

Editorial

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This issue of *V(eliko) T(arnovo) U(niversity) Review: Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences* focuses on two special topics: **Epistolarity and Travel** and **Byzantium and Its “Others.”** Apart from six articles, which explore aspects of the two special topics, two more texts are included under *Varia*. There are also five reviews of internationally and locally published books on subjects ranging from literary reception to feminism and women’s rights.

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According to Donna Laundry, letter writers are always “in some sense traveller[s]” (51). She further adds that “the eyewitness account as authenticating gesture belongs equally to the genres of letter writing and travel writing” (51). The related activities of letter-writing and travel seem to have had a long history: as early as the fourth century CE, the Spanish nun Egeria undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and wrote to her community of Christian women at home, detailing what she saw as she journeyed through various places mentioned in the Bible. A great number of memorable travel accounts in letters were produced subsequently. Thus, travel narratives in the journal and epistolary formats abounded in the early modern period (see Kinsley 408). However, it was during the “long” eighteenth century that the epistolary travel form flourished and was incorporated into a variety of genres, fictional and non-fictional alike.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s posthumously published travelogue *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763) was undoubtedly one of the great epistolary texts of the age. This issue’s first thematic section therefore opens with an article dedicated to this much-discussed work, which (like quite a lot of other travel writing!) is precariously positioned between fact and fiction. Scholars have drawn attention to the fact that most of the letters making it up were not “literally written to [Montagu’s] friends and relations between 1716 and 1718” (Garcia 62) but were in fact carefully crafted after the noble traveller’s return to England. Kostova acknowledges this. She further dwells on the structure of the travelogue, which is characterized by great diversity insofar as the travel-writer adopts “different personae and accounts for different correspondents” (Ballaster 182). Kostova’s focus, however, is primarily on acts of interlingual and intercultural mediation and representations of language difference in *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. Montagu prided herself on having acquired first-hand knowledge of upper-class life in the Ottoman Empire and having become proficient in her hosts’ language. She takes up the role of an intercultural and interlingual mediator in her epistolary travelogue as part of an attempt to dispel prejudice and change her readers’ attitudes to Islam and Ottoman social mores. However, while stressing her own autonomous cultural and linguistic performance within the foreign context, she erases, or minimizes, the role of less privileged agents of mediation, such as hired guides and interpreters, who must have helped her communicate effectively with her Ottoman hosts. This simplifies her representations of otherwise complex intercultural encounters and seriously problematizes her claim to the *authenticity* of her account of the Ottoman Empire, which she regards as its distinctive mark in comparison with earlier narratives about the east, written by *male* travellers. Kostova’s focus on acts of mediation in *The Turkish Embassy Letters* sheds light on the complexity of intercultural encounters and invites further critical reflection on one of the most significant epistolary travelogues of the eighteenth century.

Travel letters were not used as the building blocks of semi-fictional narratives about little-known lands only but were also produced for a variety of practical purposes. For instance, they could be important vehicles for the dissemination of scientific ideas and the implementation of commercial schemes. Marcel Hartwig’s article is concerned with the correspondence of the London-based Quaker

John Fothergill, M.D., who “established himself as an essential node in a transatlantic epistolary network.” Via letter writing, he closed book deals, forwarded anatomical drawings, and exchanged botanical seeds and investment schemes. The letters that Fothergill wrote also shed light on important aspects of the production of knowledge at the time.

Polina Shvanyukova’s article analyses a specimen of scientific travel writing in epistolary form authored by Commander Matthew Flinders, the officer under whose command the first circumnavigation of Australia was completed in 1803. Matthew Flinders’s official despatch to Evan Nepean, Secretary of the Admiralty at the time, is read as an example of early nineteenth-century epistolary travel writing, and special attention is paid to the textual strategies employed by Flinders to produce a coherent and accurate travel account, on the one hand, and to negotiate his professional status with his correspondent, on the other.

Overall, the three articles testify to the varied uses to which the epistolary travel form was put in the “long” eighteenth century: from travel letters “rewritten in a dramatic epistolary form” (Garcia 62) to letters disseminating scientific knowledge and providing accurate geographical information.

The Empire that we usually designate as “Byzantine”¹ today was a remarkable civilization, which lasted for more than a thousand years. During the Middle Ages, it exercised strong political, economic, and cultural influence over the countries of the eastern Mediterranean and south-eastern, northern, and western Europe. According to Judith Herrin, “from the sixth to the fifteenth century, this influence waxed and waned but was [nevertheless] a constant” (xiv). “Commercially vibrant and culturally cosmopolitan” (Sarris 36), the Empire’s capital of Constantinople was renowned far and wide for its splendour.

Especially when they felt threatened by external powers, the Byzantines (or *Romans*, as they preferred to style themselves) produced a discourse of “otherness,” stressing political, religious, and cultural forms of alterity. Depending on circumstances, the groups and individuals designated as “other” tended to vary from invading nomads in the early centuries of the Empire to western Europeans and Varangian members of the imperial guard in later times.

The first article in this issue’s second thematic section focuses on changing Byzantine attitudes to western Europeans from the eleventh century until the Fourth Crusade and for some time after it. The author Dimitar Y. Dimitrov pays special attention to the development of old stereotypes and the emergence of new ones. More active contacts between western and eastern Christians from the eleventh century onwards did not result in an expected rapprochement, but rather led to hatred and resentment. The article analyses texts by important Byzantine authors, such as Michael Psellos, Anna Komnena, John Kinnamos, Eustathios of Thessaloniki, and Niketas Choniates. The author cogently argues that the changes in Byzantine perceptions of the west could be represented in terms of three metaphorically named stages: Calm, Menace, and Bitterness and Despair.

Sverrir Jakobsson’s article approaches aspects of Byzantine life and history from the reverse perspective of the Empire’s Varangian “others.” His article analyses the legend of the Varangian as part of a larger trend in a positive textual relationship between the Nordic world and the Byzantine Empire. He traces the evolution of this legend through the character of one of the best known Varangians, King Haraldr of Norway. The article explores the development of the narrative of Haraldr from the earliest near-contemporary narratives to high medieval and late medieval romances and highlights the evolution of the discourse on the Varangians and the development of certain narrative stereotypes.

Ivelin Ivanov’s article similarly looks at attitudes to Byzantium from the perspective of Nordic “others.” It focuses on representations of the Byzantine Empire and the Greeks in two sagas from Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla: The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson (Hardruler)* and *The Saga of Sigurth the Crusader and His Brothers*. The sagas provide examples of contacts between the Scandinavian and Byzantine worlds in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The author employs a quantitative analysis, exploring names, such as *Grikkland* (Greece), *Mikligarðr* (Constantinople), *Grikkjakonungr* (Emperor), *Grikk(j)ar* (Greek), and *Grikklandshaf* (Greek archipelago, Greek sea).

¹ On the use of “Byzantine” from the sixteenth century onwards, see Sarris (4-5).

Separating objective from legendary information, he seeks to answer the important question: to what extent are the representations of the Byzantine Empire, its Emperor, and its capital in the two sagas reliable from a historical point of view?

It is hoped that the six articles briefly considered above will stimulate further discussion among scholars in the humanities and social scientists with interests, similar to those of their authors.

Works Cited

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