

Social Studies Research and Teaching: Exploring Byzantium as a Context in Absentia

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Why Byzantium?

The question, *why Byzantium* in research within a Faculty of Education, might only compete with *what is Byzantium*, for a casual reader of this material. Responding to the latter question first, I will direct you to the brilliant research projects that my students in a course titled *ED4621: Learning to Learn about Teaching Social Studies and Science*, which are published below. With regards to the former question, which is the title of this opening paragraph, I respond *why not Byzantium?*

For any reader without a robust understanding of *what* Byzantium is and was, this project is an opportunity to explore research into a new and exciting context. The projects that are published on this site are all the more exciting because they emerge from future teachers concerned with the place of research in education. Charged with teaching social studies in the elementary grades, the teacher candidates have undertaken a noble project; together, they have made a significant scholarly contribution to an area of social studies that is entirely marginalized in public schooling. Beginning with a superficial, stereotypical even, understanding of what Byzantium signifies, the cohort of education students developed hypotheses and pursued them in the historical record.

The work published here is the product of a process that entailed: evaluating primary and secondary sources, considering biases and the reliability of evidence, developing arguments and conclusions, establishing historical significance, weighing forces of continuity and change, stating cause and consequence in social study, and submitting research to peer review for evaluation. The research design credits the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking project, which concern the processes involved in authentic research (www.histori.ca/benchmarks). In forging a scholarly community and exploring an unfamiliar context with systematic rigor, the teacher candidates practiced and reflected upon the habits of mind that they will aim to cultivate in their students via social studies research. In seizing the opportunity to learn from each other and from a variety of sources, the researchers engaged with questions vital to the disciplines that they are preparing to teach. The final product, this body of published research, is the proverbial tip of the spear.

Context on the Context

Beginning with the landmark publication of Edward Gibbon's six-volume *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788), which characterized Byzantium as a drawn out millennium of decay and religiosity, Byzantine history in general has been a relatively neglected subject. The Renaissance, which saw the reintroduction of Greek texts and thought to Western Europe via academics from Byzantine regions moving to newly established academic chairs in Italy and, then, France, concentrated on ancient sources as opposed to Byzantine ones. Of all the aspects of Byzantine history, educational research is the most absent and disused. Stated plainly,

Byzantine history and philosophy of education is a marginalized subject amongst educationists. As a result, we know relatively little about education in a context so vast that it spanned 1123 years and a terrain including Europe, North Africa, Eurasia, and the Middle East. This gap has been exposed and made all the more remarkable by budding scholarship from the disciplines of history and classics, which has demonstrated Byzantium's lasting cultural achievements, dynamic weaving of reason and faith, and influence on surrounding cultures. As teachers and as educational researchers, Byzantine history and philosophy of education are subjects that need inclusion into our conversations.

The proposed historical and philosophical research aims to build upon budding research on Byzantium emerging from social history, art history, and archaeology, but concentrated on education and on teaching. For instance, Colin Wells' *Sailing to Byzantium: How a Lost Empire Shaped the World* (2007) considers Byzantium as having bridged the ancient and more modern worlds by interpreting, mediating, and transferring the knowledge and traditions of Greece and Rome to younger civilizations that emerged in territories wrested from and surrounding the former Byzantine empire. The formative influence of Byzantine educators and translators on the European Renaissance, the blossoming Arab and Islamic civilizations, is at the core of this research. These Byzantine educators, whose names extant writings are almost entirely lost to contemporary educational researchers in the West but which are available in the original Greek and Latin, can shed light on contemporary educational questions concerning Canadian educational researchers. These include the relationship between theory to practice, the nature of science, holistic education, and the relevance of humanistic studies to schooling.

A Call for Further Research on Byzantium

Broadly stated, the objective of this section is to call on educational researchers, teachers, and students to pursue further research on the Byzantine context. In pursuing readings that would enable me to facilitate this broader research project involving my students, it grew increasingly apparent that our ignorance of a millennium of history spanning three continents leaves us poorer. It is a challenge I will assume as an educational historian and philosopher, to consider and situate Byzantium within the broader context of educational history and philosophy. As a frame of study, the Byzantine Empire is vast. Its setting is marked from 330 AD and 1453 AD, dates denoting the foundation and fall of Constantinople. Geographically, Byzantium touched a vast terrain through an ongoing territorial heaving and swelling that encompassed, in various instances, vast stretches in Western Europe, North Africa, Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, Asia Minor, Anatolia, the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea.

Presently, what makes Byzantium important to the disciplines of history and philosophy of education is that it has been entirely ignored by educational researchers across the Western world. Three notable explanations for the marginalization of Byzantine sources in anthologies of educational history and philosophy include access, translation, and content. Firstly, because Byzantium collapsed following the Ottoman occupation of Constantinople and any state archives or libraries vanished, the primary sources are not housed in one particular archive. They remain scattered across the monasteries, university archives, art galleries, and museums across Europe, North America, and Asia. Secondly, and in a related note, many of these sources have yet to be

translated from their original Greek. The relative bounty of scholarship on the art and iconography of the Byzantine world can be explained in light of this point; art historians have depended on pictorial representations as opposed to text for the material bases of their studies. Thirdly, the Byzantine context permits the exploration of two themes—religious catechesis and humanist study—that are peripheral in contemporary educational studies. The classical curriculum that characterized early Canadian public school curricula was transformed by progressive pedagogical thinking in the early part of the twentieth century, while Christian catechesis has no place in Canada's secular system of schooling.