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Alexios G. C. Savvides,
Bosphorus/Bosporos
(Boghaz-ıci) from Byzantine
to Latin and Ottoman
Times (4th–15th Centuries):
Constantinople Viewed
from the North-East
Water Currents. Athens:
 Herodotos, 2020.
 238 pages, 2 maps.
 ISBN: 9789604853816

The Bosphorus, an essential landmark situated in a strategic position between Europe and Asia, played a fundamental role in shaping the history of Constantinople since the foundation of the town as a Megarian colony between 668 and 657 BC. The straits between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, “at the crossing of two of the greatest traderoutes in history,” constitute the main reason for Constantine I to choose the site for the construction of the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. Therefore, focusing on this territory provides the scholars with important insights about fundamental and long-lasting features of Byzantine history.

Bosphorus/Bosporos (Boghaz-ıci) from Byzantine to Latin and Ottoman Times (4th–15th Centuries) by Alexios Savvides presents an overview of the historical references to the Bosphorus. Quotations from ancient and modern authors open the book, stressing the importance of the region for trade and politics. In the foreword, the author outlines how the research evolved and its relationship with important books on the same theme, such as the volume *Ostthrakien* in the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini* series, edited by Andreas Külzer.² From Külzer’s source, Savvides has extracted two maps to use in his own book. If we compare the two works, we can notice that while the volumes composing the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini* series adopt a multidisciplinary approach, spanning from written to artistic and archaeological sources, Savvides focuses on written primary and secondary sources, evoking them in detail.

Four sections compose Savvides’s book. The first part focuses on toponymy, topography, and historical

geography. Greek, Turkish, and Latin toponyms are taken into account, showing the variety of nations sharing a deep connection with the Bosphorus. Throughout the book, every statement is supported by numerous bibliographical references, which are discussed in an extensive set of footnotes, as well as by long quotations. Moreover, the decision to adopt the modern monotonic orthograph for medieval Greek excerpts is quite surprising, since the polytonic system is the one generally adopted and accepted for editing Byzantine sources.

A chronological pattern characterizes the following sections. In the second section, the Byzantine period is taken in review, from the fourth century to the years immediately preceding 1453. The discussion consists mainly of quotations taken from historical sources relating events and facts which have taken place on the Bosphorus. Arab, Russian, and Turkish armies and fleets arrive on the water and shores, pressuring the main capital in the Eastern Mediterranean repeatedly throughout the centuries. Inevitably, many political facts taking place in Constantinople are sketchily outlined to provide a general context.

Generally speaking, in his exposition, the author appears especially acquainted with Byzantine, Ottoman, and some Crusades sources, while Latin and Italian witnesses seem somewhat neglected. Information about the Genoese and Venetian presence in the region is mainly taken from Byzantine or secondary sources, while no mention can be found of annals and chronicles compiled in the two Italian towns. The same can be said about the bibliography, which overlooks some significant Italian and French studies; among others, in the third section concerning the Ottoman conquest in 1453, the lack of reference to the studies of Agostino Pertusi, along with the more recent book by Thierry Ganchou, must be registered.³

The fourth section contains a rapid description of events taking place on the Bosphorus during the Ottoman centuries. The strait continues to be a pivotal element in Eastern Mediterranean geography and frequently draws Russian attention, thus provoking, on some occasions, military and diplomatic outbursts. To stress the centrality of the

region in the history of Constantinople, stereotypical nicknames are mentioned, such as the “sick man of the Bosphorus” used to describe the Ottoman Empire in more recent centuries.

A final section of quotations, essentially taken from secondary sources, concludes the book, along with a rapid summary of the principal contents in Greek.

The author states that the book’s topic “should adhere chiefly on matters of historical geography and topography of the Bosphorus/Straits area” (p. 35). Nonetheless, the linking of historical data to their geographical context, which constitutes the core of Külzer’s volume on *Ostthrakien*, is, in Savvides’ book, slightly disregarded and historical events are rarely described in their topographical setting. Moreover, issues concerning the impact of the geographical asset of the area on its history and on specific events, as well as an outline of eventual variations of the Bosphorus’ role over the centuries, are rarely addressed. Besides a long and detailed description of sources, few general conclusions can be found.

In summary, the book serves as a useful reminder for scholars of many historical and bibliographical quotations and events related to the Bosphorus, a key region between the Aegean and Black Sea. Given that written sources from specific historiographical traditions (notably Greek, English, and German-speaking studies) are evoked in detail, the publication can be considered a companion for further investigations on the region.

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1 Steven Runciman, *Byzantine Civilization* (London: Methuen, 1933), 12, quoted in Savvides, *Bosphorus/Bosporos*, 14.

2 Andreas Külzer, *Ostthrakien (Euröpē)*, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini* 12 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2008).

3 Agostino Pertusi, *La caduta di Costantinopoli*, 2 vols. (Roma: Fondazione Valla, 1990); Thierry Ganchou, *Constantinople 1453: Des Byzantins aux Ottomans* (Paris: Anacharsis, 2016).