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Mobility, Microstructures and Personal Agency in Byzantium

Wittgenstein-Prize
Project



Mobility, Microstructures and Personal Agency in Byzantium

The project, financed through the 2015 Wittgenstein-Prize of the Austrian National Research Foundation (FWF), will highlight the role of Byzantium as a global culture and analyze the internal flexibility of Byzantine society. It aims to contribute to a re-evaluation of a society and culture that has traditionally been depicted as stiff, rigid and encumbered by its own tradition. This will be achieved by the exploration of issues of mobility, microstructures and personal agency.

Mission Statement

People and Things that Move takes an approach based on material culture and historical geography and traces the dissemination of objects into and out of Byzantium through trade and gift-giving. This research raises questions about the motors of the dissemination of goods, whether through the mechanisms of government or driven by personal interest. Byzantium's interaction with non-sedentary peoples, especially nomadic tribes of the Eurasian steppe that threaten its borders, also belongs in this context.



People and Texts and Ideas that Move investigates intangible cultural transfer, be it the translation of texts, the flow of religious thought and ritual practice, the travel of literary motifs or the appropriation of technological skills. This research seeks to identify the impact of political and social power on the definition of high and low culture, and the effect of this definition on the dissemination of intangible cultural capital, across the different strata of Byzantine society and beyond the borders of Byzantium: to the Slavic world, the Latin west, cultures in the Caucasus, along the silk road and all the way to Asia.

Mission Statement

Social Mobility, Microstructures and Personal Agency focuses on the inner workings of Byzantium and asks about the means and mechanisms of upward social mobility in a highly stratified society. In a state dominated by the imperial court and the Christian church, what different kinds of strategies did people employ, adapt or develop in order to improve their lives? What kinds of groups and networks (from trade associations to pious confraternities) did they form out of self-interest? How did people exercise their personal agency order to better their lives, and what was the response of ecclesiastical and imperial authorities to their efforts? In addition to written narratives, this research will pay particular attention to legal, archival and documentary sources as well as normative writings produced by the church.

