Mark and the East

Introduction

What was distinctive about Mark's approach to the Medieval Near East, and Byzantium in particular? Part of the answer has to lie in his gift more generally for relating the range of human experience (of work, travel, hardship and fun) to the physical landscape. How landscapes, both natural and manmade, set the coordinates for the lives of everyone from the young Bedouin man to the monastic founder, the Byzantine military commander to the Paphlagonian peasant. From the expanses of the Anatolian plateau or the south Russian steppe to the claustrophobia of the imperial bedchamber, Mark's work is shot through with a humane desire to understand how people went about organising their existence within the spaces in which they found themselves.

Another part of the answer, again, on a very general level, lies in that imaginative effort to bridge the distance between the 20th/21st century historian and his or her students and readers, and the people whose lives and activity we find traces of in the sources. The clarity with which he exposed the limits and possibilities of his sources, approached questions of periodisation, and set up comparisons seemed to flow from his desire to facilitate that understanding. His uncompromising exposition of the limitation of the sources reflected the seriousness with which he took this endeavour.

I'm going to organise my brief contribution around four themes.

(1) Mark's approach to the shape of the historical landscapes of the Near East, in its wider setting.

(2) The way he foregrounded the possibilities and limitations of the sources for Byzantine and Near Eastern medieval history.

(3) His sense of the shape of the past – of the transformations in the basic structures of experience that attempts at periodization should be trying to get at.

(4) His use of comparison.

The shape of the landscape

Mark's DPhil thesis, *Social and Political Structures in the Maeander Region of Western Asia on the Eve of the Turkish Invasion*, opens with the journey, in October 1675, of two young men, George Wheler, later of Lincoln College, and Dr Jacob Spon of Lyon, from Constantinople to Smyrna.

> From Bursa they had travelled south over the hills to Akhisar. As they crossed the Hermos and still more as they descended toward Smyrna itself they were aware that they had come into a different region of Asia Minor: more fertile, more prosperous and full of the remains of classical antiquity.

Hard geological fact follows: the gneiss core of the Menderes Massif, broken by the valleys of the Hermos, Maeander and Cayster. But this is a landscape, travelled through by people, inhabited and worked in by people, and shaped by the traces of past human activity.

We soon meet other characters: Jan Van Egmont, in the early 1720s, dreaming of retiring to a hermitage in the 'kitchen garden of lesser Asia' (the 'physic garden of the universe' in the even more extravagant phrase of Edmund Chishull). The perspective is not only that of well-heeled European travellers, but also that of the inhabitants of the alluvial basins of the Cayster valley in the 1980s, proudly boasting of the greenness of their villages, or, on the other hand, of the school teacher at Ulubey up on the Banaz ovası, struggling with his heating bills.

Mark moved deftly between different scales in his teaching and writing on landscape. His chapter on the strategic geography of the Near East in *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium* starts by urging the reader to take out any modern map encompassing:

> …the whole region from the steppes of the Ukraine and southern Russia in the north to the deserts of Arabia in the south, and from the Balkans and Egypt in the west to the borders of Afghanistan in the east.

He wanted his readers and students to see the existence of the six basic geographical blocs of the Balkan peninsula, the steppes, the Fertile Crescent, the desert, and the plateaux of Anatolia and Iran, and to understand the significance of their interrelation for the history of the Byzantine state, its neighbours and competitors. But he also wanted readers and students to understand how much hinged upon the management of relations within specific local geographies. Any student taught by him on the Constantine Porphyrogennetos Special Subject can call to mind his evocation of the fates of the emirates of the cities of Melitene and Qaliqala, set in alluvial basins, dependent on the attitude of their neighbours in the mountains around them. The sense of contingency was always crucial.

Of course, when Mark asked his readers to take *any* modern map, he of course meant one that showed relief properly. He consistently complained in reviews about books with maps that failed to do so. He was a scrambler: up hills, castle walls – terrifyingly so. And when he, his students or his readers, weren't physically making their way through the landscapes of the Near East, he wanted to ensure that they did so imaginatively. Waiting for the snow-plough teams to clear the way through the mountains south of Lake Van, or feeling the sheer *enjoyment* of the young Bedouin man riding at speed across the desert after a raid.

The possibilities of the sources

Generations of undergraduates taking Mark's Special Subjects learned to enjoy exploring both the *possibilities* of the primary sources, *and* their limitations. He would be prepared to indulge the undergraduate's instinctive counter-suggestibility up to a point, but it was his enthusiasm and respect for the source material *and its absences* that he wanted to communicate above all. The opening of *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium* conveys this well, where he uses the existence of an important body of material – lead seals – to illustrate the scale of our loss of documentary material. The point could be made in a single sentence, but instead he starts giving us the details of how the seals were actually struck. As ever, he is asking how things actually worked. And by pausing on the

evidence that *does* survive for a moment, he dramatizes the loss of the documents that they once sealed even more. Once we take the cost of lead into account, we realise that most seals were recast as new blanks. In the process, we have been given an unexpectedly vivid image of a constant feature of the administrative life of the Byzantine Empire.

Or take Mark's extremely funny review article on the publication of the *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinschen Zeit*, entitled, 'Everything you always wanted to know about the history of Byzantium, 641–867 (But were afraid to ask)'.

- To the question: *should I be pleased*? – Yes, you should be absolutely delighted.
- To the complaint: *aren't there lots of errors?* -- Oh piffle. (Direct quote).
- After a brief discussion of how actually to *use* the *PmbZ* (the prospect of buying an individual copy at 986 Euros is rejected, as is that of scribbling in a library copy and being kicked out), Mark's imaginary interlocutor heads off to the library, convinced she will find the Byzantine world unveiled before her… Only to be met with the Whittowian, 'Well, yes and no.'
- Back to those lead seals. Mark produces a graph on the sources of *PmbZ* data, in which he reveals that 60% of the 8,873 individual entries are known solely as names and titles on lead seals. The latter indicate that these are not, 'just the leaders of local and provincial society, but in many cases the holders of the highest offices in the empire.' The *PmbZ* presents us with pages and pages of, 'Men and women whose role may have been crucial, but about who we are completely ignorant.'
- After a bit more of this, Mark's interlocutor loses her patience: *I can see where this is leading. You are going to say we need to focus on close reading of the sources as literature, and on archaeology as a means of opening up new insights on Byzantium through the study of material culture*.
- Does this mean the *PmbZ* project was a waste of time? Not at all, Mark reassures us – it has enabled us to 'see more clearly the evidential problems we need to surmount. I think that is

an encouraging prospect of a Byzantine historian. After all you wouldn't want to recycle the same old narratives would you? That wouldn't be history. That would be literature.'

The shape of the past

Mark respected people who went to the trouble of actually seeking out, reading or otherwise investigating the sources, generously reflected in reviews and review articles such as this. (Mark had great respect for all forms hard work: for the hard work of peasants or pastoralists eking out a living in inhospitable terrain, or for the abbot up on Mount Galesion trying to hold his monastic community together.) On this score, Gibbon, for example, won his approval. He pointed out that while very few Byzantinists seem to have actually read much Gibbon, they (we) continue to repeat Gibbon's basic narrative much more than they (we) might think. One reason was simply that Gibbon really had read the narrative source material very thoroughly.

Different sources and different questions do, of course, produce different results. Mark occasionally expressed mild exasperation with the shadow boxing that so often occurs when people fail to acknowledge the fact. For him, questions of periodization, attempts to give a shape to the past, were not an end in themselves, but aids to understanding how basic structures of social existence changed or did not, to recognising the scale and significance of change, and to appreciating *who* would have felt the change.

In his first major article, 'Ruling the Late Roman and Early Byzantine City: A Continuous History' (*P&P*, 1990), [Or *running* the Late Roman City, as Neil McLynn has suggested it could have been more accurately named], Mark argued that the decline of the institution of the *curiales* obscured an underlying continuity in the history of the late Roman urban elite through to the early seventh century and beyond. He did not find the collapse in *morale* (a very Whittowian concern), as supposed by Jones and Liebeschuetz. By bringing into the discussion archaeological evidence for building in particular in Jordan and Palestine after 550, Marlia Mango's work on date-stamped silver, and copper coinage, he built a picture of a world that was more prosperous than previously thought,

but in which urban elites chose to spend their money on different types of buidlings: monasteries, hospitals, orphanages and above all churches, rather than theatres and baths. Characteristically, his survey of evidence for urban elites into the seventh century ended with a picture – derived from the *Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon* – of the small, out-of-the way city of Anastasioupolis, perched up in northern Galatia, scorched by the summer sun, freezing in winter. If even a place like this had an active urban elite, a place where cities were a comparatively *recent* social phenomenon, then think of all the other cities we may not know about. This was an argument for continuity that opened up possibilities even while providing a sober reminder of lost evidence.

Returning to the theme twenty years later, in an article for the *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Mark surveyed the archaeological work of the intervening period, making particular reference of course to Chris's *FEMA*, asking whether a case could be made for a continuous history of the Byzantine urban elite that extended even further into the seventh or eighth century. The response is a cautious no. The general picture *appears* to confirm Foss's views: Anatolian cities were not abandoned, but no longer sustained the kind of rich landed elite that were paying for new churches and mosaics in the Levant at the same time. Once again, there is the emphasis on how much the absence of evidence is because people have not yet looked for it.

But there is also a clearly stated thesis: 'the elites who had dominated the late Roman world were to have a more continuous history outside the empire's frontiers'. The churches of Syria, Mesopotamia and Palestine evidence of 'a prosperous if ultimately marginalised Indian summer', the conquests of the Frankish aristocracy 'a triumphant comeback'; meanwhile Byzantium's Anatolian heartlands experience 'revolutionary change', the end of the old order and the transformation into a 'fundamentally peasant society' in the seventh and eighth centuries. Mark laid great emphasis on how provisional any such case must be, given the surviving evidence, and he passed over the Marxist terminology in which much of the debate to which he was contributing had been framed. But he was quite clear that the debate came down to a question that he felt to be fundamental to

understanding the world inhabited by aristocrats and peasants alike: who exploited the land, and how?

Comparison

It was characteristic that 'Ruling the Late Roman City' concluded with an unexpected comparison: urban decline in late fifteenth century Coventry. The sheer range of possible analogies and comparisons that Mark could draw upon reflected his apparently limitless curiosity. It is one of the great pleasures of reading his work, and was one of the great joys of any meeting or class with him. They always served a purpose, however. It could be to elucidate a source problem. Take his descriptions of conversations with members of the locally dominant tribe near the site of the medieval village at Fāris, in Jordan, where he was excavating with Jeremy Johns and Alison McQuitty in 1998. Although the structure had not been occupied since the Middle Ages, successions of visitors would provide detailed and precise accounts, linking their ancestors with the house. The example vividly illustrated how new oral traditions could be elaborated to serve present purposes (staking claim to potentially valuable property), but also crucially how the level of detail of an account provides no guide to its underlying veracity.

His work also included sustained comparisons to elucidate fundamental structures of the societies he was discussing. His recent 'Staying on Top in Byzantium' was a virtuoso example. On re-reading Jean-Claude Cheynet's 1990 *Pouvoir et contestations*, an exercise Mark described with relish, Mark was struck that 'staying on top was not easy in Byzantium'. Between 963 – 1204 there were 28 emperors or regent empresses, including 22 adult emperors, of whom 12 ended up murdered, blinded or tonsured. Starting from that basic observation about the perilous experience of finding oneself in the top job in Byzantium, he embarked upon a study in comparative politics embracing medieval Germany, France, England, Fatimid Egypt and Song China. Looking on the one hand at the forces in favour (or against) wider systemic stability, and on the other at those leading to rapid turnover (or not) at the very summit of the political system. At each stage, he is careful to elucidate

precisely which structural elements are being compared. For all the fun of reading an article that ranges so widely, we are being guided to a conclusion that invokes Cheynet's call to pay a 'renewed attention to the *detail* of political practice'.

Conclusions

I started by drawing attention to a deeply humane impulse at the heart of Mark's work as a historian: the desire to make sense of how people went about organising their lives in the circumstances – both environmental and social – in which they found themselves. He extended this potential historical sympathy to actors from across the social spectrum of the medieval Near East, albeit tempered with a respectful acknowledgment of how little the sources can tell us.

Neil McLynn's correction of the title of the 1990 P&P article, from 'Ruling' to 'Running' aptly conveys Mark's imaginative sympathy with those at the top, keeping the show on the road. But he was also well aware of the need to avoid 'any sentimentality about the rich and powerful'. In his review of Peter Thonemann's book on the Maender valley, he enjoys Peter's discomfort at his demonstration that, 'the potential natural advantages of the Lycus valley were harnessed only thanks to the efforts of the local propertied elites, who made the necessary intensification and connectivity come about… Thonemann cheerfully loathes these "unappealing" people, and regrets that "they would have enjoyed reading this chapter".' Mark, meanwhile, remembers sitting with Kenan Erim, director of the excavations at Aphrodisias, looking down from the balcony of the dig house, while Kenan Bey talked:

> There are those people who say we do not pay enough attention to the houses of the poor. Poor people! Did not those people walk in these streets? Did they not gaze at these buidlings, and admire these monuments? Poor people! Bah.

Mark's view was emphatically *not* just the view from the balcony. But cheerful loathing was not one of his modes either.