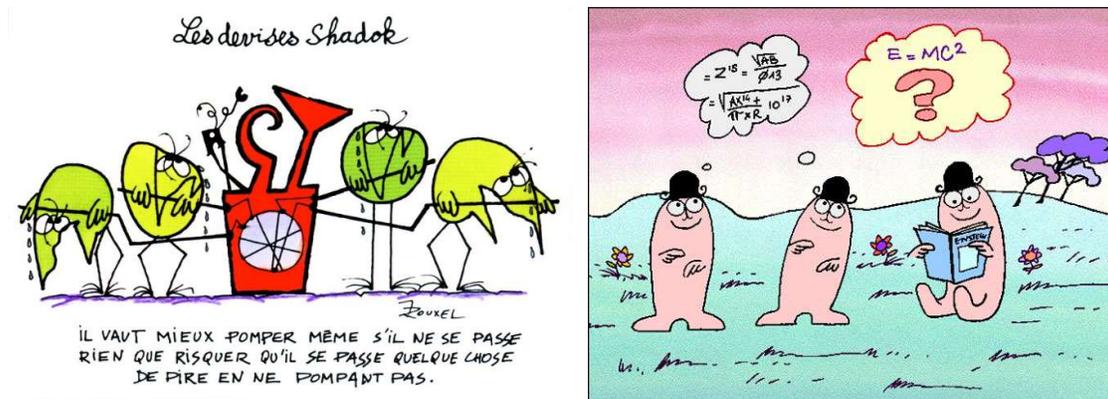


THE MAKINGS OF AN UNORTHODOX BYZANTINIST



When I was asked to speak today on Mark Whittow and the Scholarly community, I could not but think that this would be a fitting tribute to Mark's sense of humour, considering how active a member I am of the scholarly community myself. Indeed, while Mark was pivotal in our community, I could at best consider myself as the island of Pitcairn, or more fittingly for a Frenchman, of Saint-Helena.

Nonetheless, in a way, it is the perfect topic for me to speak about because since the first day I came in Oxford, ten years ago, Mark has always been my main foothold in the local Academic community and very often he single-handedly represented a good half of the public in the events I have organized in the Maison française d'Oxford. Furthermore, I have always envisioned Mark through the lens of a very famous French cartoon called *Les Shadoks*. It is a reasonable assumption that not many of you are familiar with this French classic. The cartoon depicts the stupid life of strange creatures, the so-called Shadoks, whose main occupation is to pump, just in case it would prove useful someday. The success of the cartoon stemmed from the fact that it was a metaphor of French lifestyle. And one recurrent topic of the cartoon is that the Shadoks live in awe of a more advanced race, a race graced with superior intelligence thanks to the fact that they are wearing magical bowler hats, and whose name are Gibis. I let you guess who was the inspiration for the Gibis. Anyway I always considered Mark as my own personal Gibi as he embodied all qualities of wits, social acumen and sartorial flair I vainly aspire to.



Still, I was confronted by the fact that I liked Mark much more than I knew him and as such preparing this speech was quite a challenge for me. Fortunately, I am a well-trained Byzantinist and byzantinology is all about working without sources. Furthermore, as a Byzantinist speaking about a fellow Byzantinist, I decided that it was fitting to observe the rules of the byzantine eulogy, the *enkomion*. As such I went to read Menander, the master of the second sophistic, so influential in Byzantium. One can always find solace in the classics

because as I read I learned that the very first rule of the *enkomion* is do dismiss all *realia* from the speech: no specific names, no specific dates, no specific facts. So, yes, in this framework, I became confident I could deliver a proper speech today!

As I said Mark's was pivotal in the Oxonian scholarly community and as I browsed through his curriculum I felt strangely at home as a specialist of Byzantine administration, basking in the intricacies of your committees and sub-committees. Nonetheless I confess that I was puzzled to discover that Mark was even part of the IT committee as he always struck me



Mark in Dumbarton Oaks to present his work with the British Institute in Ankara (*Anatolian castles in context: new approaches to Dark Age Byzantium*) during the 2005 Byzantine Studies Symposium *Urban and Rural Settlement in Anatolia and the Levant, 500-100 AD: New Evidence from Archaeology*

as being more adapted to the Republic of Letters than the Tyranny of Emails. But to insist on this aspect of his activities would have been redundant as most of the audience today probably sat next to him in the very same committees. So I took the liberty to write to people he worked with abroad, people who could not be here today, in order to gather testimonies. As some of you may know, Mark collaborated with the British Institute in Ankara, in various guises, between 1994 and 2000, and with the British Institute for Archaeology and History at Amman, and the Council for British Research in the Levant, as member of the Council and Research Committee, between 1994 and 2000. In either case, his involvement was both administrative and scientific, as he collaborated actively in the Castle Survey Project in Paphlagonia and in field work at Khirbat Faris (together with Jeremy Johns, I think?).

I don't have time obviously to quote all the answers I received but their contents were strikingly similar in pointing out the balance Mark struck between scholarly interests and human qualities of humour, curiosity, enthusiasm and energy. And not one of these testimonies fails either to stress the synergy between Mark and Helen. Actually, the first thing a famous French specialist of the Plantagenets told me when I asked him about his relation with Mark was how the first evening they spent together in 2004, the conversation veered immediately away from scholarship, as Mark was elated by a promotion Helen had just won and wanted to celebrate.

What strikes me particularly both from his resumé and from all the testimonies I gathered is how much of his time and energy he devoted to tasks insuring that others would have the best conditions to work. His supportive nature towards other's endeavours always comes to the fore, for instance in this email I received from Christopher Lightfoot, who remembered Mark from the excavations in Amorion: "I really appreciated him as a friend and

scholar. He was always very supportive, clearly saw the importance of the site (which he referred to in glowing terms in his publications), and appreciated my efforts to keep in going. He could easily have fallen in with the rest, who wanted the dig ended as quickly as possible and saw me as a nuisance, but he did not – much to his credit. He was one of very few Brits who visited Amorium. He was a very decent chap”. This last part is seemingly the highest possible praise as far as British people are concerned: we are indeed very far from the Mediterranean and I wonder what Menander the Rhetor would have thought of it... Similarly, Alison McQuitty, with whom he worked in Jordan, stressed “his wondering yet decisive intellect and probing curiosity about whatever I was doing. I know that he brought those traits to the [Council for British Research in the Levant] and was greatly encouraging to the Director and Assistant, who took over from myself”. I could also quote Roger Matthews, who was in charge of the Paphlagonian survey, who stresses that Mark “was a wonderful team member who brought great energy and ideas to the project. More significantly, he helped me considerably in planning for the project before we started work in the field”.

From all these testimonies, I gather that Mark had certainly chosen his last college very well: if not *through his flesh and blood*, at least certainly *through his efforts and time*, we have been *nourished, cherished and strengthened*.

As I pointed out at the beginning, alongside with Chris and Jeremy, Mark was my main point of entry into the Oxonian scholarly community, whose life I truly find fascinating. Historians always deplore or face the criticism that they can't experiment, as the past can't be re-enacted for the sake of scientific observation. But for Byzantium it is not exactly true.

It is not exactly true because I think that there is no better place in the world to study the Byzantine Empire than Oxford. Not because of the riches of its libraries, or the excellence of the local Byzantinists, but because Oxford is so much the living image of Constantinople. A society whose sense of excellence leaned on a glorious past and the strict observance of the weirdest set of rules, honoured as the intangible *mos maiorum*. A society whose certainty to be the centre of the world and the measure of all good was strangely infectious and indeed so powerful that the barbarians strove to belong by emulating its idiosyncrasies. A society whose real genius resided in its capacity to integrate the foreign elite by making culture the measure of success.

And in this framework Mark would indubitably have taken the role of Constantine VII. Not only because of the common name of their consorts, nor because he attributed to a conversation with James Howard-Johnston on this very emperor his subsequent career; and neither because of their common scholarly inclinations, both being what James termed “a cast-back to a distant past, to Late Antiquity, when an individual might set out to scan the whole human past”. Not even for his regal air when riding his bike. But, from my point of view, because he manifested a genuine interest for the turbulent people existing beyond the borders of the empire. And like Constantine VII, who acknowledged only the Frankish monarchy as something akin to the Imperial polity, Mark had a special interest in the French Scholarly community. To quote James once more, Mark was in a way an “Anglophone outrider of the French school of Byzantinists, being primarily concerned with structures, economic, social and institutional”. I don't know if it is because of this intellectual proximity but indeed I consider



Mark's book, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium*, as one of the most intellectually elegant book I ever read.

Assuredly, Mark had a special relationship with French Byzantinists. He notably contributed to the International Congress of Byzantine Studies, held in Paris in 2001, organizing and chairing a very successful round table on Byzantine economy. As a matter of fact, it was the first time I met him, I was a doctoral student, very proud to circulate the handouts. Unfortunately, the archives of

Mark discovering French academic *etiquette*
(or how spending cuts can have atmospheric results)

the conference's organization have recently been discarded so I was unable to investigate further its activities on this occasion. The proceedings were not published but Cécile Morrison told me that Marks' masterful introduction influenced in a notable way the very important book on the Byzantine Economy she published six years later together with the late Angeliki Laiou. From this time on, Mark maintained excellent relations with French Byzantinists, contributing to Festschrifts, chairing in Academic jury (you will recognize him here, in this slightly conspiratorial atmosphere, amidst the living pillars of French Byzantinology: Jean-Pierre Sodini, Michel Kaplan, Jean-Claude Cheynet and Bernard Flusin). The last time he came to visit was to celebrate with us the election of Cécile Morrison to the Academy, together with his old-time mentor and fellow fashion victim James Howard-Johnston.



*Who else could have effortlessly
matched
his handkerchief with his drink?*

Mark's links with the French Scholarly community went beyond the Byzantinists and he also had strong intellectual, if sometime conflictual, ties with the Western Medievalists, for instance Dominique Barthélémy, a champion of the Feudal "contre-Revolution". Together with Chris Wickham, Mark was instrumental in allowing the SHMESP, a swampy-sounding acronym for the Society of French Medievalists, to organize its annual conference in Oxford in 2011 and he was the only Oxonian to actually volunteer to give a paper during the conference.

Nonetheless Mark's main contacts with the French Medievalists were not in Paris but in Poitiers, actually one of the main centre of Medieval studies in France, probably founded to understand how the Black Prince could have humiliated us against such odds. Martin Aurell, the director of the centre, sent me a very touching testimony describing how Mark went to give lectures in Poitiers and in one occasion "discarded the *severitas* of the Oxford Professor to defend England's colours during a karaoke night, winning the contest thanks to his interpretation of a Beatles' song". Martin Aurell does not remember what song Mark choose. It was probably not *Back to the USSR*, but certainly *Beautiful dreamer* or *Here comes the sun* would have been a fitting choice for our dear friend.

Vivien Prigent