Where the past is

notdead

Istanbul: Tale of Three Cities. By Bettany

Hughes. Orion; 800 pages; £25. To be

published in America by Da Capo Press in

September; $35

Istanbul: City of Majesty at the Crossroads

of the World. By Thomas Madden. Viking;

400 pages; $30

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OR more than 2,000 years, the city on

the Bosporus has by turns dazzled, en-

ticed, horrified and scared the world. Over

the generations, its inhabitants have ex-

celled in art and architecture, wielded po-

litical and spiritual poweroverbigswathes

of the earth, and suffered in catastrophes

rangingfrom earthquakesto fires. In recent

years, the cityhassurged in importance as

an economicand cultural hub and suffered

awful terroristattacks.

Yet forall its colourful drama, the city’s

historycan be hard to narrate in a way that

is coherent and gripping. When studying

the Byzantine era, readers can easily get

lost in a succession ofemperors with con-

fusingly similar names, all embroiled in

ruthless family feuds. Bettany Hughes, a

prolific British broadcaster and classical

scholar, and Thomas Madden, an Ameri-

can professor of history, take up that chal-

lenge in new books about Istanbul, and in

both casesthe resultisimpressive.

In “Istanbul: A Tale ofThree Cities” Ms

Hughes plays intriguing, sophisticated

games with time and space: both those

concepts, in herview, need to be reconsid-

ered when contemplating something so

vast and fluid as Istanbul’s historical pag-

eant. Of course, that impulse is not com-

pletely original: any visitor attuned to the

city will get the sense at times that every

phase of local history is simultaneously

presentand in some waystill unfolding.

But by making unlikely connections

between well-described locations and

eventsseparated byaeons, she givesvoice

to those witchy, diachronic feelings in a

spectacular fashion. What could have

been a failed literary conceit succeeds. It is

typical of Ms Hughes that she opens the

bookwith somethingnewand something

very old: engineering work to extend the

city’s transport system, and the fresh ar-

chaeological evidence ofthe area’searliest

human settlement which that work has

unearthed. Among the finds is an 8,000-

year-old wooden coffin.

Ms Hughes draws parallels between

the protests of 2013, ruthlessly suppressed

bythe securityforcesofan elected Islamist

government, and the uprising of 532AD,

known asthe Nika riots, from the Greek for

“victory”. In the earlierevent, passions felt

by rival factions at the hippodrome some-

how fused into a general uprising against

authority. As the author observes, the city

hasalwayslentitselfto rioting: crowds can

assemble in its great public squares, and

then its steep, narrow alleys can serve ei-

therasescape routesortraps.

To introduce the city’s Jewish commu-

nity in late antiquity, who were accom-

plished metalworkers, Ms Hughes invites

readers down the backstreets where cop-

per-bashing is still practised today, albeit

by Muslim Turks. One of her recurring

themes is that through an endless succes-

sion ofdespoticemperorsand sultans, the

city’sunderdogshave alwayshad their say

in itsdestiny. Thatincludesthe female sex.

MsHughes relishes the story ofTheodora,

the powerful consort ofthe great emperor

Justinian. The daughter of a bear-tamer,

she went on to become an erotic dancer,

and then used hercharmsto attractthe at-

tention ofthe city’sbigwigs.

As the author also points out, a more

subtle female presence in earlyByzantium

was Holy Wisdom, or Hagia Sophia, to

which the greatestplace ofworship in east-

ern Christendom was dedicated. This epi-

thet can refer to a feminine form ofdivine

power, mentioned fleetingly in the He brewscriptures, whose role isto impart in-

spiration and creative force.

Like many a teller ofIstanbul’s tale, Ms

Hughessuggeststhatthe city’sconquestin

1453 by the Ottoman Turks was not quite

such a watershed asconventional wisdom

holds. Bythatyear, the place had long been

reduced to a shrunken shadowofitsimpe-

rial glory, obliged to parley with the Otto-

man emirsentrenched nearby. Nordid the

conquest spell instant doom for the city’s

Greek Orthodox authorities, who initially

at least kept many oftheir finest churches.

Thatargumenthassome force, butitcan be

overstated: the fact that a change was gra-

dual doesnotmean thatitwastrivial.

Mr Madden is also a skilled narrator,

negotiating the twists and turns in the

city’s destiny without getting hopelessly

mired in detail. His book lacks the strong

emphasis on the physical and built land- scape which is a hallmarkofMs Hughes’s

writing. But it gives a wonderfully vivid

and clear account of an episode which

Westerners have forgotten: the conquest

and desecration of the city in 1204 by cru-

sadersfrom the Christian West.

MrMadden bringshome both the reck-

less lootingand vandalism perpetrated by

the Latin forces, includingthe accompany-

ing clergy, and the anger laced with arro-

gance felt by the city’s defeated Greek

Orthodox, who felt they had been van-

quished by their intellectual and cultural

inferiors. Readinghisbookwould be a fine

way to prepare for a visit to Istanbul, but

while actually treading the streets or con-

templating the murky waters of the Gold-

en Horn, a traveller would find Ms

Hughes’s volume a better companion:

bulky at over 500 pages but well worth

humpingup and down the hills.