

Cyril Mango

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1 Obituary

Mango was born to Adelaida Damonova, a Russian refugee from Baku who had been stranded in Istanbul, and Alexandros Mango, an Italo-Greek barrister with a British university degree. Thus from early childhood, Cyril acquired for free an array of languages that any Byzantinist can only dream of. Indeed, his brother Anthony later became a multilingual interpreter at the UN, while

brother Andrew became a prominent Turcologist and author of a seminal biography of Kemal Atatürk. Theirs was a very special, cosmopolitan universe, a remnant of the famous Pera, the bygone district of Constantinople.

For Cyril, entering the Turkish Istanbul from Pera where he lived was like crossing the border into an alien land: with curiosity and caution. The Queen City was enigmatic for the boy – and for itself. Stripped of its capital city status in 1923, it was not officially baptized as Istanbul until 1930, after which the post office was obliged to return to sender any letters with the name Constantinople on the envelope. The telling stamp said simply, “address unknown”.

Cyril's early interest in this Great Unknown emerged when his family was spending the holidays on the Prinkipo (Buyukada) Island. The boy became fascinated with a medieval wall at its north-eastern shore. Today, this ruin, Kamares, no longer exists. Cyril did not yet know that the wall was the remnant of the nunnery where Empress Irene ended her days. Nor was it known to the gendarme who, finding the boy's interest suspicious, took him to the police station. “You are interested in walls? – the commissar asked sarcastically. – Well, here is a wall – look at this one!”

Cyril's “Virgil” through the backstreets of the Queen City was Ernest Mamboury who had settled in Constantinople in 1909 and became absolutely enchanted with its Byzantine past. Mamboury was an amateur historian who made a living by teaching math at the local French lycée. Being a citizen of a neutral country had some advantages: after World War I, he participated in the excavations carried out by the French, and in the 1930s those by the Germans. Based on that experience, he began digging a little himself and wrote an excellent tourist guide to Istanbul, the first professional guide that ever existed. He also organized the history club which Cyril attended. After school, Mango began working for the British Council in Istanbul. There, he crossed paths with Sir Steven Runciman, who was waiting out the war in the honorary position of Professor of Byzantine Art and History at the Istanbul University. “His erudition, even when he was still in his teens, was extremely impressive”, – wrote Runciman of Mango in his memoirs many decades later. Yet Mango did not seem to be in the least impressed by the self-important aristocrat who was his complete scholarly antithesis.

Mango attended universities in St. Andrews and Paris and later worked in Dumbarton Oaks and Oxford. His last position as professor was at King's College London. His career was brilliant but not exceptional. What was really unique about him was his scholarly output. He formulated the principle of “Byzantinologie totale”, i.e. not divided by disciplinary partitions, and he himself served as the perfect embodiment of this principle as he edited original Byzantine texts from manuscripts, made scholarly translations and learned

commentaries, and acted as an art historian, archeologist, epigraphist, archivist, etc. As a colleague of his once said, Mango was a multipurpose scholarly expedition in one skin: his favorite pastime was to get in a four-wheel-drive and go to the back country in Turkey (or Greece, or Syria) looking for Byzantine ruins with barely discernible inscriptions. He would then date his find and make insightful determinations on the history of that building's construction based on the full set of written sources, but also on the tiniest details of its vaulting and gabling, and after that draw further inferences from the correlation between the inscriptions and the masonry.

Yet his chief passion was always Constantinople, the alluring and enigmatic city of his childhood. He authored and edited many books about it: the first, *The Brazen House: A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople* was published in 1959. Later came *The Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul*, (1962), *Constantinople, City on the Golden Horn*. (1969), *Le développement urbain de Constantinople, IV^e–VII^e siècles*, (1985), *Hagia Sophia from the age of Justinian to the present*, (1992), *Studies on Constantinople*, (1993), *Chora: the Scroll of Heaven*, (2000). He was reluctant to let go of his last and main book, a grandiose history of Constantinople, updating it until his last breath. It will now appear posthumously. No topographic hypothesis, no archeological find in Istanbul was valid without Cyril Mango's verdict. Once in 1965, a bulldozer accidentally pulled out of the ground a marble slab with several Greek words chiseled into it. Mango instantly realized that those words were from a published poem associated with the St. Polyeuctus church and that, therefore, the construction workers must have stumbled upon the remains of that great cathedral. Nowadays, thanks to the TLG database, such discoveries can be made by a college student, but back then it required formidable memory and erudition. The "Byzantinologie totale" manifested itself, for example, in Mango's idea to climb the dome of Eski Imaret Camii in order to check if the Golden Horn was visible from there: Mango read in a Novgorodian chronicle that in 1204, when the crusaders' fleet was attacking the City, Emperor Alexius V climbed the dome of the Pantepoptes church to follow their movements. Until 2000, scholars commonly identified Eski Imaret as the Pantepoptes, but Mango proved that this could not be the case, since the Golden Horn was not visible from its dome.

Turkish connections and the knowledge of local customs enabled Mango to obtain access where no one else was allowed in. For instance, even in those blessed times when Hagia Sophia was still a museum, nobody was admitted to the south-western corner of the gallery: it was closed, without any explanation, to both tourists and researchers. No one could see the mosaics that are located there. This mysterious ban always reminded me of the Julio Cortázar's novel *Los premios*. Mango was the only person who managed to see the mosaics and

photograph them. Since then, every Byzantine scholar has used his 1977 publication. Another example of the “Byzantinologie totale” relates to the mid-19th century Swiss architect Gaspare Fossati, who was in charge of repairing Hagia Sophia and who simultaneously made drawings of what he saw. In 1894, many mosaics and frescoes were destroyed by an earthquake. Mango had the genius to go to the cantonal archive of Ticino, the homeland of Fossati, and search for his drawings there – and he found them! Mango returned to the humankind a lost piece of Hagia Sophia (1962). He also turned to the archive of the Russian Archeological Institute in Constantinople, kept in St. Petersburg, long before Russian specialists became interested in it.

And yet, Cyril Mango’s main talent was his ability to shed light on the Byzantines’ world outlook and make quite unexpected observations. For example, he showed that the perception of Byzantine art by the Byzantines themselves differed greatly from our Modern perception. His ability to think outside the box opened to Mango many things that never caught anyone else’s attention: for instance, he would observe in passing that the Old Russian chronicles had nothing in common with the Byzantine ones; that the Byzantine epitaphs were much less “spiritual” than the Ancient ones; that the Byzantine Devil was not frightening, etc. In fact, each of his numerous articles contains some revelation. Even if Mango was sometimes proven wrong (which happened, though quite rarely), his writings are more captivating than those of his “more correct” opponents.

Mango’s most frequently cited article is his 1974 inaugural Oxford speech “Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror”. He always treated Byzantium on familiar terms, even dismissively, and in that speech he derided the very attitude of Byzantine intellectuals towards reality, their invariable determination to squeeze it into the Procrustean bed of Atticizing traditionalism. In many of his other publications, Mango tended to cool down the exaltation of the public: nobody did more than him for the study of Hagia Sophia, yet it did not stop him from making the caustic remark (in 1992) that if the dome had collapsed immediately after the construction of the cathedral, maybe we would not be idolizing the genius of its architects. The most unusual of Mango’s books is *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (1980): it is extremely erudite and nonsensical, and does not romanticize the subject at hand.

Mango was contrarian and difficult, his students trembled before him, and not only students ... Once, he walked out on an organizing committee of the International Congress of Byzantine Studies, only because of a disagreement over phrasing.

In 1951, at the very dawn of his career, Mango published a preliminary list of the Greek inscriptions of Constantinople, promising to complete a full corpus

in the near future. For some reason, this work stalled, and such was Mango's scholarly prestige that during the ensuing seventy years, nobody dared to take over this long overdue task, to "snatch" it from the maître. One can surmise that over the course of years and decades, this publication turned for Mango into some sort of talisman: while he was still working on it, death did not dare to claim him. But each book will see the light of day in its own time.