



Sailing from Byzantium: How a Lost Empire Shaped the World

By Colin Wells

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A gripping intellectual adventure story, **Sailing from Byzantium** sweeps you from the deserts of Arabia to the dark forests of northern Russia, from the colorful towns of Renaissance Italy to the final moments of a millennial city under siege....

Byzantium: the successor of Greece and Rome, this magnificent empire bridged the ancient and modern worlds for more than a thousand years. Without Byzantium, the works of Homer and Herodotus, Plato and Aristotle, Sophocles and Aeschylus, would never have survived. Yet very few of us have any idea of the enormous debt we owe them.

The story of Byzantium is a real-life adventure of electrifying ideas, high drama, colorful characters, and inspiring feats of daring. In *Sailing from Byzantium*, Colin Wells tells of the missionaries, mystics, philosophers, and artists who against great odds and often at peril of their own lives spread Greek ideas to the Italians, the Arabs, and the Slavs.

Their heroic efforts inspired the Renaissance, the golden age of Islamic learning, and Russian Orthodox Christianity, which came complete with a new alphabet, architecture, and one of the world's greatest artistic traditions.

The story's central reference point is an arcane squabble called the Hesychast controversy that pitted humanist scholars led by the brilliant, acerbic intellectual Barlaam against the powerful monks of Mount Athos led by the stern Gregory Palamas, who denounced "pagan" rationalism in favor of Christian mysticism.

Within a few decades, the light of Byzantium would be extinguished forever by the invading Turks, but not before the humanists found a safe haven for Greek literature. The controversy of rationalism versus faith would continue to be argued by some of history's greatest minds.

Fast-paced, compulsively readable, and filled with fascinating insights, **Sailing from Byzantium** is one of the great historical dramas—the gripping story of how

the flame of civilization was saved and passed on.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. In this deft synthesis of scholarship, classicist Wells shows how the Byzantines exerted a profound influence on all neighboring civilizations. Concrete examples still exist that testify to that influence—such as Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy—but this book focuses on the more ineffable products of culture that traveled from the Bosphorus, influencing Western, Islamic and Slavic cultures. The story of Renaissance Europe's embrace of pagan learning is familiar, but Wells tells of a fascinating intellectual circuit that begins with the transmission of Greek learning to the newly powerful Arabs and leads to Averroës's commentary on Aristotle, Aquinas's use of this commentary and finally to the Byzantine Cydones's translation of Aquinas in the 14th century. By then, the dominant Orthodox movement of Hesychasm deemed pagan learning incompatible with Christian faith, forcing many humanists to the Catholic West. Wells devotes much space to the Hesychasts and blames them for this betrayal of Greek heritage and for weakening the empire before its final collapse in 1453, but duly credits them with shaping the Russian Orthodox Church and positioning Moscow as the Third Rome. This volume, which contains a useful glossary of historical figures, detailed maps and a time line, is a superb survey of Byzantium's many cultural bequests. (*July 25*)

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From [Booklist](#)

Wells begins his detailed book with a list of the major characters--51 of them, including humanists, monks, emperors, patriarchs of Constantinople, philosophers, historians, classicists, and prophets. The Byzantine Empire began in the early fourth century with the foundation of a new Christian capital, Constantinople, on the site of the old Greek city of Byzantium. It ended when the Ottoman Turks captured that city in 1453, making it the capital of their Islamic empire, which in territorial aspirations and imperial style essentially replaced the old Byzantine Greek Empire. Wells points out that more recent historical research has revealed a story of lasting achievement and vigorous expansion. He divides the book into three parts: "Byzantium and the West," discussing the Byzantine legacy to Western civilization; "Byzantium and the Islamic World," describing the rise of the Arab Islamic Empire on former Byzantine lands in the Middle East; and "Byzantium and the Slavic World," exploring the religious side of the Byzantine legacy. Wells brings vividly to life this history of a long-lost era and its opulent heritage. *George Cohen*

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Review

"In this work of extraordinary learning...readers will find themselves guided on a fascinating journey through a story that has never before been presented in such an accessible and thought-provoking fashion."—Thomas R. Martin, Jeremiah O'Connor Professor of Classics at the College of the Holy Cross

"A superb survey of Byzantium's many cultural bequests.... In this deft synthesis of scholarship, classicist Wells shows how the Byzantines exerted a profound influence on all neighboring civilizations.... Contains a useful glossary of historical figures, detailed maps and a time line."—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"This history is a needed reminder of the debt that three of our major civilizations owe a debt to Byzantium. Highly recommended."—*Library Journal*, starred review

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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