

THE FRONTIERS OF THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

A Short Overview

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In my talk I will discuss the conceptual frontiers of the Byzantine Empire from a variety of aspects. I will begin with presenting the traditional historiographical view of Byzantium's political frontiers as a measure of its success as a state, an approach which inevitably leads towards the Gibbonian view of the empire as going through a thousand-year process of decline and decay. Although this conception is constantly argued against by Byzantinists, it is still popular in the minds of both non-specialists and the general public in the West. A closer examination of Byzantium's frontiers will show that reality was much more complicated than this idea suggests. The rest of my presentation will therefore shortly discuss three different aspects of the Byzantine Frontier – the political frontier, the cultural frontier and the religious frontier. I will attempt to show that the political frontier was far from the modern-like state borders we often take for granted when we see maps of ancient states, and broadly trace the way the Byzantines themselves understood these frontiers. This issue relates to the cultural frontiers of Byzantium, which extended far beyond its actual political borders and created something like a common culture with its neighbors in medieval times, in which the Byzantine Empire was clearly portrayed and accepted as the cultural center. Both these terms also connect to our understanding of Byzantium's religious frontiers, their implications for its neighbors, and the influences they still have today in Eastern Europe. Combining the ideas for all of these frontiers should give us a better appreciation of Byzantium's importance in history and its relevance for contemporary issues.