



July 21<sup>st</sup> 2020

Dear Graduate Students of Byzantine Studies in Turkey,

Thank you for publishing your open letter, with which the three members of the International Bureau of the AIEB completely sympathise. We understand both your frustration at the turn of events, on the one hand, and your desire to be involved in the decisions that so directly impact your own academic and scholarly futures and careers. Let me clarify the key issues, according to the list of three main points in your open letter.

1. I believe the international community of Byzantine scholars fully acknowledges the hundreds of scholars in Turkey who contribute to Byzantine Studies - we are fully conscious of the excellent work done in all fields that comprise our discipline. I am also sure that religious and political identities play no role in any decision taken by the AIEB, and I want to emphasize the fact that as president of the Association, I have always made strenuous efforts at all our meetings to challenge and to resist any and all nationalistic agendas. In reaching our decision, therefore, I can assure you that we were extremely conscious of the dangers and challenges that postponing and moving the Congress would have for your scholarly community, and we are currently working out what measures we can take both to avoid your fears of isolation or ostracizing, as well as how we can offer financial support for Turkish scholars and graduate students in respect of Congress participation and attendant expenses. Please believe me when I say that we have in no way disregarded the outstanding efforts made with regard to the organisation of the Congress by the Turkish Organizing Committee, as I hope will become apparent in my next point.

2. I cannot, of course, speak for your own National Committee, who will no doubt be in touch with you in due course. But what I can say is that that the decision to postpone the Congress to 2022, as well as the decision to move the Congress from Istanbul to another venue, was NOT a decision taken by the Turkish Organizing Committee alone, nor by the AIEB alone: this was a joint decision reached, after due consideration of all relevant factors, by the International Bureau of the AIEB together with the Turkish Organizing Committee, whose advice and recommendations we followed. I wish to add four additional comments here, however. i: while the venue for the Congress will be changed, the program developed by the Turkish Organizing Committee remains the program for the Congress; ii: members of the Turkish organizing Committee – who have, everyone agrees, done an outstanding organisational job – will remain part of the team that will be responsible for the Congress of 2022, wherever it takes place; iii: the AIEB is planning to raise as much additional funding as possible to support the cost of attending the Congress specifically for Turkish students and junior scholars. Of course, I cannot predict how successful we will be, or how much we will be able to raise, but we have made it a condition of transferring the Congress to its

new venue that this is a key element in the revised plans; finally, iv: since we propose to maintain the Turkish organizing Committee's Congress program, we will also maintain the official languages as specified in the original plans for the Congress in Istanbul, with the addition of the language of the new host country if it is not already an official language for this Congress.

3. You ask for a detailed account of our reasoning, which I am happy to give. But you will not be surprised to know that it was not only the situation with regard to Covid-19 that weighed on our minds. It is certainly the case that, in light of current scientific assessments, the overall situation with regard to the pandemic is unlikely to have resolved itself before the end of the calendar year 2021. In view of the substantial numbers expected – at the minimum, 1,000 participants, and possibly 1,500 – it has become increasingly evident that it would be rash to go ahead with an August 2021 event: the possibility, if not the probability, of many participants not being able to attend, of a further wave of the pandemic, of the possible last-minute cancellation of the event, all played a role in our thinking.

A second factor that influenced the decision was that, while the former director of the Turkish History Society (under the auspices of which the Turkish National Committee for Byzantine Studies operates) had in 2016 supported the candidacy of Turkey for the Congress with a letter forwarded to all national committees, a new director has recently been appointed. As the Turkish History Society is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Turkish National Committee sought grant of permission from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and from the Presidency to hold the Congress. No answer has ever been received, either positive or negative, from either of these authorities.

Meanwhile the Turkish Organizing Committee prepared for an online congress, which also required an official permission, which has not yet been forthcoming. After due consideration, we judged this to be, in the end, and in spite of their excellent plan, no replacement for a physical meeting. The whole purpose of our Congress is to facilitate physical meetings, discussions, networking, developing personal contacts and conducting the Association's business meetings, as well as presenting recent and new research. It is especially important for junior colleagues and graduate students in these respects, in ways that an online meeting cannot match. Our Congress is, in other words, far more than a conference, and we did not feel that an online platform would provide the sorts of opportunities which we expect from the quinquennial Congress.

My hope for Byzantine Studies in Turkey, and for the Congress in particular, was precisely that its success in Istanbul might go some way towards informing people about their Byzantine heritage and legacy and countering the often negative attitude towards Byzantium. However, the likelihood of a very contested election campaign in 2022-2023 was strongly felt not to be conducive to a successful Congress in 2022, again because of the likelihood of many participants staying away – defeating the point of the Congress and depriving Turkish students and colleagues of the opportunity to participate in a truly international meeting. It is possible that we have overestimated the threat that this may pose to the Congress, but the danger of its coming to pass were, to be frank, too great a risk for us to consider retaining Istanbul as a venue for the Congress. Hence the International Bureau and the Turkish National Committee's jointly-agreed decision to – regretfully – move the Congress.

It would be remiss of me not to mention a final, and regrettable fact, namely the high level of anger, or disappointment, or distress, or all of these, within the international community of scholars at the government's decision regarding the Ayasofya museum. Together with other decisions regarding (amongst other examples) the Ayasofya in Trabzon, that in Vize, the Arap Camii in Istanbul, and so forth,

we have been deluged with emails from colleagues who now intended not to participate in the Congress in protest. I have tried to explain why this will not help either Byzantine Studies in Turkey or our Turkish colleagues, but resistance has been strong. In the end, we decided we had to choose between holding a congress in Istanbul in 2022 with a minimal international participation (thus defeating the whole purpose of the meeting) that may, in the event, not obtain the necessary authorization and have to be cancelled at the last minute anyway; and moving it to a different venue. We chose to recommend the latter.

Please believe me when I say that I deeply regret this. Those of you who know me will also know that I am a strong proponent and supporter of Byzantine Studies in Turkey and extremely sympathetic to the needs of my colleagues and their graduate students throughout the country. In the present international climate, and given all the issues I have described, I genuinely believe we had very little choice in arriving at our decision.

I am quite sure my response will not satisfy everyone, and that you will still have questions and concerns, not only about participating in the Congress, but also about the general situation and recognition for Byzantine Studies in Turkey. I want to assure you now that, as long as I remain president of the AIEB, we will do everything we can to continue our support for Turkish Byzantine Studies and to encourage our colleagues internationally to do likewise at both institutional and national level.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Haldon', with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

John Haldon

President