

Constance Head, *Imperial Twilight, The Palaiologos Dynasty and the Decline of Byzantium*, Chicago, Nelson-Hall, 1977, pp. 210.

Though possibly more popular in format than some might desire, Professor Head consistently pursues her stated intention of providing "the intelligent layman or student of history" with a picture of the nature of the Byzantine world in its last centuries. The focus of the work is a "series of glimpses of the Palaiologian emperors and the time in which they lived..." And it is the personalities who clearly dominate the scene, whether Michael VIII or Andronicus III or Constantine XI. The character, personality, and even physical description of each of the Emperors of the dynasty are vividly discussed by Professor Head.

At times, however, the florid description of court intrigues and the vicissitudes of Imperial marriages overshadows the general if often disastrous development of conditions within and outside of the Empire. The author seems to define politics, and this is strictly a political history, too closely as a discussion of court politics. Consequently, the narrative gives a rather restricted picture of events not directly related to the court; and the context of these interesting domestic developments is sometimes lost in the welter of detail. All of which gives a somewhat isolated perspective from which the student is to understand the nature of late Byzantine history.

The personal sketches of the emperors are well done and provide an intriguing series of insights into the characters of the several Palaiologean rulers. At times the descriptions are overly novelistic. The author has a tendency to use excessively flamboyant descriptive adjectives which tend to become telegraphic aphorisms of praise or criticism without adequate supportive evidence.

That one aspect of Byzantine society has overshadowed all others in the author's presentation, provides the most serious opportunity for reservation with regard to this work. The character and personalities of the individual Emperors are interesting in themselves but the full fascination of the later Byzantine period can come only when this society is treated as a whole. For instance the social and economic background which is necessary to make many of the actions and decisions explicable, is often not there or too briefly presented. The pronoïars, the Zealot Republic at Thessaloniki, the problems of provincial administration, the peasants, those too seldom impinge upon the author's discussion of courtly affairs. Though John VIII is described as the Renaissance Basileus, the Byzantine renaissance and intellectual developments as a whole receive far too scanty a treatment even within the limits of space and content in this book; it seems a little difficult to appreciate the artistic or scholarly accomplishments of the Byzantine Greeks when scholars as Gemistos Plethon, Mark Eugenicos, or George Scholarios are not mentioned and the entire intellectual retinue of John VIII at Ferrara/Florence is referred to as "a host of Orthodox scholars and theologians and his brother Demetrios...". Again the fascinating but sometime limited perspective of the court has intervened.

Though the bibliography of secondary sources might lack the important Palaeologean studies of Ostrogorsky, Raybaud and Zakythinos (among others), the author displays a thorough knowledge of the relevant original sources. Professor Head has carefully utilized these sources to present her sketches of Imperial personalities. In this context it is unfortunate, considering the literary facility of the author, that she seems to have missed some important parts of the Byzantine forest while looking at the more magnificent of the individual Imperial trees.