



**Heineken
Prizes**



KNAW

2016 Dr A.H. Heineken Prize for History, awarded to Judith Herrin

Presentation speech by Maarten Prak, Chairperson of the 2016 Dr A.H. Heineken Prize for History Jury

Ladies and gentlemen,

Reading the many depressing headlines about the Middle East today, we have to remind ourselves that the Middle East is also the cradle of many great civilizations.

The empires of Mesopotamia originated there, as did the city states of Phoenicia and eastern Greece.

It was the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

And it was home to Byzantium, that great successor to the Roman Empire.

At one point stretching from Italy in the west to present-day Iran in the east, the Byzantine Empire lasted for more than a thousand years.

As we heard Judith Herrin say, calling something 'Byzantine' today often signals disapproval.

It can refer to things that are overly complicated or dominated by political intrigue.

However, historians have come to realize that Byzantium was in fact an important bridge between our ancient history and modern times.

And in many ways, we have Judith Herrin to thank for that insight.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Herrin's path-breaking work has radically changed our perceptions of Byzantine civilization and the wider world it belonged to.

She showed, for example, how two diverging strands of Christianity gave rise to separate empires: the Byzantine Empire in the east and the Carolingian Empire in the west.

She explained how the large Byzantine Empire was held together by officials who protected the political, military, cultural and religious interests of Constantinople, the capital we now know as Istanbul.

And thanks to her, we stopped seeing women of the Byzantine world just as subservient, invisible instruments of family, church and imperial power.

Through persistent research, Judith Herrin found new sources that showed those women as people with their own voices and their own social and political commitments.

For all such insights, Judith Herrin had to study a wide variety of archaeological and visual sources, as well as ancient texts in many languages.

She did so maintaining the highest scholarly standards.

At the same time, she also wrote really wonderful books. They enabled her to share the fruits of her studies with lay audiences as well as her academic peers.

She managed to do what most historians dream about:

Not only to make a valuable contribution to scholarship, but also to captivate lay audiences all over the world with her stories.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The work of Judith Herrin is rooted in her conviction that good scholarship matters; that global medieval history cannot be fully understood without knowledge of the Byzantine Empire; and that Humanities research is not some sort of luxury, but that it provides essential lessons for the world we live in today.

For that, I invite you to join the jury in honouring Judith Herrin, winner of the 2016 Heineken Prize for History!