

Mark and the Sacred

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Mark was good at saints. We heard that in the address by William Whyte at Mark's funeral service. And he was certainly alive to the importance of hagiography: the footnotes to the chapter on icons and iconoclasm in his book are full of references to saints' lives that he deploys with confidence and engagement; I counted thirty saints mentioned by name in the index to his book and they are an eclectic bunch. The Byzantine landscape was studded with holy men and monasteries, and Mark wrote about the founding of a such a monastery in the eleventh century on Mt Galesion near Ephesus in Asia Minor by one St Lazaros, defending the reliability of the *Life* written soon after the saint's death on the grounds that a later writer would have softened or mythologized its 'gritty realism'. Instead he found it an important text, and 'unrivalled' as a detailed account of the founding and development of an eleventh-century monastery.¹ Lazaros established himself on a column as a stylite – but characteristically Mark explains Lazaros's charisma and his success by an appeal not to the model of Peter Brown's late antique holy man but to a late nineteenth-century account of a north Yorkshire charismatic 'wise man'. I'm sure he was pleased with that.

But I was given the broader and challenging title of 'Mark and the sacred'. Challenging, because I don't think this is a subject he addressed directly himself. His long list of publications moves between archaeology, castles, urbanism and

¹ 'The Life of St Lazaros of Galesion: how to found and maintain a successful monastery', in Margaret Mullett, ed., *Founders and Refounders of Byzantine Monasteries*, Belfast Byzantine texts and Translation 6.3 (Belfast, 2008), 251-72.

political and economic history, and latterly global history. Apart from St Lazaros it is hard to find an item addressed specifically to a religious theme. Mark was no Peter Brown; he clearly owed a good deal to Cyril Mango's far more astringent approach to Byzantium and Byzantine religion. That is not to say that he did not find religious issues important, and to cite William Whyte again, and confirmed by Helen, he was himself a supporter of established religion who participated actively in its rituals and for instance enjoyed joining in loudly in hymn singing. He was not much attracted, in his publications at least, to exotic religious or ascetic manifestations. But he was a great believer in the value of religious rituals at critical moments in people's lives, and according to Helen he insisted on lighting candles to saints when on family holidays, the more obscure the better, on the grounds that prayers to them were more likely to be heard. The fun lay in each case in choosing which one. According to Andrew Small he was passionate about church architecture when on LABS trips. He loved feast days, stories and obscure miracles, and his students were very familiar with his taste for way-out saints, but it was typical that in his book he singles out the support of the nearby bishop of Ephesus as a crucial factor in explaining Lazaros's success – practicality rather than prayer. We have been reminded that as Proctor Mark relished University Sermons and himself delivered the Latin Litany. His unforgettable funeral at Christ Church cathedral was a great occasion in the same mode. In a way, I suspect, Mark's Byzantine Orthodoxy came quite close to the Anglicanism he knew and valued as part of the essential glue of society, and to be valued and supported for that.

We have to ask then how he saw religion (namely the Byzantine form of Christianity) functioning in relation to the Byzantine state and to historical

development, and we can best do this I think by looking at what he says in his book, *The Making of Byzantium, 600 to 1025*, published in 1996. It is intriguing that in other editions the title was *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium*, because if he had followed that title up further it might have led to a rather different book.

The main thrust of the book is on the military and political successes and failures of the Byzantine state in the crucial centuries after it had been hit by the Arab conquests. Mark is clear that the history of Byzantium in this period belonged to the early medieval world. He stressed the unifying nature of Christianity, over and above the eastern divisions, and saw it as a 'useful morale booster';² he also advanced the unusual view that the ties between Constantinople and Aphrodito in Egypt in the sixth century were closer than those between Constantinople and Rome.³ In his chapter on how the empire survived the conquests, he wrote of the conviction that Constantinople was a holy city, New Jerusalem as well as New Rome, protected by the Virgin and with a role to play in the 'apocalyptic drama' to come, appealing to the *Life* of St Andrew the Fool, which he dates to the early eighth century.⁴

The church is singled out as a factor in Byzantium's survival, and Mark uses saints' lives to illustrate the impact of holy men and monks, but he suggests that this has been exaggerated in contrast with the organization of the secular or institutional church.⁵ Among the book's particular strengths are its insistence on physical and strategic geography, and the attention it gives to Byzantium's northern neighbours. After describing some very difficult times for Byzantium,

² *Making*, 47.

³ *Making*, 45.

⁴ *Making*, 127 (citing Mango 1982, though the latter's date is actually the late seventh).

⁵ *Making*, at 128, with 128-33.

and some serious setbacks for the Byzantine state, it ends with an upturn - an account of the achievements of the emperor Basil II, known as 'the Bulgar-Slayer' for his victory over the Bulgars and conquest of Bulgaria. But despite the title there is no conclusion arguing that Orthodoxy had now been achieved or indeed was a crucial factor.

Mark's book was published in 1996, so quite early in his career and his thinking. It is over twenty years old now, but especially in its northern focus and geographical coverage it was an unusual book, and even though of course there is now vastly more evidence to discuss, so much of what he wrote is now part of current thinking, absorbed into our consciousness.

In choosing this period Mark was faced with having to explain the battles over religious images in eighth- and ninth- century Byzantium, and the eventual failure of iconoclasm – a hugely controversial subject among Byzantinists and one on which there is a mountain of secondary literature. Mark did go in for theological explanations when necessary, for instance in his brief description of the differences between Chalcedonians and Monophysites that split the eastern church in the sixth century. But theology, and the vast amount of contemporary theological writing on icons in treatises, letters, polemics and council acts do not play much of a role for him here. It is telling that his discussion is placed in a chapter titled 'The shock of defeat', which begins with a section explaining the Byzantine religious world-view and belief in demons with reference to Evans Pritchard and Max Gluckman on African anthropology. Cyril Mango's *Byzantium, Empire of New Rome*, had been published in 1980, and John Haldon's *Byzantium in the Seventh Century* in 1990; both in different ways rejected traditional theological emphases in Byzantine history, and it was no different with Mark. He

deploys saints' lives again here, and knew his Theophanes very well; he had seen unpublished work by Mango on the rise of icons and he was alert to the huge amount of rewriting of history in the iconophile sources, but he wrote before several important studies, and before a mass of more recent publications. He believed that Byzantine iconoclasm was a response to Islamic (and Jewish) hostility to images, and motivated by the Byzantine belief that the conquests were caused by divine punishment for religious disunity.⁶ The reasons for had to do with political and military defeat, and he connected both the reappearance of iconoclasm after the vindication of religious images at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 and its eventual official end in 843 directly with external events and 'short-term political reasons'.⁷

For Mark iconoclasm was a 'symptom' of an inward-looking and introverted culture (163) and a 'siege mentality', a 'rejection of the inclusive Near Eastern culture' of late antiquity (164). It failed when things began to get better with the Arabs and Byzantium looked elsewhere than to the east. Moreover, iconoclasm was never very widely supported anyway. It is a coherent and persuasive view, argued with all his accustomed energy and verve. Above all, we hear again the authentic voice of Mark, and that is what we all miss so much.

⁶ *Making*, 136 (disunity), 139-42 (reaction to Islam).

⁷ *Making*, 150 f., 158, 159-64.

