

What did refinement and good taste mean for the Byzantines? What were the criteria informing these powerful tools of social distinction? How did the elites and other rival groups use them to gain sociopolitical prestige and impose their cultural hegemony? The answer to these questions revolves around the crucial concept of *asteiotēs* ("urbanity"), which the Byzantines partly inherited from the classical tradition. More complex than the well-studied *paideia*, *asteiotēs* defines an ideal of urbane education and ethical refinement that both incorporates and goes beyond mastery of the classical tradition. Given its connection with education, the intellectual elites, the imperial court and the very urban space of Constantinople, a thorough investigation of *asteiotēs* and its diachronic evolution will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics governing Byzantine history, literature and society.

The international workshop *The city's finest: exploring notions of 'urbanity' between East and West, from antiquity to the Middle Ages* is organised in the context of the Swiss National Science Foundation research project *The power of (good?) taste. Understanding refinement, sophistication and social distinction in Byzantium* (P5R5PH\_203048). By bringing together scholars of Byzantine literature and society, it prepares the ground for a thorough investigation of *asteiotēs* in Byzantium. The participation of international experts in a wide range of disciplines, from medieval Arabic literature to Scandinavian archaeology, will lead to a wider investigation of ancient and medieval "urbanities". This, in turn, will shed light on the Byzantine reception of earlier notions of 'urbanity', while at the same time highlighting the similarities and differences between Byzantine *asteiotēs* and analogous concepts in other medieval cultures.

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# The city's finest: exploring notions of "urbanity" between East and West, from antiquity to the Middle Ages

10-11 June 2022



SOCIÉTÉ  
ACADÉMIQUE  
de Genève



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## Friday 10 June 2022

§ 09.45 – 10.15: Welcome coffee

§ 10.15 – 11.00: Greetings and introductory remarks

Valeria F. Lovato (University of Geneva) – **The many sides of *asteiotēs*: preliminary remarks on the evolution of a multifaceted concept in Byzantine texts**

§ 11.00 – 12.30: Session 1: Defining and classifying “urbanities”

Chair: Eric Cullhed (University of Uppsala)

Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli (Max-Weber-Kolleg für kultur- und sozialwissenschaftliche Studien) – **"What is urbanity then? If nobody asks me, I know..."**. Implicit and explicit urbanities in early Christian literature

Axel Christophersen (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) – **Performing the urban way of life – approaching urbanity as social practice**

Federico Aurora (University of Oslo) – **Reflections on an *asteiotēs* database: structure, feasibility, and sustainability issues**

§ 12.30 – 14.00: Lunch break

§ 14.00 – 15.30: Session 2: Urbanity and its opposite in medieval Arabic texts

Chair : Bruce Fudge (University of Geneva)

Letizia Osti (Statale University, Milan) – **Virtues and feelings in the city and in the desert: the norms and practices of medieval Arabic refinement**

Karen Moukheiber (University of Balamand) – **Urbanity in Abbasid Baghdad: The Poetry of Enslaved Women at the Caliphal Court, Elite Households, and the Slavers' Homes**

Zoltan Szombathy (Eötvös Loránd University) – **The Reverse of Urbanity: Images of Uncouth and Maladroit Behavior in Medieval Arabic Texts**



## Saturday 11 June 2022

§ 10.00 – 11.00: Session 3: *Urbanitas*, Christianity and education in medieval Europe

Chair: Natacha Crocoll (University of Geneva)

Rodrigo Furtado (University of Lisbon) – **Christianization, education, and elite self-preservation: ‘urbanitas’ in Visigothic Iberia**

Steffen Hope (University of Oslo) – **Understanding saints as agents of urbanisation and urbanity in medieval Scandinavia**

§ 11.00 – 11.30: Coffee break

§ 11.30 – 12.30: Session 4: At the heart of “urbanity”: the city and its inhabitants from Western Europe to Byzantine historiography

Chair: Antonella Ghersetti (Ca' Foscari University, Venice)

Matthew Kinloch (University of Oslo) – **Urban Populations in Doukas' History: Some Narratological and Comparative Observations**

Floriane Goy (University of Geneva) – **Décrire l'espace urbain au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle : entre revalorisation et tension**

§ 12.30 – 14.00: Lunch break

§ 14.00 – 15.00: Session 5: Urbanity between humor and wit in the ancient Greek and Byzantine traditions

Chair: David Bouvier, University of Lausanne

Eric Cullhed (University of Uppsala) – **The Dark side of Dark Wit**

Floris Bernard (Ghent University) – **‘Dung on your lips’: social risk and moral ambiguity of humor in Byzantine poetry and letters**

§ 15.00 – 15.30: Final discussion and concluding remarks (André-Louis Rey, University of Geneva)