Introduction to Byzantine archaeology conversations cosponsored by Dumbarton Oaks and the Council of American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC).

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Author: Jan M. Ziolkowski
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My name is Jan Ziolkowski. As director of this establishment, I take delight in welcoming you, whether for a first visit or for the latest of many returns.

Dumbarton Oaks has existed since 1940 as a research library and collection in Washington DC under the aegis of Harvard University. Although it has been able to maintain its atmosphere and quality, it has had to undergo transformations and to reinvent itself with each successive decade. Because of all that has happened technologically, financially, and otherwise, the tempo of change has never been faster than over the past few years.

The world has altered greatly since the 1940s through the early 1970s, when Dumbarton Oaks subsidized Byzantine field work to a sizable tune. The third director, Giles Constable, in his essay on “Dumbarton Oaks and Byzantine Field Work,” laid out a new policy when he stated that “The days of the blockbuster projects, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, are over, at least at Dumbarton Oaks, in view not only of the increasing demands on our resources but also, and more especially, of the clearly stated desire of the founders that most of the income of the endowment should be used for various purposes in the District of Columbia.” If that opinion held true three decades ago, it applies even more fully today.

Constable also opined that “Dumbarton Oaks should back people rather than projects.” Following that principle led to the present event. In 2009 there was considerable talk about the promises and pitfalls that lay ahead for Byzantine archaeology. The upshot was conversations that took place here on April 9 and 10 of 2010. Although opinions may differ, I believe that those conversations were a great success, and I was delighted afterward to enter discussions about a sequel with Mary Ellen Lane of the Council of American Overseas Research Centers. Mary Ellen has been a wonderfully creative and supportive partner in helping to bring to fruition the idea we cooked up, over lunch nearby a year and a half ago, for a cosponsored meeting that would bring together representatives of American Research Centers abroad with archaeologists from North America and elsewhere, so that they could conduct discussions to broaden and solidify the infrastructure for Byzantine archaeology in North America.

According to rumors that reached me recently, some participants have been given to believe that Dumbarton Oaks is formulating an ambitious plan to fund meetings and programs for Byzantine archaeology over a ten-year period. Those reports are utterly unfounded. We have hosted one set of conversations and we are now about to host an encore. Beyond that, I have made no pledges and make none now.

That firm absence of a guarantee should not be taken as discouragement. Anyone who looks at the record will see that I have directed my energies and imagination resolutely toward
supporting international scholarship in the various areas we represent. The proviso is that we have
done so here at Dumbarton Oaks, creating synergy whenever feasible with Harvard and with DC
universities such as the Catholic University of America, George Washington University, and
Georgetown University. We have also endeavored to promote ties with national and international
organizations as well as with the diplomatic and cultural communities particular to Washington.

Cooperation among scholars as well as between scholars and nation states has always
been a desideratum, but it matters now more than ever. Our fields are great, but they are ever less
a cultural given in any of our sundry countries. To find the best solutions to our common
problems and to make the best cases for our shared passions and expertises, we need to
collaborate by exchanging information and perspectives.

Before closing, I wish to single out a person I have left unnamed until now. The first
round of these conversations was prompted by very similar remarks about the state of Byzantine
archaeology made three years ago by John Haldon of Princeton, a senior fellow in Byzantine
studies here who is sadly not present today, and Mike McCormick, a much valued colleague of
mine from Harvard with deep roots at Dumbarton Oaks. Margaret Mullett, director of Byzantine
studies at Dumbarton Oaks, seized with characteristic gusto upon the opportunity to hold those
conversations, and she has been equally enthusiastic about this iteration of them. It is to Margaret
that I now turn over proceedings.