

BYZANTIUM AND THE ORIENT – THOUGHTS IN BRIEF ABOUT A NEW EXHIBITION

*Das goldene Byzanz und der Orient, Schallaburg (Austria)
March 31–November 4, 2012*

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A perceptible change could be noted in research attitudes in Migration period and early medieval studies in Hungary during the past two decades, marked, for example, by a focus on the cultural contacts between the peoples settling in the Carpathian Basin and Byzantium. The study of the relations between the peoples of the Carpathian Basin and Byzantium is no longer restricted to a review of diplomatic ties and the successive campaigns by northern peoples against the empire – instead, there is a growing emphasis on the analysis of cultural contacts as reflected by various elements of the material culture. “Golden Byzantium & the Orient”, a magnificent exhibition in the Renaissance castle of Schallaburg on show between March 31 and November 4, 2012, is organised around many captivating themes.

Thematic exhibitions occupy a special place in our modern world, a place dominated by a preoccupation with direct and immediate social profitability, because they can be seen as a good measure of academic achievement. This is hardly surprising, given that the display of valuable and rarely seen objects offer scholars a rare chance to be seen by the broader public and to bask in the media attention brought on by catchy headlines. The high attendance figures of these exhibitions is an excellent argument in debates over the usefulness and *raison d'être* of the academic disciplines lumped under the humanities waged between professionals of these disciplines and decision-makers who feel entitled to single-handedly decide how exactly taxpayers' money should be spent.

The curator of the exhibition emphasized the exhibition's social profitability in the preface written to the catalogue containing the greater part of the displayed items and a collection of short essays.¹ He also went a step further, asserting that the rediscovery of Byzantium, which had for a long time been banned from the shared European intellectual and cultural heritage, would offer an excellent opportunity for redefining a common European identity, a need made ever more acute *vis-à-vis* the crisis engulfing the continent during the past few years. Although rooted in Latin Christianity, the secondary and, often, ambivalent role of Byzantium and eastern (Greek) Christianity in Western and Central European identity is hardly surprising. Suffice it here to recall the role of Greek Orthodox (“Byzantine”) traditions and culture in the identity of the Eastern Slavic and Balkanic peoples to understand the Central European resentment towards the Orthodox East. These modern cultural boundaries obviously had a decisive impact on the research interests and attitudes of scholars working in different parts of Europe. Not least, the cultural biases often influenced and determined the nature of the problems addressed by Byzantine studies, a discipline that emerged at the close of the 19th century.

The modern cultural boundaries also left an imprint on Hungarian archaeological studies. It is not mere chance, then, that until recently, Hungarian archaeologists displayed little scholarly interest in Byzantium as one of the neighbours of the peoples settling in the Carpathian Basin. One major element of the academic concept behind the Schallaburg exhibition was the extensive presentation of the intricate relations between Byzantium and her neighbours. In contrast to the many exhibitions on Byzantium mounted during the past two decades, which spotlighted the empire itself and relegated relations with the neighbours to a secondary place,² the organisers of the Schallaburg exhibition (the specialists of the Römisch-Deutsches

¹ The exhibition catalogue: *Das goldene Byzanz und der Orient* (Schallaburg, 2012). The title of the preface by Falko Daim is in itself programmatic: “Europa neu denken” (*ibid.*, 9–13).

² A list of these exhibitions was compiled by Etele Kiss in the review of the Byzantium exhibition mounted in Munich in



Fig. 1

Zentralmuseum of Mainz, the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, the Institute for Byzantine Research of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and the Institute for Byzantine and Greek Studies of Vienna University), treated the latter as equally important, no doubt owing to the overall vision of the exhibition's curator, Falko Daim. This is reflected also by the proportions: six essays in the catalogue and ten thematic galleries in the exhibition are devoted to Byzantium, while six other essays and eight thematic galleries highlight the relations between the empire and her eastern (Sassanian, Arab, Seljuk and Ottoman) and western neighbours (from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance), as well as with the northern peoples (Avars and Bulgars).

Hungarian visitors will most likely be interested in the rooms devoted to the Bulgars and the Avars (even more so, because the relations between the ancient Hungarians of the Conquest period and the Árpáadian Age are not treated in a separate section). The exhibits displayed in the galleries dedicated to the Avars and the Bulgars are, for the greater part, splendid objets d'art crafted from gold that are most likely to attract visitors, and thus the period's specialist will hardly encounter lesser known pieces. At the same time, some of the displayed objects are rarely exhibited exactly because of their high value and it is possible that they have never been shown together previously. The perhaps most outstanding pieces are the exquisitely crafted jewellery articles (*Fig. 1*) and diadems of the Preslav Treasure, probably made in a workshop catering to the elite of Constantinople, and the Monomachos Crown, a gift to the Hungarian sovereign from the imperial court. In addition to admiring these magnificent works of art, the Schallaburg exhibition offers a unique possibility for an instructive exercise, namely a comparison of the Byzantine and Byzantine-influenced artefacts from the two regions. The displayed finds reflecting the depth of the Byzantine impact on the Bulgars' material culture after their conversion to Christianity contrast sharply with conditions before the conversion, and the same holds true for the Byzantine artefacts appearing in the Avar material.

2004: *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 131 (2006), 288–295. Kiss's prediction that interest in Byzantium would wane proved to be wrong. For the catalogues accompanying exhibitions on Byzantium with a traditional perspective, see: *Byzantium 330–1453* (London, 2008), *Byzanz: Pracht und Alltag* (Bonn, 2010), *Wege nach Byzanz* (Mainz, 2011). For exhibitions of the type "from Constantinople to Istanbul", based on the concept of history as a *longue durée*, see *De Byzance à Istanbul. Un port pour deux continents* (Paris, 2009), *Hippodrom: A Stage for Istanbul's History/Atmeydanı: İstanbul'un Tarih Sahnesi I–II* (Istanbul, 2010), *From Byzantium to Istanbul. 8000 years of a capital* (Istanbul, 2010). The relationship between the empire and her neighbours was explored to some extent in the catalogue accompanying an exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum: *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era: 843–1261* (New York, 1997). However, the exhibition and the catalogue principally focused on the Middle Byzantine period.

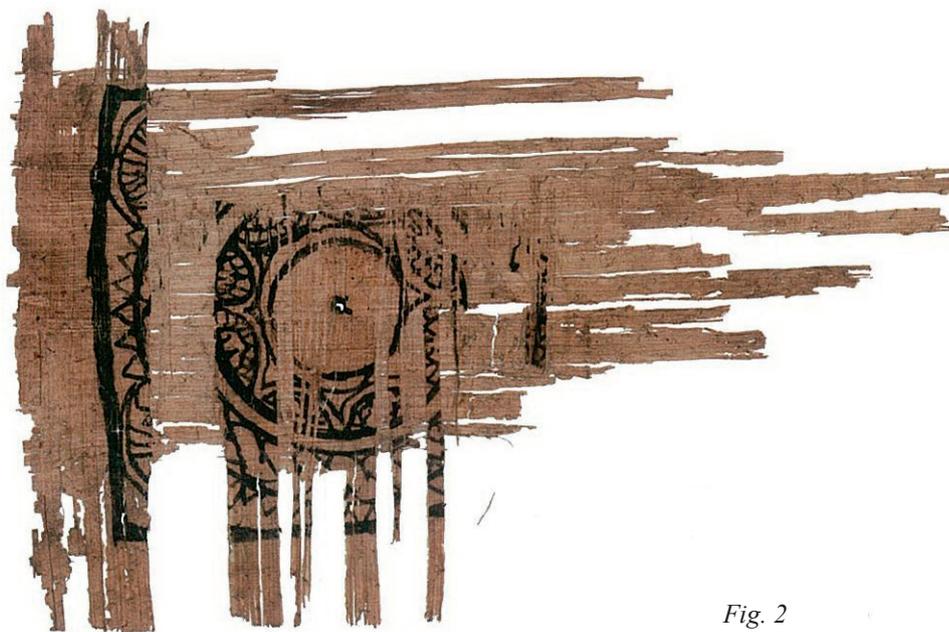


Fig. 2

These pieces provide an excellent illustration of the nature of the relations between Byzantium and the peoples living beyond the empire's northern borders. On the one hand, the exhibited antiquities include the artefacts expressing the position of the Central and Eastern European “nomads” in the intricate alliance system maintained by Byzantium; on the other, the relics displayed in the Sassanian, early Islamic and Western European galleries of the exhibition illuminate the cultural “chasm” that separated the oriental and Mediterranean empires from the nomads of Central and Eastern Europe, which in effect constrained the forging of genuinely meaningful cultural contacts.

The exhibition is an outstanding contribution to the study of various issues of interest to scholars from East Central Europe not only by encouraging comparisons of this type, but also by bringing together the relics of various interacting cultures into a single narrative spread out over a unified museum area. Suffice it here to quote another example, a find housed in the Papyrus Collection of the Austrian National Library (Fig. 2). Dating from 4th–5th century, the papyrus fragment shows a pattern for creating a “Coptic” textile,³ offering a rare glimpse into the pattern-books of Late Antiquity. In the lack of preserved specimens, the one-time existence of these pattern-books was assumed from the detailed analysis of various finished products such as textiles, mosaics, illuminated manuscripts and the like. The papyrus fragment from Vienna brings us closer to what some of these elusive objects actually looked like and thus also offers insights into the spread of various motifs and patterns.

These few highlighted examples are perhaps sufficient for illustrating what the exhibition's title expresses in more general terms: researchers specialising in the archaeology and history of the Carpathian Basin will find many intriguing exhibits to pique their interest if they visit the beautiful castle of Schallaburg, and the layman too will come away with a rich cultural experience. The exhibition features many excellent installations and reconstructions to aid visitors, alongside visitor-friendly, well-written, informative text panels.

³ No. IX.3 in the exhibition catalogue. Similar relics were published by Annemarie Stauffer: *Antike Musterblätter: Wirkkartons aus dem spätantiken und frühbyzantinischen Ägypten* (Wiesbaden, 2008).