lovingly catalogued data about saints' cults in Gaul. These other surveys include M. Vieillard-Troiekouroff, *Les monuments religieux de la Gaule d'après les oeuvres de Grégoire de Tours* (1976), M. Weidemann, *Kulturgeschichte der Merowingerzeit nach den Werken Gregors von Tours* (1982), L. Piétri, *La ville de Tours du IV^e^ au VI^e^ siècle* (1983), and the volumes in the ongoing series, Topographie chrétienne des cités de la Gaule. Yet it is vital that these large surveys not be considered the last word on the subject. What is not in B.'s book is even more revealing about the current state of research on saints' cults. Not only does her survey rely primarily on the writings of the period, but she tends to treat those writings as documents and sources of information. Since the reliability of this information requires evaluation, some of the best sections in her book are the discussions of the historical validity of obscure Lives and Passions. Once authenticated, this information can then be sorted and catalogued under various topics.

In contrast, another method for interpreting these writings would treat them more explicitly as texts, constructed by their authors for purposes other than merely collecting and transmitting data. During the past twenty years the most influential book on the saints' cults of late antiquity has been Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago, 1981), in large part because of his willingness to treat ancient writings as texts rather than merely documents. His example has encouraged other sideways readings that locate miracles of healing as part of a dialogue about community solidarity and the formation of personal identities, that interpret donations to shrines as a vital aspect of the early medieval gift economy, and that evaluate ideas about relics and miracles as more accessible versions of sophisticated theological doctrines. In these readings saints and their cults would function as symbols, semantic signs in larger discourses about the making of self, the definition of community, or the allocation of power between kings and bishops. B.'s comprehensive survey now provides a reliable starting point for such more adventuresome readings of saints' cults. With all of his misgivings about the adequacy of his Latin, Gregory of Tours probably never anticipated that his writings could be so stimulating for modern scholars.

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EASTERN EMPRESSES

L. JAMES: *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*. Pp. xii + 194. London: Leicester University Press, 2001. Cased, £50. ISBN: 0-7185-0076-8.

In *Empresses and Power in Early Byzantium*, Liz James makes what is possibly the first attempt at a diachronic analysis of the office of empress in the early Byzantine empire. Whereas there have been numerous studies of empresses from a biographical point of view, Charles Diehl's *Figures byzantines* (Paris, 1906) being an oft-cited archetype, the empress's position of power through time has never before received a dedicated treatment. Thus, from the outset, one of the strengths of J.'s book seems to be its analytical advance over previous and contemporary biographical studies, such as Diehl, Kenneth Holum's *Theodosian Empresses* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), and Judith Herrin's *Women in Purple* (London, 2001). J. makes clear from the introductory chapter, 'Will the Real Byzantine Empress Please Stand Up?', that she considers this innovative tack to be her primary contribution to the discussion: 'Very simply, [this book] will look to see what happens if we try to take a broader look at

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Byzantine empresses, seeing them as empresses rather than individuals. To do this, it will engage, above all, with the question of the nature of power in Byzantium' (p. 2).

Her analytical stance is, of course, only a framework, and within this framework the central argument is that empresses wielded real power, not just pseudo-power 'behind the throne' (pp. 84–5, 164). This argument, however, is not new; it is in fact Holum's main thesis: 'Ultimately, these women did achieve authentic imperial dominion' (p. 3). While J. does attempt to cover much more chronological ground than Holum, investigating the relations of empresses and power from Constantine's mother Helena in the fourth century (d. 330) to the Eirene in the eighth (d. 802), her argument may run the risk of being redundant in the light of previous research. Though the reader is never fully assured of the originality of her thesis, perhaps the breadth of her timeframe and an increased emphasis on visual evidence are enough to call for a reiteration of this accepted tenet.

In Chapters 2–9 J. considers, in turn, various kinds of evidence about the empress. Panegyrics, portraits, the *Book of Ceremonies*, histories, coins, laws, seals, counterweights, and diptychs all make their appearance, and J. handles this disparate array impressively. She is particularly good with visual media, especially diptychs (Chapter 8), from which she succinctly explains the distinctive relationship between ceremonial presentation and the insinuation of power. In so doing she relies on studies of western kingship theory: in particular, the idea of a conscious split between the public and private 'bodies' of the emperor and empress: 'Just as with male imperial images, there is scope to interpret these images not only of a person but also of an office and of power. The personal becomes political' (pp. 144–5).

Understandably, gender plays a major rôle in this book. However, J. is not simply concerned with rescuing neglected empresses from male-oriented historiography, but poses the interesting question of how an empress could exploit her own gender to gain power and influence (p. 4). It is often said that producing male heirs was the main avenue to success in this regard, but J. suggests that sons, at least in early Byzantium, were less important for an empress's power than her personal, visible attachment to the emperor (pp. 65, 78). Through the emperor himself while alive, or in his stead after his death, an empress could wield a surprising amount of power (p. 87). Her femininity, therefore, was significant to the Byzantines not when it became masculinity, but rather as the latter's complement. Given this revisionist conclusion, it is somewhat surprising to see Byzantium consistently labeled 'misogynist' (e.g. p. 145), which is probably anachronistic in this context anyway. While J. would have done better, perhaps, to stick to issues of representation rather than occasionally to adopt, without defense, a moralizing tone, her discussion of gender in this book is overall an important contribution rather than a faddish cliché.

No one will argue that the traditional picture of the Byzantine empress still commands pre-eminence: several studies now, including previous ones by J., have convincingly shown her to be at the center of things rather than tucked safely away in Diehl's secluded garden. The strength of J.'s book lies in tying these studies together to present a coherent picture of the empress at work. The obvious hurdle for the diachronic model, in this case, is that the evidence is so patchy. Although J. sees this dearth as a reason for adopting this kind of analysis in the first place (pp. 7–8), what is possibly lost, despite four detailed tables of names and dates, is the context-sensitivity that is so much the strength of biographical studies. Future studies will no doubt see this book as an insightful and challenging experiment in analysis.

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