

## Byzantium in Brno: joining an Eastern and Western Middle Ages

Review of:

*Byzantium or democracy? Kondakov's legacy in emigration: the Institutum Kondakovianum and Andre Grabar, 1925-1952* by Ivan Foletti and Adrien Palladino, Rome: Viella, Brno: Masaryk University Press, 2020, 211pp, 381 b. & w. illus. € 25.00 ISBN 9788833134963

Robert Nelson

On the first day of the August Coup of 1991 that led to the fall of the Soviet Union, I was in Leningrad to work at the Russian Museum. Arriving at the Museum, I found the staff in tears about the military coup in Moscow, but they nonetheless allowed me to work. As I left, an elderly curator gave me a color lithograph of an early Byzantine icon. When I inquired about its source, she replied that it was from volume three of the history of the iconography of the Mother of God by Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov.<sup>1</sup> Puzzled, I said that I knew only two volumes of that major work, whereupon she replied that the plates were printed and the whole was ready for publication when the Russian Revolution aborted the project. That was during World War I, she said. She wanted me to have the lithograph, because World War III had begun that August day. Fortunately, she was wrong, but I always wondered about the unknown Kondakov volume until I began reading the book under review by Ivan Foletti (IF), a professor in the department of art history at Masaryk University in Brno, and Adrien Palladino (AP), a post-doctoral fellow in the same department.

In a recent video presentation,<sup>2</sup> IF succinctly explains that the volume examines the immigration of Russian historians of Byzantine art to interwar Europe after the Russian Revolution. They brought with them the Russian conception of Byzantium as the ancestor of their country. Living in European democracies gradually gave the émigrés new insights into that civilization. Later they again reoriented their scholarship during and again after the Nazi control of Czechoslovakia and France, the countries that are the principal concern of IF and AP. Their book focuses on Kondakov's intellectual heirs, who founded the Institutum Kondakovianum in Prague and on the early career in Strasbourg and

<sup>1</sup> N. P. Kondakov, *Иконография Богоматери* [Iconography of the Mother of God], 2 vols. (St Petersburg, 1914–15; repr. Moscow, 2003); N. P. Kondakov, *Iconografia della Madre di Dio*, vol. 1, ed. and tr. I. Foletti (Rome, 2014). An excellent recent overview of Kondakov's work is Maria Lidova, 'The Rise of Byzantine art and archaeology in late imperial Russia', in Jaś Elsner, ed., *Empires of faith in late antiquity: histories of art and religion from India to Ireland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 128-60.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.academia.edu/video/k094nj>, accessed 3 January 3, 2021.

Paris of the Russian native André Grabar, a student of Kondakov, and later a major scholar in Paris. The dates 1925 and 1952 in the book's subtitle refer to the founding and demise of the Kondakov Institute. The book's central contention is that environment conditions scholarship.

*Byzantium or democracy* has an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter, 'Russian Émigré Byzantinists', sketches the careers of Kondakov (1844-1925) and Grabar (1896-1990) after the 1914–18 war and introduces the Institute that was established two months after Kondakov's death. It had a library and art collection and published the *Seminarium Kondakovianum*, an international journal dedicated to Russian, Byzantine, and Migration art. In 1931, it also published Grabar's monograph on the Russian icon of the Holy Face of Christ in Laon.<sup>3</sup> Grabar had studied with Kondakov in Russia. The second chapter, 'Byzantium and Democracy', follows the Institute in Prague and Grabar's career in France during the interwar years. Chapter three, 'Byzantium in Crisis', treats the 1939–45 war and its aftermath up to 1952.

The book ends with the differing fates of Grabar and the Institute after the war. Grabar started the major French journal for late antique and medieval art, *Cahiers Archéologiques* (1945-),<sup>4</sup> and published his monumental study, *Martyrium: recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique* (1946).<sup>5</sup> The postwar fate of the Kondakov Institute was less fortunate. It had managed to continue functioning during the war in spite of the ever present threat of Nazi interference, but after the Communist coup d'état of 1948, the institute was absorbed into the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in 1951 and disappeared. In recent years, scholars around IF have resurrected the journal *Seminarium Kondakovianum*, as *Convivium: exchanges and interactions in the arts of Medieval Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean* with the added designation *Seminarium Kondakovianum, series nova* to signal its ties with the past.<sup>6</sup>

In the past decade IF has authored numerous projects in art historiography with most appearing in the last few years. He wrote his doctoral dissertation for the University of Lausanne on the life and career of Kondakov, often considered the "father" of Byzantine art history and the author of numerous publications on the subject. For scholars without Russian, Kondakov has been best known through the French translation of his second dissertation on Byzantine manuscript illumination,<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> André Grabar, *La Sainte Face de Laon: le Mandyliion dans l'art orthodoxe*, Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1931.

<sup>4</sup> Paris: Vanoest and A. & J. Picard, 1945-.

<sup>5</sup> Paris, Collège de France, 1943-46. The illustrations were published in 1943 and then two volumes of text in 1946. On the book and responses to it, see Annabel Jane Wharton, 'Rereading *Martyrium*: the modernist and postmodernist texts', *Gesta* 29, 1, 1990, 3-7.

<sup>6</sup> Brno, Czech Republic: Masaryk University, 2014-

<sup>7</sup> N. Kondakov, *Histoire de l'art byzantin considéré principalement dans les miniatures*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1886-1891).

the original version of which has now been revised and updated.<sup>8</sup> IF's French dissertation, later published in Italian and English,<sup>9</sup> is one of many recent studies about Byzantine art in Russia and the revival of the icon.<sup>10</sup> In *Byzantium or Democracy*, IF was presumably responsible for the sections about Kondakov, and AP for the parts about Grabar, because AP has recently written about him separately.<sup>11</sup> The book's alternates the histories of Kondakov, his Institute and Grabar, which creates repetition, but allows the shared historical circumstances to be highlighted.

Kondakov and Grabar came from different backgrounds. Kondakov was born a serf in Khalan', a small village east of the present border of Ukraine. Grabar was born in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, to a family 'of judges and aristocrats' (p. 78). There also was a difference in ages, for Kondakov (b. 1844) was two generations or fifty-two years older than Grabar (b. 1896). Both lived long and productive lives. Kondakov studied at Moscow University under the philologist Fedor Buslaev from 1834-38. After a period of secondary teaching, he secured a position, teaching art and archeology at the University of New Russia in Odessa and then taught at St. Petersburg University from 1888. Grabar began his university studies in Kiev, before switching to St. Petersburg, where he studied with Dmitri Ainalov, a pupil of Kondakov, who had recently retired at the age of fifty-two to devote himself to scholarship. The authors suppose that Grabar and Kondakov met in St. Petersburg, a reasonable proposal, although no evidence is cited.

Kondakov had a home in Yalta, as well as St. Petersburg, and at the beginning of the Revolution he was in Yalta, working on his book about the iconography of the Mother of God. Dispossessed from both homes, he taught briefly in Odessa before leaving Russia with his wife in the spring of 1920 as the Bolsheviks were advancing on one of the last remaining White Russian areas. He brought with him the manuscripts of two projects, the aforementioned third volume

<sup>8</sup> N. P. Kondakov, *История византийского искусства и иконографии по миниатюрам греческих рукописей*, revised by G. P. Parpulov and A. L. Saminsky (Plovdiv, 2012), an online book of Oxford University Research Archive (Oxford, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Ivan Foletti, *Da Bisanzio alla Santa Russia. Nikodim Kondakov (1844-1925) e la nascita della storia dell'arte in Russia* (Rome 2011); Foletti, *From Byzantium to Holy Russia: Nikodim Kondakov (1844-1925) and the Invention of the Icon* (Rome 2017).

<sup>10</sup> The latest might be Louise McReynolds, 'Excavating Byzantium. Russia's archaeologists and *translatio imperii*', *Kritika: explorations in Russian and Eurasian history* 21: 4, Fall 2020, 763-789. See also Jefferson J.A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield Jefferson, eds., *Alter icons: the Russian icon and modernity*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010; Maria Taroutina, *Icon and the square: Russian modernism and the Russo-Byzantine revival*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Adrien Palladino, 'Transforming Medieval Art from Saint Petersburg to Paris. André Grabar's Life and Scholarship between 1917 and 1945', *Transformed by Emigration. Welcoming Russian Intellectuals, Scientists and Artists (1917-1945)*, eds. I. Foletti, K. Foletti, A. Palladino, *Convivium Supplementum* 4, Brno, 2020, forthcoming.

of his iconography of the Virgin and a general study of the Russian icon.<sup>12</sup> Like thousands of other Russian refugees, Kondakov went first to Constantinople and then to Bulgaria, where he received a royal welcome from the Bulgarian King. He left Bulgaria to teach the fall term of 1922 at Charles University and there was welcomed by an old friend Tomas Masaryk, a former professor at the same university and now the president of Czechoslovakia. As the authors explain, Kondakov's emigration was not an isolated event but part of a state sponsored initiative to welcome Russian refugees, known as the Russian Relief Action.

Grabar's transition to Western Europe was not as smooth, but ultimately just as successful. Because of the Revolution, he moved to Odessa to continue his studies and there attended Kondakov's lectures. Grabar also left Russia in 1920 and spent three years in Bulgaria, where he saw Kondakov again and met his wife, Julia Ivanova, a medical doctor. He then went briefly to Prague and Berlin before securing a post teaching Russian at the University of Strasbourg and another managing the church of the local Orthodox community. He and Julia became French citizens in 1928, which enabled him to hold a more important university position and her to practice medicine. In the same year Grabar published his two French dissertations under the guidance of the distinguished Byzantine art historian Gabriel Millet. The next year Oleg, the older of his two sons, was born; he would become the leading historian of Islamic art in the United States, if not the world, and a professor at Harvard University before moving to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

In 1936 Grabar *père* published his widely praised and still fundamental book on Byzantine imperial art, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin*.<sup>13</sup> It launched him on a major career in France and contributed to his appointment the next year to succeed Millet at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. The authors argue that *L'empereur* derives from Kondakov's work, although it is more likely the product of Grabar's maturation in France. In any event, a broader intellectual contextualization of *L'empereur* would be welcomed.

Moreover, Grabar's career as a whole deserves study, which the authors have ably begun. However, as they point out, that effort will not be easy, because they found few details of Grabar's personal life. In hindsight, someone should have begun the research earlier, when the old professor could have been interviewed, as

<sup>12</sup> Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov, *The Russian icon*, translated by Ellis H. Minns, Oxford: The Clarendon press, 1927, reviewed by André Grabar in *Byzantion* 6, 2 (1931), 912-18. The English version was an abridged version of the not yet published Russian: *Russkaya ikona*, 4 vols, Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1928-33. Wendy Salmond has made an excellent study of the Minns' translation and its reception in 'Ellis H. Minns and Nikodim Kondakov's *The Russian Icon* (1927)', in *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, eds. Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharov, Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017, 165-193. [<https://openbookpublishers.com/10.11647/OBP.0115/OBP.0115.11.pdf> accessed 24.02.2022].

<sup>13</sup> *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin: recherches sur l'art officiel de l'empire d'Orient*, Paris: Les Belles lettres, 1936.

well as his son Oleg, whom I recall spent much time discussing scholarship with his father towards the end of his life, discussing his career and art history generally. Nonetheless, there may well still be others who could provide valuable information on both scholars and their relationship. For example, Oleg's Princeton dissertation, 'Ceremonial and art at the Umayyad court' (1955), would appear to follow *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin* and its concern for Byzantine ceremony.

Finally, buried in the middle of *Byzantium or democracy* (p.104) are illuminating statistical details about the journal of the Kondakov Institute, *Seminarium Kondakovianum: Recueil d'études, archéologie, histoire de l'art* and its continuation *Annales de l'Institut Kondakov* (1927-40). They published a total of 150 articles, including 63 about Byzantium, 40 about Byzantine and Slavic interactions and 30 about the Migration Period. The languages of the articles reveal the international character of the journal but also its continuing connections with Russia. 89 articles are in Russian, about 25 each in French and German, 13 in English, and only 1 in Czech, the language of its host country. By 1937, the Institute was exchanging its journal with 70 institutes indicative of a broad academic readership. Most articles adopted a transcultural approach to be distinguished from the more nationalistic accountings of Byzantine art in Russia.

Through the impact of Kondakov, Russian studies of Byzantine art in the later nineteenth century established the basic framework for work elsewhere. With the emigration of Russian scholars to Western Europe and the United States, that framework shifted. Instead of tracing a linear chronology from Constantinople north to Moscow, Byzantine art studies adopted more synchronic structures that stressed ties with the Mediterranean as a whole. André Grabar's *Cahiers Archéologiques* also promoted this broader perspective, one that recalls Fernand Braudel's great book, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* of 1949.<sup>14</sup> Although published after the launch of *Cahiers Archéologiques*, the book had been outlined before the war. Grabar must have been aware of it and the work of other members of the *Annales* School based, like Grabar, in *Hautes Études*.<sup>15</sup>

*Byzantium or democracy* is revelatory for someone trained by another important group of émigré scholars, those exiles from Germany and Austria who fled Nazi persecution.<sup>16</sup> The authors' important book invites further thought about how the Russian and German-Jewish immigration of art historians might be compared. In what ways, for example, are the Kondakov and Warburg Institutes similar and dissimilar as to their founding, aspirations, separation from local university structures and subsequent histories? The Kondakov Institute, of course, disappeared with the closing of the Iron Curtain across Central and Eastern Europe,

<sup>14</sup> Paris, Colin, 1949

<sup>15</sup> H. R. Trevor-Roper, 'Fernand Braudel, the Annales, and the Mediterranean', *Journal of Modern History*, 44, no. 4, 1972, 472.

<sup>16</sup> My primary mentor at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, was Hugo Buchthal formerly of the Warburg Institute. I also studied with Richard Krautheimer, Richard Ettinghausen, and Peter von Blanckenhagen.

but it has reemerged in the book of IF and AP and the journal *Convivium*, and through Hans Belting's gift of his library to the Department of Art History at Masaryk University, Brno.<sup>17</sup> Those developments, made possible by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and incorporation of the Czech Republic into the European Union, illustrate the basic thesis of *Byzantium or democracy*, as expressed in its last two sentences:

In the thirty years we have examined in this book, from Kondakov's arrival in Prague in 1922 to the definitive suppression of the Institute bearing his name in 1952, "Byzantium" remained a very fluid concept. Invented in Early Modern Europe, it continued, and continues, to change along with the surrounding of those who study it (p. 163).

Finally, what about that third volume of Kondakov's massive survey of the iconography of the Mother of God? When Kondakov left Russia after the Revolution, he lost the support of Russian Imperial Academy for the publication of his book. In Prague with the help of others, he made an agreement with the Vatican to publish volume 3, but before that would be realized, Kondakov died on 17 February 1925, and his manuscript disappeared. IF learned that it was sent to Rome in March 1925,<sup>18</sup> but he recovered not the original Russian but a French translation and published it in 2008.<sup>19</sup> Yet I still wonder about what the old curator told me in what then was Leningrad. If the plates for volume 3 were printed there before the Revolution, might the original Russian of Kondakov's book still be found somewhere in St. Petersburg? IF's work and my speculations are attempts to mend the cultural rifts of the last century, when much damage was done by the political division of Europe into the East and West of communism and capitalism. One way to repair the breach is to understand more precisely how and when it happened among the many subfields of the humanities. *Byzantium and Democracy* is an excellent beginning and has much to teach us and not only about what the authors rightly prefer to call the Empire of Constantinople.<sup>20</sup>

**Robert Nelson** is at Yale University where he is Robert Lehman Professor in the History of Art. He studies and teaches medieval art, mainly in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the history and methods of art history. He was the co-curator of Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai at the J. Paul Getty Museum in

<sup>17</sup> Ivan Foletti, et al., *From Kondakov to Hans Belting library: emigration and Byzantium—bridges between worlds*, Brno: Masaryk University and Rome: Viella editrice, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Ivan Foletti, 'The last Kondakov: rediscovery of a manuscript', *Orientalia christiana periodica*, 74, no. 2, 2008, 495-502.

<sup>19</sup> N. P. Kondakov, *Iconographie de la Mère de Dieu*, ed. Ivan Foletti and Damien Cerutti, vol. 3, Rome: Lipa, 2011. Regrettably, I have yet to see the actual book, as the sole copy in the United States is at a library that does not loan, and I cannot travel.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Kaldellis has productively challenged the term Byzantine to denote that civilization in *Romanland: ethnicity and empire in Byzantium*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2019.

2006-2007. His book, *Hagia Sophia, 1850-1950*, 2004, asks how the cathedral of Constantinople, once ignored or despised, came to be regarded as one of the great monuments of world architecture. Current projects involve the history of the Greek lectionary, the reuse of Byzantine art in Venice, the social lives of illuminated Greek manuscripts in Byzantium and their reception in Renaissance Italy and the collecting of Byzantine art in twentieth-century Europe and America.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)