

Barbara Crostini, Sergio La Porta (eds.)

Negotiating Co-Existence:

Communities, Cultures and *Convivencia*  
in Byzantine Society

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Cultures and *Convivencia* in Byzantine Society.**

Ed. by Barbara Crostini, Sergio La Porta. -

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## Foreword

Thanks are due to the European Science Foundation (ESF) for sponsoring the workshop entitled ‘*Convivencia* in Byzantium? Cultural Exchanges in a Multi-Lingual and Multi-Ethnic Society’, Trinity College Dublin, 1–3 October 2010, under the auspices of its Exploratory Workshops scheme. According to their brief, these workshops aim at bringing together a relatively small number of international scholars to map out an area of research for further study. The purpose of this meeting was therefore that of drawing a broader picture of what is normally understood as ‘Byzantium’, capturing its multi-cultural essence and emphasizing the manner of interaction between different linguistic, ethnic and religious strands in its midst.

Further thanks go to Dr Sarah Alyn-Stacey, Director of the Centre of Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Trinity, for encouraging and co-sponsoring the event. When Professor Sergio La Porta agreed to act as co-editor of the final volume I could not anticipate how precious his collaboration would be to secure an outcome, and I am deeply indebted to him. Finally, we would like to thank all contributors to the workshop who have made this adventure possible.

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# Contents

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <i>Barbara Crostini</i><br>Introduction: Exploring Byzantine <i>Convivencia</i> | 9 |
|---|---|

## I. DELINEATING ARABS AND ISLAM IN BYZANTIUM

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <i>David Woods</i><br>Maslama and the Alleged Construction of the First Mosque<br>in Constantinople c. 718                          | 19 |
| <i>Reinhold F. Glei</i><br>John Damascene on Islam: a Long-Term History in Byzantium  | 31 |
| <i>Nike Koutrakou</i><br>Language and Dynamics of Communication in Byzantium:<br>the ‘Image’ of the Arabs in Hagiographical Sources | 45 |

## II. MATERIAL EXCHANGES AND CULTURAL DIFFUSION

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>Arianna D’Ottone</i><br>Manuscripts as Mirrors of a Multilingual and Multicultural Society:<br>the Case of the Damascus Find | 63  |
| <i>Mariachiara Fincati</i><br>Τὸ ἰουδαϊκόν: Greek Bible and <i>Hebraica Veritas</i><br>among Byzantine Christians and Jews      | 89  |
| <i>Athanasios K. Vionis</i><br>‘Reading’ Art and Material Culture: Greeks, Slavs<br>and Arabs in the Byzantine Aegean           | 103 |

### III. CROSSING BORDERS IN TEXTS AND ART: TALES FROM THE FRONTIERS

*Isabel Toral-Niehoff*

Constantine's Baptism Legend: a 'Wandering' Story  
between Byzantium, Rome, the Syriac and the Arab World 129

*Francesca Dell'Acqua*

The Fall of the Idol on the Frame of the Genoa *Mandyllion*:  
a Narrative on/of the Borders 143

*Charmaine Lee*

The Tale of the Veronica in Paris, BnF fr. 1553:  
an Example of *Translatio studii et imperii*? 175

### IV. THE DYNAMICS OF CO-EXISTENCE

*Joshua Holo*

Both Byzantine and Jewish? The Extent and Limits  
of Jewish Integration in Middle Byzantine Society 189

*Annick Peters-Custot*

*Convivencia* between Christians: the Greek and Latin Communities  
of Byzantine South Italy (9<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries) 203

*Savvas Neocleous*

Greeks and Italians in Twelfth-Century Constantinople:  
*Convivencia* or Conflict? 221

*Sergio La Porta*

Re-Constructing Armenia: Strategies of Co-Existence  
amongst Christians and Muslims in the Thirteenth Century 251

Index nominum et rerum 273

List of Contributors 297



## Introduction: Exploring Byzantine *Convivencia*

While the first mosque ever to be built in Rome was inaugurated in 1995, as early as the eighth century that other supremely Christian capital, Constantinople, already had one in its landscape.<sup>1</sup> No wonder the Latin conquerors of 1204 experienced a sense of alienation at the complex civilization they were encountering, from their relatively clear-cut Western perspective. The geographical proximity with the emergent Muslim states clearly pushed the Byzantines into a more immediate reckoning of this reality not only at the political, but also at the religious and cultural levels, even before Islam itself became a concrete threat to the very core of the empire. Moreover, the Eastern Roman Empire harboured a complex mixture of Christians (including Latins, Armenians, Georgians, Syrians, Slavs) as well as large Jewish communities. How did these different ethnic and linguistic groups interact in areas where they lived at close quarters with each other? What types of exchanges can be documented from the evidence of historical sources, as well as in the extant artistic and cultural testimonies? In what specific areas were these exchanges fruitful as opposed to purely polemical or antagonistic?

Building upon the recent interest in comparative studies across the ethno-linguistic cultures of Byzantium,<sup>2</sup> the European Science Foundation Exploratory Workshop held in Dublin in October 2010 aimed at bringing

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<sup>1</sup> This ‘fact’ is problematized below in the essay by David Woods, pp. 19–30.

<sup>2</sup> These comparative studies are now widespread especially for the Late Antique Period; see for example Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: OUP, 2011); Kenneth G. Holum, Hayim Lapin, *Shaping the Middle East: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in an Age of Transition, 400–800 C.E.*, Studies and texts in Jewish history and culture 20 (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2011). For medieval Byzantium, though recently increasing in importance, the focus has remained bilateral: see for example the colloquium “Christians and Jews in Byzantium, Images and Cultural Dynamics”, Jerusalem, May 2006, <http://csc.org.il/download/files/Byzantium.pdf> [consulted 01/06/2012] and the current exhibition at the Met on ‘Byzantium and Islam’: see <http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/byzantium-and-islam> [consulted 08/05/2012].

together experts from different religious, linguistic and cultural perspectives to open up, emphasize and explore to what extent the Byzantine empire could be described as a place of *convivencia*, a term usually applied to the peace-time co-existence of Muslims, Jews and Christians in medieval Spain. Rather than espousing the still-prevalent Greek- and Orthodox-centred view of the Byzantine Empire, the challenge offered to the participants was that of showing to what extent and in what ways this great variety of threads was actually woven together to form what came to be perceived as Byzantine identity. The caveats on labelling ‘the other’ as synonymous for the enemy must therefore be taken seriously.<sup>3</sup> Rather, looking for concrete points of contact, the term *convivencia* was adopted, with a question mark, in the title of the meeting. *Convivencia* thus replaced the more traditional term, Commonwealth, used to capture the composite nature of Byzantium as sanctioned and approved by previous scholarship in the field.<sup>4</sup> The choice of a Spanish word was meant to jolt the participants —and now, the readers— into a new and unconventional way of thinking through the relationships between the dominant and subsidiary cultures, sharpening the perception from outside-in —concerning how diversity was negotiable and multiplicity was at the basis of fruitful interaction or conflict— and abandoning the fixed viewpoint, that from inside-out.

Adopting the terminology and perspective of *convivencia* also served a further, comparative purpose. It aimed at setting Byzantine historiography on a comparative footing with the recent historiography on the Iberian peninsula, with which it has shared a fate of marginalization and relative

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<sup>3</sup> D. Smythe, ‘Byzantine Identity and Labelling Theory’, in *Byzantium. Identity, Image, Influence, XIX International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (Copenhagen, 1996), pp. 26–36. A seminal volume remains *Strangers to Themselves: the Byzantine Outsider*, Papers from the Thirty-Second Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, March 1998, ed. by D. Smythe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> The founding father of this term in Byzantine scholarship was Prince Dmitri Obolensky, in his book, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe 500–1453* (Crestwood, NY, 1<sup>st</sup> edn, 1971, repr. 1982). Among scholars who have fruitfully used this concept, see G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); J. Shepard, ‘Byzantium’s Overlapping Circles’, in *Proceedings of the 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London 21–26 August 2006*, ed. by E. Jeffreys and F. Haarer, 3 vols (London, 2006), I, pp. 15–55, p. 53. Paul Stephenson pays homage to Obolensky’s definition and provides a history of its reception in the introduction to his handbook, *The Byzantine World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).