.

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through scholarly reaction and publication information. While not meant to be exhaustive, this brief article should allow the reader to gain an understanding of the general situation with English language one-volume Byzantine History textbooks. For the purposes of this article, our chronological framework will begin in 1892 and run through to the present-day.

**PRIMARY TEMPLATES**

Even though over one hundred and twenty-five years has passed since the publication of the first English language Byzantine History textbook, works today are still primarily organised around the same templates established in 1892 and 1926 respectively. The first one-volume handbook, appearing in 1892, was that of Charles William Chadwick Oman, published initially in the *Story of the Nations.* Though primarily famous as a military historian, Oman was conversant in the majority of the Latin and Greek sources for the Byzantine Empire, basing his work on a clear and sympathetic reading of the texts. In: terms of organisation, Oman chose what we would call the *chronological narrative* approach to Byzantine History. After briefly looking at the founding of Byzantium during the 1st millennium B.C., Oman begins his history with the refoundation of Byzantium as Constantinople by Constantine I in AD 324, and from there he moves chronologically forward in time until the fall of Constantinople in AD 1453. Oman covers all the main events of Imperial history through short narrative chapters, which primarily covered seventy to one hundred years at a stretch. Reflecting the available sources, and possibly the popular interests of the time, the greatest focus is on the reign of Justinian I, followed by the reign of Heraclius and the rise of Islam. While it concisely covers the entire history of the Byzantine Empire, the chronological narrative employed by Oman has a disadvantage in that, by necessity, it places a prime focus on political and military history of the major emperors and dynasties. In: spite of being interwoven into the narrative as best as possible, administrative, cultural, economic, religious, and social history receive shorter to little coverage. A popular work Oman’s *The Byzantine Empire* would be reprinted by publishers in the United Kingdom and the United States at least nine times up through the 1920’s, and would only be superseded as a one volume narrative handbook with the publication of the first edition of A. A. Vasiliev’s *History of the Byzantine Empire.*

Norman H. Baynes established the second main template used for a Byzantine History handbook in 1925 with the publication of his short book, *The Byzantine Empire.* Baynes, successor to J. B. Bury as the leader of Byzantine Studies in Britain, taught for over twenty years at University College of London and his book reflected his approach to teaching. In:stead of a chronological narrative Baynes employed a *thematic approach* to Byzantine History, focusing on topics such as social life, the Orthodox Church, administration, Byzantine military and others. In:deed, a chronological narrative or a focus on political events is almost completely absent from the book, apart from an exceedingly brief chapter entitled “A List of the Byzantine Emperors” which introduced the main dynastic periods and listed the emperors. In: addition, unlike later thematic studies, Baynes only took his coverage up to the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Students with an interest in the later Byzantine Empire or the Palaeologian dynasty would have to look elsewhere. Unlike Oman’s work, Baynes also included a short annotated bibliography as an aid to students looking to further their reading on the thematic topics. The popularity and high use of Baynes’s *The Byzantine Empire* is seen in the at least twelve reprints issued from 1925-1977 by five different publishers and the translations into Spanish and Italian editions that are still in print. Only with the publication of the first edition of J. M. Hussey’s *The Byzantine World* in 1957 would a new thematic based work superseded Baynes volume. Despite the development of some variations over the course of the long 20th century, the *chronological narrative* and the *thematic templates* remain the primary organisation types used in the writing of Byzantine History textbooks to this day.

**OVERVIEW OF IMPORTANT WORKS**

Oman’s *The Byzantine Empire* would remain the primary one-volume narrative history of Byzantium until the late 1920’s, the sheer number of reprints issued point to its use and longevity. Though only one critical review of Oman’s work from its initial publication is readily available, that review comes from J. B. Bury, then the leader of British Byzantine Studies. While lightly questioning the decision to compress eleven centuries into only 350 pages, Bury was impressed with Oman’s work, noting particularly his skill in dealing with the Palaeologian period. A replacement for Oman’s work would only come with the publication of A. A. Vasiliev’s *History of the Byzantine Empire,* which beginning with the publication of its first edition in 1928 and 1929, would arguably come to be the primary English language textbook used for the next thirty years. Vasiliev was originally one of the leading Russian Byzantinists, publishing important work on Byzantine-Arab relations, until the Russian Revolution. Ripple effects from the Revolution later appear to have prompted his immigration to the United States. Succeeding Michael Rostovtzeff, Vasiliev was hired as a professor of ancient history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison History in 1924, teaching there from 1924 till his retirement in 1938. Vasiliev’s *History of the Byzantine Empire,* much like Baynes, reflected his approach to teaching Byzantine History in the classroom. In: terms of breadth of coverage Vasiliev’s work was a much more scholarly text than Oman’s, longer and considerably more detailed, with primary and secondary sources cited

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2 Works selected through several searches of the WorldCat First Search database and arranged chronologically. Book reviews found through several searches of JSTOR. Though they are important, this article excludes multi-volume works, as from Edward Gibbon and George Finley, as well as edited multi-author works such as the *Cambridge Medieval History* volumes, or the multitude of “Companion” volumes that have flooded the academic book market.

3 OMAN 1892

4 See the discussion in MARCINIAK 2011 [https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/article/view/17221/23339]

5 VASILIEV 1928-1929

6 BAYNES 1925-1929

7 BURY 1893 327-328. The 2011 review of Oman’s *The Byzantine Empire* in MARCINIAK 2011 arose from the republication of the work by Westholme Press.

8 HUSSEY 1957

9 BARKER 2002 244-247, 259.
in footnotes, and an almost frightening long bibliography reflecting the sheer depth of Vasiliev’s knowledge. Almost a quarter of a century after his first edition Vasiliev, with the assistance of his former student Peter Charanis, revised his work for a second American edition. Based on previous revisions for the French translation, this second edition featured some revisions based on new publications and updated bibliographical references. The available critical reviews of both first and second editions, though each with varying disagreements on detail, praise the wide coverage and the usefulness to students. Though somewhat dated in places, and later overshadowed by George Ostrogorsky’s History of the Byzantine State, it is still one of the most complete history of the Byzantine Empire available. The second published edition has been continuously in print since 1952 and has recently been reprinted once again, this time in digital format.  

Complementing Norman H. Baynes thematic approach is Sir Steven Runciman’s Byzantine Civilisation, published in 1933 by E. Arnold. Most famous for his three-volume history of the Crusades, Runciman was the only Byzantinist trained by J. B. Bury, and published widely throughout his long life on a variety of topics in Byzantine History. Though working on a slightly longer canvas, Runciman adapted the basic features of the thematic approach used by Baynes. Beginning with two short grounding chapters, on the foundation of Constantinople and a Historical Outline, Runciman then proceeds thematically through Byzantine history concluding with a look at ‘Byzantium and the Neighbouring World.’ Byzantine Civilisation met with somewhat mixed review from scholars. Though most praised the readable prose and considerable knowledge that went into the work, frustrations with the citations and bibliography recurred. Though not as successful as Baynes Byzantine Empire, Runciman’s Byzantine Civilisation would be reprinted, though never revised, six times between 1948-1975. 

In terms of the short thematic survey, despite Sir Steven Runciman’s Byzantine Civilisation, Norman H. Baynes The Byzantine Empire would remain the main one-authored work until the 1957 publication of Joan M. Hussey’s The Byzantine World. Hussey, a student of Baynes, taught for many years as a professor at University College of London and The Byzantine World reflected her students need for an up-to-date short survey of Byzantine history and society. Hussey took the strengths of Baynes Byzantine Empire, its thematic coverage of the Byzantine world, and corrected its weaknesses, namely the lack of chronological and political history. Four sections provide the political and military history of the empire, with some of the administrative changes taking place woven in as well, while the seven remaining sections provided thematic coverage to aspects of the Byzantine world. Met with favourable reviews, The Byzantine World would be published in hardcover and paperback formats in both the United Kingdom and the United States and have a run of four editions. The second edition of 1961, the first published in the United States, is still available in a hardcover reprint version from Greenwood Press. While some of the perspectives have shifted since Hussey last revised The Byzantine World in 1970, her work still provides students an accessible introduction to the Byzantine Empire and a launching point for more specific studies.

Probably the single most important one-volume narrative work on the Byzantine Empire in the mid-late 20th century was George Ostrogorsky’s A History of the Byzantine State. Ostrogorsky, a Russian born Byzantinist who settled at the University of Belgrade, published the German language first edition of History of the Byzantine State in 1940. Translated by Joan M. Hussey, History of the Byzantine State was published in the United Kingdom and the United States, with the second and third German editions of 1952 and 1963 providing the basis for the first and second English language editions of 1956/57 and 1968/69. Due in part to the structure of the Handbuch der Alterswissenschaft series, in which the German language original appeared, History of the Byzantine State only provides a short introduction to the early Byzantine period from Constantine to Justinian. Full coverage is left the middle and late periods of Byzantine History with the majority of the narrative focus on political and socio-economic issues. Receiving numerous laudatory reviews from senior Byzantinists worldwide, History of the Byzantine State quickly become the standard textbook for Byzantine History, replacing Vasiliev’s History of the Byzantine Empire, and would remain so up until the 1980’s. Since the late 1980’s the textbook situation for Byzantine Studies has become fragmented as Ostrogorsky’s History of the Byzantine State became increasingly out of step with scholarly research. In: the shorter one-volume narrative textbooks, Robert Browning’s The Byzantine Empire became increasingly popular for use in North American classrooms during the 1980’s and 1990’s. First published in 1980, Browning’s Byzantine Empire is considerably shorter than Ostrogorsky, a fact that was an advantage to college professors. Unusually for a narrative textbook Browning took A.D. 500 as his beginning date, rather than a 3rd or 4th century starting point. With five chapters covering pivotal eras in Byzantine history, Browning’s Byzantine Empire
offered a more unified synthesis of political and cultural history than Ostrogorsky. While well regarded in North America, it was relatively overlooked in Britain and Europe. After numerous requests from North American professors, Browning published a lightly revised edition in 1992, which remains in print today, though its use has declined.

For thematically structured textbooks, this period saw the publication of two new options: H. W. Haussig's *A History of Byzantine Civilization* and Cyril Mango's *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome.* Published in a lavish format more suited to an art history text, Haussig's *Byzantine Civilization* contains no references, a limited bibliography, and illustrations that are untied in any way to the text. Though translated by Joan M. Hussey, Haussig's *Byzantine Civilization* is not a work that lends itself to ease of use, and would overwhelm an undergraduate student with no grounding in Byzantine history. Though receiving limited praise from reviewers, Haussig's work has never been reprinted, not even in paperback, and appears to have had limited to no impact in the classroom. In contrast, though an often bleak and negative view of the Byzantine Empire, Mango's *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* was a much more important and long-lasting publication than Haussig's. Though thematic in approach, Mango takes a different approach than that of Baynes or Runciman. Considering his work to be a triptych on Byzantine society, Mango looks first at aspects of Byzantine life, then the 'Thought World of East Rome,' followed by a short section on 'The Legacy' of Byzantium. However, excluded from Mango's *Byzantium* is any narrative overview or discussion of administration, law, or theology. Additionally, this book weighted heavily towards the early Byzantine period, with much less coverage of the middle and late periods. Generally well received by reviewers, Mango's *Byzantium* would be reprinted four times and translated into Greek, Italian, and Polish.

The only true large-scale attempt to replace Ostrogorsky's *History of the Byzantine State* was in 1997 with the publication of Warren Treadgold's *A History of the Byzantine State and Society.* Taking a wider view of Byzantine history than many scholars, Treadgold began his work with the reign of Diocletian in A. D. 284 and, unlike other Byzantine textbooks extended his coverage past the fall of Constantinople in A. D. 1453 to the Byzantine states of Morea and Trebizond, which briefly survived the fall of the Empire. Representing an innovation in Byzantine History textbook formatting, Treadgold used a combined narrative/thematic organisation for *Byzantine State and Society* that allowed conventional narrative chapters to be supported by thematic analytic chapters that covered aspects of Byzantine society. While no other scholar has attempted a work quite so large on this scale since, the reviews of *Byzantine State and Society* were mixed. Leading scholars such as John Haldon, Walter E. Kaegi, and Wolfram Brandes, with whom Treadgold has methodological and interpretative differences with over a number of themes, were critical of large aspects of the book. Other scholars such as Michael Angold, John W. Barker, and Peter Sarris, though with some issues over certain details, generally provided positive reviews of Treadgold's work. The result would be that while Byzantine State and Society would be used in college classrooms, it has never truly supplanted Ostrogorsky and is too detailed to be used for entry-level undergraduates. Four years later Treadgold would produce a much shorter one-volume history, *A Concise History of Byzantium* for Palgrave Macmillan, which though based upon *Byzantine State and Society* and using its narrative/thematic organisation, was a completely new work.

On the thematic front, the years between 2000 and 2007 saw the publication of four different works attempting to fill the need for an updated thematic survey. The first two, published in 2000 and 2001 respectively, were John F. Haldon's *Byzantium: A History* and Alexios G.K. Savvides & Benjamin Hendrickx's *Introducing Byzantine history (a manual for beginners),* followed in 2006 by Averil Cameron's *The Byzantines,* and finally by Judith Herrin's *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire* in 2007. Haldon, Savvides & Hendrickx, and Cameron returned to the thematic template first laid down by Norman H. Baynes with his *Byzantine Empire* in 1925, while Herrin's thematic approach is an unusual one, marrying chronological advance with a different theme for each chapter. While Haldon adapts the Baynes template, he does introduce some variation to chapters. In particular in 'The peoples and lands of Byzantium' he carefully examines the ethnic distribution of the empire, along with a clear discussion of the importance of geography in understanding trade and military actions; while 'Life in town and countryside' provides a concise overview of research on urban and rural life. Haldon aimed his short, but dense work at undergraduates and novice historians, and it was well received by reviewers at the time. However, Haldon's *Byzantium* unfortunately lacks any substantial notes or a critical bibliography, and as reviewer James Howard-Johnston notes sometimes overly compresses the political history, making it somewhat problematic as a textbook. Savvides & Hendrickx manual is a somewhat curious textbook. Written by a Greek and South African Byzantinists in English, yet published by a French publishing company, *Introducing Byzantine History* was not widely distributed upon its publication, making it is relatively hard to find for purchase. Savvides & Hendrickx aim their textbook directly at undergraduate students, eschewing the

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22 For reviews see GREGORY 1973 272-274; TALBOT-RICE 1971 429-430.
23 See: ANGOLD 1981 278-280; HITCHNER 1982 249-250; NICHOLS 1981 489-490, which is reviewed with Browning's *Byzantine Empire*; RUNCIMAN 1983 183; also see the in-depth discussion of Mango's approach in KAZHDAN 1983 320-322.
24 TREADGOLD 1997.
and 2011 *History of Byzantium* provides a middle length textbook with coverage of the full span of Byzantine History. Clearly written, with interspersed boxes dealing with primary sources and other topics, *History of Byzantium* lacks footnotes, but has bibliographic sections at the end of each chapter along with a general bibliography. Though critical reviews are sparse, both Warren Treadgold and Dionysios Stathakopoulos consider *History of Byzantium* a useful textbook for the undergraduate student.39 Also, a review of recent syllabi for Byzantine History classes shows that Gregory’s *History of Byzantium* is assigned a majority of the time. However, it should be noted that part of the reason for Gregory’s dominance of the classroom is simply the fact that there are very few other options available.

So, what can be gathered from this review of publications? As we have seen, even in modern-day publications, much of the template used by Byzantinists when writing entry-level textbooks on Byzantine history tend to hew towards either: the chronological narrative established by Charles W. C. Oman, or to the thematic approach established by Norman H. Baynes. The only innovation in these templates came with Warren Treadgold’s adaption of a combined narrative/thematic approach. While Treadgold’s template offers new possibilities of combining chapters on traditional political/military history with chapters on social/cultural history, no other author to date has used this approach. In: addition, despite the importance of a general survey of Byzantine history, no one other than Treadgold has attempted to write an in-depth one-volume work since the 2nd edition of Ostrogorsky’s *History of the Byzantine State* appeared in 1968. Likewise, while Timothy E. Gregory’s *History of Byzantium* has seems to have filled the need for an entry-level textbook, no other work really exists that meets the needs of professors and their students. This raises the question – in today’s climate of historical specialisation is it truly possible to have a general survey of Byzantine History? Or is the best move for our discipline to shift towards shorter period based introductions, centred on the Early, Middle, and Late Byzantine periods? At present time, the future remains unclear.

### APPENDIX: CHRONOLOGICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF BYZANTINE HISTORY HANDBOOK/TEXTBOOKS


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31 SAXVIDES & HENDRICKX 2001 Note - due to its publication by a French publishing firm the table of contents is located at the back of the book.
32 SAXVIDES & HENDRICKX 2001 19-23.
33 SAXVIDES & HENDRICKX 2001 77-85.
34 The Greek translation of this work, published in 2003, however has been much more successful. Following the initial translation a 2nd edition was published in 2008, then reprinted in 2011, with a 3rd revised and expanded edition that was due for publication in 2016.
35 The broad chronological sections are: I. Foundations of Byzantium; II. The Transition from Ancient to Medieval; III. Byzantium Becomes a Medieval State; IV. Varieties of Byzantium.
36 In particular see the reviews of: CURTA 2009 813-814; and TREADGOLD 2009 99-101. Treadgold notes in *Byzantine Exceptionalism and Some Recent Books on Byzantium* (TREADGOLD 2010) 19, that “the list of errors in my review in *International History Review* 31… and that of Florin Curta in *American Historical Review*… though prepared independently, never overlap.”
37 See REES 2011 495.
38 GREGORY 2005; For the 2nd Edition see GREGORY 2010.
J. M. Hussey. The Byzantine World. 1st Ed. London: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1957. (Narrative/Thematic Combination)
Constance Head. Imperial Byzantine Portraits. New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas Brothers, 1982. (Chronological Narrative) Head called her work a verbal & graphic gallery; it is in many ways a modern day regnal chronicle.

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