AN INTERVIEW WITH DIMITRA KOTOULA

Conducted by Gwen Ellis & Stephanie Taylor
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Dimitra Kotoula is an art historian, archaeologist, professor, and poet. She studied history, art, and archaeology at the University of Ioannina in Greece, and at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. She has received numerous grants and fellowships, namely: an AHRB PhD fellowship and research grant from the Dumbarton Oaks Center in Washington DC; a grant from Princeton University; the British School at Athens; and the Academy of Arts, Letters, and Science in Venice.

Her work focuses primarily on Byzantine and post-Byzantine art. She has published on the issues of form and function in Byzantine architecture and art, the sensory experiences of the Byzantines, as well as post-Byzantine iconography and Byzantine depictions of the Last Judgement. If you're a history student of Antiquity or Byzantium, it's likely that you've already encountered some of her work: she was a contributor to the Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity. Her current research centers around perceptions of Byzantium in the modern period, beginning in the nineteenth century.

Currently, she works for the Greek Ministry of Culture, and has also been teaching at College Year in Athens since 2010. She was a visiting research fellow at the Center for Hellenic Studies at King's College, London in 2016, and has taught Byzantine art and history at various universities in Greece over the years. In addition to being a prodigious scholar, she is also a poet, and has published two collections of poetry.

Gwen: When people imagine "the Middle Ages," what do they usually think of? How accurate is this general consensus, and would you change anything about it?

Dimitra: Ah, yes. Actually, when we talk about the Middle Ages, usually we think of an era full of superstitions, largely with Europe as the focus, with rivalries between various religious groups, mainly the Christians and the Muslims. We also think about an era of darkness, a gloomy period—that's why in some cases we call them "the Dark Ages." A period unfriendly for the sciences, the letters, culture. And of course, we believe that people back then were obsessed with religion, and they knew nothing about all the things that nowadays we consider important for our culture, or the arts and sciences.
To be honest, I would change everything [about this perception of the Middle Ages]. This is a very dark image, and not a correct one. It doesn't do justice to that era. And unfortunately, even the name itself, "the Middle Ages," suggests that we're a bit awkward, in a sense—we don't know how to treat these years which were actually crucial to the formation of modern Europe and the modern world. We call them a bit awkwardly—middle years, or "medieval" era, implying that we had Classical Antiquity, the Greco-Roman world, and then we had a gap in between, and then the Renaissance, the rediscovery of the classical world. In between, it is as if we have a gap, and we don't know how to name it—like, "okay, the Middle Ages, the medieval era." So, first of all, even the name has to change, in my opinion. Of course, all these conceptions [about the Middle Ages] that we have are more or less wrong. I can't talk that much about the Middle Ages, but I can talk about Byzantium, and I can reassure you that things back then were totally different.

Gwen: Yeah, stemming off from that—the scholar Maria Mavroudi has written, "Byzantium is… largely absent from general histories of philosophy and science, including those that appeared within the last decade."[1] Furthermore, many people think that Byzantium didn't make any new artistic or intellectual innovations, and merely imitated the classical tradition—is this true? Or were they making artistic and intellectual innovations? If so, do you have examples?

Dimitra: Yes, it is absolutely true [that Byzantium is absent from histories of philosophy and science]. And unfortunately, this is a cliche that was inherited to our modern world by Edward Gibbon and his cornerstone, groundbreaking work about the decline and fall of the Roman Empire.[2] It is true that from that point onwards [the publishing of Gibbon's work], Byzantium was seen as an unfortunate successor of the Greco-Roman world that contributed nothing towards cultural development. It just repeated things or copied. Or, at best, preserved the Greco-Roman tradition.
However, the Byzantines offered a lot of things. Actually, Byzantine civilization and culture are quite fascinating. First of all, they challenged the arts and the letters, they challenged the way that the world was looking at things. In contrast to the naturalistic, close-to-nature way of depicting things that the Greco-Roman world used to do, the Byzantines introduced

[1] Page 36 of "Translations from Greek into Latin and Arabic during the Middle Ages: Searching for the Classical Tradition."
[2] Gibbon wrote *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a massive six-volume work, in the eighteenth century.

allegorical viewing. What they did was they questioned human senses as the only trustful way of perceiving the world. That was really huge. They, in a sense, had the courage to propose another way of looking at the world around them. They were pioneers in questioning existing beliefs. And in doing so, they produced really beautiful works of literature and art.

As far as cultural innovations, Byzantine society was quite open to newcomers and to cultural exchanges and interchanges. They always viewed rival cultures as a challenge—instead of being hostile, they always were keen to borrow elements and to develop even further their own culture. That was another very interesting thing about Byzantine civilization and culture—the Byzantine world was a multinational, multicultural world. So, the Byzantines were never afraid of the new, of innovations, of experimentation in the arts and the letters, and culture, too.

Certainly, the Byzantines did preserve the classical literature, the Roman literature, and it was thanks to them that the works of that era still survive. However, they did produce, especially in the arts, alternative ways of looking at things. And in many cases, this way of looking at things demanded the participation of the viewer, which is something very modern. Many of the Byzantine works of art functioned like modern-day installations—they required the participation of the beholder, of the audience in order to function.

Gwen: Are you thinking mostly of icons?

Dimitra: Yes, I am thinking of icons. We know, for example, of descriptions in texts of so-called "animated icons,"[3] and these actually functioned as installations—in order for the artifact to function, it needed the participation of the viewer, and the viewer was called to respond by the artifact. In that way, a connection was built, and the art had a meaning, a purpose. To build such an interactive relationship with an artifact, it was something very radical for that era. I mean, contemporary artists experiment with that. And it is not without significance that Byzantine art was rediscovered by the avant-garde movements in the nineteenth century. It was these artists who turned their interest to Byzantium, and Byzantine art in particular, because of all these characteristics. They borrowed elements for their own artistic works.

Gwen: You already touched on this question a little bit when you mentioned multiculturalism, but what important lessons do you think Byzantium teaches us?

Dimitra: Yes, that's a very good question. First of all, you can learn many things from Byzantium. Byzantium was a millennium-long empire. It lasted up until the fifteenth century, and certainly it knew how to survive; sustainability, and the strength to change according to the circumstances of each era—very important. The Byzantines knew how to

[3] Icons are devotional images which were, and are, believed to have worked miracles in the physical world and provided a mode of communication between the viewer and God.

adjust, and through that, they managed to survive without losing their identity as the Greco-Romans.[4] This identity, the Roman identity, was rediscovered many times throughout the millennium-long existence of Byzantium. And this is a very important lesson—we have to adjust to any challenge that we face.

Also, the Byzantines were extremely open-minded. In Byzantium, anyone could claim the throne. Constantinople was *the* cosmopolitan city of the medieval world, especially during the year 1000. It was the only city center that was inhabited by all the known nationalities of the world, and it was a city open to newcomers. Byzantine society was an open one.

Also, the Byzantines had a big interest in the arts and sciences. In that sense, they were quite advanced. Also, the role of women was quite crucial for Byzantium. What I mean by that is that there were Byzantine empresses who actually ruled as sole empresses—like Irene, for example. She ruled during Byzantine Iconoclasm,[5] not as a regent to anyone but as a sole empress. Actually, Charles the Great[6] proposed marriage to her, but she turned him down. She was an orphan, by the way, from Athens. And she managed to rule the empire all by herself during a period of crisis. Of course, we also have the anonymous Byzantine women who managed to keep their family industries, their identity, their language, and their beliefs throughout very, very dark years. They had social power, and they had agency. We also have amazing female saints in Byzantium, and ascetics, who produced beautiful texts.

So, I think that endurance, open-mindedness, the ability to adapt to any circumstances, coexistence and tolerance of various national and religious groups, acceptance of differences—all these are lessons that the Byzantines give us today.

Gwen: This kind of takes the conversation in a different direction, but how does Byzantium still endure in Greek public consciousness? Does Byzantium still influence Greek, or global, society today?

Dimitra: Well, recently Byzantium started to appear quite often in various ways in world culture. There are fashion shows inspired by Byzantium, we have novels published very recently, again, inspired by Byzantium. But I have to admit that Greece is the place where it dominates cultural life. Modern-day Greeks are proud of their Byzantine past. The unfortunate thing is that they put the focus on religion rather than the other aspects of Byzantine culture. Byzantium, in many cases, is misused, because we view it as the lost old glory of Greece. In some cases, in modern Greek reality, we do have attitudes that are not very pleasant. Byzantium is exploited by, mainly, some political groups; they still believe in the old Byzantine glory. Regardless, Byzantium is still very much alive in our contemporary Greek culture, and it is part of the Greek identity. Greece had to fight for that—during the nineteenth century and the years of the formation of the modern Greek state, the classical

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[4] "The Byzantine Empire" is a term which was applied retroactively to the Eastern Roman Empire—Byzantines themselves never called themselves "Byzantine," rather they referred to themselves as Romans (or, sometimes, Greco-Romans).

[5] A period of time (c. 726–842 AD) in the Byzantine Empire when religious imagery was banned.

[6] Charlemagne (d. 814 AD); the King of the Franks in Western Europe.

past was [considered] the "important" part of Greek history. However, this gradually changed; modern Greeks now incorporate [Byzantium] into their identity.

Gwen: Yeah, I remember when we were living in Greece, somebody told me once that every Greek person knew the year 1453[7]—knew exactly what happened.

Dimitra: Oh yes. We all know that legend about the last Byzantine emperor who fought during the siege of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks—that he didn't die, but he disappeared miraculously, and he's somewhere frozen, and he will reappear at some point in the future….

[All laugh]

Dimitra: And he [supposedly] will claim Constantinople back. I believe that to visit Constantinople is a dream that all Greek people have. We feel that it is still a very familiar city that we want to visit, and if we visit, we will feel at home. It doesn't have to do with any rivalry between the Greeks and the Turks; it is just a feeling. It [Constantinople] is something that we share with the Muslims.

[...]

Gwen: Okay, our final question is: do you have a favorite anecdote or story from the Byzantine Empire?

Dimitra: Ah, yes! That is very interesting, a very nice question. I have so many. When I was young, my granny used to tell me various stories like the one about the last Byzantine emperor. They border between reality—truth—and fiction. For example, the story of how silkworms reached Constantinople—there was a group of monks who managed to bring, secretly, silkworms in the sticks that they were carrying with them. They were part of a diplomatic mission to China, and when they came back, they managed to do that, secretly. There are many anecdotes like this one. All these are part of the Greek popular consciousness as regards Byzantium and the Byzantines.
There is also the famous, famous story, which again borders between fiction and reality—more or less real if we believe the historian of the era, Procopius—about Empress Theodora[8]—

[All laugh]

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[7] The year 1453 AD was the year Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks and the Byzantine Empire ended.
[8] Many rumors have been spread about Empress Theodora (d. 548 AD), wife of Justinian I. Even her contemporaries painted her as a sexual deviant; this perception has carried through to the modern era. There is much debate about the extent of the truth of these rumors, and Theodora's life has profoundly influenced the way historians examine and reckon with gender in their work.

Dimitra: Yes, she's a cult figure still! She was a very low-class [that is, impoverished] lady who managed to climb up to the throne. During the Nika Riots,[9] even the palace was at siege, and the emperor Justinian was about to abandon the throne and fly away. It was Theodora, the empress, who actually insisted that they both stay in the palace, saying that, "royal purple is the noblest shroud." She kept Justinian on the throne, and Constantinople (and, of course, the empire) was saved from a huge crisis. We don't know how Byzantium, and in general the Mediterranean world, would have developed if Justinian had just gone away. I mean, I like this idea of a powerful woman who never gives up. And I believe that there were many, many Byzantine women like Theodora. Yes, okay, Theodora was the empress, and we know about her—but we also have many anonymous women in Byzantium who maintained their family businesses, kept the economy standing, kept their faith, their beliefs, and their identity.
I think all these anecdotes are based on true facts, and they have quite a lot to teach us.

[...]

I know that this is a difficult era, and we all have to try to find inner power and the courage to remain creative. Maybe this is another lesson that the Byzantines can teach us—even in the gloomiest eras, Byzantium produced beautiful works of art. For example, just before Iconoclasm, there were natural disasters, pandemics (the Justinian Plague), enemies attacking the empire, and the empire's territory shrunk. The economy was really bad. But, this very gloomy and dark era is illuminated by wonderful works—beautiful metal objects, art. And it is quite amazing to know that. […] I think that in Byzantium, always, beauty had a mission. It was there to teach you something. Either to encourage you to find another truth beyond beauty, or to speak to the courage of creating art in gloomy eras. In eras where you wouldn't believe that beauty is possible. It is amazing. Even during, for example, the Crusader era, when Constantinople ceased to exist for nearly 60 years,[10] we have beautiful works of art. We have the earliest example in monumental painting of the cycle of St Francis,[11] a Latin saint of the Western Church—there were artists in Constantinople producing that. It is amazing…. This courage. It is quite exceptional for a culture to be under crisis and, at the same time, have the inner strength to respond to those dark circumstances by producing something beautiful.

[...]

[9] Riots which began in 532 AD in Constantinople; political factions set fire to a number of public buildings around and including the palace.
[10] During the Fourth Crusade, Latin crusaders sacked and conquered Constantinople. It remained in Latin hands for nearly 60 years.
[11] During the Latin occupation of Constantinople, a cycle of frescoes about the life of St Francis of Assisi were painted in the Church of the Virgin Kyriotissa. These murals are the earliest known example of the St Francis cycle in mural form.

This is the point, not just of studying Byzantium, but history in general—history is not something dead, which we study just because we like it, or it is exciting, or whatever. It is something we study because it gives us the power to respond to modern challenges. We study past civilizations, and we can find there the inspiration and the ways to cope with what we are living nowadays. At the personal level, at the national level, at the global level. We are living in a very difficult world. Very, very challenging. And we have to respond, and we have to endure, and we have to adjust. Within these limitations, we have to remain creative. And when I say creative, I don't mean just taking brushes and painting—I mean to inspire the people around us. To still be kind. To be open to people. Nowadays, when everyone is locked in the house, and we are about to lose contact with others, we have to remain open to them, and kind to them. It's not easy. And I think history inspires us in that sense. That's why we study the past—because we draw parallels to the present, and through that, we can make our lives more beautiful.