THE BYZANTINE REVIEW

ByzRev 08.2026.023
doi: 10.17879/byzrev-2026-9590

NAOMI R. PITAMBER, Byzantium and Landscapes of Loss: The Recreation of Constantinople in the Laskarid and Palaiologan Eras. Cambridge University Press 2026. xxiv, 330 pp. – ISBN 978-1-009-33179-1

• VASILEIOS MARINIS, Yale University (vasileios.marinis@yale.edu)

This book investigates the art, architecture, and material culture of the Empire of Nicaea, one of the three successor states that emerged after the Fourth Crusade conquered Constantinople in 1204. This polity was founded by Theodore I Laskaris (d. 1221), ruled for many years by the capable John III Vatatzes (r. 1221–1254), and ceased to exist as a separate political entity when Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1259–1282) retook the city on the Bosphorus in 1261. In the introduction, PITAMBER outlines two goals: first, 'to demonstrate the Laskarid sources of key early Palaiologan works in Constantinople, illuminating the dependence of the center on the periphery, and thereby the capital upon exile'; second, 'to provide pathways of analysis and interpretation that consider the center and periphery in tandem' (p. 10). PITAMBER does not seek 'to replace Constantinople-as-center with Nicaea-as-new-center, but to provide an extended and invigorated renegotiation of how center and the periphery are intertwined during and following the era of exile' (p. 15). Her theoretical framework is based on EDWARD SAID's contrapuntal reading, which she adjusts to read 'the physical remains of the neglected and overlooked Laskarid periphery that inform the Constantinopolitan center in the thirteenth and fourteenth century' (p. 34).

In chapter 1 ('The Laskarid Periphery as Center and Source'), PITAMBER discusses Michael VIII's usurpation of the throne, as well as his religious policies. All these resulted in well-documented internal rifts and schisms that his son Andronikos II attempted to heal. PITAMBER rightly underscores Michael VIII's Laskarid origins, particularly evident in his early coins. Chapter 2 ('Imperial Laskarid Imagery from Exile') investigates Laskarid coins and seals, focusing particularly on two images found on them, Christ Chalkites and Saint Tryphon. The latter was martyred in Nicaea and is often accompanied by a blooming lily, a reference to a miracle that took place in that city on his feast day. PITAMBER argues that the famous mosaic of Christ Antiphonetes in the Chora monastery has heretofore been misunderstood: it was in fact a deliberate choice that linked ex-

ile in Nicaea with Constantinople, and the Palaiologans with earlier ruling dynasties. Chapter 3 ('The Palaiologan Palace of the Porphyrogennitos and Nymphaion') offers a detailed and useful description of the Laskarid palace at Nymphaion (now Kemalpaşa), which, according to PITAMBER, was not built until after 1211. She considers this palace the antecedent of the so-called Tekfur Sarayı, a palace in the Blachernai region of Constantinople that was likely constructed in the years following the Byzantine reconquest of the city. In chapter 4 ('Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and Nicaea'), PITAMBER argues that the fifth-century Nicaean church imitated the Theodosian Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. She then discusses the inlaid pavement at the west end of the nave, which, she argues, was manufactured for the coronation of Theodore I Laskaris in that church. Chapter 5 ('Fresco Painting in the Laskarid Realm') provides exhaustive descriptions of Laskarid frescoes, particularly those surviving in fragmentary state in the pastophoria of Hagia Sophia. PITAMBER finds in their style continuities with Komnenian painting, as well as precedents for the later Palaiologan developments. Chapter 6 ('Laskarid Nicaea as the "New Rome"') examines Larkarid fortifications and their surviving inscriptions in Nicaea, Smyrna, and elsewhere, which show how the Laskarids 'fashioned themselves as the preservers and extenders of Byzantine power' (p. 259).[1] The conclusion nicely summarizes the author's main arguments and provides an interesting epilogue.

The book has many virtues. It collects and analyzes Laskarid art production and adds novel insights about its ideological undercurrents. It challenges the notion of 'Renaissance' in Byzantine art and the paradigm of center versus periphery. It shows deep knowledge of the period's historical circumstances and the region's geography and topography. It is the product of diligent fieldwork, particularly evident in chapter 5. And it is written with great clarity. At the same time, it is hampered by a methodological straitjacket: SAID introduced contrapuntal reading as a means of interpreting literature by considering both the colonial (Western) narrative and the marginalized, even silenced histories that underpin it. He famously applied this methodology to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, arguing that the Bertram family's wealthy lifestyle was only possible because they owned slave plantations in

1. This chapter would have benefited from ANDREAS RHOBY's work, especially A. RHOBY, Byzantinische Epigramme auf Stein. Vienna 2014, and IDEM, 'Tower Stablished by God, God is Protecting You'. Inscriptions on Byzantine Fortifications – Their Function and Display. In: CHRISTOS STAVRAKOS (ed.), Inscriptions in the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine History and History of Art. Wiesbaden 2016, pp. 341–370.

Antigua. The restoration of these silenced voices is, according to SAID, essential for the complete understanding of a work of literature. Applying this kind of postcolonial theory to the Laskarids requires significant reduction and various mental acrobatics. Who is doing the silencing? PITAMBER seems to argue that it is Michael VIII: '…the obfuscation of Laskarid art and architecture results from Michael VIII's intentional efforts to downplay his usurpation of the Laskarid throne' (p. 32). But then in chapter 3, we read that Tekfur Sarayı in Constantinople 'clearly retains the stamp of exile in its architectural similarity to the Laskarid Palace, the political and geographical milieu where Michael VIII first consolidated power and which defined his early experiences of Byzantine imperial power' (p. 102). Are modern scholars perhaps guilty of ignoring the Empire of Nicaea? Its history has been the subject of important studies, as PITAMBER's footnotes attest. Its art and architecture are also relatively well known, considering how little has survived. For example, that Nymphaion might have served as the prototype for Tekfur Sarayı has been argued before; some twenty years ago, the inlaid mosaic pavement in Hagia Sophia in Iznik (the centerpiece of chapter 4) was redated to the early thirteenth century;[2] and while we are grateful to PITAMBER for the documentation of the frescoes in the same church, their fragmentary condition makes her assertions about their value as stylistic precedents of early Palaiologan art at best hypothetical, especially since they are based on tenuous connections with Thessalonike and Žiča.

The 'contrapuntal reading' results in some unlikely suggestions. A gold *hyperpyron* issued by Michael VIII shows on the reverse the Theotokos orans surrounded by the walls of Constantinople. PITAMBER argues that the motif of the walls was inspired by coins minted in Nicaea a millennium before and concludes that 'In placing the Virgin orans at the center of the ring of city walls, Michael moves the center of the realm from Nicaea to Constantinople, recircumscribing the empire's center and periphery with imagery taken from Nicaea's ancient numismatic history' (p. 58). In another such instance in chapter 4, PITAMBER suggests that the fifth-century Hagia Sophia in Nicaea was built to imitate the form of the Theodosian Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Even if we overlook that the Constantinopolitan building had five aisles and the Nicaean three, and that the former has been replaced by the Justinianic Hagia Sophia and, therefore, no accurate mea-

2. CHRISTINA PINATSI, New Observations on the Pavement of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Nicaea. Byzantinische Zeitschrift 99 (2006), pp. 119–126.

surements of its dimensions are possible, is it really reasonable to argue that, in the early thirteenth century, the people of Nicaea would have remembered that? When this church was built in the fifth century, it imitated a building that had been lost for hundreds of years by the time the Laskarids arrived in the city. In sum, this modified 'contrapuntal reading' detracts from PITAMBER's scholarship. If we disregard the question of imitation, the rest of chapter 4 offers a comprehensive and well-argued discussion on how the Laskarids memorialized lost Constantinopolitan monuments.

Despite these methodological shortcomings the attentive reader will find much of value in PITAMBER's book and will appreciate the author's affection for the material she studies, her tenacity, and her clarity.

Keywords

Empire of Nicaea; Byzantine art and architecture; postcolonial theory