The Byzantine Commonwealth 50 years on: Empires and their Afterlife

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2018 sees the centenary of the birth of Sir Dimitri Obolensky, one of the outstanding Byzantine historians of the 20th century. This conference aims to return to some of the lines of enquiry and themes that Obolensky explored in his writings, the singularity of Byzantium and the empire's place in the Eurasian world, and its interaction with other societies, cultures and powers, addressing some of the following questions:

- What were Byzantium's vital ingredients and how far were they consistent, or stable?
- In what senses was Byzantium inclusive, exclusive, or expansionist, and was it polycentric in fact if not in ideology?
- How and why did Byzantium appeal to members of external societies or elites?
- Which of them proved most impervious to Byzantium? How useful is the centre-periphery model for analysing the formation of pre-modern societies?
- Was the afterlife of Byzantium wholly a matter of religion?
- Would 'Orthodox' or 'Slavic' Commonwealth more aptly characterize the sphere in which Byzantium's vital ingredients had most repercussions?

Sasanian afterlife: Iranian cosmology and political culture in the tenth-century *dar al-Islam*

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As the Abbasid Caliphate's hold over some of its outlying provinces grew fitful and contestable in the ninth and tenth centuries, a number of ambitious army commanders and governors stepped in to fill the power vacuum. Some of them tried to legitimize their position by resorting to a variety of elements of Sasanian political culture. This went beyond individual terms, motifs or visual symbols and it could invoke Iranian cosmology more generally. The Samanids and the Saffarids offer obvious examples but other, less celebrated, regimes are also in play.

The Mongols as agents of cultural exchange

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Traditionally, the Mongols of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are remembered for their military prowess – they established the largest contiguous land empire known to history – and for their brutality: as they conquered, they massacred enormous numbers of people, and destroyed cities and agricultural land over vast areas of Eurasia. There is no reason to doubt that the initial Mongol conquests, under the imperial founder, Genghis Khan (d. 1227) were as grim as has generally been supposed. But during the last twenty years or so, subsequent Mongol rule has come to be seen by historians in a quite different light. It now seems that, after the first conquests were over, the Mongols acted, quite consciously and directly, as sponsors of an extensive process of cultural transmission and exchange across their empire and beyond – especially, but by no means exclusively, from east to west. This encompassed many fields. That influences deriving from Chinese art of the period can be clearly seen in Persian art has long been recognised. But it has been shown that these exchanges also affected such areas as historiography, geography and cartography, agriculture, cuisine, medicine, and printing. This paper will discuss some of these developments, relating this phenomenon, as far as I can, to what Obolensky writes in his chapter on "Factors in Cultural Diffusion".

From war to peace in medieval steppe empires

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A history of medieval Eurasia is inconceivable without taking into account the migrations, invasions and conquests of political formations originating in the steppes. What impacts, influences or legacies (ephemeral? long-lasting?) steppe empires may have had, and in what areas (culture? society? diplomacy and trade?) however, have proven difficult questions. It may be an obvious point that such questions cannot be answered unless we take into account the process through which nomads became "imperial". Such a process involves a transition from a state of war characterized by centralization of political power, territorial acquisitions, and the exponential growth of the military side of society, to a state of peace that promoted civil institutions, the strengthening of diplomacy, and the development of trade. While different empires adopted different solutions in their attempt to shift from war to peace, it is, arguably, such transitions that defined most cogently their historical role and their relations with subjects and neighbours. This paper will draw on examples from the sixth to the fourteenth century to illustrate how these empires managed (or not) war and peace, focusing especially on the Mongol period, whose *pax mongolica* unified, albeit briefly, the regions of Eurasia from the Black Sea to the Yellow Sea.

Session II. A commonwealth of things?

Byzantium's empires of gold
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In terms of the workings of its internal economy and its relationship (through tribute and trade) with neighbouring peoples, for much of its history the Byzantine Empire was in many ways defined by its gold currency (the *solidus* or *nomisma*), such that, in Late Antiquity in particular, the gold coinage of Constantinople became intimately bound up with concepts of 'economic *Romanitas*' and imperial prestige. The minting of coins bearing the image of the emperor in Constantinople and conforming to Constantinopolitan models on the part of certain of the post-Roman successor kingdoms has, however, too often been read to imply some sort of loose acknowledgement on their part of on-going Constantinopolitan suzerainty. Rather, this paper will examine the underlying social and economic reasons for the minting of mock Byzantine coins, by placing the western pseudo-imperial coinages in the context of mock Byzantine coins also struck under Muslim rule in the Near East and across Central and Inner Asia. As such, it will examine how a key aspect of early Byzantine economic culture was appropriated by the empire's neighbours and rivals.

Finding the frontiers of the commonwealth
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When looking at the frontiers of the Commonwealth it is difficult not to pay attention to the following methodological problem: for at least two decades in the archaeology of the East-Central and Eastern Europe there has been a fiercely contested discussion about the validity of assigning archaeological finds to specific ethnic groups, for example, Germans, Poles, or Ruthenians. It seems that in the case of the studies on the Polish-Rus' borderland using the concept of the Byzantine Commonwealth is the perfect way to "evade" the naive attempts of assigning individual finds to particular ethnic groups. This is one more proof of the longevity of the thoughts of Dimitri Obolensky. In my presentation I propose to focus on the region of the Cherven' Towns, i.e. the middle Bug river area. Today, this is the border between Poland (thus also the European Union) and Ukraine, while during the Middle Ages this zone used to be the Polish-Rus' borderland. The study of this area, which until recently has been very poorly investigated, could be crucial for the understanding of the nature of the borders of the Byzantine Commonwealth. From the region of the Cherven' Towns great hoards of jewellery are known, as well as a tremendous number of items of sacral nature. Most important here is the discovery of over one thousand of the so-called Dorogichin lead seals. Currently, extensive research on these artefacts is being carried out, which includes the analysis of chemical composition of the lead used for their production. The artefacts from the region of the Cherven' Towns but also from nearby Chełm, founded in the mid-thirteenth century by Daniel of Galicia/Danylo Romanovych, depict the boundaries of the Kievan Rus', or more generally, of the Byzantine Commonwealth as a gateway facilitating interactions with neighbours rather than as strongholds guarded by military garrisons.

The Byzantine visual commonwealth
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The concluding chapter of Obolensky's *Byzantine Commonwealth* is devoted to the spread of Byzantine civilization, specifically literature and art. Because Byzantine art passed freely across political frontiers, he considered it "the basic international idiom" throughout the lands of the Byzantine commonwealth. While Obolensky was deeply attuned to the local nuances of this international idiom in diverse locales from the Southern Peloponnese to the Caucasus, his model of cultural diffusion remained resolutely unidirectional, moving out from Byzantium to various centers of the Balkans, Romania, and Russia. Such a model parallels the art historical account of Byzantine "influence" in western Europe that dominated early twentieth century historiography. My paper revisits the role played by the visual sphere in the construction and maintenance of cultural ties with Byzantium, reassessing the possibility of a Byzantine visual *oikoumene*. In this way, it contextualizes the implications of Obolensky's model of the commonwealth within the historiography of Art History.

Elites on the frontier provinces of the empire
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In summing up Basil II's reign, Dimitri Obolensky noted that "The clients and satellites of the empire, both within and beyond its frontiers, had been pacified by the power and the liberalities of the emperor, and drawn into the orbit of Byzantium by the prestige and appeal of its civilisation." His study focused mainly on the Balkans. However, imperial policy towards peripheral peoples and their elites established within the empire seems to have been common to all border populations, whether in Anatolia, the Balkans or Italy. One should therefore examine the flexible principles of imperial policy throughout the empire, rather than favouring one frontier zone over another. We should also consider the significance of religion and the importance of the patriarch of Constantinople's attitude. What were the key factors in making these elites adhere to Byzantium? Kekaumenos' 'Advice and Anecdotes' offers an answer for one particular period in time and for factors specific to his family, but it is prosopography, reinforced by sigillography, which makes it possible to hypothesise for the tenth to twelfth centuries. These disciplines allow us, albeit imperfectly, to follow the fate of non-Greek elites in frontier regions along with their reactions to the evolution of imperial politics.

The Byzantine commonwealth: a view from the east
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Obolensky's Byzantine Commonwealth reveals an individual approach to historical space. On the one hand, the Introduction defines its remit as Byzantium's relations with the peoples of Eastern Europe and openly excludes the Caucasian lands on geographical grounds. On the other hand, chapter 6 treats the Black Sea coast, including Crimea and Abkhazia, and traces Byzantine missions to the Khazars and the Alans. This paper reflects on why the lands and peoples, literatures and cultures of the Caucasus were excluded from Obolensky's Byzantine Commonwealth and reassesses the extent to which they could have been included at the time. More broadly it explores how Byzantine approaches to the Caucasus, and Caucasian responses to Byzantium, developed over time and the extent to which these corresponded with political and cultural relations in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Finally, it examines the movement of Armenians, Georgians and others into the Balkans, suggesting that the peripheries of Byzantium and the peoples on and beyond them, were not as singular or isolated as they appeared fifty years ago.

Byzantine reclaiming of southeast Europe: a study in Byzantine soft power, ninth to fourteenth centuries
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Growing rivalry with Rome, intensified during Iconoclasm and exacerbated by personal vanities, interests and conflict, helped to push Constantinople toward its European hinterland, which resulted in the Empire's embracing of its Bulgarian and Slavic neighbours in the second half of the ninth century and marked the beginning of Byzantium's reclaiming of south-eastern Europe. From that point on, a long Byzantine shadow seemed to always hover over the region until the end of the Middle Ages, with the Balkans as one of the apparently clearest examples of the existence and functioning of the Byzantine commonwealth, Dimitri Obolensky's brilliant cultural and political concept that had methodologically—but also politically—tortured generations of Byzantine scholars, reluctant to state unequivocally whether the Empire's influence was the main and overwhelming factor in political and cultural development of the young "national" polities in south-eastern Europe. The present paper looks at Byzantium's changing strategies toward its European hinterland from the ninth to the late fourteenth centuries, and examines the strength and eventual success of Byzantine soft power in the Balkans, including the significance of the Byzantine aristocratic diaspora in the eleventh century and the political concept of the union with the Empire, devised at the very end of the thirteenth century for bringing into alliance Serbian King Milutin.

Late Byzantine views of Rus beyond the church
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The late Byzantine empire maintained close ties with the East Slavonic principalities of Rus, but these have been studied almost exclusively in the context of the crises surrounding the appointments of rival metropolitans for the East Slavonic lands in the mid- to late fourteenth century. Other types of sources show, however, that Rus was a subject of serious scholarly interest for several generations of late Byzantine intellectuals. The contemporary politics, geography and natural history of Rus, as well as its earlier conversion to Christianity under Byzantine auspices, are discussed in works of various genres written throughout the post-restoration period. This paper will investigate the diverse subject matter found in late Byzantine writings about Rus and its importance for understanding the empire's relations with its northern neighbour at this time. Although the accuracy of these writings is limited, they reveal that the hostility which arose from the machinations in the church hierarchy was not the full story of Byzantine-Rus relations. Indeed, in the empire's weakened state post-1261, some members of the Byzantine elite viewed Rus as a powerful and reliable (if unsophisticated) supporter whose geopolitical success was thanks largely to Byzantium's civilising influence.

Political culture of early Rus' vs. the Byzantine law: two contradicting ideologies and means of their reconciliation
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Obolensky, in his survey "The Relations Between Byzantium and Russia (11th – 15th Century)" (1970), raised a vexed question of Russia's belonging to the "Byzantine Commonwealth" as a kind of a vassal state. Obolensky's main idea was to highlight the difference between the symbolical dimension of Byzantine sovereignty over the young Russian state and the real situation in which Byzantine emperors had no political, diplomatic or economical means of implementing this sovereignty at their disposal. This contradictory situation can be well analysed on the basis of the so called "church statutes" of Prince Vladimir and of Prince Yaroslav of Kiev. On the one hand, the authors or editors of those statutes were surely aware of the key-position of the Greek Emperor in the entire Orthodox Church. Since the Russian Church was from its very beginning nothing else than a part of the Byzantine Church, one had to admit the formal sovereignty of the Emperor over the Metropolitanate of Kiev as well. On the other hand, it surely appeared doubtful from the domestic point of view to tolerate the national Church be dependent from a very distant foreign power. A compromise must be found to reconcile both of these approaches: the national and the ecumenical one. The church statutes of the Kievan princes demonstrate that this compromise was achieved by means of symbolic acceptance of Byzantine church legislation in form of the "Greek Nomocanon". The church statutes, accepting formally the Byzantine Nomocanon as the legal Code for Russian ecclesiastical courts, were issued, nevertheless, not by Byzantine authorities, but by Russian government in the person of Great Prince of Kiev. Thus, the Russian sovereignty over the Kievan Church could be officially established, even if the authority of the byzantine Nomocanon was emphasized in the wording of the statutes.

Byzantium and the Golden Horde: war, trade, and diplomacy
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Around 1262, the khan of the Golden Horde Berke passed an agreement with the Byzantine emperor Michael Palaiologos and Baybars, the Mamluk sultan of Egypt and Syria. Baybars needed manpower for his armies as he had to fight both the crusaders and the Mongols in Syria and over the Euphrates. Khan Berke was at war against the Mongols led by Hülegü who had taken control of eastern Anatolia and Transcaucasia. As the Mamluk sultanate and the Golden Horde had no common border, Baybars and Berke needed to ally with the Byzantines to communicate with one another. Their first treaty established rules of exchange according to which those who operated under the sultan and emperor's flags, regardless of their origin, were provided with travel authorization

and local protection. Michael Palaiologos agreed to let the sultan's envoys and merchants ship goods and slaves from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean through the straits of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles - the straits being the only maritime exit of the enclosed Black Sea. The Byzantines, in turn, received substantial benefices from the Mamluk trade in the form of taxes and gifts. This agreement remained valid, with adaptation, until the fifteenth century. This paper will re-examine the alliance between the Byzantines, the Mamluks, and the Golden Horde by offering a new analysis of the content of the treaties and their impact on the geopolitics of the Steppe, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean.

Session V. Law and ideology

Keeping up appearances: Byzantine perspectives of 'legality' and the Italians

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In this paper I will examine questions related to the notion of 'legality' in the Byzantine imperial acts directed to Venice, Pisa and Genoa in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries. A twofold distinction of the notion of 'legality' will be discussed. Firstly, the emperor's consistent attempt to establish a form of 'legality' concerning his position and his relation to the Italians, i.e. that he is by far superior and they are his subjects. This form of 'legality' suits indeed the idea of the Byzantine emperor as ruler of the *oikoumene*. Secondly, the apparent 'legality' that the emperor intends to safeguard in some concrete cases related to the Italians. The latter form of 'legality' is related to legal procedures and the idea of a fair and just emperor.

Identity, law and beards: judicial shaving in Byzantium, c. 600–900

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What made the Byzantines Byzantine? What were the essential ingredients of Byzantine culture that underpinned a Byzantine Commonwealth? One answer notably commented upon in Obolensky's magnum opus was law. Being subject to the law of the emperors was one way of being Roman, a form of identity and an intellectual discourse older than the imperial office itself. Beards were a far more recent form of 'Byzantine-ness', and one that could only be claimed by men. But from at least the seventh century beards became a defining, virtually universal symbol of Byzantine masculinity. This paper will examine how these two aspects interacted, in particular through the rise of the penalty of shaving. This first appeared in Roman Law in the Ecloga of 741, and by the late ninth century had become one of the most common forms of punishment in the law-codes. What was the point of judicial shaving? Just how novel was it? Why did its prominence increase so markedly? Finally, was this something shared across the wider Byzantine World? After all, to some degree a commonwealth of Byzantine law emerged. To an even stronger degree there arose a commonwealth of beards. Was there also a commonwealth of judicial shavers?

Translations of Byzantine law books into Arabic

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This paper looks at the importance of the translations of the *Ecloga* and the *Procheiros Nomos* into Arabic. While the Arabic *Ecloga* is only transmitted in a Coptic context, we have both Melkite and Coptic versions of the *Procheiros Nomos*. So two questions arise: what was the reason for the translation of these texts by the Melkites and the Copts respectively; and secondly, what was their function in an Islamic environment? It also seems worth taking account of the attitude of Byzantium itself. To what degree has the Byzantine state or church been instrumental in translating these legal texts, and what was their function from the perspective of Byzantium?

Identity through language in Byzantium and its neighbours

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Byzantium fostered the evangelization and alphabetization of neighbouring countries in their national languages, but, from the time of Justinian, only accepted ancient Greek as the written norm inside the Empire. To understand the cultural model Byzantium exported to other countries it is essential to consider how the Empire coped with the problem of its own linguistic identity. Besides the role of Latin (subject to a process of *exhellenismos* in the field of law) the problems to deal with are mainly related to the levels of language: 1) the unity of the Greek classical norm (which included Homeric, Attic, and other dialects), a question approached by the grammarians; 2) the name and uses of the low level of the written norm (*koine*), for the texts translated into other languages were mostly written in this register; 3) the existence of spoken variants and local dialects in which oral literature was produced that passed to other cultures. A short presentation of the topics will be made and a small sample of texts will be delivered for further discussion.

Boundaries and bonds: Khazaria and the 'commonwealth'

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The Khazars are a major presence in *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, but in his review of the book, Robert Browning was nonetheless left wondering: 'Were they part of the "Commonwealth" or not?'. Insofar as Dmitri Obolensky's conception is taken to a bounded entity, the question appears justified. However, Obolensky's book also allows for a more open-ended relationship between Constantinople and the wider world. This paper will develop this element of Obolensky's work by looking at the different, and changing, logics of 'encompassment' implied by the bonds between Byzantine society and the Christians and non-Christians of Khazaria. At the same time, this paper will consider the significance of conceptions of universal rule endogenous to the steppe.

The reluctant empire

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Obolensky's choice of title for his book was a deliberate anachronism which had unintended consequences for his overall vision. In reality, not only did the "member states" of the commonwealth that he imagined rarely yearn to imitate their "metropoly", but Byzantium itself was generally reluctant to engage, in whatever way, with its "barbaric" periphery, if we leave aside the territories of the former Roman Empire. The Byzantines never were as expansionist as the Romans had been; neither were they as inquisitive as the modern colonial nations would become. In my paper, I will look afresh at the Byzantine influence on Rus'. Was it as overwhelming as it is reputed to be? Neither the Greek language, nor the Byzantine architecture, the Constantinopolitan way of life or the Empire's institutions took root in Rus'. Did the Byzantines really care?

Byzantine globalism: the power of attraction
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The vision of Byzantium, shared by scholars of Dimitri Obolensky's generation, as an imperial civilization unified and motivated by Orthodoxy, with a universal mission and a multicultural ideal, has been much eroded over the past fifty years. It has been demonstrated that the empire's territorial expansionism in the Middle Ages was sporadic and opportunistic, and the structural pillars of its culture and ideology were essentially self-supporting and inward-looking: its Christianity perpetuated the Judaic mentality of an Elect Nation, its Hellenism was elitist and exclusive, and its Roman political identity was nationalist rather than imperialist. In this paper, I suggest that Byzantium had a global strategy of survival, based on the powerful attraction of the city of Constantinople, the imperial court, and the imperial office. It punched well above its weight, and reached way beyond its borders, by engineering a massive flow of human and material resources into a central vortex of power. In this perspective, the exclusivism and inertia of Byzantine elite society can be seen as mechanisms for maintaining the centre's power of attraction. Even the fierce competition for high office and the imperial throne was a magnetic force that kept the best on board and ensured that they rose to the top. My presentation will illustrate key points of how the system worked, and – naturally – how and when it failed.

A commonwealth of elect nations: contradiction in terms?
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By the ninth century, the Byzantines developed a strong sense of Election: an exclusive religious and national Roman identity, based on the biblical model of the ancient Israelites. The conversion of Eastern Europe, which gained impetus in that century, gave rise to what Obolensky termed as "The Byzantine Commonwealth": Byzantium transmitted its religion, culture and political institutions to its neighbouring peoples and enjoyed a hegemonic position throughout its sphere of influence. However, willingly or unwillingly, Byzantium also transmitted to the neighbouring peoples its concept of National Election. The Byzantine Election Concept was adopted by the recent converts and became a part of their own evolving national awareness. The Byzantines themselves created 'a bug within the system', a destructive and centrifugal force that originated from the very heart of the Commonwealth. Byzantine responses to the multi-faceted challenge posed by the Bulgarian ruler Symeon between 912 and 927, attest to the ways in which the Byzantines viewed their collective identity and position within the *oikoumene*, as well as their neighbours'. These revealing responses form a rare opportunity to explore the ways in which the Byzantines negotiated – literally negotiated – their national identity with a Christian rival, and transmitted their sense of Election to the peoples of the "Byzantine Commonwealth.".