

Final Report:

“Approaching Byzantium in Ottoman Istanbul: the Reception of the Byzantine Heritage of Constantinople by Scholars from the Holy Roman Empire in the 16th century”

Nicholas Melvani

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz, Deutschland

Final Report: “Approaching Byzantium in Ottoman Istanbul: the Reception of the Byzantine Heritage of Constantinople by Scholars from the Holy Roman Empire in the 16th century” © 2026 by Nicholas Melvani is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>



FINAL REPORT

1 General Information

DFG reference number: ME 5786/1-1 (Original project), ME 5786/1-2 (Continuation)

Project number: 463526198

Project title: “Approaching Byzantium in Ottoman Istanbul: the Reception of the Byzantine Heritage of Constantinople by Scholars from the Holy Roman Empire in the 16th century”
(Short name: “Approaching Byzantium”)

Name of the applicant: Nicholas Melvani

Official address: Historisches Seminar, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Jakob-Welder-Weg 18, 55128, Mainz

Name(s) of the co-applicants: N/A

Name(s) of the cooperation partners: N/A

Reporting period (entire funding period): 1 July 2021 – 30 June 2024 (original project), 8 October 2024 – 7 October 2025 (continuation)

2 Summary

The project “Approaching Byzantium” analyses the ways visiting the city of Constantinople contributed to the perception of Byzantium by humanists from the Holy Roman Empire who sojourned in Ottoman Istanbul during the 16th century. The project focuses on diverse types of evidence which show how visitors experienced the city: a. references in texts (i.e., travel accounts) and images (e.g. panoramic views) to the topography of the Byzantine monuments of Constantinople as preserved in the 16th century, and b. the transfer of Byzantine manuscripts from 16th-century Istanbul to collections in Central Europe. It includes an extensive database with georeferenced entries about sites in Istanbul described and depicted in textual and visual sources, as well as about manuscripts from the Ottoman capital now preserved in Vienna, Munich, Tübingen, and elsewhere; the evidence and the theoretical issues raised are analysed in a separate monograph. Overall, the project provides an updated picture of an important chapter in early modern history, namely the relations between East and West and the place of Byzantium within these relations.

Das Projekt „Approaching Byzantium“ ermittelt die Bedeutung des Besuchs Konstantinopels für die Wahrnehmung von Byzanz durch Humanisten aus dem Heiligen Römischen Reich im 16. Jahrhundert. Für das Projekt werden verschiedene Arten von Quellen herangezogen, die zeigen, wie die Besucher die Stadt erlebt haben: a. Verweise auf byzantinische Monumente in Konstantinopel, so wie sie im 16. Jahrhundert erfahrbar waren, in Texten (etwa Reiseberichten) und Abbildungen von Istanbul; und b. byzantinische Handschriften, die von Istanbul in Sammlungen in Wien, Augsburg, Tübingen und andere Städten von Humanisten überführt wurden. Das Projekt enthält eine umfangreiche Datenbank mit georeferenzierten Einträgen zu in Text- und Bildquellen beschriebenen und dargestellten Orten in Istanbul sowie zu Handschriften aus der osmanischen Hauptstadt heute in Wien, München und Tübingen erstellt; sowohl eine Monographie zur Rezeption des byzantinischen Erbes von Konstantinopel durch Gelehrte aus dem H.R. Reich. Insgesamt liefert das Projekt ein aktualisiertes Bild eines wichtigen Kapitels der frühneuzeitlichen Geschichte, nämlich der Beziehungen zwischen Ost und West und der Stellung von Byzanz innerhalb dieser Beziehungen.

3 Progress Report

Background and Objectives

The project “Approaching Byzantium” was launched in July 2021. Its main goal was to analyze the ways visiting the city of Constantinople contributed to the perception of Byzantium by humanists from the Holy Roman Empire who sojourned in Ottoman Istanbul during the 16th century. In order to achieve this goal, the project focused on diverse types of evidence to show how visitors experienced the city: a. **references in texts** (i.e., travel accounts) **and images** (e.g. panoramic views) **to the topography of the Byzantine monuments of Constantinople** as preserved in the 16th century, and b. the **transfer of Byzantine manuscripts** from 16th-century Istanbul to collections in Central Europe. This interdisciplinary approach was significantly enhanced by incorporating a focus on space and historical geography. Thus, the project built on recent developments in the study of the urban topography of Byzantine and Ottoman Constantinople/Istanbul (Magdalino 2007, Kafescioğlu 2009, Westbrook 2020) and contextualized this evidence within the framework of current trends in studying the reception of Byzantium by early modern scholarship (Marciniak and Smythe 2016, Aschenbrenner 2019).

The project entailed two Work Packages, a. the creation of **a GIS database and a presentation website** showing all sites of Constantinople/Istanbul attested in the above-mentioned textual sources and depicted in the images, as well as illustrating the movement of manuscripts from Istanbul to cities north of the Alps, and b. **a monograph** analyzing the above-mentioned evidence. Data entry into the database has been completed and all the data is

freely available on the website “Approaching Byzantium” (<https://approaching-byzantium.openatlas.eu/visualization?mode=map>). The first draft of the monograph is also ready (approximately 150 pages). In total, I used 32 travel accounts written by travelers from the Holy Roman Empire to Istanbul from 1529 to 1608, either as members of Habsburg diplomatic delegations (28), pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land (2), or captives taken by force to the Ottoman capital (2). The accounts were in German, Latin, French, and Italian.

Results and findings

The project generated **new information about the activity of travelers** from the Holy Roman Empire in Istanbul: it documented **specific places visited and itineraries**; by extension, it revealed an updated picture of Ottoman Istanbul, especially the way its Byzantine layer was integrated into the 16th-century urban fabric. Thanks to the mapping technology employed in the database, these findings are eloquently illustrated and are easily perceptible on the website. The analysis of the topographical data demonstrated that most travelers followed specific routes, mainly from the seat of the Habsburg delegation opposite the Column of Constantine to the Topkapi Palace for their diplomatic missions; they also explored the northwestern parts of the city, especially the Orthodox neighborhoods close to the Patriarchate of Constantinople and, more rarely, the southwest corner. They would regularly visit Galata, whereas boat tours of the Bosphorus, which took them to the mouth of the Black Sea and to the Asian suburbs, were a popular one-day excursion. The systematic topographical presentation in the monograph has helped reveal important facts about the **transformation of specific public and residential quarters during the first Ottoman decades of Istanbul**, especially thanks to cross-referencing of the texts with the information from Byzantine sources and from the detailed survey of the Frenchman Pierre Gilles (Grémois 2007). In terms of the reception of the Byzantine legacy, it became clear that most scholars and artists were mainly fascinated by the so-called **“Antiquities” of Constantinople**, namely the Columns and the Hippodrome, as well as other aspects of the Roman heritage dating from the first centuries of Byzantine Constantinople, and by the famous Hagia Sophia. Interest in the medieval monuments (for example, the numerous Middle and Late Byzantine religious buildings) was lower, with some exceptions, for example the Tübingen theologian Stephan Gerlach, who was motivated by the Orthodox – Protestant dialog and recorded **several facts about Byzantine churches** and the religious practices of local Christians.

During the funding period I was invited to **contribute to two edited volumes** with articles treating aspects of my project. The first contribution has already been published in a special volume titled “Orthodoxy on the move” in a special issue of *Theologia Orthodoxa*, published

in Cluj by the University Barbeş-Bolyai. My article (Melvani 2023) focused on the reception of the Byzantine churches still extant in 16th-century Istanbul by theologians from the Tübingen school who were members of the Habsburg delegation in the Ottoman capital. A second text titled "From Vienna to Byzantium: Humanists from the Holy Roman Empire in 16th-century Istanbul" (submitted in 2023) will appear in a special volume of the journal *Erudition and the Republic of Letters* with the theme "Byzantine History and the Antiquarian". In this article I concentrate on the ways the travelers encountered the material remains of Byzantine Constantinople: I describe the process of interacting with the past, searching for specific aspects of the built environment, closely examining monuments, reading inscriptions, and collecting movable items, such as coins and manuscripts. I argue that, by turning attention toward the medieval monuments and manuscripts of Constantinople, some travelers from the Holy Roman Empire to Istanbul imparted a recognizably Byzantine flavor to humanist antiquarianism. The **first draft of the book** was prepared during Year 3. The first part is a topographical approach titled "Biographies of Buildings", which discusses the factual information about the monuments of Istanbul contained in the travel accounts and the images. This part has been divided into 13 chapters, each of which concentrates on a specific urban quarter of the city, starting with the area around the Forum of Constantine and including the boroughs of Pera-Galata, Üsküdar, Eyüp, and the hinterland. Each chapter contains entries on individual sites and monuments, in which I discuss the textual and visual evidence against the backdrop of historical and archaeological research on Byzantine and Ottoman Constantinople. The second part, titled "Biographies of Books", focuses on the manuscripts transferred by travelers to cities in the Holy Roman Empire. This includes chapters about the collections in Augsburg, Tübingen, and Vienna; each manuscript is discussed in a separate entry, which follows the course of each codex from the moment it was acquired in Istanbul to its arrival and reuse in its new home, based on current palaeographical scholarship.

Overall, my research has already made original contributions to the study of the Byzantine monuments and manuscripts in Ottoman Istanbul and of the place of Byzantium in the 16th-century Habsburg-Ottoman rivalry within the framework of the humanist and theological trends of the time. Presentations and publications of the preliminary results have demonstrated the vitality of the project and the interdisciplinary nature of the audiences concerned, which extend beyond the narrow limits of the discipline of Byzantine studies, from which I originate, as this research has addressed crucial issues currently discussed in the historical sciences on a global scale.

Deviations from the original concept

During the course of the project, it became clear that the three years originally planned would not suffice for complete coverage of the topic and that it was important to **continue the project for one more year**. Thus, I submitted an application for a continuation (Fortsetzung) to adjust the work program to the delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic during the initial stages and to address unforeseen challenges that had emerged in the meantime by introducing additional evidence into the discussion. The continuation phase was approved by the DFG and was initiated in October 2024. The new work plan entailed studying additional types of textual and visual references to the Byzantine monuments and landmarks of Istanbul and of relevant manuscripts: a. a selection of unedited reports and diaries written by travelers from the Holy Roman Empire, b. images contained in costume books and friendship albums, and c. Greek manuscripts in the University Library of Strasbourg which originated from Istanbul. The **additional evidence and the revised work program** indeed expanded the horizon, enabled the effective interpretation and contextualization of the material and provided material for the monograph.

Activities, events and approaches

In May 2022, I organized an **international workshop** at Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz titled “Byzantium in the 16th century”, with the participation of seven scholars from Germany, Austria, Italy, and Turkey. The workshop had been foreseen for 2020 (i.e., before the start of “Approaching Byzantium”), as part of my post-doctoral project I was conducting at JGU-Mainz at the time, but had been indefinitely postponed due to the pandemic. I incorporated the Workshop into my current project as a suitable platform for discussing my ongoing research with the internationally acclaimed experts I had invited since 2020. The topic was the transformation of Constantinople into the capital of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. The Workshop was a great success and offered the opportunity for fruitful discussions between specialists in diverse fields (Byzantine archaeology, Ottoman art history, Byzantine history, early modern history) about an understudied and complex issue. The papers were later collected and were published in an edited volume which also included additional contributions by scholars who were not participants in the Workshop (<https://doi.org/10.11588/propylaeum.1609>).

In June 2022 I was invited to participate in the **conference “War with Byzantium”** organized by the GRK “Byzantium and the Cultures of War” at JGU-Mainz with a paper titled “Victory Landscapes in 16th-century Istanbul” (<https://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/event-118235>). With this paper I examined the ways the seven hills of Constantinople were used in the dia-

chrony to advertise messages of military victory enhanced with sacred properties and discussed how this landscape was perceived by travelers from the Holy Roman Empire in the 16th century, who viewed the Byzantine and the Ottoman monuments as signs of Roman and Ottoman victories respectively. I have submitted my text for publication in the forthcoming proceedings of the conference.

In July 2022 I participated in two sessions of the **International Medieval Congress in Leeds**. The first was the Round Table “Aesthetic Categories and the Boundaries of Art in the Middle Ages”, whereby I spoke about “Byzantine Art and Architecture in Ottoman Istanbul viewed by 16th-century Humanist Scholars”, namely the ways the travelers perceived works of Byzantine art, in relation to the Ottoman surroundings (<https://www.imc.leeds.ac.uk/imcarchive/2022/sessions/912/>). The second session was the panel “Crossing Medieval Borders: Multicultural and Contested Spaces - Contested Sites at the Nexus of Dynamic Border Zones”, where I discussed the topic “Shifting Borders in the Late Middle Ages: Byzantine Constantinople and Ottoman Istanbul Viewed by Scholars from the Holy Roman Empire in the 16th Century”, namely the ways the limits between East and West were perceived and recorded in the travel accounts which form the material of my project (<https://www.imc.leeds.ac.uk/imcarchive/2022/sessions/1015/>). Both talks were related to the IMC’s theme “Borders”. After the Congress I was invited by the latter session’s organizer Elisa Ramazzina of Belfast University to submit an expanded version of my paper for an edited volume to be published by Brill on the topic “Borders and Water”. The article (already submitted) discusses the impact of Istanbul’s special position on the edge of Europe and explores how the straits and gulfs that define the city’s landscape were transformed into cultural borders.

In November 2022 I presented a paper at the **international conference “Byzanz an frühneuzeitlichen Höfen. Rezeptionen, Konfrontationen und Projekte”** organized by JGU in Mainz with the title “Byzantine Constantinople and Habsburg Global Aspirations: The Reception of the Roman Imperial Heritage in Ottoman Istanbul by Scholars from the Holy Roman Empire” (https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-134645#mtAc_event-86967). My text has been published in the proceedings of the Conference (Melvani 2025).

In March 2023 I was invited by the director of the Gennadius Library in Athens Dr. Maria Georgopoulou to give a **lecture on the pictorial representations of Istanbul** by artists who sojourned in the city as members of the Habsburg delegation to the Ottoman Empire, as part of the Gennadius annual “Work-in-Progress Seminar”. The Gennadius, part of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, is one of the leading venues for the study of travel literature about southeastern Europe. My talk was titled “Constantinople in the 16th Century: Three Panoramic Views”. My presence in Athens gave me the chance to consult the rare

book collection of the Gennadius, which includes material on Melchior Lorck and Pieter Coecke van Aelst, and the primary sources the library holds, including an original 16th-century Costume Book by Lambert de Vos (all three artists were members of Habsburg delegations to Istanbul and therefore relevant to my project).

In May 2023 I was invited to take part in the **workshop “Post-Conquest Materiality: Objects in the Histories of the Ottoman and Spanish Expansions”** organized by the Leibniz Institut für Europäische Geschichte in Mainz, as part of a series of workshops (<https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-138224>). For this event I presented part of my ongoing research into the manuscripts that were transferred from Ottoman Istanbul to Vienna, Augsburg, and Tübingen by travelers from the Holy Roman Empire, as an example of the impact the end of Byzantium had on European material culture, especially material culture. I have submitted my text to be published in an edited volume that will include a selection of texts from the Workshop series.

In September 2025 I **co-organized a session at the 55. Historikertag** in Bonn, titled “Confronting the New. Power Dynamics among Muslims, Christians and Jews in Sixteenth-Century Istanbul” with Dr. Susanne Härtel (Humboldt University, Berlin) and Dr. Denise Klein (IEG, Mainz). During the session I presented a paper titled “Christians, Muslims and Byzantine Buildings within the Public Space of Ottoman Istanbul”, in which I discussed the ways the Muslim and Christian communities of Istanbul repurposed and reused the churches and monasteries from the Byzantine past in order to assert their power in 16th-century Istanbul.

In September 2023 and in March-April 2024 I conducted **two research trips to Istanbul** to reconstruct the itineraries of the travel writers and to establish the vantage points of the visual artists, by taking into consideration the Byzantine and early Ottoman urban frameworks. During these two 10-day visits, I concentrated mostly on the old civic center of the Byzantine capital (modern Çemberlitaş, Beyazid, Sultanahmet) where most authors under investigation resided and the area of the so-called Fifth Hill and Fener in the northwest, which was the epicenter of the activity of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, frequently visited by the scholars to establish contact with the local Christians. During a **research trip to Tübingen** (January 2024), I examined Greek manuscripts from Constantinople in the University Library and studied the notes in the handwriting of Martinus Crusius, in order to obtain a better understanding of how scholars in the humanist centers responded to the Byzantine texts.

Handling of Research Data

The database is hosted by the Austrian Center for Digital Humanities and Cultural Heritage (ACDH-CH) on its servers in Vienna. In accordance with the agreement signed with the

ACDH-CH and with Dr. Zachary Chitwood (of Mainz University at the time), a separate dataset was created within the MAMEMS database already established for the latter's ERC-funded project "Mount Athos and Medieval Mediterranean Society". The database uses the software OpenAtlas (see below). The **presentation website** of the Project was designed by the frontend developers of OpenAtlas during Year 3 and the year of the continuation project. Together with the OpenAtlas team we set the main features of the website and configured the start page as a map centered on Istanbul showing clickable places (<https://approaching-byzantium.openatlas.eu/visualization?mode=map>).

OpenAtlas has advanced tools for automated validation of the data, especially for detecting inconsistencies such as duplicate files, similar names, invalid links, unused types, and orphaned data. The ACDH-CH uses up to date software and security mechanisms and performs multiple automatic backups daily; the project's manager can download all the data in PostgreSQL at any given moment. OpenAtlas has its own User Management system to ensure controlled and secure access to the data. The Principal Investigator worked with a Manager account, whereas the students performing the data entry had Contributor accounts. The OpenAtlas team leader (Alexander Watzinger of the ACDH-CH) has an Administrator account. The database will be hosted by the ACDH-CH's repository ARCHE for long-term archiving. ARCHE foresees and ensures the preservation, accessibility, readability, and discoverability of the data for an unlimited time. Data management was the responsibility of the Principal Investigator (Nicholas Melvani), who, together with the staff of the ACDH-CH, will also be responsible for the Long-term archiving.

Research Data

The database was created with the OpenAtlas software by a team from the Austrian Center for Digital Humanities and Cultural Heritage (ACDH-CH) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. OpenAtlas uses the international standard of CIDOC CRM for metadata. All the data is owned by the Principal Investigator, who performed data entry and supervised and edited the work of the student assistants. Image files (jpeg and tiff) are either in the public domain or accessible via a CC-BY 4.0 license; in the latter case, owners are credited accordingly. The total volume of the data and of the image files is 5 GB. My collaboration with the OpenAtlas team has helped expand the ways the software can be used to analyze data from texts, images, and artifacts and to document complex concepts and phenomena, for example for mapping cityscapes and depicting movement in space.

The Database contains 3,835 entries. 225 "**Place**" **entries** contain the basic information about each site, mainly date of construction and geographical location (with indication on the

built-in map viewer). Each entry also contains a Description field with free text for entering the basic facts about the monument's main Byzantine phases and patrons, as well as its use during Ottoman times. In addition to Byzantine sites, Ottoman monuments were also documented, in order to provide a complete picture of how the travelers perceived the pre-1453 layers within the contemporary urban framework. Passages from the travel accounts describing a specific site are assigned a linked **"Source" entry** with the precise bibliographic reference to the published text. Whenever it was clear that a traveler had visited a site, a corresponding **"Event" entry** was created and provided with dates (time spans are also possible). "Events" and "Sources" link to entries for each traveler in an **"Actor" tab**, which contains the basic biographical information about each person. I also dealt with the difficulties arising from unidentified locations, establishing hierarchies between building complexes and their components, and with depicting movement and the succession of events on the map, by introducing new functionalities in collaboration with the OpenAtlas technicians. "Source" entries were also created for the **images** and were connected with the places depicted, as well as with "event" entries. All the images were accessed online from digital collections and 127 digital images were uploaded to the database as jpg or tiff files. In order to connect image files with their metadata and with the map, the OpenAtlas team integrated **IIIF functionalities** into the database, which enables viewing and editing image files online.

For each manuscript I created an **"Artifact" entry** (in total: 338 entries) with information on the text preserved in the codex, its bookbinding, material, script, date, illustration, as well as on its Byzantine pre-history before its acquisition by a traveler. Acquisitions, transfers, and changes of ownership are documented by linked "Event" entries, which are in turn linked to "Actor" entries (the travelers or other owners). Whenever it is possible to determine the place where a manuscript was located in Istanbul, the entries are linked with the corresponding "Place" entry. Place entries are also created for Vienna, Augsburg and Tübingen and other places where Byzantine manuscripts were transferred to.

Bibliography

Aschenbrenner 2019: Nathanael Aschenbrenner, *Reframing Empire: Byzantium and the Transformation of European Identity, C. 1400–1520*, Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, 2019.

Gastgeber 2020: Christian Gastgeber, "Ogier Ghislain de Busbecq und seine griechischen Handschriften", in: André Binggeli, Matthieu Cassin, and Marina Detoraki (eds), *Bibliothèques grecques dans l'Empire ottoman*, Turnhout 2020, 145-181.

Grémois 2007: Jean-Pierre Grémois, *Pierre Gilles, Itinéraires byzantines*, Paris 2007.

Kafescioğlu 2009: Çiğdem Kafescioğlu, *Constantinopolis/Istanbul: Cultural Encounter, Imperial Vision, and the Construction of the Ottoman Capital*, University Park, PA 2009.

Magdalino 2007: Paul Magdalino, *Medieval Constantinople*, in: Paul Magdalino, *Studies on the History and Topography of Constantinople*, Aldershot 2007, no. I.

Marciniak and Smythe 2016: Przemysław Marciniak and Dion C. Smythe (eds), *The Reception of Byzantium in European Culture since 1500*, Farnham, Surrey 2016.

Melvani 2023: Nicholas Melvani, "Approaching Orthodox sacred space in Ottoman Istanbul: the wanderings of Protestant Humanists through the Byzantine monuments of Constantinople", *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai – Theologia Orthodoxa* 68 (2023), 47-78 (<https://doi.org/10.24193/subbto.2023.1.02>).

Melvani 2025: Nicholas Melvani, "Byzantine Constantinople and Habsburg Global Aspirations: The Reception of the Roman Imperial Heritage in Ottoman Istanbul by Scholars from the Holy Roman Empire", in: Matthias Schnettger, Jan Kusber, Klaus Pietschmann, and Stefan Albrecht (eds), *Byzantium at Early Modern Courts: Reception, Confrontation and Projects*, Mainz 2025, 97–108 (<https://doi.org/10.11588/propylaeum.1617.c23253>).

Westbrook 2020: Nigel Westbrook, *The Great Palace in Constantinople*, Turnhout 2020.

4 Published Project Results

4.1 Category A – Articles in peer-reviewed journals, contributions to peer-reviewed conferences or to anthology volumes, and book publications

"From Vienna to Byzantium: Humanists from the Holy Roman Empire in 16th-century Istanbul", *Erudition and the Republic of Letters. Special issue: Byzantine History and the Antiquarian* (2026), 1-36 (forthcoming).

4.2 Category B – Any other form of published results

"Byzantine Constantinople and Habsburg Global Aspirations: The Reception of the Roman Imperial Heritage in Ottoman Istanbul by Scholars from the Holy Roman Empire", in: Matthias Schnettger, Jan Kusber, Klaus Pietschmann, and Stefan Albrecht (eds), *Byzantium at Early Modern Courts. Reception, Confrontation and Projects*, Mainz 2025, 97-108.

N. Melvani (ed.), *Byzantium in the Sixteenth Century: Constantinople and its Afterlife. Topography, Institutions, Reception*, Mainz 2025 (funded by the Leibniz WissenschaftsCampus Byzanz zwischen Orient und Okzident, Mainz - Frankfurt).

Presentation website "Approaching Byzantium":

<https://approaching-byzantium.openatlas.eu/visualization?mode=map>

N. Melvani, "Christians, Muslims and Byzantine Buildings within the Public Space of Ottoman Istanbul", Abstract of paper read at the 55. Deutscher Historikertag, Bonn, 18 September 2025:

https://www.historikertag.de/Bonn2025/programm/?_event_search=melvani

4.3 Patents (applied for and granted)

N/A