

## Mark & Trade ('the material')

Hello, I'm Andrew Small. Mark was my supervisor from 2013 when I first came to Oxford as a timid masters student through to my doctorate. Before I begin, I want to thank the organisers of today's event. I'd like to thank Max in particular for asking me to speak for the first time about Mark. I had not realised how deep I had buried thoughts, memories, emotions about Mark by throwing myself into various pieces of work over the last year. It is probably a result of some deep-seated Calvinism. It was only when I stopped, because of Max's invitation, to excavate what I had buried that I truly began to appreciate how thoroughly Mark shaped not only myself but the intellectual life of all us in this room – as students, colleagues and friends.

Trade and the material, the topic that Max gave me, might not be as vast as Mark and the world, but it still gives me probably too much to talk about in the allotted fifteen minutes. However, I have found it to be a perfect topic to explore because Mark's ideas were always firmly grounded in a finely attuned handling of different types of evidence, 'the material'. His ability to do this and then communicate them is a way to get to the very heart of what made Mark, Mark, the scholar, the teacher and the human being.

I will start with a memory I have of sitting on a sofa in Mark's cosy, wee study in Beam Hall, walls encased with books, sipping on a typically strong coffee, trying to be careful with the crumbs from a Portuguese custard tart. I was coming towards the end of my first year as one of Mark's masters' students and we were discussing what the subject of my master's thesis should be. It was an important supervision, as what we decided that day would determine not only what we'd do the next academic year but also for a future doctorate, which would build upon the master's thesis.

Mark had a number of ideas. One was to look at medieval Indian ocean trade and the links between the Fatimid Caliphate and China using surviving documents and the archaeological record. That was tempting but I balked at the challenge of mastering the material and coming up with a doable topic-. Another was a bit too doable: a close study of Byzantine ceramic sherds in Italy, so we could get a better understanding of the chronology of medieval southern Italy. That one I was very clear on.

Although I had spent less than a year in Oxford, I had seen the effect of too many hits of pottery could have on an academic's sanity and told Mark that perhaps that that project might have to wait for someone with a different skill set from my own.

Eventually, together we came up with a project, initially looking at the links between trade and commerce with political structures in Byzantine Italy, which with further work, and with some nudging and occasionally very polite shunting from Mark, became a thesis examining long-distance trade connections between Byzantine Italy, Fatimid North Africa-he got his Fatimids- and west Africa through coinage, documentation and archaeological material.

Everything about that meeting and the doctoral project that was to come out was quintessential Mark. First, the cosy, encouraging atmosphere in which it was first conceived and then shaped through subtle suggestion and friendly advice. Then to look for an unexamined angle to a problem, taking a wider view but making sure that the ideas, thoughts and arguments were thoroughly grounded in all the available evidence, not restricting it to a single type.

I am not an archaeologist. I cannot speak with any authority or real knowledge about Mark's work as a DPhil student in the Maeander Valley but Mark's training as both an archaeologist and a Byzantinist must have fundamentally shaped his desire to sweat every bit of use out of a piece of evidence and not to privilege textual over material evidence, in a way that

was ahead of its time in Byzantine studies. Then, once the evidence had been carefully considered and weighed, to come to a conclusion, to come up with ideas, that were always boldly and clearly argued. You might disagree with them, but you knew what they were and what the evidence for it was.

That two-step process, of the careful assessing of multiple types of material and clarity of exposition, common sense in theory but difficult in practice, I think is the common thread through Mark's published work. No more clearly than in *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium* where Mark, in fifteen magisterial and lucid pages, carefully goes over all the available evidence for Byzantium and her neighbours in turn - from the different genres of texts, to the lead seals the Byzantines were so fond of, or to the archaeological evidence. Then to set out the geographical context, before, in the rest of the work, laying out a bold, innovative narrative, packed full of exciting ideas, about how Byzantium, interacting with the wider world, changed and adapted across four centuries.

Here in Oxford, over the last month in the LABS research seminar, we have been discussing the influence of *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, a book written by Dimitri Obolensky, published in 1971, on our field. A common theme has been that Obolensky's work was often the first major book that

many academics of, shall I say, a certain age bracket engaged with. For me and many others of my own age bracket, our *Byzantine Commonwealth* is Mark's *Making of Orthodox Byzantium*, and critical to its appeal is Mark's clarity of thought when handling the material at his disposal. It was and, to me still is, an inspiring example of what an individual historian can accomplish.

It was also, looking back on one conversation, a method, an approach that reflected a part of Mark's personality. I once asked Mark why he became a Byzantinist and not in one of the many other historical periods he was interested in. His reply that day was that Byzantine studies presented to him, at a certain point of his life, a number of interesting problems that drew him in, and one of them was the challenge of mastering the nuances and subtleties of all the scraps of evidence that were available.

The other important overlap between Mark's personality and his method was his openness to new ideas, evidence and experiences which was inextricably linked with his ability to change his mind and not be dogmatic in his opinions. It was something that we all should aspire to, but it was something that Mark was actually capable of doing. One simple but important example is how Mark was converted from thinking about

Byzantium to thinking and talking and writing explicitly about a medieval East Rome. It may seem a subtle change but once Mark had made that shift, perhaps prompted by some of his former students in this room today, it opened up new approaches and angles to the material for him to exploit, enabling him to ask new, interesting questions. It's the reason he could then write a great piece comparing the collapse of Roman power in the fifth century in the west with the collapse of Byzantine/East Roman power in the east in the eleventh. It was a better way to approach the material and he could accept the change adroitly and with grace.

Latterly, Mark, as we've already heard, had become interested in wider, global historical topics, beyond Byzantium, which had drawn his intellectual curiosity. His approach to the evidence and the material did not change, it expanded, through voracious reading and faithful attendances of Oxford's many research seminars. It was, in essence, the same method as before, now deployed on a much wider scale with Mark transferring his ability to assay different types of material, to ideas and evidence from across the world and different eras. He could compare them against each other in the same judicious, reasoned way, stimulating his own thinking and others along the way.

Trade, or more accurately all forms of exchange whether of goods, peoples and ideas, had by now come more to the fore of his thinking with his global turn. Previously, exchange had been a sort of 'dark matter' in Mark's published work, observable only through its indirect effects on his other ideas – on late antique urbanism, or East Rome's Eurasian grand strategy and so forth, without necessarily becoming a direct topic of discussion in any single piece. It was more through Mark's teaching - whether in a supervision, a lecture or discussing it over a refreshing lager and peanuts in a Serbian bar, that one could see the importance that trade, and exchange had on his thinking and historical imagination.

The most important point about Mark and trade is not really about his thoughts on trade in history or what he published about them. Rather it was Mark himself as a great trader of historical ideas and evidence, a one-man marketplace of ideas, residing here in Oxford. In my mind's eye, Mark would have been a great merchant adventurer prince, like Maniakh the Soghdian, who Mark wrote about in one of his last published pieces – a diplomat, a trader, a mediator between worlds – travelling from city to city, eager to encounter new people and arguments, buying ideas only after carefully weighing and assaying the evidence, then putting them into new, thought provoking combinations before purveying them, through his

writing, teaching or a hoot of a conversation. A product of his world but changing and energising it as he travelled along. I count myself blessed to have spent a few years travelling with him as one of his many apprentices, a member of his caravan. It was a wonderful and most profitable journey.

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