

**Cecily Hennessy: Images of Children in Byzantium;** Farnham: Ashgate 2008; 296 Seiten; ISBN 978-0-7546-5631-9

It is always exciting to learn of a new Byzantine art-historical study that focuses on thematic subjects. Cecily Hennessy presents us with a first major study on the depiction of children and childhood in Byzantine art, in which she sets out to provide “an understanding of three areas of study: the role of art, of children in art and of children themselves in society” (p. 2). This important yet little studied subject has found its way into exhibition catalogues yet has remained in the shadow of larger studies relating to a specific medium or work of art. The images discussed are presented in a variety of textual and pictorial contexts and are approached from different perspectives. The very diversity of the works of art – illuminated manuscripts, icons, ivories, metal objects, and monumental art – justifies the viability of such a thematic study, and although there is no declaration of a grand theory at the beginning of the book, there is still much for the art historian and historians of Byzantium to discover here.

Originating with her 2001 doctoral dissertation and enhanced by subsequent articles, the author’s study is based upon a fine knowledge of the subject, thus rendering the volume’s comprehensive bibliography and index invaluable. Like any adapted dissertation (Hennessy acknowledges her work with Robin Cormack at the Courtauld Institute of Art), the book begins with a revised introduction, which primarily contextualizes her work and lays out her methodology.

Entitled ›Setting‹, chapter 1 (pp. 1–39) endeavors to define children (male and female) and childhood in Byzantium, and their derivatives, by constructing a conceptual and historical framework upon which the later discussion of the imagery is based – general, art-historical, and social studies dealing with various relevant aspects such as legislation and education. Furthermore, a reading of the hagiographic literature provides insight into contemporary Christian perceptions and attitudes regarding children and childhood. With an eye toward differentiating between genders, Hennessy surveys studies relating to the nature of childhood and the inherent problem with adopting a biological-cultural view of childhood. It is not surprising, as the author states, that comparatively little historical-sociological research has been done on girls/young women (p. 32). She completes this survey with an assessment of the dissimilarities between children in Byzantium and our times – “certain issues [...] are quite different: extended legal dependence, early marriage, strong gender differentiation and, in lower classes, child labour or slavery” – as well as possible similarities, and concludes that “children [in Byzantium] were educated, nurtured, respected and cared for” (p. 33). Hennessy cautions the reader of the incapability of any written sources to provide a representative view of children in Byzantium, and puts forward what I believe to be the study’s main question: “can visual imagery give a more representative view?” (p. 33), maintaining that the visual material and its interpretation provide additional “evidence of cultural responses and attitudes [to childhood]” (p. 37).

The author’s ambitious agenda is twofold: (1) to examine the imagery of children in Byzantine art not only from the obvious adult perspective, as she puts it,

“sometimes in a sentimental or patronizing way, sometimes idealized or symbolized” [but] “attempts to also explore imagery and issues it provokes from a child-centred point of view, considering not only children and childhood as the primary subjects [...] also how art about children was intended to affect them”; and (2) “to draw attention to children in art history and by extension to children in general in a way that is alert not only to the habitual but also to the unexpected, enigmatic or challenging aspects of childhood” (p. 34).

In line with her declared methodological approach (p. 35–36), the author chooses to discuss works of art covering the entire time span of the Byzantine Empire. Deliberately trying not to turn the book into a kind of art-historical survey (although she takes care to maintain a chronological continuum and to discuss works of art from all media), she focuses only on certain types of representations and contexts, dividing the study into four themes – childhood, family, sanctity, and power in representations of Christ and the Virgin childhoods. This chapter effectively makes the transition to a scholarly discussion of the visual material in the ensuing chapters.

Chapter 2 (p. 41–81) focuses on subjects such as the depiction of children and the perception of them in Byzantium, and addresses questions such as: when children become adults, how can the beholder differentiate between adolescents and adults, or younger children? The answers are sought through an analysis of the visual elements used for characterizing male and female children as opposed to adults, and by an interpretative approach dealing with the ways these images were used in art (for example “real”, “ideal” or “conceptualized” children).

As an example of how her approach bears fruit, Hennessy’s interpretation of figures appearing in the mosaic floors of the villa in Piazza Armerina (Sicily), dated to 320–340, provides the reader with visual means for identifying male and female children and youth (p. 43–53): short stature and short or knee-length tunics characterize male youths; maturity of features and a variety in dress differentiate between younger and older children; the round faces of children are distinguishable from the more oval faces of mature figures; slenderer children’s bodies as opposed to full adult ones; the hairless faces of boys as opposed to the bearded ones of men; short hair for both young and older boys; long hair arranged half up is reserved for girls; and youth often appear shoeless. Hennessy notes that the good-natured and lively mood set in these works of art is characteristic of juvenile activities (playing, energetic pursuits, hunts, circus performances, etc.); when associated with *erotes*, the scene’s mood evokes fun, mischief, and perhaps even love (p. 47).

The author then provides various examples, such as children and youth engaged in a variety of pastoral and sporting activities shown on the sixth-century mosaic floor from the Great Palace in Constantinople (p. 53–59), which also attests to the continuation of the Greco-Roman tradition in Byzantium. The discussion of the “marginalia” depicting children and youth as entertainers in circuses, jongleurs, and other performers, notably in the illuminated homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos, and the ways in which these images depict children’s societal integration is very convincing (p. 63–69). Such depictions may also appear in monumental art, for instance, in scenes

of *The Crossing of the Red Sea* or *The Entry into Jerusalem*. Hennessy compares “erotes” with children, offering what may be one of the most important observations of this study: Their association through physical resemblance (soft, infantile bodies) and the connotations of “erotes” (fun, mischief, and physical pleasure) may indeed point to aspects of children’s life in Byzantium.

The author concludes this chapter with an observation, that while keeping an external childish appearance (young features, small size, type of dress, and demeanor), most of the images discussed represent children engaged in adult activities, which, in turn, points to their strong integration into Byzantine society. One may wonder whether it wouldn’t have been more appropriate to precede this chapter in childhood with at least a short discussion of infants (besides that of the Virgin *Galaktotrophousa*).

Chapter 3 (p. 83–110) completes what may be called the “societal” aspect of children/youth imagery through the discussion of issues such as familial ties and the roles played within the family nucleus, and questions such as the portrayal of family relations (parents, siblings, and extended family members) and their social status. It presents a wide range of works of art, from late antique images in gold-glass portraits (p. 84–86), through early Byzantine church decorations (p. 87–105), to late Byzantine illuminated manuscripts (p. 105–109) – many of which were donor portraits (imperial, aristocratic, and others) that Hennessy effectively connects to the social world of Byzantium. She points to the ways in which family relations, such as affection and intimacy, are reflected in a range of realistic to idealized depictions, especially through biblical imagery. Other images may reflect educational concerns such as teaching young children the value of giving, as discussed in relation to the eleventh-century wall paintings in the church of S. Clemente in Rome. The author correctly observes that the artists accord the children similar characteristics by paying attention to details accorded their parents, thus pointing, once again, to their integration into the social life of Byzantium.

Chapter 4 (p. 111–142) shifts the discussion from the ostensible realm of reality to that of ideals, searching for the pictorial strategies by which children and sanctity are rendered, and in what contexts. The visual material is broad enough to enable the author to select from a vast pool of figures of saints, biblical heroes, and divine figures, which, the author argues, reflect the Byzantines’ perception of childhood as another expression of sanctity. Thus, for example, in the northern inner aisle of the sixth-century church of St. Demetrios in Thessaloniki, the figure of young Maria portrayed with her family and the church’s namesake, who interceded with God on behalf of her family, make her an active protagonist in the scene, thereby pointing to her possible impact on children’s piety (p. 111–116; fig. 4.1). The author contends that biblical heroes, such as young David appearing on the early seventh-century silver *David plates* (p. 116–124), or Joseph and Solomon, may have been influential as models of childhood, especially as “models of physical prowess and spiritual primacy” (p. 122). The discussion of St. Nicholas, extremely popular in Byzantium after the ninth century, refers to two typical scenes – the first bath and going to school – both of which draw on everyday life (p. 124–128). The first scene, as the author correctly observes, emulates the first bath of other holy children – Christ and the Virgin. Images of St. Nicho-

las usually combine a generic depiction of a child (short in height and wearing a short tunic) with a symbolic one (having a receding hairline and sometimes a halo), indicating his cleverness and spiritual maturity. Later sections in this chapter deal with depictions of youthful, sometimes attractive, saintly figures signifying ideals such as beauty, goodness, and, by extension, their association with God, as, for example, Christ represented as an adolescent or early depictions of St. Demetrios. Concluding the discussion, one has the sense that children and youth in Byzantium were variously engaged in religious worship and devotional practice.

Chapter 5 (p. 143–178) examines children in the secular realm, a task that could prove to be thorny, since sacred and secular are repeatedly interwoven in Byzantine culture and art. Here, the author relates images of children to adult portrayals of political power that share a common visual vocabulary—frontality, hierarchy, and formality (p. 143). The visual material includes young rulers shown mostly, but not exclusively, in dynastic portraits on coins and in illuminated manuscripts. Despite the highly conventionalized depictions, one can still discern glimpses of reality and personal aspects of the subjects' lives, as, for example, in the Parisian Gregory (Paris, BN, gr. 510, 880–886, fols. Cv, Br). One miniature shows emperor Basil I standing between the prophet Elijah and Gabriel. Another depicts the empress Eudokia flanked by two of her sons: Leo, her eldest, presumably the son of Basil's predecessor Michael, Eudokia's lover whom Basil hated and ultimately murdered; and Alexander, Basil's son whom he did not hold in high regard. Hennessy argues that the grouping of mother and sons apart from the father highlights the dynamics of this specific imperial family, and, as is widely accepted, makes the young sons the recipients of this manuscript, and not Basil I (p. 145–154; figs. 5.1–5.2).<sup>1</sup> Here again, the author tends to generalize, without corroborating her assumptions. In the final part of this otherwise fine-tuned analysis of the said Gregory manuscript, she rightly argues that “the repeated appearance of the young [biblical] heroes is designed to provide models for the [imperial] boys to emulate and with which to identify” (p. 153).

The author correctly observes that some of the imperial portraits of rulers do not show princesses (p. 162); girls or female adolescents are seldom found in Byzantine art in comparison to their male counterparts. A rare example deviating from this rule appears in the painting on the northern wall of the nave in the S. Sophia cathedral (Kiev, 1043–1046), where king Yaroslav and his children, both male and female, are portrayed (p. 163–168; fig. 5.9). Based on these imperial portraits, the author contends that similar attention to details given to children as to their parents – an approach consistent with the depiction of children in non-imperial portraits – points not only to the fact that children were not marginalized in their families, but also how, from a young age, children were deeply cast within the political and religious realm.

In the final chapter (p. 179–212), Hennessy focuses on the most idealized and venerated figures in Byzantine society, Christ and the Virgin, arguing that their por-

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1 LESLIE BRUBAKER: *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium. Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus*; Cambridge 1999.

trayal resembles that of other royal and saintly child-like figures. The author interprets their portrayal as children through the same fourfold thematic division employed hitherto – childhood, family ties, sanctity, and power.

First examining textual sources for the narratives of Christ and the Virgin infancies, the author then relates them to early Christian through late Byzantine works of art. She is quite emphatic that all images of both infancies not only serve as foundation for the construction of the dogmatic perception of the virgin birth, but also point to »the centrality of childhood experience, familial bonds and spiritual independence« in Byzantium (p. 182). The author opens the imagery analysis with the discussion of the infancy cycle of Christ in the triumphal arch mosaics of the fifth-century Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Since the figures of Christ and the Virgin in these mosaics have been widely researched and their interpretation long accepted, it is not surprising that Hennessey decides to deal with figures whose meaning is still debatable and should in no way be viewed as children or youth (p. 183–189). One of them is the female figure seated to Christ's left in *The Annunciation* scene (pl. 13), who has been identified on occasion as the Virgin, Sophia (goddess of divine wisdom), and *Ecclesia ex Gentibus*. The author interprets this figure as Salome the midwife from *The Infancy Gospel of James*, who reveals here her withered hand. Hennessey identifies the female figure standing beneath the third arch in *The Presentation of Christ at the Temple* as Salome as well.

Her analysis of Christ's infancy in this church is one of the more interesting parts of the book, and it is unfortunate that she did not delve deeper into them, even at the price of reducing the number of well-known and well-researched examples hastily reviewed in the rest of the chapter—as the author herself admits in chapter 1. These include the mention of established narrative formulae such as the infant Christ swaddled in the manger or the baby/young child receiving the magi (p. 188–191); the aspects of familial intimacy visible in the cycle of Mary that illustrates the twelfth-century homilies of James of Kokkinobaphos, Vatican City, Bibl. Apost. Vat., gr. 1162 (p. 191–198); and a whole gamut of non-narrative types of the Virgin with the Christ child (p. 198–210). Hennessey concludes the chapter with the somewhat general observation that the “prevalence of imagery of Jesus and Mary as children [...] must [...] show a sensitivity to, and acceptance of, the centrality of children in concepts of belief and in society” (p. 212).

The short chapter of conclusions (p. 213–217) opens with the question of why the subject of children did not merit scholarly attention hitherto (it is hardly referred to throughout the study) and is answered with the somewhat vague conjecture that it probably has to do with our way of looking at art and perceiving children (p. 213). One conclusion that can be heartily accepted states that images of the Christ child and the Virgin, endowed with sanctity and values, would have played some sort of role in the education of the young in Byzantium (p. 215). Moreover, the conclusions that “[...] it has become apparent that, first, there are many representations of children in Byzantium, second, the children are often central to the depictions, and third, children retain their qualities as children and are portrayed as such, not as small adults” (p. 217) are in harmony with the book's “cursus”. This short also reveals Hennessey's seeming attempt to impose contemporary notions about childhood – their maltreatment, wicked behav-

ior, etc. – on Byzantine imagery. Thus, for example, it is doubtful that the Byzantines interpreted the biblical scene of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as evil (!)-(p. 213).

The study of children and childhood imagery in Byzantine art is most certainly not an easy task, and the author's work and methodology, as a whole, is to be commended. Undoubtedly, the main contribution of the book lies in her rescuing the subject from obscurity and bring it to the forefront of modern scholarship. The book could serve as a springboard for further research on children and childhood in Byzantine art.

Generally speaking, the study is well researched and well grounded in wider social, historical, and literary contexts. However, as one might expect in any large study dedicated to a thematic subject, the author does not suggest that her approach is exhaustive; although she strives to avoid generalizations, she sometimes falls into this trap; and although there are aspects that she does not discuss and related issues that she might have explored further in a lengthier study, she nevertheless has made a significant contribution to the study of social life in Byzantium as mediated by diverse images of children and youth.

Two salient questions remain inadequately answered and expose the book's major limitations. One claim, first verbalized in chapter 1 and rather prominent throughout the study, is that children and youth were patrons who commissioned and received works of art portraying children (pp. 34–37; 42–43; 68; 214); this suggestion is based on the assumption that children and young people in Byzantium comprised about half of the population, and that most of them began working by the age of 11-or-so (p. 26–28). The reader might well wonder how relying on uncertain demographic assessments could provide a solid basis for the author's premise! As most of the author's historical assumptions regarding this question are far from being historically valid and well documented – a unique example being the hagiographic *Life of Saint Pankratios*, where the saint is referred to as “the young painter” (p. 42–43) – much of the time the reader is required to accept many vague suppositions and subsequently unsubstantiated conclusions. For instance, “[...] children had taste and discrimination and made artistic choices. In turn, the artefacts were being made at some level by children themselves» (p. 214).

Another lacuna is the study of the female child/youth whose paltry representation in Byzantine art (e.g., the figure of Asenath in the Vienna Genesis) could lead one to conclude that artists were reluctant to portray young females. One may wonder if their absence is related in any way to the author's contention that girls in Byzantine art are shown either as small and childlike or as young women, but never as adolescents, based on the hypothesis “that girls did not have a period of adolescence, but moved quickly into adulthood” (p. 129). I would speculate that the artistic disinterest in depicting girls in any given medium or context in post-iconoclastic art has more to do with their social status in Byzantium than with the artists' particular political aspirations or some such proclivity.

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