

Constantinople: Ritual, Violence, and Memory in the Making of a Christian Imperial Capital. Rebecca Stephens Falcasantos. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. 238 pp. \$95. Hardcover ISBN: 9780520304550.

In *Constantinople: Ritual, Violence, and Memory in the Making of a Christian Imperial Capital*, Rebecca Stephens Falcasantos examines the confluence of conflict, communal ritual, and memory as they contributed to changes in the city's religious structures during the fourth and fifth centuries CE. The study assesses the eventual dominance of Christianity against the backdrop of ideological fluidity and uncertainty which characterized its rise to prominence beginning with the reign of Constantine I (d. 337).

In Chapter 1, Falcasantos describes the continuities of the Roman past which shaped the religious and social landscapes of Constantinople during the early fourth century. The author argues that an understanding of the evolution of late-antique Christianity can only be achieved by situating Christianity within the traditional structures inherited from the Roman past which influenced the foundation of the Constantinian city. Falcasantos contends that Christian agents used traditional frameworks to negotiate a Constantinopolitan religious landscape still dominated by the religious systems of pre-Christian Rome. To support this argument, Falcasantos points to Christian leaders trained within the *paideia* and who emulated traditional Roman civic cult, including the panoply of ritual actions surrounding processions, to assimilate and become a normal part of the city's religious milieu. The result was an elastic Christian identity which was suffused with pre-Christian traditions, and which only gradually hardened into an "orthodoxy" during the fifth century.

In Chapter 2, Falcasantos argues that later Christian tradition which held that the city's ritual infrastructure was Christian in function was the result of "reinterpretation" by Christian historians intent on neutralizing the polytheism of Constantinople, bulking up Constantine's Christian bona fides, and rhetorically refashioning sites as Christian. An example of this revisioning was Eusebios's interpretation of the Apostoleion. Constantine's mausoleum, the Apostoleion, was a natural location for the veneration of the emperor and performance of imperial cult. Remodeled by Eusebios, the Apostoleion became part of an imperial Christian landscape, a place for the veneration of the twelve apostles and a holy site dedicated to the mysteries of Christ. This recasting was a product of its time: the religious hothouse of Roman syncretism in which Christianity vied increasingly for prominence.

In Chapter 3, Falcasantos explores the fraught dynamic between Christians who sought to define and enforce "imperial sponsored" Christianity and the city's social hierarchies during the reign of Constantius (d. 361). This exploration is based on the histories of fifth-century Constantinopolitan scholars Sokrates and Sozemenos, both of whom were steeped in the religious myth-making of an age which witnessed the triumph of Nicene Christianity. Their resultant histories, based on the earlier work of Nicene partisans, were strategically curated to fit this outcome. In curation, Sokarates and Sozemenos described competitions between Arian and Nicene Christians whose social boundaries were well-established and whose conflicts transpired against an urban

landscape cleansed of non-Christian cult. Falcasantos contends that this pre-Christian *tabula rasa* was nonexistent; rather, it was a rhetorical device based on *imagined* communities that masked the uncertainty which characterized the capital's urban and social landscapes.

In Chapter 4, Falcasantos turns to the role of ritual performance and its effectiveness in “reshaping” Constantinopolitan religious structures. Antique ritual practices were multivalent: not only did performance have practical religious purposes, but also acted as mechanisms demarcating in-/outgroups. Membership in these groups was opaque, since the degree of “participation” indicated “belonging” in many ritual circumstances. Christian writers held that participation was often a matter of perception: an individual's freedom to attend may have been severely circumscribed, which would not have been apparent to onlookers. Considering this, historians such as Sozomenos argued that mere attendance did not mean participation; rather, participation required some form of *physical contact*. Thus, there were “shades” of participation and consent, and in many instances, this was determined not by the person being observed, but by the observer.

Chapter 5 examines the hardening of the lines between “orthodoxy” and “heresy” during the reign of Theodosios II (d. 450). Falcasantos looks at the Theodosian policies which made this hardening possible and argues that these were, in part, an extension of propaganda meant to legitimate Theodosios II's reign as well as one of the reasons he was able to retain power. The author returns to the historiography-cum-propaganda of Sozomenos and Sokrates. While Sozomenos argues that the piety of the childlike Theodosios II ensured the stability of the empire (the miraculous dissolution of Hun armies bent on conquering Constantinople is attributed to the emperor's piety), Sokrates argues essentially the same, albeit a mature piety framed by asceticism and “philosophical masculinity.” Falcasantos also assesses Theodosios's “three main periods of reform.” Intended to “purify” Constantinople's landscape of competing cults, these reforms codified religious outgroups. It seems the necessary corollary for a unified Theodosian vision of Nicene Christianity was a religious landscape sterilized of competition.

Falcasantos jarringly concludes that Constantinople had “become a monument of imperial orthodoxy” by the end of the fifth century, and that the “group that mattered most” was not “the Church,” but “rather the city.” To be sure, the author has written extensively about the contestation and evolution of pre-Christian and orthodox Christian belief and practice in Constantinople, a struggle writ large on the civic landscape. But throughout the reading there is no sense that what “mattered most” to the “majority” (whomever they may have been) was “the city” – and, indeed, it is not clear just what is meant by this. Does Falcasantos mean the city's architecture as found along the Mese or the territory enclosed by the Theodosian Walls? Or “the city” in the sense of the people who lived there? It is not clear and, frankly, makes this concluding chapter the weakest of the lot.

The work is nevertheless compelling. Chapters 1 through 5 are argued well, with theses posited and supported by a satisfying range of primary and secondary sources, although an argument can be made that Falcasantos would be well-served by adding a complementary source to Eusebios in Chapter 2. Admittedly, there are scant contemporary (or near-contemporary) accounts, but much depends on him; one wonders how Philostorgius or Gelasios treated similar

subjects. The text is best-suited to graduate-level seminars, as the history is nuanced and would find very little audience receptive to it in even an upper-divisional course, which consider far more wide-ranging histories than a reading of this nature obliges. Further, readers will need more than a passing familiarity with the late-antique world of Byzantium, as Falcasantos has clearly written this with a knowledgeable audience in mind.

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