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Reviews

Nadine Schibille, *Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine Aesthetic Experience*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. Pp. xii, 282.
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Hagia Sophia in Constantinople has been centre stage in Byzantinist discourse for more than two centuries. Considering that numerous Byzantine sites across the eastern Mediterranean still lack systematic and detailed documentation, another monograph on *the* monument above all monuments that signifies Byzantium[1] might seem out of step. Yet, Nadine Schibille's book, a revised version of her PhD dissertation, proves that the opposite is true. In her study, Schibille is concerned with the 'aesthetic data' contained in the sixth-century architecture and decorative programme of Hagia Sophia. In other words, she analyses the late-antique perceptions and polyphonic reception of the building, its mosaics and marble surfaces. The book offers a synthetic assessment of how contemporaries (writers and viewers) experienced and understood the fundamental components of early Byzantine visual culture through aesthetics.

The monograph is comprised of seven chapters. In the introduction, Schibille sketches the lines of her inquiry by explaining how an investigation of Hagia Sophia from the aesthetic standpoint can broaden our picture of monumental art, and its function and perception, in sixth-century Byzantium. Crucially, Schibille's endeavour selects 'sight' and 'vision' as the key sense in understanding the fundamental aesthetic features entailed in the ecclesiastical space of the church, including light. The first chapter discusses the two surviving *ekphraseis* of Hagia Sophia, written by Prokopios and Paul the Silentiary respectively, and highlights their significance in re-constructing early Byzantine beliefs about visualisation and imagination. The author, then, moves on to the sixth-century anonymous hymn for the inauguration of Hagia Sophia (*kontakion*), and emphasises the predominant role of light in the spiritual and intellectual experience of the edifice. Special attention is paid to the differences between the *ekphrastic* accounts and the *kontakion* in relation to the audiences they served.

The second chapter introduces us to the well-known construction history of the Justinianic church and indicates the dome's vitality in the illumination and overall impression of the building. At the core of the chapter, light (before and after sunset) is put under the microscope and emerges as a profoundly influential element for the creation and optical appreciation of Hagia Sophia's sacred space. Here Schibille also places the building within the context of pre-sixth-century developments in ecclesiastical architecture, from St John Stoudios to Hagios Polyeuktos, to demonstrate that, despite employing some well-established architectural solutions, Hagia Sophia represents a groundbreaking artistic achievement.

The third chapter analyses the original decorative programme by concentrating on materials, stylistic patterns, colour selection, technique and geographical provenance. Schibille argues for an intricate interplay between Hagia Sophia's marble revetments and the *ekphrastic* descriptions, which serves to underscore the luminosity and exceptional brightness of the interior space. As for the non-figurative mosaic decoration, the author notes that it constitutes a most effective medium of creating a unified monumental entity rather than a disorienting mix of individual compositions. The issue of originality plays strongly into the final part of the chapter on how colours and materials were not a matter of coincidence but the result of a scrutinized and meticulous selection process.

In chapter four, Schibille proceeds to questions of symbol and meaning in the mosaic decoration. The cross represents the focal sign in the interior space of the church, the "beginning and end of all things". Similar to her examination of the architecture, the author considers affinities and differences of the mosaics with other Justinianic mosaic ensembles surviving in the Mediterranean basin. Keeping up with the notion of Hagia Sophia's exceptional superiority, we read that while the mosaics of Saint Vitale in Ravenna or Saint Catherine on Sinai targeted specific kinds of beholders, the material beauty of the Great Church essentially surpassed the terrestrial sphere by conveying the concept of divine wisdom.

1 L. James, 'Book Review of Robert S. Nelson, *Hagia Sophia, 1850–1950. Holy Wisdom Modern Monument* (Chicago and London 2004),' *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 31.1 (2007), 117.

In the fifth chapter, Schibille turns to Neoplatonic philosophy to refine her understanding of some recurrent terms such as divine nature, light and beauty. Here the problem, as she rightly points out from the start, is that there is no concrete link between philosophical word and the art of Hagia Sophia. Through a rigorous discussion that includes Plotinus' *Enneads* and several Platonic works, Pseudo-Dionysius rises as the key writer, who deemed universal beauty as encompassing "the opposing concepts of light and darkness" which, in turn, evokes the human quest for divine wisdom.

How could the tangible beauty of Hagia Sophia lead the faithful to God? Seeking to answer this question in the sixth chapter of her monograph, Schibille delves again into the written record. In dialogue with the works of Plato, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius, she develops the concept of mimesis, defined as the quality contained in all beings and realities. Appropriately, Schibille brings the artist/architect to the stage by arguing that through the erection and adornment of the Great Church, they introduce the human mind to divinity. Light is seen as the formative medium that communicates divine transcendence.

Schibille's final chapter reminds us that the metaphysical dimension of Hagia Sophia becomes accessible when approached from the perspective of aesthetics. Divine revelation was indeed the ultimate objective of the Great Church. In supporting this idea, Schibille's decision to evaluate a new piece of evidence - a Syriac inauguration hymn glorifying the church of Hagia Sophia in Edessa – comes too late in the book and, at first reading the scrupulous analysis appears somehow out of context. Nevertheless, it is the colourful mosaic decoration to which Schibille returns. The aesthetic values evoked by this material lavishness helped the beholders to draw direct links to the divinity.

The important contribution of Schibille's book lies in its focussed investigation of Byzantine aesthetics as evidenced in one of the most important monuments of the world. The author offers an aesthetically rich narrative that epitomises a major point in modern art-historical discourse, the constant interaction between word and image. Surprising the casual reader who would think that Hagia Sophia has been adequately explored, Schibille succeeds in shedding light on significant, yet less-known, facets of the Justinianic building. Aesthetics in the early Byzantine world are now more fully understood thanks to the stimulating research in Schibille's monograph.

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C. Entwistle and L. James (eds), *New light on old glass: recent research on Byzantine mosaics and glass*. London: The British Museum, 2013. Pp351 + xi.
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Byzantine glass has been the preserve of specialists, little understood even by the art historians who study mosaic wall decoration or mosaic icons. The reflective and translucent qualities of glass were appreciated by Byzantine authors, and it is indicative of the concerns of modern Byzantine studies that their writings have generated more comment than the actual glass itself. The essays collected in *New light on old glass*, edited by Chris Entwistle and Liz James, present a first attempt to introduce Byzantine glass into the mainstream of material cultural studies. This foray is not tentative: the book is large, lavishly illustrated, and includes 30 chapters devoted to aspects of Byzantine glass technology, production and use, with particular emphasis on the use of glass in wall mosaics. The papers are a record of a conference sponsored as part of a large Leverhulme research grant awarded to Liz James (University of Sussex) on the composition of Byzantine glass mosaic tesserae, and one of the longest chapters in the book presents an overview of her findings. Additional individual chapters range in content from site studies (glass mosaic tesserae from Amorium, Classe, Damascus, Daphni, Milan, Petra, Phokis [Hosios Loukas], Poreč, Ravenna, Rome, Thessaloniki, Thessaly and Torcello); to specific objects (the Lycurgus cup, the Genoa mandylion) or types of objects (gold glass, glass medallions, window glass); to techniques (silver stain); to contemporary documentation concerning glassworkers; to aesthetics (the Euphrasian basilica in Poreč and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, the mosaic decoration of which, as suggested long ago by Robin Cormack and demonstrated fairly conclusively here – whether or not one accepts her aesthetic interpretation – in Nadine Schibille's 'A quest for wisdom. The 6th-century mosaics of Hagia Sophia and late antique aesthetics', pp. 53–59, was originally composed entirely of geometric and floral decoration and crosses); to fakes; to modern recording of Byzantine mosaics (Dimitra Kotoula, 'Recording Byzantine mosaics in 19th-century Greece. The case of the Byzantine Research Fund (BRF) archive', pp 260–70) and the production of new mosaic interiors (Paul Bentley, 'Victorian or Justinianic?