



NEW APPROACHES TO
BYZANTINE HISTORY AND CULTURE

Wisdom's House, Heaven's Gate

Athens and Jerusalem in the Middle Ages

Teresa Shawcross

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New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture

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Princeton University
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PREFACE

Imagine a Mediterranean at the dawn of the eleventh century divided between two rival superpowers. One was the Christian Empire—Byzantium—of Basil II, the greatest ruler of the Macedonian dynasty and the other, the Islamic Caliphate of al-Hakim, the greatest ruler of the Fatimid dynasty. Through taxation, these states had at their disposal the vast resources of their territories' agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and local commerce. They also profited from control of the flow of goods along the networks of long-distance trade that made up the overland and maritime Silk Routes.

This book is the story of what the subjects of these superpowers thought—or, rather, of what they were told they ought to think by those who claimed to be their teachers and rulers. It is the story of how particular systems of knowledge and belief came into being. I trace the formation of two intertwined, highly generative versions of Abrahamic monotheism. These are Chalcedonian Orthodox Christianity and Ismaʿīli Shiʿī Islam. Engaged in constant contact and exchange with those on the other side of the border, the proponents of each religious doctrine and rite saw in their enemies a distorting mirror in which they could discern their own truths. Integral to their projects were the claims they advanced over not only the traditional legacies but also the ritual and symbolic landscape of a pair of cities that had long boasted names to conjure with, both within the Mediterranean and beyond: Athens and Jerusalem. Beginning in the Caliphate and provoking a response in the Empire, a revival occurred of Classicism—specifically of Hellenism—that contributed to the transformation of religion by the seemingly incompatible but nonetheless

combined forces of intellectualism and mysticism. Training in philosophical wisdom provided access to another, heavenly world. The selective adaptation and compilation of material from existing works of Neoplatonic thought—together with the composition of new writings—allowed the resources of a carefully curated metaphysical speculation to be combined with dogmatic theology in order to promote the ambitions of competing elites. Statesmen and teachers such as Abu Ya‘qub al-Sijistani and Michael Psellos created the frameworks that sought to render the power exercised by the regimes they served not merely legitimate, but also attractive. For, in the Middle Ages, ideas still mattered. Indeed, they were vital concerns. They fed a wider cultural fermentation traceable not only in the pages of scholarly manuscripts whose perusal was reserved for a literate minority, but also in public architecture and art. Official construction projects coupled with demographic shifts profoundly reshaped—even in regions geographically remote from the conflict zone—the environment in which all classes of society participated in organised worship: performing their devotions in order to join the rank of those who had been fully initiated and received the gift of illumination.

When analysing the political and religious ideology of Constantinople and Cairo, we have tended hitherto to focus on the hostility these regimes shared for Baghdad, rather than on the rivalry between them. The received opinion has been that the relationship of the Macedonians and Fatimids was generally an amicable one. But the existence of a series of peace treaties between the two dynasties cannot disguise a fundamental incompatibility of territorial and economic interests. This does not mean that such incompatibility should be equated with a grand civilizational struggle between Christianity and Islam. Continuity with conflicts between the Heraclians and the Umayyads or the Isaurians and the Abbasids—often waged primarily by the satellite powers of each—may have been asserted by specific tenth- or eleventh-century writers eager to analyse and explain current affairs. However, actual policies can be shown to have changed considerably not only from reign to reign, but also within individual reigns. Constant manoeuvring by rulers, as well as by their courtiers and their subjects, manifested itself in escalations and de-escalations of various types.

A more nuanced picture thus begins to emerge from a careful reconsideration of the sources. This revisionist work is being initiated by a new generation of scholars. The study contained here does not pretend to be definitive or even comprehensive. It aims simply to advance an

argument—and to inspire further discussion. In tentatively formulating an outline for an alternative historical narrative, I have preferred, instead of offering a running commentary that would draw attention to points of disagreement and offer a critique, to acknowledge rather in my footnotes our very considerable dependence on the advances made by earlier researchers. This recommended itself as the approach that was not only the most straightforward, but also the most likely to achieve an exposition that would be as accessible as possible to readers.

As is always the case when one undertakes to step outside the protection of a specific discipline or specialism, I have needed a scholarly community with vision and forbearance. I count myself fortunate in that regard. My book would not exist without the award of a New Directions Fellowship from the Mellon Foundation. It was facilitated by two fellowships at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London and at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens—as well as by shorter residencies at Harvard Divinity School, the School of Middle-Eastern Studies at Leiden University, the Department of Asian and North-African Studies at Ca' Foscari-University of Venice, and the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan. It owes a particular debt to the undergraduate and graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and interested members of the wider public who at various times have attended my seminars. Encouragement and support were provided by: Ellen Alvord, Colin Austin, Chris Benfey, Chris van den Berg, Brendan Burke, Rhea Cabin, John Camp, Fred Cheyette, Ioanna Christoforaki, Ioanna Damanaki, Martin and Claire Daunton, Melinda Duer, Sylvie Dumont, Aspasia Efstathiou, Joseph Ellis and Ellen Wilkins-Ellis, Tara Fitzpatrick, Elizabeth Key Fowden, Maria Georgopoulou, Geoffrey and Joan Greatrex, Louise Haywood, Catherine Holmes, Tariq Jaffer, Elizabeth Jeffreys, Anthony Kaldellis, Marie Kelleher, Hugh Kennedy, Manolis Korres, Dimitris Krallis, Michael Maas, Fred McGinness, Maria Mavroudi, Peter Meyers, James Montgomery, Barbara Nagel and Daniel Hoffman-Schwartz, Jenifer Neils, Leonora Neville, Pamela Patton, Anna Pianalto, Jamie Reuland, Ian Ryan, Teo Ruiz, Peter Sarris, Martha Saxton and Enrico Ferorelli, Lenia and Derek Shawcross, Jonathan Shepard, Irini Solomonidi, Alan Stahl, Tasos Tanoulas, and Wendy Watson and John Varriano. I am especially beholden to Nikolas Churik, Jeremy Farrell, Greg Fisher, David Gyllenhaal, Luke Madson, Lucas McMahan, and Jean-Marcel Rax for their assistance with technical matters. The project has had to contend with the transformation of publishing by the outsourcing and automation of tasks such as

copy-editing, typesetting and printing that used once to be the responsibility of staff based in house. Recent months have seen an ever greater reliance by publishers on so-called artificial intelligence. I wish to thank the press's employees and subcontractors for having striven to find solutions for the problems arising out of the limitations of a technology that, while promising, is still in its infancy and struggles to handle multilingual texts.

I dedicate this book to my siblings—in gratitude for the many hours we have spent together in play as children and in discussion as adults. They will understand me when I reach for the words of the poet in order to explain what spurred me on to write the pages that follow: “Ἐρως [...] τῶν πάλαι θρυλουμένων / ἔγραψε ταῦτα ...”

2022, Feast of St Dionysius the
Areopagite, location undisclosed

Teresa Shawcross

A NOTE ON THE RENDITION OF THE NAMES OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THINGS

Rendering foreign names comprehensible in English is a task that is necessary but also ideologically fraught. The challenge is even greater when one is dealing with several different language families. Semantic clarity has been privileged throughout this text over a merely mechanical transliteration. Anglicised names have thus been adopted where these are already well established. When in doubt, choices were guided by the recommendations set out by the journals *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* (for Greek) and the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (for Arabic), which have gained widespread acceptance in their respective fields. Not infrequently, best practices regarding the transcription, transliteration or translation of terms or titles established in scholarship for one field of study directly conflict with those for another. In these cases, a sensible middle ground has been sought. I have wished to avoid the kinds of scenarios ridiculed in the fable—authorship of which is sometimes attributed to Aesop, sometimes to Ibn Sa‘id, and sometimes to La Fontaine—of “The Miller, his Son and the Ass.” Inevitably, this has led to some inconsistencies, for which the reader’s forgiveness is asked.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Taking as its starting point an investigation into the physical topography and symbolism of the two cities of Athens and Jerusalem, this book offers a cultural history of the rival superpowers—the Byzantine Empire and Fatimid Caliphate—that between them dominated the Mediterranean world during the Central Middle Ages. It shows that the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on the orders of al-Hakim punctuated a century of heightened interaction resulting from changing patterns of warfare, trade, and pilgrimage. Resettlement of both Christians and Muslims from Syria-Palestine in Asia Minor and the Balkans introduced these migrants' host culture to new forms of religious and artistic expression. In Hellas, a flurry of building projects reinvented Athens as a New Jerusalem and the Parthenon as a New Temple. The Acropolis became famous for its miraculous lamp and elaborate liturgy. The clergy who performed the sacred mysteries justified them with reference to concepts of hierarchy, illumination, and divinisation. These concepts were derived from a philosophical tradition over whose ownership the two superpowers competed. The resulting political theology was the creation of male intellectuals; but female patrons and worshippers also had an impact.

Praise for *Wisdom's House, Heaven's Gate*

“This incisive assessment of the cultural and intellectual relationship between Christian Byzantium and the Fatimid caliphs offers striking new perspectives on the significance of Jerusalem and Athens, opening up the history of the Parthenon as a Christian cult centre alongside that of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. It is an important and highly original contribution to Mediterranean history.”

—David Abulafia, Professor Emeritus of Mediterranean History in the *University of Cambridge* and Fellow of *Gonville and Caius College*

“This remarkable book shows how the Parthenon of Athens, the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, and the Califate of Cairo came to be locked in an ideological confrontation which affected every fiber of their respective cultures on the eve of the Crusades. The unexpected interweaving of two adjacent faiths and two societies (Byzantium and Islam) has seldom been explored with such learning, zest and insight.”

—Peter Brown, Professor Emeritus, *Department of History, Princeton University*

“What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? Quite a bit, it turns out, as Teresa Shawcross shows in this tour-de-force of early medieval Mediterranean history. Through a study of the two show-case cities, we see that, far from representing incompatible and alien cultures, Fatimid Egypt and Macedonian Byzantium were inextricably bound together in discourses of political and religious competition that reflect their common roots in the Hellenistic Abrahamic ferment of the Mediterranean world. Bridging disciplines and linguistic and religious culture, *Wisdom's House, Heaven's Gate* is a model for how historians should approach the history of this complex and dynamic world.”

—Brian A. Catlos, Professor of Religious Studies at the *University of Colorado Boulder*

“Before the arrival of Seljuk Turks and crusaders, the eastern Mediterranean was dominated by two superpowers, the Byzantine empire and Fatimid caliphate. In this masterful study, Shawcross traces the rivalry between their cultures as they sought to appropriate each other’s symbols and legitimacy, including monotheistic piety and Neoplatonic philosophy. Athens and Jerusalem became the flashpoints for this nexus of mutual, criss-crossing influences. The story is brilliantly told, much of it here for the first time.”

—Anthony Kaldellis, Professor of Classics, *University of Chicago*

“This book is a stimulating and original discussion of the thought world of the Eastern Mediterranean in the eleventh century. Breaking away from the traditional paradigm of mutual incomprehension, it uses the images of the cities of Jerusalem and Athens to show the cross-currents and similar concerns of two great religious traditions. In this lively and important work, Shawcross emphasises the importance of the Parthenon and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as well as of the image of the Imam, in the discourse of the time and the new religious ideas elaborated in Fatimid and Byzantine intellectual circles.”

—Hugh Kennedy, Professor of Arabic, *SOAS, University of London*

“Departing from Tertullian’s lapidary distinctions between faith and reason, between Jerusalem and Athens, Shawcross’ engaging and original book examines the Christianization of Hellas in the context of the political rivalry of Byzantium and the Fatimid Caliphate in the Middle Ages. Describing in meticulous detail the intertwined worlds of Classical knowledge, Islam, and Christianity, the author provides an insightful guide to how religion and knowledge were coproduced in the eastern Mediterranean. This is a capacious and wonderful book.”

—Teofilo F. Ruiz, Distinguished Research Professor of History
(Emeritus), *UCLA*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Teresa Shawcross is Associate Professor of History and Hellenic Studies at Princeton University and a Senior Member of Robinson College, University of Cambridge. She has previously published *The Chronicle of Morea: Historiography in Crusader Greece* and *Reading in the Byzantine Empire and Beyond*.

ABBREVIATIONS

GCS	Die Grieschischen Christlichen Schriftsteller
MGH SS	Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores
PG	Patrologiae cursus completus, Series graeca, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857-66)
PL	Patrologiae cursus completus, Series latina, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844-80)
PO	Patrologia orientalis

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