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Eastern Byzantine Architecture by Robert Ousterhout

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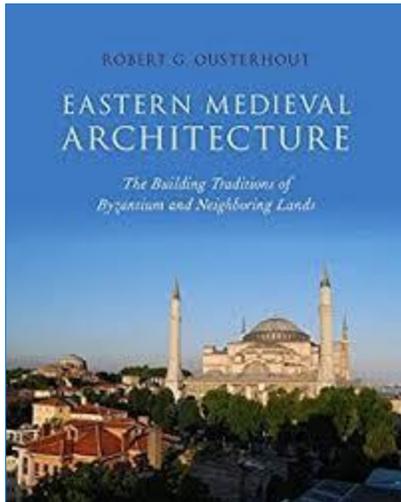
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BOOK REVIEW: Robert Ousterhout, *Eastern Medieval Architecture: The Building Traditions of Byzantium and Neighboring Lands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp 816, 368 b/w ills + 445 col + 6 maps, \$65 from global.oup.com (pb.), ISBN: 9780190272739
<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/eastern-medieval-architecture-9780190272739?cc=us&lang=en&#>

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Robert Ousterhout's *Eastern Medieval Architecture: The Building Traditions of Byzantium and Neighboring Lands* is a sizeable undertaking. 816 pages long, the 27 chapters are supplemented with 445 color images, 368 black/white illustrations, and six maps. Ousterhout uses the Byzantine, or East Roman, Empire (324-1453 CE) as the through line in this introduction to the understudied monuments of Eastern medieval architecture. His objective is to explain why medieval architecture in the East followed a different trajectory than that of Western Europe. Written, in part, as a corrective to a field that privileges Western architecture, Ousterhout provides a perspective from which to view Eastern architecture on its own terms, rather than through the lens of the medieval West and with preconceptions based on the greater familiarity with Western material.

Ousterhout accomplishes the ambitious undertaking by creating a chronologically and geographically inclusive survey. The book is organized in four chronological sections that cover over 1,000 years of history and address a geographic expanse from Italy to the Caucasus and from Russia to Egypt and Ethiopia. Part of *Eastern Medieval Architecture's* value is its organization. Sections and chapters can work

independently of each other; thus, the reader can choose to utilize the entire book, a single section, or chapter without sacrificing legibility.

Several elements characterize the book: both secular and sacred architecture feature in each section, as does the construction process, technology, and materials of the period; regional developments are given the same attention as the centers of Rome, Constantinople, and Jerusalem; and major social and/or architectural transformations serve as the introductory and end chapters of each section. A central theme of the entire book is the active agency and responsiveness of architecture. The underlying methodology is formal. More accurately, Ousterhout's approach emphasizes the need to "read" the structures themselves as primary evidence. He meaningfully synthesizes primary source information (material-cultural, archaeological, and textual) and social history giving a nuanced understanding of these sites in their many contexts. He offers the reader several different entry points to this material; chapters alternately consider the monuments by period or region, or by thematic essays on topics such as "Ritual Settings" or "Master Builders and Their Craft."

"Part One: Late Antiquity (Third to Seventh Centuries)," chapters 1-10, starts with the Roman world during Late Antiquity as it adapted to the rise of Christianity and ends with Justinian's building program and architectural developments of the sixth century. Unlike most surveys, which frequently start their discussion of Christian architecture with structures associated with Constantine I the Great, *Eastern Medieval Architecture* begins a century before Constantine. Beginning at Dura Europos and then transitioning to third-century Rome, Ousterhout demonstrates how the early progressions in Christian architecture represent an adaptation of already existing architecture and social and religious practices. A main focus of these early chapters is the building projects of Constantine. Particular attention is given to Constantine's project to (re)invent Constantinople and Jerusalem – the former as an imperial capital and the latter as an affirmation of Christian identity.

"Part One" also examines regional shifts in Italy and North Africa (the "West") in conversation with those in Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and inland Asia Minor (the "East"). The section ends with three chapters organized around Hagia Sophia, the most famous and influential of Byzantine churches and a unique achievement in the history of architecture. The architectural developments of this time set the stage for "Part Two: The Transitional Period (Seventh to Ninth Centuries)."

"Part Two" (Chapters 11-12) covers the two significant centuries in the transition from the Late Antique to the medieval period. The section opens with a brief social history before providing a historiography of scholarship on this era. The dearth of physical evidence from the Transitional period both underscores the strength of

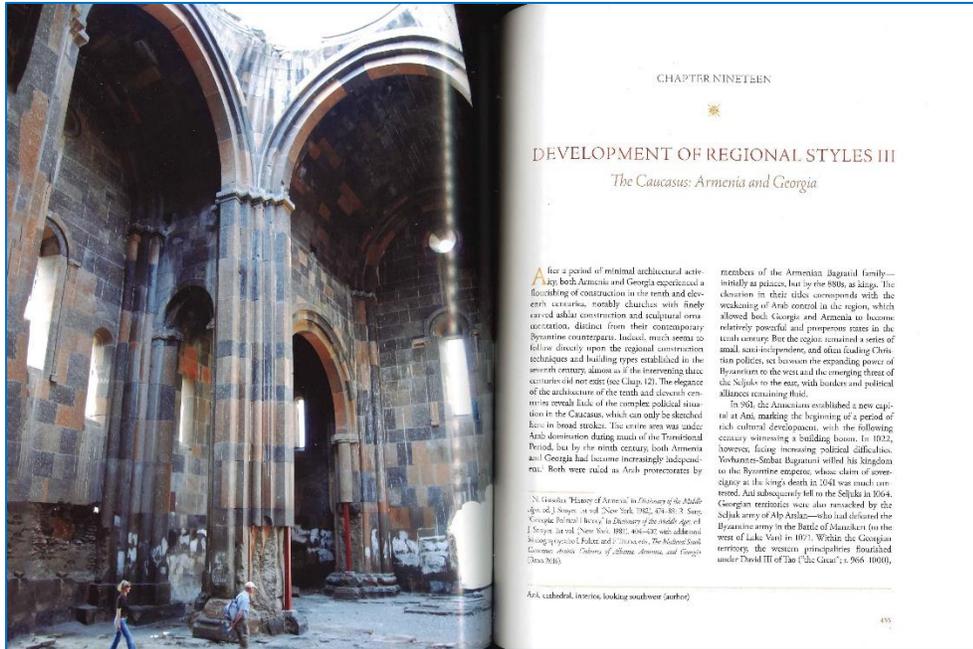


Figure 1.
Cathedral of Ani,
interior, 1001 CE.
Photo: R.
Ousterhout,
*Eastern Medieval
Architecture, 454-
455.*

Ousterhout's formal approach and, as he argues, the need for such an approach. This section analyzes the four steps of development that mark the transition between the Early Christian basilica and the domed Middle Byzantine church: the cross-domed unit, cross-domed church, cross-in-square, and variations on the domed basilica and a continuation of traditional forms. Importantly, Ousterhout notes that while the monuments in Chapter 11 are discussed by building type, this organization should in no way suggest an evolutionary development. The rest of the chapter then illustrates the limitations of these four typologies and the many possible variations and combinations. Chapter 12 expands the geographical scope to consider regional developments in the Caucasus, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, and Ethiopia (Abyssinia).

"Part Three" examines the Middle Byzantine period ("Ninth to Twelfth Centuries") and includes chapters 13-22. Ousterhout notes the reduced scale of both empire and architecture that emerged from the Transitional centuries into the Middle Ages. New church architecture was smaller and tended to be private foundations rather than the large-scale, imperial projects of Late Antiquity. This section also addresses monasticism as a significant social force in Byzantine society, responsible for many of the new structures. At this point, the cross-in-square becomes the standard church plan, exemplified by the Myrelaion in Constantinople. Chapters 17-19

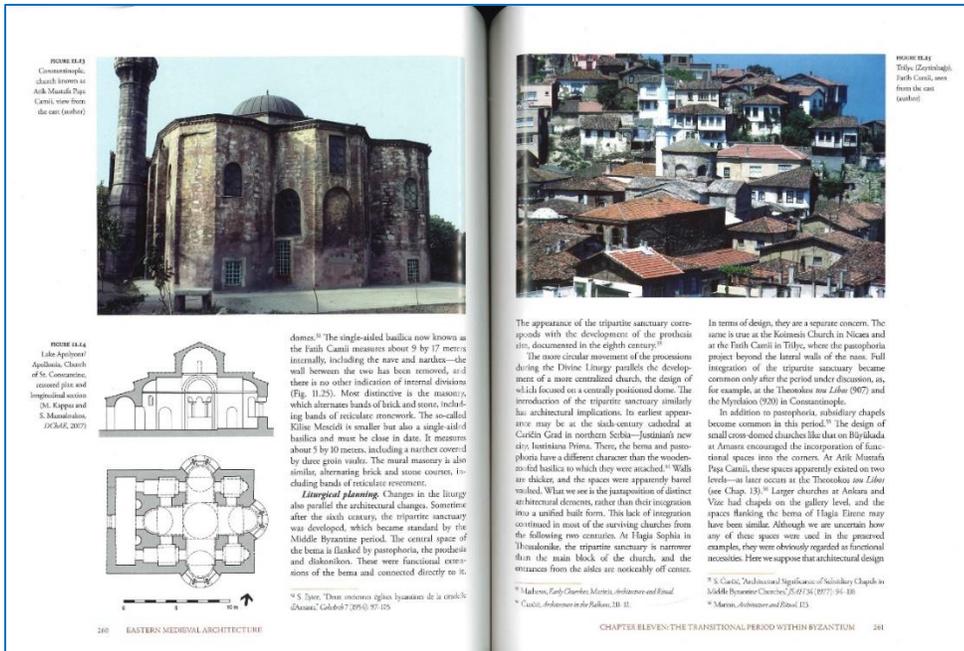


Figure 2 A typical page spread in *EMA*, where text shares the page with color images and black-and-white building plans. Photo: R. Ousterhout, *Eastern Medieval Architecture*, 260-261.

explore developments in Greece and Macedonia, as well as the rock-carved and built architecture of Middle Byzantine Anatolia and the rich building traditions of Armenia and Georgia. A clear theme in the latter portion of “Part Three” is a focus on identity construction and expression. Ousterhout treats the major social and political rupture of the Middle Byzantine period – the Crusades. Chapters 20 and 21 analyze the heterogenous architecture of the Crusader era and the increased contact between Byzantium and Western Europe, considering the architectural developments of this time in their various political and cultural contexts. The final chapter investigates the architectural and cultural exchanges between Byzantium and Bulgaria, Kievan Rus’, and Serbia.

The discussion of the Eastern European areas of the Byzantine *oikoumene* serves to transition the reader into the final section of the book, which deals with the Late and Post-Byzantine era (“Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries”). “Part Four” begins by briefly outlining the conquest of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204 and examines the architecture of the rival, Byzantine successor states of Nicaea, Epiros, and Trebizond that appeared in the wake of the Crusades. Chapter 24 then surveys the Byzantine recovery of Constantinople and the new architectural idioms introduced by the Palaiologan dynasty (founded in 1261 by Michael VII Palaiologos, r. 1261-82). Ousterhout further contextualizes these final developments with the ways in which they are adapted and adjusted by the Ottomans and the Russian state after the fall of

the Byzantine Empire. Both new world powers sought to utilize Byzantium and its history but did so in markedly different ways.

The epilogue to *Eastern Medieval Architecture* is useful for Byzantinists and medievalists alike in that it demonstrates how medieval architecture connects to the contemporary world. Ousterhout uses his “Epilogue” to show the enduring legacy of Byzantine architecture, which can poignantly be seen in the domed design of St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church and National Shrine in the new Liberty Park, World Trade Center, New York City. As a complement to the expansive chronological and geographic scope of the body of the book, Ousterhout leaves the reader in contemporary Philadelphia at the church of St. Frances de Sales – not an Orthodox church but a part of the building traditions of Byzantium, nonetheless.

Eastern Medieval Architecture: The Building Traditions of Byzantium and Neighboring Lands is an engaging exploration of the monuments of the Christian East, as well as the interaction between architecture and the many cultures and intellectual, political, and economic currents that help shape it. Augmented by recommendations for further reading and an extensive bibliography, *Eastern Medieval Architecture* offers the reader a starting point for study of these structures, as well as a window into an impressive career. Twenty-three years ago, Ousterhout’s 1996 *Gesta* article, “An Apologia for Byzantine Architecture,” clarified some “common misconceptions” regarding Byzantine architecture.¹ Chief among these misconceptions are the accusations that (in opposition to that of the West) Byzantine architecture is “small, stagnant, and dull.”² The first footnote in *Eastern Medieval Architecture* cites the “Apologia” – the entire book is another resounding refutation in text and image of those misconceptions. Accessible and affordable, Robert Ousterhout’s *Eastern Medieval Architecture* is a must-have for any teacher or student of architecture, Byzantium, or of the medieval. 🐼

¹ Robert Ousterhout, “An Apologia for Byzantine Architecture,” *Gesta* 35, no. 1 (1996): 21-33.

² Ousterhout, “Apologia,” 22. “Small” is refuted on page 23, “stagnant and repetitive” on pages 23-32, and “dull” on page 32.