In *Byzantine Matters* Averil Cameron presents five pieces on broad aspects of Byzantine history, focused on historiographical concerns: issues of periodization, topics that are controversial or contested, places where there are obvious challenges and open questions, connections to methodologies and developments in other milieu and in other fields, and so forth.

“Absence” surveys the general neglect of and negativity about Byzantium, which extends for the later period to an “essentialist and inexorable rhetoric of decline and victimhood”. Cameron follows this from Gibbon through Robert Byron and others, but argues that its traces still persist. She considers the problems of fitting Byzantium into Western European historical schemas, the unfamiliarity of Orthodox Christianity, parochial ideas of “renaissance”, and criticisms of Byzantine literature as derivative and lacking in creativity.

“Empire” begins with questions such as when the Roman Empire ends and how Byzantium overlaps with late antiquity. Considering definitions of empire more generally, Byzantium exhibited “reliance on a service aristocracy rather than an aristocracy of birth” and had the ability to administer a broad, diverse area and extract from it the resources to maintain military control and an imperial centre. Cameron also touches on the alternative notion of a commonwealth based on “soft power”.

“Hellenism” considers a range of controversies and debates about Byzantine continuities with the classical Greek world on the one hand and with modern Greece on the other. It also looks at arguments about the persistence of Greek philosophical ideas as “a strand of oppositional rationalism” against Christianity. Cameron argues the need for a broader treatment of identity: “Hybridity was built into the very nature of Byzantium and so were the multiple identities so familiar to its varying population and the different phases of its history.”

“The Realms of Gold” begins with the early history of Western encounters with Byzantine art. That is inextricably tied up with the iconoclastic controversies, the resolution of which “not only declared images equal to texts but went even further and privileged the image, claiming that words could lie but images conveyed the truth”. And there are other difficulties entailed by the intimate relationship of Byzantine theory of representation with theology.
“The Very Model of Orthodoxy” argues that, though “the centrality of Orthodoxy in Byzantium cannot be disputed . . . it was exposed to constant challenge”. Cameron explores the relationship of theology and philosophy, the weakness of the state, and the lack of a central religious authority. The relationship between emperors and theological debate is illustrated with examples from the reign of Alexius I Comnenus.

As even these bare summaries show, these pieces are quite broad, touching on a variety of topics. They make, however, no attempt to be comprehensive – they are not general overviews of Byzantine art or religion, for example, and there is no treatment at all of social history or military history.

_Byzantine Matters_ doesn’t assume much background knowledge, but with its historiographical emphasis neither is it an introductory work. The primary target is, surely, undergraduate students of history or classics; the goal being to tempt them to leave well-studied areas elsewhere and venture instead into the study of Byzantium. The result is also well pitched for lay readers with an interest in the complexities of history.