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Social Life and Byzantine Expansionism during the Macedonian Emperors

Abstract

For the Byzantine Empire, the period from 867 to 1025 represented 150 years of ascension. The main characteristic of this time is the fact that the effusion of material and spiritual life was not the work of a single person, as it happened in the time of Constantine the Great or Justinian I, but of a succession of sovereigns. Most of these were distinguished people, even though some were usurpers.

The Macedonian Emperors displayed considerable talents as gifted statesmen, eager to increase the prestige of the Empire, skilled militaries, whose life was mainly on the battlefield, among soldiers, being aware that the source of imperial



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power was there. Without being in favour of unnecessary expenses, they were greatly preoccupied with the welfare of their subjects and with enhancing the abundance of the state. The Macedonians constantly tended to make the Byzantine Empire a great power of the Eastern world, a citadel of the triumphant Christianity.

Keywords

Macedonians, expansionism, society, Byzantium, social life

1 Introduction

The period between the return of the Byzantine world to the cult of icons (843) and the death of Emperor Basil II (1025), a period which coincides in its principal directions with the rule of the Macedonian dynasty (867-1028), constitutes the *golden age* of Byzantine history, in which the Empire on Bosphorus reached the climax of its power and managed to give the full measure of its originality.

The period opens with Michael III (842-867), the last emperor of the Amorian dynasty (820-867), whose reign announced through its problems, the apogee of the Byzantine state. The founder of the Macedonian dynasty was Basil I (867-886), coming from a modest family of Armenian origin, colonized by Emperor Nicephorus (802-811) in the Theme of Macedonia. He began to lead the Empire after a brilliant career in the Byzantine metropolis, being first a favourite of Emperor

Michael III - a hostler, then a *parakoimomenos*¹ and a *caesar*² – eventually usurping the throne of his protector. Under the new dynasty, leading as a result of a usurpation, the hereditary principle gained ground to the prejudice of the elective one, never abandoned in theory, through the introduction of the institution of the *Porphyrogenitus*. These represented the imperial descendants born in the *porphyra*, who were reserved the throne succession ever since their birth, thus keeping the crown in only one family.

Consolidated also by the dynasty continuity, the throne being passed from father to son – Basil I, Leon VI the Philosopher (886-912), Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (912-959), Romanos II (959-963), Basil II (963-1025) – in five generations, dynastic legitimacy reached its highest limit during the reign of Constantine VII and Basil II, when, for reasons of state,

¹ A Byzantine court position, whose duty was to ensure the emperor's security while he was asleep. This was an emperor's personal servant living next to the chamber of the basileus. The position probably derived from that of *praepositus sacri cubiculi* in the late Roman Empire, but it was first attested under this name in the 8th century. The *Parakoimomenos* had a huge influence on the emperors and a main role in the internal political life, especially in the 9th and 10th centuries, when this position was usually reserved for eunuchs.

² Initially, in the Roman Empire this title designed the Emperor and it was the equivalent to that of *augustus*. During the tetrarchy of Diocletian (284-305) this designed the *co-imperator* or the *inferior* emperor, the second after the *augustus*. During the reign of Constantine the Great there appeared the dignity of *caesar*, without a certain position. Starting with the 5th century, the title was granted as an exceptional distinction to the members of the imperial family (sons, sons-in-law, father, brother, uncles, nephews), necessarily to the heir of the throne before the coronation. Starting with the 7th century, the title was reserved to the second imperial dignity, after the emperor, and starting with the 8th century the title was also attributed to foreigners. During the Komnenos dynasty (12th century) it lost its importance, especially after Alexios I Komnenos created the position of *sebastocrator*, placed immediately after that of emperor. When Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180) introduced the position of *despot*, the title of *caesar* acquired a lower rank in the imperial hierarchy.

competent generals were adopted to the throne - Romanos I Lekapenos (920-944), Nicephorus II Phocas (963-969) and John I Tsimiskes (969-976); however, the prerogatives of the legitimate emperors did not suffer any change³.

What represented a clear change in the Macedonian governing was their external policy, abandoning the former defensive policy of the iconoclast emperors, in favour of an essentially offensive policy. The new foreign policy found its doctrinary expression in returning to the thesis of the uniqueness of the Empire and its universal power. Nevertheless, claiming worldwide hegemony was not done in terms of the political conception of Constantine the Great (306-337) or Justinian I (527-565), but in the name of an original doctrine, which ensured the ordinary Byzantine man of the role of Constantinople as a unique legitimacy factor in the political world of those times. It was the doctrine of *the kings family*, according to which the Christian princes form a spiritual family led by the Emperor of Constantinople, the other princes being *brothers, sons, friends* or *subjects* in relation to the basileus. The main objectives of the external Macedonian policy were the reconquest of Armenia, Mesopotamia and northern Syria, which controlled the trade routes of the East, the restoration of the Byzantine *thalassocracy* in the oriental and central Mediterranean and regaining the rule of the Balkans in order to have the Byzantine control over the Danube River Basin and the other trade routes to the West⁴.

³ Stelian Brezeanu, *Imperiul Bizantin sub dinastia macedoneană, Studii și articole de istorie (The Byzantine Empire under the Macedonian Dynasty. Historical studies and articles)*, XLIII-XLIV, (1981), (39).

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 44-45.

2 The territorial expansion under the Macedonian Dynasty

The internal consolidation of the Empire, as well as of the eastern borders by the iconoclast emperors allowed the new dynasty, founded by Basil I, to adopt an offensive external policy, which culminated in the time of the soldier- emperors, such as Nicephorus II Phocas, John I Tsimiskes and Basil II. This period was called by the French Byzantinologist Gustave Schlumberger “the great Byzantine epopee”⁵.

Along with all borders, the Empire had to face the Arab danger (except for the Danube borders). In this context, both Basil I and Leon VI organized several campaigns, some of them with interesting results, but without decisive victories⁶. In the West, they managed to conquer Taranto, whereas the Arabs consolidated their conquests in Crete and Sicily, to which they added Syracuse, Taormina, and Reggio⁷. In the Eastern part of the Empire, the Arabs were pushed to the Asian frontier, but in 904 a Muslim pirate fleet launched a surprise attack on Thessaloniki, taking about 20.000 prisoners. This moment also marked the reanimation of the Byzantine offensive in the time of Romanos Lekapenos, who had successful campaigns in

⁵ Gustave Schlumberger, *L'Épopée byzantine à la fin du X-e siècle*; 3 vol., (Paris, 1896-1905); Henri Grégoire, *Autour de l'épopée byzantine*, (London, Variorum Reprints, 1975).

⁶ Charles Diehl, *Figuri bizantine. Marile probleme ale istoriei bizantine (Byzantine Figures. The Great Problems of Byzantine History)*, vol. I. Translated by Ileana Zara, preface and chronological table by Dan Zamfirescu, (București, The Publishing House for Literature, 1969), pp. 305 and p. 325.

⁷ C. Cahen, *L'Islam, des origines au début de l'Empire ottoman*, (Paris, 1970); Robert Mantran, *L'expansion musulmane (VII-e-XI-e siècles)*, (Paris, 1969); See also A. A. Vasiliev, H. Grégoire, M. Canard, *Byzance et les Arabes*, t. II: *La dinastie macédonienne*, (Bruxelles, 1935-1950).

Mesopotamia and through the reconquest of the citadel of Edessa⁸.

Neciphorus and John Tzimiskes also had successful campaigns, first as generals and then as emperors. Phocas reconquered Crete and Cyprus between 965 and 966, Tarsus, Cilicia, Mopsuestia and Anazarbus and Antioch (969)⁹. John Tzimiskes fought beyond the Euphrates, organizing a real crusade for the liberation of the Holy Places: he reconquered Baalbek, Damascus, a part of Palestine (Nazareth, Accra, Caesarea), without getting to Jerusalem (being 180 km far from it). On his return, he also conquered Beirut, Sidon, and Laodicea, eventually having to consolidate the possessions in the north of Syria.

Basil II kept all these territories without extending them considerably. He managed to conquer Edessa in 1001, and he organized the defense of Euphrates. Another region that was involved in ceaseless fights between the Persian Empire and the Byzantine one was Armenia¹⁰. In the 7th century, it was occupied by the Arabs, and the conquest of the citadel of Amorium in 838 was their last notable victory. In 872, the army of Basil I conquered the town of Tephrike, situated in the eastern part of the Armeniac Theme, thus ending the existence of an area controlled by the Paulicians, a Manicheian sect oscillating between the Arabs and the Byzantines¹¹. The

⁸ Steven Runciman, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapene and his Reign: a Study of Tenth Century Byzantium*, (Cambridge, 1929).

⁹ Gustave Schlumberger, *Un empereur byzantin au X-e siècle: Nicéphoros Phocas*, (Paris, 1890).

¹⁰ On Armenia in this period, see: N. Adontz, *Etudes arméno-byzantines*, (Lisabona, 1965); J. Laurent, *Etudes d'histoire arménienne*, (Louvain, 1971); M. Canard, J. Laurent, *L'Arménie entre Byzance et l'Islam depuis la conquête arabe jusqu'en 886*, (Paris, 1980). The last work contains many Arab sources translated in French.

¹¹ Dimităr Anghelov, *Die Entstehung des Bulgarischen Volkes*, (Berlin, 1980); Jadran Ferluga, *Der Byzantinischen Handel auf dem Balkan von*

progress of the Byzantine troops in this territory was accelerated in the 10th century, when they reached Mesopotamia, Cilicia and the north of Syria.

In the time of Constantine VII and Romanos II, their main generals, Nicephorus Phocas and John Tsimiskes entered Cilicia, conquering Germanicea (949), Hadath (957) and Samosata (958); Basil II managed to conquer a great part of Armenia. His conquests included the area between Lake Van and Vaspukaran, and in 1020, the Byzantines reached Georgia, a region with the Chalcedonian faithful, whose aristocrats often tried their chance in the Byzantine army and administration.

Byzantium did not give up Italy either, where Leon VI organized two themes: of Longobardia and Calabria¹². It seems that the Byzantine Emperor disputed its imperial title with Otto, coronated in Rome in 962 and a founder of the Holy Roman-German Empire. However, the Arab danger made these ambitions occupy a second place, Nicephorus Phocas trying to form an alliance with Otto. John Tsimiskes even gave the Byzantine princess Theophano to Otto as a wife ¹³. Otto was eventually defeated by the Arabs.

As concerns the relations with the Bulgarians at the south of the Danube, we can say that this danger remained localised. The conflict became acute under the successor of Boris, Symeon, who had been raised in Constantinople. This is where he learned very well the Byzantine lesson: there was a need for only one Empire on earth, thinking of replacing the Byzantine Empire to a Bulgarian one. His ambitions pushed him to the walls of Constantinople or Thessaloniki¹⁴. Even if he managed to

VII bis zum Anfang des XIII Jahrhunderts, (Skopje, 1986); Steven Runciman, *A History of the First Bulgarian Empire*, (London, 1930).

¹² A. Chastel, *L'Italie et Byzance*, (Paris, 1999).

¹³ Charles Diehl, *Figuri bizantine. Marile probleme ale istoriei bizantine*, (*Byzantine Figures. Great Problems of Byzantine History*) p. 355.

¹⁴ Dimităr Anghelov, *Die Entstehung des Bulgarischen Volkes*, (Berlin, 1980); Jadran Ferluga, *Der Byzantinischen Handel auf dem Balkan von*

make peace, being obliged to pay tribute, Leon VI was eventually forced to cede to Bulgarians vast territories in Macedonia.

In 912, Alexander refused to pay tribute anymore, a measure which led in 913 to a new threat for Constantinople. For the Bulgarians, the battles in Anchialos in 917 or Adrianopol in 922 remained well-known, as these battles allowed them to occupy Macedonia and Thracia, except for Thessaloniki and Constantinople. The conflict with the Bulgarians led to a change of power after the death of Symeon in 927. His successor, Peter, did not equal his predecessor and under tsar Samuel, Emperor Basil II led many victorious campaigns between 986 and 1014. His fierceness made him subsequently be known as the “Bulgar-Slayer”, the one who defeated Bulgarians.

3 The Byzantine Society during the Macedonian Dynasty

In this short period, the property of great landowners increased, to the detriment of the small property of independent peasants, which led to substantial changes in the social, military and even political organization of the Empire. A vertical analysis of this phenomenon can lead us to a few considerations.

Firstly, the opposition among of the richest, the strongest (*dynatoi*)¹⁵ and the smallest (*penetai*)¹⁶ did not reflect completely the social reality in the rural byzantine milieu, where the conditions were extremely complex. The strongest were the ones whose wealth or position allowed them to exert a certain pressure on the small peasant households. A wealthy

VII bis zum Anfang des XIII Jahrhunderts, (Skopje, 1986); Steven Runciman, *A History of the First Bulgarian Empire*, (London, 1930).

¹⁵ *Dynatos* meant strong in the economic hierarchy, but also in the hierarchy of the dignities and positions.

¹⁶ *Penetes* meant a poor person.

man had the most beautiful house, in which he could receive his guests; the peasant of a middle condition could afford to have a pair of oxen, a donkey, a servant and if he became very poor he only had his house left. In the same town, one could find the great landowner without material worries, as well as the peasant of a middle condition, the independent peasants (*pareci*)¹⁷ and the poor peasants who owned a house and a garden or slaves. The byzantine peasant could have one or two slaves, which were used both for domestic chores and for agriculture¹⁸.

Secondly, between the richest and the ones who had almost nothing, there was also the so-called class of agricultural exploiters. The leaders of the villages came from the middle class of peasantry, out of which were also recruited the soldiers of the themes or *stratiotes*¹⁹. In the 10th century, Constantine VII considered it normal for these to possess the land²⁰. In this period, the disappearance of the small property had serious economic, fiscal and military consequences. In its turn, the excessive development of the high property represented a danger, whose amplexness could genuinely be appreciated in the

¹⁷ *Parec* was considered the peasant who had a piece of land if he paid his rent for the respective field; he could cede that right.

¹⁸ J. L. Teall, *The Byzantine Agricultural Tradition*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. XXV, (1971), (33-60); Michel Kaplan, *Quelques remarques sur les paysages agraires byzantins (VI-e milieu du XI-e)*, *Revue du Nord*, LXII, (1980), (155-176); Idem, *Les villageois aux premiers siècles byzantins (VI-e-X-e siècles): une société homogène*, *Byzantinoslavica*, XLII, (1982), (202-217).

¹⁹ The *stratiotes* were those soldiers, who, in exchange for the military service received important fiscal facilities.

²⁰ Georges Ostrogorsky, *Observations on the Aristocracy in Byzantium*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. XXV, (1971), (1-32); R. Morris, *The Powerful and the Poor in X-th Century Byzantium. Law and Reality, Past and Present*, CLXXIII, (1976), (3-27); Michel Kaplan, *L'Economie paysanne dans l'empire byzantin du V-e au X-e siècles*, *Klio*, LXVIII, (1986), (198-232); Evelyn Pătlăgean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance (IV-e – VII-e siècles)* (Paris, 1977).

time of Basil II, when the rebellion of the great aristocrats of Asia Minor, Bardas Phocas and Bardas Skleros, occurred.

A *Novella* given by Romanos Lekapenos in 922 tried to remedy this situation: he forbade rich men to purchase the land of the poor and gave satisfaction to the poor when there was a competition between the rich and the poor wanting to buy land. The *Novella* established that the following categories could purchase much lands: the close relatives, the coproprietors sharing the land with the seller, the proprietors who had a lot next to the one which was sold, the neighbours who paid taxes in common with the former owner. The rich could only buy if they had land in the respective village²¹. Unfortunately, the *Novella* did not have the expected results, as the winter of the years 927-928 was extremely difficult, especially for the poor, then a drought led to very poor crops so that the landowners were in a very difficult situation. These measures were reconfirmed by Romanos Lekapenos in another *Novella* dating from 934, but this one could not be applied either because the very clerks who had an obligation to implement the law were landowners. On the other hand, the discouraged peasants willingly placed themselves under the power of these rich people, becoming their serfs.

Basil II was even more categorical: a *Novella* in 966 cancelled the prescription of 40 years for the aristocrats that purchased land, forcing the rich to pay the taxes on the poor if the latter were unable to do this²². As concerns the exploitation of the land, we must not mistake the vast property for the great exploitations: first of all, because there was a dispersal of lands in different villages, and the villages were sometimes rented to peasants who benefitted from them indefinitely. The peasants lived in the same areas, cultivated the same crops and paid their

²¹ A. Ducellier, M. Kaplan, B. Martin, *Le Moyen Âge en Orient*, (Paris, 1990), p. 141.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 142.

taxes either themselves or with the help of the landowners. From an economic point of view, there were few things differentiating *pareci* from the peasants who owned land. One must remark that from the beginning to the end of the Byzantine Empire, irrespective of the juridical situation of the land, the basic cell exploiting the land remained the middle-size and small family. This type of exploitation represented the common ideals of all the members of the byzantine society. The peasant cultivated the land for his necessities: renewing the live stock, obtaining tools, the family's food and that of the servant, the money for the taxes or the rent. Taking into account the prices of purchasing the animals or the tools, the possible surplus seemed derisory; the peasant could not escape his condition through economic means²³.

The category of the powerful people referred to two complementary situations: the richness as an economic power and having authority, that is, administrative or military force. The definitions of the legislative texts in the 10th century made reference to three elements:

- a) richness: the laws in the 10th century do not mention the highest limit of power, but rather the lowest limit, that is, the condition of a weak person. Anyway, the decisive element in belonging to the powerful people category remained the financial one.
- b) the dignity or the position occupied, where we can include the civil and military servants in the central administration;
- c) the *strategoï* in the provincial administration, as well as the Church authorities (bishops or hegumens), who were considered among the most powerful.

This situation activated a double mechanism: the ones that had the power used it to dominate the weak ones and to buy their land. In the beginning, the respective officials were not necessarily wealthy, but using the power they had; they could

²³ Michel Kaplan, *L'Economie paysanne dans l'empire byzantin du V-e au X-e siècles*, pp. 210-232.

obtain a social and economic higher position, which later allowed them to integrate into the old aristocracy. This category was already rich. In this sense, we have testimonies, such as the one of the Peloponnesian Danielis, who gave about 3.000 slaves to Emperor Basil I in the 9th century or the Paphlagonian Maurice, who had a small army to defend against the Turks. Philaret, the author of an autobiography, explains that when he had problems, his situation was improved with the help of an official of the revenue authority in his province²⁴. We can see how power was used in favour of the aristocracy that owned land, taking advantage of the privileged relationship with clerks eager to increase their wealth.

By reinstating the great property, the rural byzantine milieu was considerably changed from a social point of view. This did not mean that the rural economy was completely changed; part of the peasants who sold their lands recovered them locally, as *pareci*, in the same areas, thus without changing the agricultural production. Despite all this, in some regions, in different epochs, these social mutations caused a certain phenomenon of desertification, which covered whole villages. At the eastern frontiers of Asia Minor, the political factors amplified this phenomenon. Just as the expansion of the small property was parallel to the demographic growth, the reverse social movement led to a considerable demographic decline in the rural areas, even to a rural exodus with grave consequences on agriculture. The development of the rural middle and small property hence corresponded to economic growth in this area, and regression caused a recession.

²⁴ Cf. A. Ducellier, M. Kaplan, B. Martin, *Le Moyen Âge en Orient*, p. 140.

4 Conclusions

The almost two centuries of Macedonian governing were the superlative expression of everything that Byzantium meant for the eastern and western world. Unlike the epoch of Justinian, when the work was accomplished by only one emperor, the achievements of this epoch belonged to a succession of emperors, all of them remarkable for the diversity of their qualities.

All the areas of social life went through a process of renovation, compared to the previous epoch. Thus, after the achievements of the iconoclast basileis in external affairs, the economic life of the entire basin of the Mediterranean Sea became stable and secure. The industry and commerce, upon which the central authority exerted a strict monopoly, had a growing importance in the economic life of the byzantine state.

At a social level occurred the formation of the aristocratic class in the course of feudalization, the direct consequence of the dissolving phenomena inside the rural communities. Aware of the danger, the emperors promoted a series of measures in favour of the free peasantry and *stratiotes*, but the excessive taxation and the reorientation of external politics led decisively to the ruin of this social stratum. In administration, the old regime of the themes witnessed a certain decline, determined by the mutations in the byzantine society and by the fact that the imperial power gave up its defensive politics.

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