

CONVIVIUM

Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval
Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean
Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova



UNIVERSITÉ DE LAUSANNE
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CONVIVIUM V/2/2018

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Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean

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Reflections on Mobility, the Roots and Prospects of European Culture

Ivan Foletti & Elisabetta Scirocco

In 1479, Gentile Bellini arrived at the Ottoman court in Constantinople, where he would spend several years in the service of the Sultan Mehmed II. Various factors impelled Bellini to make this journey; one was certainly financial. A few years earlier, Thomas Palaeologus, heir to the Byzantine throne, had fled Constantinople during a Turkish attack (bringing with him some precious relics). Coming to rest in Italy, he lived the rest of his life there, in exile. In twenty-first century perception and terminology, both Bellini and Palaeologus, if viewed outside their socially elevated contexts, would be termed *migrants*: the former an economic migrant, the latter a political refugee.

Today, in countries on four continents, right-wing politicians are advocating the position that migrants in neither category have the right to enter their worlds. This notion is finding large and growing numbers of highly vocal adherents. In some countries, even politically moderate citizens are restricting the availability of resources to admit migrants, welcoming only those migrants who are fleeing political persecution.

It is not *Convivium's* place, to probe the very thorny issues relating to migration and policy. However, a glance into history offers a useful perspective. The historical examples of Giovanni Bellini and Thomas Paleologus, developed in this volume by Hans Belting and Anita Paolicchi, are relevant in two ways. On the one hand, their stories speak for movements among different countries and cultures that were at times very intense.

On the other hand, their journeys brought about the circulation of objects, knowledge, ideas, and beliefs—side-effects that, in some cases, are seen today as threats to national (read: tribal) identity, as though identity were something that becomes petrified for eternity. The history of humanity shows that movement and migration have produced cultural transfers; intellectual, artistic, and religious interactions; and the evolution of shared heritages.

Today, while writing this editorial from the geographic heart of Europe (where *Convivium* is based, in the Czech Republic) and looking at the artistic and monumental landscape radiating around us, gradually reaching the scale of all Europe, it is clear to us that what constitutes local identities (which some people today want again to be national) emerges from the constant, incessant dialogue with *the other, the different*.

The arrival of nomadic tribes in central and southern Europe in the fifth and sixth centuries had a deep and lasting effect on the Roman world. The first encounters in the post-Roman era were not always pacific. In the following centuries, however, exchanges and interactions became the norm within a horizon that embraced Europe and the Mediterranean basin. The ultimate result was a foreign visual culture that significantly enriched the heritage of antiquity. The intercultural milieu of Norman Palermo at the center of the Mediterranean routes, the international artistic identity of the court of Charles IV in Prague, the economic and artistic pathways that related to the Netherlands are only three among innumerable examples of the ontological nature of cultural dialogues for the birth of the present world.

Coming closer to some of the microhistories touched upon in this issue of *Convivium*, these constant interactions are clearly visible in the article by Mzia Janjalía and Marina Bulía dealing with the medieval Caucasus, or the short notice by Thomas Kaffenberger on a rural Greek church in Cyprus. Both examples provide material proof of the circulation of persons, models, technologies, and ideas.

The closing contribution to this issue, devoted to the experimental project “Migrating Art Historians”, deals with movement in so-called Romanesque Europe. Traversing 1540 kilometers, a group of scholars and students followed pilgrimage roads in present-day France to gain a direct understanding of Christian monuments as they were experienced by medieval pilgrims. Thanks to the boundless generosity of the people met in the French countryside, an academic project has seen a sign of hope that made us aware of the discrepancy between political ideology and human reality.

But today, one after another European country is giving way to sovereignism, restricting mobility and rejecting federation, and not pausing to envision the future of Europe. The rhetorical violence of such isolationism does not reflect the essence of the society we inherited from the past, nor that of the present, but paves the way instead toward an impoverished future.

Brno, October 11, 2018