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Leo VI and the Transformation of Byzantine Christian Identity: Writings of an Unexpected Emperor, by Meredith L. D. Riedel (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2018, pp. xvii + 219. £75.00)

Leo VI (b. 866, r. 886–912) was indeed a decidedly unexpected emperor. Treated as the second son of Basil I, despite suspicions circulating at the time that Basil's predecessor, Michael III, was his biological father, he became heir apparent as a result of the death of his elder brother Constantine on the field of battle in 879. In August 883, he was accused of plotting to kill his father and spent three years under house arrest, being released in July 886 and restored to imperial favour a mere six weeks before Basil I was killed in a hunting accident. During his extended confinement, he avoided being blinded – and hence permanent disqualification from imperial office – only through the intervention of the patriarch Photios and Basil's political advisor, Stylianos Zaoutzes. His accession to the imperial office on 30 August 886 therefore would have struck contemporaries as unexpected.

As Riedel observes, Leo VI was also an unusual emperor. In an era of conflict with Bulgars, Arabs and others, Leo VI was a non-campaigning emperor, compelled to navigate the fallout from distant conflicts from the Great Palace in Constantinople. Victories and defeats over external opponents both had domestic implications. He was also a scholar, to whom a substantial and varied body of literature has been attributed – indeed he was termed 'the Wise' during his lifetime, certainly by 899. This too makes him unusual, for Byzantine emperors tend to be approached through the writings of others rather than in their own words. The extant works associated with Leo VI include the long military treatise known as the *Taktika*, the law code initiated by his father known as the *Basilika*, 113 individual pieces of legislation called *Novellae*, and 42 homilies, all but three of which were delivered by the

emperor in person either in the Palace or various churches in Constantinople on major feast days during the liturgical year. This is ample material through which to examine Leo VI's understanding of the role of the emperor and his religiously-charged conception of the empire and Byzantine cultural identity. Riedel's monograph is focused on recovering the imperial ideology of Leo VI as he himself expressed it.

Not only was Leo VI an unexpected and an unusual emperor; until recently he has also been, from a scholarly perspective, a rather neglected emperor. This state of affairs began to change with the publication twenty years ago of Tougher's monograph on the reign of Leo VI and scholarly momentum has been maintained through Antonopoulou's meticulous research on the homilies, Dennis and Haldon's respective translation of, and commentary on, the *Taktika*, as well as studies by Simon, Troianos, Dagron and others on different aspects of the legislation. Riedel's research represents a significant step-forward for it demonstrates that there is much to be gained from studying these compositions collectively, revealing the thought-world and the ambitions of the emperor himself. Leo VI emerges as someone who defined his authority in strongly religious terms and sought to impress the image of an orthodox, divinely-sanctioned, and wise Christian emperor – a new Solomon – across his empire, employing a religious rhetoric which reinforced the *Wir-gefühl* of its citizens. Instead of ignoring or downplaying the significance of religious language, Riedel situates it at the heart of her analysis, enabling the different works to be brought into relationship with one another.

Riedel's study is structured around her examination of the *Taktika* (chapters 2–4), the legislation (chapter 5–6), and the homilies (chapter 7). Chapter 8 develops the notion of a chosen people whilst the final chapter, 'Byzantine Christian Statecraft', rehearses the key propositions advanced previously in and draws them together in a coherent whole. The length of all three collections precludes detailed analysis of every part. Instead Riedel introduces

each of them and identifies major themes before focusing on specific passages. Although research on the *Taktika* has largely been centred on the degree to which it was intended to be a practical work, Riedel highlights the ways in which it both paraphrases and develops earlier military manuals, especially Maurice's *Strategikon*. In particular, her study of the ideal Byzantine general in Constitution 2 stresses his Christian piety. The spiritual qualities of the ideal general do not feature in earlier manuals, implying that these were inserted by the emperor himself. Leo VI's legal reforms are described in the *prooimion* to the *Novellae* as an act of *anakatharsis* or 'cleansing', requiring the affirmation of certain existing laws, the abrogation of others, the transformation of customs into civil obligations, and the creation of new laws. Riedel posits that this represented a revolution in legal theory, intended to produce a more fully Orthodox Christian polity. Leo's penchant for composing and delivering homilies – unprecedented among Byzantine emperors but reflecting perhaps his upbringing under Photios, 18 of whose homilies have been preserved – supports this contention. Homily 34 was delivered by Leo on the feast of Elijah and commemorates his own release from imprisonment through the mediation of the prophet, who had himself known exile and persecution but returned in triumph to overthrow his enemies. Such occasions allowed Leo VI to take centre-stage and assert his spiritual credentials as a recipient of divine favour before the assembled elite. Arguably the homilies were a more effective way of both defining and performing his piety than either the *Novellae* or the *Taktika* which were targeted at specific audiences. It may be significant that the homilies appear to date from the first half of Leo's reign, before the fall of Stylianos Zaoutzes in 899, whilst the *Taktika*, addressed to Byzantine commanders, has been dated to the final years of Leo's reign, variously 904 or 907.

The figure of Leo VI presented by Riedel emerges as a learned, pious and shrewd individual whose writings merit sustained comparative analysis. This monograph makes a

valuable contribution to our understanding of this unexpected and unusual emperor and will be a key point of reference for future scholarship.

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