

Empires and exploitation:

The case of Byzantium

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Introduction

In the context of the other “empires” being discussed in this conference, the Byzantine example is something of an anomaly. First, it was for most of its existence—from the seventh to the fifteenth century AD—territorially rather small (restricted largely to the southern Balkans and Asia Minor); second, although historians from the seventeenth century have called it an empire, its “emperor” was described by the Greek words *Basileus*, king, or *autokrator*, “autocrat,” and the Roman term *imperator* was used only very rarely and in correspondence with western rulers after the seventh century. Third, it was an “empire” the history of which is largely one of contraction, with occasional efforts to recover lost territories followed by further contractions, so that imperialist exploitation of foreign conquests is the exception rather than the rule. Exploitation is thus meaningful only in terms of the ways in which the state and society of Byzantium functioned—who exploited whom and how, in economic and political terms—and in respect of the cultural impact of Byzantine civilization on the outside world. In this paper I shall be concerned for the most part with the former.

In spite of the fact that it represents one of the most interesting examples of a late ancient state formation which survived, with substantial modifications, well into the medieval period, the Byzantine (or medieval East Roman) empire has received remarkably little attention from either comparative historians or state theorists, certainly when compared with the treatment afforded Rome, out of which Byzantium evolved. This situation seems to me to reflect the fact that historians and specialists of the Byzantine world have themselves been very reluctant to generalize from their work or to draw broader conclusions within a comparative context, so that their subject has remained fairly difficult of access to the non-specialist. It is worth bearing in mind that the study of the Byzantine world and its culture, economy, and society evolved directly out of classical philology, and classical philology, with its earlier empirical and positivist emphasis, bequeathed to Byzantine Studies a similar tendency. This seems today somewhat paradoxical, insofar as classical philology has more recently been strongly affected by developments both in structural linguistics, comparative literary theory, and, more

recently, post-structuralist critiques of traditional approaches to notions of author, reader, and intertextuality, while the study of Roman history, society, and institutions has likewise been transformed since the 1950s by similar developments as well as by exciting advances in archaeology and related sciences. In contrast, and in spite of some changes which have become apparent only in the last few years, the study of the Byzantine world remains firmly embedded in the traditional pattern.

There have been some important exceptions, however; and significant innovative perspectives have now opened up, especially in the study of Byzantine literature (e.g., Cameron 1991, Mullett 1997) but also, under the influence of western medieval and Roman archaeology, in the study of Byzantine material culture, urbanism, and related phenomena. Recent work has raised issues of resource appropriation and distribution; and related issues of logistics, both in military and other aspects, have now been broached (Haldon 1999). But the lack of synthesizing works by specialists in the field, which would put Byzantium into a longer-term comparative perspective, means that outsiders have tended, and still tend, to pass over this state and society with little or no comment. Work by scholars such as Peter Brown (1981, 1982) and Alexander Kazhdan (1985) on aspects of the social-cultural history of the late Roman, Byzantine, and western medieval worlds, by Michael McCormick (1998) on the ways in which the Islamic and East Roman, and medieval Italian and Frankish worlds, were connected through patterns of travel and communication, or Alan Harvey (1989) and Michel Kaplan (1992) on the agrarian economics of Byzantium in their wider context, have begun to address the issues from a broader, comparative perspective. But Byzantium still appears frequently, especially in general histories and more popular literature, as some sort of uniquely privileged survival, a haven of Orthodox spirituality, Roman law, and oriental despotism, taken as a special case rather than in its natural Balkan and Anatolian context. Those working from a broader comparative standpoint have only recently begun, and mostly fairly superficially, to integrate the Byzantine world into their syntheses. The first volume of Michael Mann's admirable survey, *The sources of social power*, mentions it briefly and problematically; the second volume of Runciman's *A treatise on social theory* is just as brief, although better in respect of the conclusions it draws; most other comparativist surveys—for example, Tainter's *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge 1988)—barely pay lip-service to the Byzantine case. Perry Anderson's *Passages from antiquity to feudalism* (London 1974) pays serious attention to the East Roman context, but his very able treatment is vitiated for today's reader in part by the fact that since the time of writing in the early 70s, a number of important advances in understanding how the East Roman state evolved have been made. Anderson was also working within an Anglo-Marxist framework in which he wanted to retain traditional notions of “mode of production,” and demonstrate that whereas western feudalism was the result of a synthesis of slave and primitive-communal (“Germanic”) modes, no such synthesis took place in the East and Balkans because of the conservatism of the eastern Roman state superstructure. As we will see, this conclusion is not entirely incorrect, although it needs to be expressed in different terms to be of heuristic value. But the main difficulty is that the framework of the discussion, which tends toward an illustration of the uniqueness of western social-economic evolution, does not really contribute toward a discussion of exploitation and power-relationships, the more so since Anderson does not really give adequate space to the internal dynamism of Byzantine culture and

political-economic development. My own *The state and the tributary mode* (1993) represents an attempt to correct this general picture by placing the later Roman and Byzantine social formations firmly in a comparative historical and social-economic context and foregrounding the state and the nature of state power. But it is perhaps indicative of the situation that work of this sort, while it has been taken up by outside specialists and comparativists, has met with little response from inside the field.

Apart from these debates, the Byzantine world has attracted “outside” attention in two specific connections: first, in respect of the evolution of the so-called “Byzantine commonwealth,” that is to say, the development of a distinctly “Byzantinizing” cultural zone in eastern and south-eastern Europe and western Russia. Here, Byzantine traditions, predominantly in respect of Orthodox Christianity and ecclesiastical organization, and in the associated culture of an imperial court with ecumenical pretensions, became firmly established and influenced the development of those cultures thereafter, and until the present day in certain respects. This influence was not restricted to the level of popular piety and Church structures, or to palace culture and religious art; it affected also attitudes toward and definitions of power, the relationship between ruler and elite, and between center and periphery. Although there have been few broadly comparative treatments from outside the specialist field (again, Mann and Runciman deserve mention as well as Skocpol [1979] and Gellner [1988], all approaching the issue from very different perspectives, and none say very much on the question of Byzantine influence), a useful descriptive account of the issues by a specialist has appeared (Obolensky 1971), which serves as a good starting point for further comparative work.

The second case is to do with transition or transformation: where the Byzantine world impinges directly on the outside world, and especially upon the history of western medieval Europe, it has attracted greater attention. Thus the period from the later fourth to the seventh century, during which the western Roman world was transformed into the various “Germanic” successor kingdoms, and during which the Roman empire in its supposedly traditional form finally disappears, has attracted some comparative historical discussion, in which broader issues are raised (e.g., de Ste Croix 1981; Cameron 1993; Haldon 1993, 1995). Even more explicitly, the period of the Crusades, and in particular the first through fourth crusades (ca. 1097-1204) during which Byzantine and western Christian cultures came into direct and sometimes hostile contact, has been an important stimulus to comparative work, both in respect of cultural history as well as in terms of political structures and the social relationships underlying them. This has been most apparent in the debate about whether or not Byzantium was ever “feudal” in the western sense, even if that sense has now also been challenged (see Reynolds 1994), but it has affected other aspects of the history of the Byzantine world also (e.g., Jacoby 1993).

Yet in spite of these points of contact and areas of common interest it is only with some difficulty that I can present a critique of the pre-existing literature on the comparative situation and evolution of the Byzantine state, since there is so little to discuss. Few specialists, for example, have attempted to look at the Byzantine state either in the context of wider discussion of state formation and power (Garnsey and Whittaker 1978; Claessen and Skalník 1981; Kautsky 1982; Mann 1986; Carneiro 1987; Runciman 1989; Khoury and Kostiner 1990) or in terms of its “dynamic,” in the way that, for example, Luttwak has attempted to do for the Roman empire in the period of the early Principate (Luttwak 1976). In the present paper, therefore, I will attempt to sketch

in what I think are the main structural features of the development of the Byzantine state and the societies or social sub-systems which supported it, the relationship between “the state” as a set of institutions and a social elite or elites, and the methods and degree of “exploitation” involved in their maintenance, and how these structures evolved and were transformed over time.

Introductory/descriptive

The Roman state from the late fourth to the mid-seventh century was structured as a hierarchy of administrative levels, headed by the emperor. The latter was both a figurehead of great symbolic importance, since he was perceived as God's representative on earth; as well as a practical ruler actively involved in every aspect of government, surrounded by a palatine and household apparatus that was the center of imperial administration. Civil and fiscal power was delegated from the emperor to progressively lower levels of this pyramidal system, first to the so-called Praetorian Prefects, whose Prefectures were the largest territorial circumscriptions in the state; then on to the *dioecesaes* or dioceses, into which each prefecture was further divided, and which had a predominantly fiscal aspect. The dioceses were divided into *provinciae* or provinces, territorial units of fiscal and judicial administration, and these were further divided into self-governing *poleis* or *civitates*, the cities, each with its *territorium* or hinterland. Cities were the basic tax-collecting units, and the leading landowners of the cities were responsible for collecting taxes of varying sorts, assessed on a yearly basis according to estimates of state budgetary requirements for the year ahead. This pattern was slowly transformed after the third century, so that by the middle of the sixth century, the state intervened directly to ensure that taxes were properly assessed and collected. The late Roman state was thus a complex bureaucracy, rooted in and imposed upon a series of overlapping social formations structured by local variations on essentially the same economic basis across the whole central and east Mediterranean and Balkan world. Social and political tensions were exacerbated by several factors: religious divisions between different Christian creeds, which had also a regional pattern; local economic conditions, especially in the poorer regions of the Balkans; and the burden placed upon the tax-paying population—again varying strongly by region—as a result of the state's needs in respect of its administrative apparatus and, in particular, its armies. All these elements were in turn affected by periodic shifts in imperial religious policy, which reflected both the power-politics of the court and the convictions of individual rulers (Brown 1971; Jones 1974, 1964; Haldon 1997).

While agrarian production dominated the economy, the cities were the homes of a literate elite of landowners (although in the less heavily urbanized regions ranch-like country estates with fortified villas could be found), many of whom were members of what is loosely dubbed the “senatorial aristocracy.” Social status was largely determined by one's relationship to the system of imperial titles and precedence, whether one had held an active post in the imperial bureaucracy, and at what level, access to which was determined largely, but not exclusively, by family wealth and kinship, although regional variations were marked.

The Church and the theological system it represented (from the late fourth century the official religion of the Roman state and, probably by the mid-sixth century, the majority religion within the empire) played a central role in the economy of the Roman world—it was a major landowner—as well as in imperial politics, in influencing the moral and ethical system of the Roman world, and in directing imperial religious policy. Emperors were inextricably involved in the conflicts generated by theological disagreements, given the prevailing view that the emperor was chosen by God, that he had to be Orthodox, and that his role was to defend the interests of Orthodoxy and the Roman—i.e., Christian—*oikoumenê* (the inhabited, civilized—Roman—world).

These structures underwent a series of important transformations between the later sixth and early ninth century. In spite of the problems faced by the eastern half of the empire in the middle and later fifth century, its greater structural cohesiveness and flexibility enabled it to survive both external attacks and the disruption of economic and trading patterns. It was also able during the sixth century to take the offensive and to recover large regions that had been lost to invaders or settlers. Thus the East Roman state in the early 630s still embraced North Africa, Egypt, modern Syria, western Iraq, and western Jordan, along with the Lebanon and Palestine, Anatolia, much of the Balkans, Sicily, Sardinia, and considerable areas of Italy, although reduced by the Lombards. Most of the Balkans was out of effective central control, dominated by Slav or other invaders. The cost of this sixth-century imperialism was very great, however, so that when in the 630s the Arabs emerged from the Arabian peninsula under the banner of Islam and the holy war, imperial resistance was little more than token. By 642 all of Egypt and the Middle eastern provinces had been lost, Arab forces had penetrated deep into Asia Minor and Libya, and imperial forces had been withdrawn into Asia Minor, to be settled across the provinces of the region as the only available means of supporting them. Within a relatively short period, the East Roman state lost some 50% of its area and 75% of its resources. This induced radical changes in an administrative system and government that still had to maintain and equip a considerable army and an effective fiscal organization if it was to survive (Haldon 1997). While many of the developments that led to this transformation were in train long before the seventh-century crisis, it was these developments which brought things to a head.

All areas of social, cultural and economic life were affected. The devastation, abandonment, shrinkage, or displacement of many cities in Asia Minor as a result of invasions and raids, especially from the 640s but also during the period of the Persian wars (602-626), combined with the fact that, by the later sixth century, the function of cities in the state fiscal system was already changing, encouraged the state to move its fiscal attention to the village community, which became the main unit of assessment by the later seventh century. There occurred a “ruralization” of society (Brandes 1989; Haldon 1997). This picture was further affected by the pre-eminent position taken by Constantinople in these changed conditions. The establishment of the new imperial capital in the year 330, on the site of the ancient city of Byzantion, with the imperial court, a senate, and all the social, economic, and administrative consequences, had far-reaching consequences for the pattern of exchange and movement of goods in the Aegean and east Mediterranean basin (Brandes 1989; Spieser 1989; Kaplan 1986).

The social elite was transformed. The so-called “senatorial aristocracy” of the later Roman period was replaced by an elite of “new men” selected by the emperors on a more obviously meritocratic basis, a group which undoubtedly included substantial numbers of the older elite, although the sources tell us very little on this point. The newcomers into the administrative and military hierarchy of the state were initially heavily dependent upon the emperor and upon imperially-sponsored positions. But as a result of its increasing grip on state positions and the lands it accrued through the rewards attached to such service, this elite soon turned into an aristocracy. During the eighth and ninth centuries they were still very dependent on the state; during the tenth and especially the eleventh they became both increasingly independent and more self-aware as a social elite. The state had to compete directly with a social class whose enormous landed wealth and entrenched position in the apparatuses of the state meant that it posed a real threat to central control of fiscal resources. (Haldon 1997: 153-172, 395-399; Cheynet 1990).

The events of the seventh century also produced a re-assertion of central state power over late Roman tendencies toward decentralization. The hierarchy of administrative levels remained, but was simplified and leveled somewhat, with the emperors exercising a more direct control over the appointment of senior posts and the management of key areas of state policy, especially fiscal and military affairs. The state was both limited by, and in its turn partly defined, the nature of key economic relationships. This is exemplified in the issue and circulation of coin, the basic mechanism through which the state converted agricultural produce into transferable fiscal resources. Coin was issued chiefly to oil the wheels of the state machinery, and wealth was appropriated and consumed through a redistributive fiscal mechanism: the state issued gold in the form of salaries and largesse to its bureaucracy and armies, who exchanged a substantial portion thereof for goods and services in maintaining themselves. The state could thus collect much of the coin it put into circulation through tax, the more so since fiscal policy generally demanded tax in gold and offered change in bronze. There were periods when this system was constrained by circumstances, resulting in the ad hoc arrangements for supplying soldiers and raising tax in kind, for example (as in the seventh century), and it also varied by region. But in a society in which social status and advancement (including the self-identity of the aristocracy) were connected with the state, these arrangements considerably hindered economic activity not directly connected with the state's activities. For the continued power and attraction of the imperial establishment at Constantinople, with its court and hierarchical system of precedence, as well as the highly centralized fiscal administrative structure, consumed the whole attention of the Byzantine elite, hindering the evolution of a more highly-localized aristocracy which might otherwise have invested in the economy and society of its own localities and towns, rather than in the imperial system (Angold, 1985; Harvey, 1989).

Resources and competition

The evolution of the Byzantine state was determined by many interlinking factors. One way to approach its history is to look at the issue of resources and power, in other words, in particular, how were resources exploited and controlled, and by whom, and how were the products of those resources distributed across the social formation as a whole at different times? How much of the wealth produced in the different sectors of the

economy—agrarian, pastoral, commercial—could be taken in the form of rent and tax or indirectly, in skills, services, and labor?

Resources consisted in agricultural and pastoral produce, in ores and other raw materials, in manpower, and in skills and knowledge. The crucial issue for the central government was maintaining enough control over those resources to ensure its own continued existence—the structural evolution of taxation and the apparatus of fiscal exploitation illustrates this quite clearly, and from this standpoint, the history of the empire as a political entity can be summed up in terms of the ways through which this aim was achieved. In particular, this means a discussion of the fact that, throughout its long history, the central government had always to compete with others—the senatorial landowning elite, the middle and later Byzantine aristocracy, foreign merchants—over these resources, which were, of course, finite. The importance of that tension reveals itself very clearly in the internal political history of the empire, and the instrumental means by which one set of interests or another within the leading elements of East Roman society gained or lost its predominance are reflected in the history of both fiscal policies and civil conflict.

Looking at the conflicts which thus arose offers particularly useful insights into the ways in which the Byzantine state actually worked, and under what conditions centralized state power and authority is liable to break down. In modern industrialized societies, for example, taxation is the means whereby the state re-distributes surplus value which has already been produced and distributed across society—among both the owners or controllers of productive resources in land and labor power, on the one hand, and those who sell their labor power in return for a wage/salary. In pre-modern societies, in contrast, surplus appropriation can take place only through rent or tax, in their various forms: the processes involved necessarily reflect the direct contact between state or dominant elite and tax- or rent-payers. In both cases, the nature of the social and economic tensions between those who do the appropriating and those who do the producing is determined by two features: by competition over the distribution of resources between the potentially antagonistic elements in this equation; and by the forms taken by tax and rent, through which surplus is appropriated in the first place.

Both state centers and ruling elites in pre-modern formations thus have an equally powerful vested interest in the maintenance of those social and economic relations to which they owe their position. The state (as embodied in a central or ruling establishment) must appropriate surplus itself, or ensure that an adequate portion of such surplus is passed on to it, to be certain of survival. But there has historically always been a tendency for the functionaries entrusted with these duties to evolve, however gradually, their own independent power base, thus representing a competitor with the state for resources. The relationship between the ruler or ruling elite and those who actually appropriate surplus on their behalf is in consequence always contradictory and potentially antagonistic because, as indicated already, dominant socio-economic groups and states function at the same level of primary appropriation: since there is no real difference, except in scale and administrative organization, between the extraction of tax, and that of rent, whatever the form it takes. The “antagonism” was, of course, a structural antagonism—it need not necessarily be expressed through any awareness on the part of the individuals or groups in question. Furthermore, this relationship is generally not a simple one-to-one equation: the state may be embodied in a particular power elite, which

may or may not originate from a dominant social class or aristocracy, for example, so that a whole complex of interwoven social, economic and political vested interests is involved. But the ability of the state to extract surplus depends ultimately upon its power to limit the economic and political strength of such potentially competing groups. The only real way to achieve this has been to create, or attempt to create, a totally loyal, because totally dependent, administrative group, a bureaucracy which is identified entirely with the interests of the central establishment, such as the Ottoman *kapikullari* or the earlier *Mamluk* elite. Byzantine emperors were enabled to achieve this, for a while (although they may not have had this intention), by the circumstances peculiar to the second half of the seventh century. But in the longer term this structured relationship was central both to the failure of the Byzantine state to resist economic challenges from elsewhere, as well as to the success of the Italian commercial republics in respect of their own social and economic organization (Haldon 1993).

But the history of the structures of the state—taxation, military organization, justice, the palatine administration, and so forth—represent only one aspect of a more complex whole, and we must not forget that the individuals who in groups or by themselves acted as agents in this scheme of things also functioned within a field of cultural activities, through which they expressed themselves in language and through which they established and defended their own individual identities as members of a wider society. Literature and visual representation of all types, religious and secular buildings, all contributed to the perceived environment inhabited by the subjects of the Byzantine emperor, as well as of the emperor himself. The importance of this becomes apparent when such perceptions directly impinge on political actions and cultural responses to change.

For resources can also be reckoned in terms of cultural attitudes and “ideologies,” since these too have an instrumental input into the ways in which a culture appropriates its physical environment and responds to political situations. As the empire's political situation stabilized following the nadir of the seventh and early eighth centuries, for example, so a more diverse culture began to evolve, as various genres of late Roman and Hellenistic literature were revived, albeit in a clearly Byzantine form, while “classical” motifs in visual art also made their appearance. And together with this revival of learning and literature there evolved also a heightened consciousness of the differences between the educated and literate and those who were not, a consciousness that was represented especially strongly within the bureaucratic and ecclesiastical establishment at Constantinople. The educated writers of the ninth century were only beginning to grapple with this heritage and to make it their own again. By the middle of the eleventh century the revival of interest in classical literature and style was characteristic of the Byzantine social elite. The diglossy which had haunted the Greek-speaking world from the first century B.C.—by which the spoken demotic Greek of ordinary everyday life was distinguished from a literary and somewhat artificial and archaizing form of the language—was reinforced by this process, of course. An accurate use of archaic Attic Greek when writing, combined with a thorough knowledge of classical mythology and rhetorical methods as well as the established canon of Christian writers, was the hallmark of the educated Byzantine, through which she or he was differentiated from the functionally literate clerk or village priest as well as the illiterate mass of the population. Choice of theme and topic reflected not just the writer's educational attainment and

classical knowledge, however, but also a strategy for reinforcing the point of the topic about which the author was writing. The deliberate exploitation by historians and chroniclers of material from ancient texts, often incorporated almost verbatim, was part of this picture, for the selection of material was dictated also by what was considered appropriate as much as by what actually happened. Choice of language in speaking or in writing thus became a matter of cultural politics. It is no coincidence that the highly educated composer of a group of twelfth-century, Constantinople-set satirical poems, chose to set his verse down in a demotic form of the language, rather than in the classical form with which he was thoroughly familiar (Cameron 1991, 1992; Mullett, 1997; Kazhdan and Epstein 1985).

But political expansion, military success and the confidence engendered by the empire's dominant position in the East Mediterranean region in the first half of the eleventh century also led to an increasing cultural arrogance about Byzantine superiority, in which the culture and character of non-Byzantines were treated with an increasing element of contempt. This was not universally so, but it is clear enough in a substantial amount of the writing of the period. This is especially true of attitudes toward the "Latins," attitudes which had an instrumental effect on Byzantine abilities to comprehend and respond to western economic and military growth. Until the ninth and early tenth centuries, and in spite of the power of the Frankish empire, there had been no serious rivals either to Byzantine ideological claims or to Byzantine cultural achievements. But as the tenth century drew on it became clear that the medieval West was in fact a region of great economic, social, and above all military dynamism, a dynamism which the Byzantines had to confront in the eleventh century in the form of the Normans in particular, but equally, in terms of both economic and political power, in the shape of the Italian merchant cities. Stereotypes of the barbarous westerner became common. As the political and military success of these "barbarians" began to be seen as a serious threat to imperial power, and as western cultural attitudes challenged the assumptions of the Greek-speaking Byzantine elite and their values, so fear gave such caricatures an added edge. Traditional suspicion of western liturgical and other religious practices, of the papacy and its claims, all these elements now combined to blind most Byzantines to the political realities of "Latin" power and potential and to encourage a xenophobia and hostility which was, through the direct confrontation of these two halves of the Christian world in the events of the Crusades, to lead to massive and irreversible mutual misunderstandings and hatred. The sack of Constantinople and the fourth crusade were symptoms as well as results of these developments (Angold 1995; Brand 1968; Nicol 1972; Lilie 1993).

Modes of exploitation

A fundamental principle of late Roman and Byzantine taxation was to ensure the maximization of exploitation and hence of revenues. Tax was assessed according to a formula tying land—determined by area, quality and type of crop—to labor power, a formula referred to as the *capitatio-iugatio* system. Land that was not exploited, either by agriculture or for pasturage, was not taxed directly. The tax burden was re-assessed at intervals, originally in cycles of five, then of fifteen years, although in practice it took place far more irregularly. Maximization of income was achieved in the later Roman

period by a system whereby land registered for taxation but not cultivated was attributed for assessment to neighboring landlords, a process known as *adiectio sterilium*. From the seventh or eighth centuries a number of changes were introduced. Each tax unit was expected to produce a fixed revenue, distributed across the tax-payers, who were as a body responsible for deficits, which they shared. The tax-unit—the community, in effect—was jointly responsible for the payments due from lands that belonged to their tax unit but were not farmed, for whatever reason. Remissions of tax could be requested or bestowed to compensate for such burdens, but if the community took over and farmed the land for which they had been responsible, they had also to pay the deficits incurred by the remission. As noted already, the cities lost their role as crucial intermediaries in the levying of taxation, which was now devolved for the most part upon imperial officials of the provinces and upon the village community (Jones 1964, 1967; Hendy 1985; Haldon 1997).

The most important change which took place after the seventh century seems to have been the introduction of a distributive tax assessment, whereby the annual assessment was based on the capacity of the producers to pay, rather than on a flat rate determined by the demands of the state budget. This involved, of course, accurate records and statements of property, and one important result was that the Byzantine Empire evolved one of the most advanced land-registration and fiscal-assessment systems of the medieval world, as well as one of the most sophisticated bureaucracies for administering it. It also appears to have been associated with the ending of the connection between the land-tax and the poll-tax: instead of a combined *captatio-iugatio* assessment, the land tax, or *kanon*, was now assessed as a separate item, with the replacement for the poll-tax, known as the *kapnikon*, or “hearth” tax, raised on each household. These changes may not have happened overnight, and there is no imperial legislation to give us a clue as to when and how they occurred; but they had been completed by the middle of the ninth century, and probably long before.

The regular taxation of land was supplemented by a wide range of extraordinary taxes and *corvées*, noted already, including obligations to provide hospitality for soldiers and officials, to maintain roads, bridges, fortifications, and to deliver and/or produce a wide range of requirements such as charcoal or wood. These continued unbroken into the middle and later Byzantine periods, although their Latin names were mostly replaced with Greek or Hellenized equivalents. But certain types of landed property were always exempt from many of these extra taxes, in particular the land owned or held by soldiers, and that held by persons registered in the service of the public post, in both cases because of traditional favored conditions of service, and because they depended to a degree on their property for the carrying out of their duties (see below on soldiers).

Although the basic land tax and the accompanying hearth-tax now became the fundamental elements of the tax system, it was complicated by the addition of a vast range of extra and incidental impositions: quite apart from the extraordinary taxes in kind or services mentioned already, government tax officials began to add more and more extras to their demands, in the form of fees for their services and demands for hospitality (which could then be commuted for money), so that the system became immensely ramified. During the second half of the eleventh century, depreciation of the precious-metal coinage combined with bureaucratic corruption led to the near-collapse of the system (Harvey 1989; Haldon 1997; Oikonomides 1996).

Fundamental changes were not made until the early twelfth century when inflationary pressures and the complexity and *ad hoc* nature of the old system forced the emperor to introduce important changes. The older charges were rationalized, standard rates were established, and the bureaucracy was trimmed. But increasingly, as the wealthy and powerful managed to extract exemptions for themselves and their lands from many fiscal burdens, so the weight of the state's demands fell upon an increasingly hard-pressed peasantry, so that the social divisions within the empire, which had grown with the evolution of the new, middle Byzantine elite as it gradually turned itself into an aristocracy of office and birth, became more and more apparent. During the later ninth century the system of communal responsibility for untilled lands was transformed into a system whereby land could be temporarily exempted from taxation, removed from the fiscal district to which it originally belonged and administered separately, or granted special reductions in taxation. Such interventionist measures seem to have been intended to maintain as close a degree of control as possible over fiscal resources in land. Yet over the same period, and in order to retain control over its fiscal base and to compete with the elite and the powerful, the government itself began to transform fiscal land into state lands, so that rents to the government in its capacity as a landlord now became indistinguishable in many respects from taxation. There is some evidence from the eleventh century that some landlords invested in "improvements" in their estates, including the construction of mills, for example, which were leased out or exploited directly; but the extent to which this resulted in increased agrarian output is not clear. And whether the state's estate managers followed suit is entirely unknown, although more research remains to be done in this field.

The evolution of *pronoia* represented an alternative means of redistributing resources by the government, but also encouraged this overlap (Angold 1984; Hendy 1985; Harvey 1989). This institution represented a major change in the ways in which resources were administered. Meaning literally "care" or "forethought," the term referred to the concession by the state of the right to receive the revenues from certain public (i.e., fiscal, or taxed) districts; or of certain imperial estates, and their tenants, along with part or all of the rents and taxes raised from them. Such grants were made to individuals by the emperors for a variety of reasons. They took the form of personal grants from the ruler, who represented the state in the institutional sense; and while there was also a more general meaning of the term *pronoia*, the most important involves *pronoia* grants in return for military service. This was a new departure, and involving as it did, for the first time, the temporary alienation of state revenues to private individuals, marks a further move along the line from absolute toward devolved state power. It is important to emphasize that *pronoia* grants were at first limited to members of the extended family of the imperial clan, the Comneni; and that although the emperor Manuel I appears to have employed them a little more liberally, they first appear on a wider scale after the events of 1204 and the introduction into many areas of the Byzantine world of western, feudal arrangements. These no doubt had an influence on the Byzantine way of doing things, and may have speeded up the development of *pronoia* on a more generalized basis. But such grants were given not only on a large scale to individuals, but also to groups, and sometimes on a very small scale; while the government, at least in theory, always retained the right to revoke such a grant. They rarely became hereditary in the proper

sense (Harvey 1989; Bartusis 1992, 156-189; Magdalino 1993). And there is no evidence, either, that holders of such grants of revenue intervened in the process of production, except insofar as demands for tax and rent might promote an increase in the rate of exploitation of peasant labor.

Until the end of the twelfth century the government was able to retain fairly effective control over fiscal resources. But the growth of the aristocracy, which had first challenged the state in the tenth century, had continued; it was from members of that elite that the emperors from the later eleventh century were drawn, and whose hold on power was determined largely by their ability to maintain a series of family alliances—through marriage, governorships, and so on—with their peers. After 1204 in particular, the devolution of imperial authority became the chief means by which emperors governed and administered, and through which imperial resources were mobilized. Central taxation—the land tax and its associated impositions—remained the basis of government finance; but as the empire shrank territorially, so commerce came to play a more important role, yet one which was already limited by the strength and dominant position in the carrying trade of Italian merchants and maritime power. The fact that the *kommerkion* on trade was, by the end of the empire, more important a source of income than the land-tax, illustrates the insoluble problem faced by the emperors of the last century of Byzantium.

By the later thirteenth century the land tax was raised on the basis of a flat rate, assessed at regular intervals, but modified in accordance with local conditions and other factors, while the tax on labor power had reappeared as an imposition on individual peasant tenants and their households. Supplementary taxes and impositions continued to be raised, some of them devolved onto landlords, for example, and many of them designated for specific types of government expenditure or to cover the expenses of particular state requirements, such as the hiring of mercenary forces or the paying of tribute to foreign powers. In one case, in the Peloponnese during the first half of the fifteenth century, taxes introduced by the Ottomans, who had controlled the region for some 16 years after 1404, were retained by the Byzantine administration which took over, so that Islamic taxation terms appear in a Byzantine context: *ushr* (tithe) and *haradj* (land-tax), for example (Angold 1984; Laiou-Thomadakis 1977; Oikonomides 1969). What is worth stressing in all this is the relative degree of flexibility exhibited by the state's fiscal machinery over a long period of time, perhaps an indication of the direct appreciation of what was at stake—control over vital resources—on the part of successive generations of rulers and fiscal administrators. In fiscal practice more than in any other area of Byzantine state activity, ideology seems not to have masked or obfuscated the realities of the situation, with the single exception of the state's approach to trade and commerce, of which more below.

A brief account of the dynamics of the Byzantine state: economics and ideology

There existed a fundamental contradiction in the Byzantine world between the fiscal interests of the state and the non-state sector of private merchants, bankers, shipping, and so on. The state represented a particular set of ways and means of regulating the extraction, distribution, and consumption of resources, embodying a strongly autarkic relationship between consumption and agricultural production. The export of finished

goods, the flow of internal commerce between provincial centers, as well as between the provinces and Constantinople, and the movement of raw materials and livestock, were determined to a large extent by three closely connected factors: the demands of the state apparatus (army and treasury) for raw and finished materials and provisions; the state's need for cash revenues to support mercenary forces and the imperial court; and the demands of the imperial capital itself, which dominated regional trade in the western Black Sea and north-west Asia Minor, north Aegean and south Balkans. The pattern of supply and demand was already heavily slanted toward Constantinople, as we have seen, and this pattern became even more accentuated after the loss of central Anatolia to the Turks in the 1070s and 1080s. Trade in the Byzantine world was mostly inward-looking, from the provinces and from the empire's neighbors to Constantinople and between the provinces. Such trade represented after the later ninth century a flourishing aspect of the internal economy of Byzantine society, and large numbers of traders and entrepreneurs were associated with it. But the exploitative state apparatus still dominated, although, as in the later Roman world, while state-dominated trade may have had an inhibiting effect in some respects, it may also have encouraged trade and commerce along the routes most exploited by the state itself, precisely because private entrepreneurial activity can take advantage of state shipping and transportation.

But this essentially late Roman pattern left little room at the level of production and distribution of wealth for outwardly-directed commercial activity or enterprise. Even when the state farmed fiscal contracts, the opportunities for private entrepreneurial activity were limited, not just by state intervention, but by social convention. What one did with newly-acquired wealth was not invest in independent commercial enterprise, but rather in the state: titles, imperial sinecures or actual offices, and court positions were first on the list of priorities. And although land and the rent accruing from landed property (in addition to the ideologically positive realization of self-sufficiency) were important considerations, it is clear that imperial titles and pensions were just as fundamental to the economic position of the power elite. Investment in commerce was ideologically marginalized, even though the developing group of *archontes*, the local middling and small-scale landed elites of the provincial towns and cities, had in many regions of the empire an active involvement in small-scale commodity production and manufacturing, and the associated movement of goods which resulted. The best-documented examples come from the south Balkan silk industry, but there is no reason to doubt that other regions witnessed similar activity (Harvey 1989; Hendy 1985; Dagron and Mango 1995; Laiou 1980/1, 1982). Such ideological structures or practices can be traced back into the late Roman period and before, associated with aristocratic ideals of culture, the use of time, notions of leisure, and so forth; they reflected the desired self-image of a social elite, and the socio-economic context of the Byzantine world up to the tenth and early eleventh century offered no challenge to them, since they had no damaging results for the status and position of the elite.

For most wealthy Byzantines, resources were derived predominantly from agricultural production. The social elite, both great magnates and local gentry, derived status from the possession of land and, in particular, membership of the imperial system. The wealth which the members of this elite could expect to derive from trade and commerce, both during the earlier period of its evolution and in the tenth and eleventh centuries, was, in

comparison with that derived through rents and state positions, of far less significance. Thus, while merchants were an active element in urban economies by the eleventh century, playing an important role in the distribution of locally-produced commodities, they appear to occupy a relatively subordinate position in the process of wealth redistribution as a whole. In particular they played no role in the perceptions of the society in general of the maintenance of the empire, and in the social order as it was understood. The social elite had no interest in their activities, except as suppliers of luxury items on the one hand, and as a means of selling off the surpluses from their own estates in local towns or fairs, or the capital, on the other. At the same time, the government exercised a somewhat inhibiting control over entrepreneurial enterprise, insofar as it carefully supervised the relationship between traders selling goods to the capital and those who bought those goods and sold them on, or worked them into other commodities. In view of the fact that such control was exercised also over the import and export of other goods, such as grain, between the empire and its neighbors, trade offered only minimal inducements, except where a particular loophole in these arrangements could be exploited, or where a hitherto unregulated commodity was involved. Even foreign traders were subject to these controls, at least until their economic influence became too powerful, in the later twelfth century. Groups of foreign merchants were thus normally resident in a specific quarter, and had to be accompanied by imperial officials when they did business (Angold 1984; Hendy 1989; Jacoby 1991/92).

This contrasts very clearly with the situation in the Italian merchant cities with which the Byzantines did business in the later eleventh and twelfth centuries, especially Venice, Genoa, and Pisa. To begin with, while the major trading cities possessed an agricultural hinterland from which most members of the urban elite derived an income, leading elements of the elites of these cities were at the same time businessmen whose wealth and political power was often dependent as much on commerce as on rents. As they evolved during the eleventh and into the twelfth century, the city-states themselves, increasingly dominated by merchant aristocrats and their clients, came to have a vested interest in the maintenance and promotion of as lucrative and advantageous a commerce as possible, so that the economic and political interests of the leading and middling elements were identical with the interests of the city, its political identity, and its independence from outside interference. State/communal and private enterprise were inseparable. The economic and political well-being of the city as a state was thus to a large extent coterminous with that of the social elite and its dependants. The Byzantine state, in contrast, played no role at all in promoting indigenous enterprise, as far as we can see from the sources, whether for political or economic reasons, and viewed commerce as simply another minor source of state income: commercial activity was regarded as, and was in respect of how the state worked, peripheral to the social values and political system in which it was rooted (Abulafia 1987; Balard 1989; Nicol 1988; Martin 1988).

This difference is not a reflection of the failure of an archaic and statist political-economic system to respond to new conditions, either in respect of international commercial relations or of internal economic growth. There did exist a relatively active, albeit more or less entirely inwardly-directed commerce, and a merchant "class" to conduct it. But the interests of commerce were subordinate to the relationship between the political and ideological structure of the imperial state on the one hand, and to the

perceived interests of the dominant social-economic elite on the other. I emphasize the word *perceived*. Commerce was seen as neither economically nor politically relevant, an apathy conditioned by the way in which state and society had evolved over the centuries. For those at the top of the social scale, it was viewed as both economically unimportant and socially and culturally demeaning; while for those who were involved in trade it brought no social advancement and, for the most part, no great social wealth. This combination of practices, rooted in the value system of the world of ancient elites, was reinforced by the relative economic superiority of the Byzantine over the early medieval western world until the tenth century.

But given these preconditions, and the rise of the Italian maritime cities—especially Venice and Genoa—in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the longer-term results for the Byzantine economy and state were unfortunate. Internal conflicts, military failures, and the political collapse of the later eleventh century, the establishment of a series of hostile Turkish states in Anatolia, and the need for the Byzantines to call upon allies with military and especially naval resources which they could themselves no longer mobilize, pointed the way. The naval weakness of the imperial government throughout the twelfth century, particularly in respect of the threat from the Normans in Sicily, directly promoted reliance upon Venetian assistance, purchased through commercial concessions. Together with the role played by Venice, Pisa, and Genoa, among several cities, during the period following the First Crusade (and the competition between Venice and Genoa in particular), this paved the way for Italian commercial infiltration of the Byzantine economic and exchange sphere during the twelfth century, culminating in the concessions achieved under the emperors of the later twelfth century. Indeed, it was because Italian commerce was on a small scale, and regarded as unimportant to the economic priorities of both state and aristocracy, that it was enabled to prosper. Demographic expansion in Italy stimulated the demand for Byzantine grain and other agrarian produce, which meant that Venetian and other traders slowly built up an established network of routes, ports, and market bases, originally based on carrying Byzantine bulk as well as luxury goods and Italian or western imports to Constantinople, later expanding to a longer-distance commerce to meet the needs of an expanding Italian market. Commerce and merchant or banking activity were no less marginal to the Byzantine elite in the twelfth century than they had been before the eleventh century. Yet while Byzantine society appeared to be solidly based within the traditional framework, a new and much more complex Mediterranean-wide market was evolving, linking East and West, a market upon which cities such as Venice and Genoa depended very heavily for their political existence and the relatively new-found power and wealth of their ruling elites (Laiou 1981/82).

Coinage reforms in the early twelfth century, necessitated by the collapse of the traditional but (from the point of view of market activities) very inflexible monetary system in the 1060s-1080s, made day-to-day money transactions easier. But greater commercial exchange and commodity production, stimulated by the economic expansion of the eleventh century, combined with the greater flexibility of the reformed coinage, also facilitated an increasing involvement of outsiders in internal Byzantine commerce and investment. This was seen chiefly as an irritant and as a political problem by Byzantine commentators, although some also bemoaned the fate of Byzantine merchants. But the observation was itself made possible because of the successful exploitation by Italians of an expanding market which had not impinged upon Byzantine consciousness a

century earlier, although the presence of Italians in Constantinople certainly appears to have stimulated local services, such as the production and supply of naval equipment of all sorts. The real expansion of Venetian and Genoese activity within the empire began toward the end of the twelfth century, when improved relations between the Byzantine government and the Venetians, Genoese, and Pisans reflect Byzantine concerns about the political designs of the emperor Frederick Barbarossa and the need to win friends and allies with naval potential as well as political power in Frederick's geo-political backyard. The concessions granted by Byzantine rulers reflect the notion that trade still occupied a marginal place in the economy of the state. They also reflect both the fact that Byzantine rulers could still effectively exploit the hostile relations between Venice and Genoa and the overwhelmingly non-commercial, political emphasis placed by the imperial government on these matters (Hendy 1985; 1989).

The fourth crusade, which sacked Constantinople in 1204 and carved up the empire, destroyed the traditional order. When a re-constituted central imperial state was revived in 1261, it inhabited a very different world, not simply in terms of the well-established political presence of western powers in the east Mediterranean and Aegean regions, but also in terms of its ability to maintain itself. The reduced income derived from the appropriation of surplus through tax on a much smaller, and constantly shrinking, territorial base; the fragmentation of territory and political authority; and the lack of a serious naval power with which to defend its interests, were fundamental. Income derived from taxes on commerce played a proportionately larger role in real terms as well as in the eyes of the central government. Yet the traditional elite, with few exceptions, was still based on the income from land; while the state itself was unable to compete with Italian and other commercial capital and shipping. In the mid-fourteenth century the emperors attempted to exploit the political situation in the Black Sea at the expense of the Genoese and to bolster the position of Byzantine merchants by reducing dues payable at the port of Constantinople, so that they could compete equally with those imposed upon the majority of Italian traders, and thus promote an increase in imperial revenue. Genoese coercion soon restored the situation. Nevertheless, the emperor's plan reveals the importance of revenues of this sort to the much-reduced empire. But by this time it was too late effectively to change the pattern which had evolved, although a number of Byzantine aristocrats had begun to take an active interest in commerce. With a few exceptions, "Byzantines" or "Greeks" played a generally subordinate role to Italians, sometimes as business partners, often as small-time entrepreneurs, as middlemen, and as wholesalers; frequently as small-scale moneylenders/bankers; rarely as large-scale bankers (although there were some), or major investors, still more rarely in major commercial contracts. Indeed, the market demands of Italian-borne commerce began also to influence the patterns of production within the empire, with the result that the state itself no longer had any effective role in managing or directing the production of wealth (Laiou 1981/82; 1982; Angold 1975).

In the context of the economic growth which affected the whole European and middle eastern world from the tenth and eleventh centuries, the pre-eminence of Italian shipping in trade and commerce within the formerly relatively closed Byzantine sphere had unforeseen effects. First, it contributed toward the economic growth of those Italian merchant cities most involved, and resulted in turn in an increase in their dependency on

that trade for their own internal stability. Second, it deprived the various Byzantine successor states and their elites of any possibility of successfully responding and adjusting to the economic and political conditions which prevailed after 1204 and especially after 1261, since by the time they showed an interest in commerce and shipping on a large scale, Italian merchants, bankers, and shippers already had a long-established dominance, together with a network of markets and a system of business and managerial practices with which Greek enterprise, whether or not supported by a state, could not hope to compete.

Yet commerce became increasingly essential to the growth of local economies within the Byzantine world, at the same time impinging to an ever-greater extent on the traditional means of state-directed redistribution of wealth. Its untrammelled operation contradicted the essence of imperial state control and threatened also the traditional mode of operation of aristocratic landholding and consumption. Byzantine entrepreneurial activity thus posed a threat not only to the state's efforts to maintain a position of dominance with regard to the appropriation and distribution of social wealth; it was also a direct challenge to the pre-eminent position of the landed aristocracy within the state. The operation of the traditional fiscal establishment, together with the ideological and cultural devaluation of commerce, prevented indigenous commerce from taking advantage of expanding markets. Inadequate investment in a context already dominated by Italian shipping in respect of external trade, meant that Byzantine merchants were never in a position to mount an effective challenge.

Neither foreign merchants nor commerce caused the political breakdown of central imperial power, however much they undercut the efforts of the state to retain central control over its resources and, more importantly, the process by which those resources were distributed, especially during the second half of the twelfth century. On the contrary, it was the structural relationship between the centralized bureaucratic state and its fiscal machinery, on the one hand, and the dominant social elite, on the other, which were determinant. This relationship, and the practices through which it was expressed, underlay the political and fiscal collapse of the state in the years immediately prior to the Fourth Crusade; after which the movement of goods in the Aegean and East Mediterranean basin was firmly in the hands of Italian commerce and investors, however important the role of Byzantine and Greek middlemen and petty traders may have been within this network. As the empire shrank, so commerce and trade, rather than land, came to be the main source of state income. But by the end of the empire the government shared only minimally in this resource.

Imperialism and exploitation: the cultural dimension

So far I have surveyed some aspects of the ways in which the imperial government and the social elite of the empire exploited the productive resources of the empire's territories to maintain their own existence: in other words, economic exploitation. These methods of exploitation were, of course, supported by a legal and institutional framework of property relations and state rights, which were themselves important in the realization and maintenance of such structures. But at certain periods exploitation took on a more externalized aspect, when the empire went onto the offensive, both militarily as well as culturally. In the former case, conquest—justified always on the grounds that the

conquered lands were “really” Roman—involved the re-absorption of new territories into the fiscal-administrative apparatus of the state. Conflict arose over who reaped the benefits—the central government, or the provincial elites whose attempts to convert new territories into private estates challenged state fiscal dominance—and thus forms part of the picture already painted. Such exploitation had also a cultural political aspect, insofar as Byzantines, and in particular the Constantinopolitan cultural elite, while siphoning off physical resources from such lands, generally looked down upon the conquered populations as inferior provincials, attitudes sometimes tinged with a “racist” bias in respect of assumed characteristics of different population groups, who were dismissed as “barbaric” or uncultured (although it should be stressed that such views prevailed also in respect of the “indigenous” provincials of the empire, so that there was no real distinction between the two groups of exploited populations) (Whittow 1996; Obolensky 1971; Mango 1994; Dvornik 1970).

In the latter case, Byzantine cultural imperialism tended to take the form of missionary activities to convert conquered populations to the Christianity of the Constantinopolitan patriarchate, and in the period from the middle of the ninth century until the eleventh century there was a conscious policy directed from the capital to establish a Byzantine cultural protectorate in the Balkans in particular, spreading to Kievan Russia through diplomatic and military alliances in the later tenth century. In the central and western Balkans, however, conflict between Rome and Constantinople developed, for the papacy was equally interested in expanding its own ecclesiastical-political (and, therefore, cultural) power in these regions. One of the reasons for the sharpening of tensions between Byzantium and the West lies in this conflict over cultural power in neighboring territories, which served also as political-military as well as cultural buffers between the East Roman world and the barbarian lands beyond them (Dvornik 1948; 1970).

Cultural identity is, obviously, a crucial element in both attitudes toward the “outsider” and in respect of internal social-cultural differentiation. With its roots ultimately in the Roman republic, and with its elite at least consciously aware of its Roman imperial heritage, the Byzantine empire is in truth the last of the ancient empires to survive beyond the great transformative movements of the period from the fifth to the seventh centuries. In particular, its history illustrates the ways in which a political ideological system such as that of the Christian eastern Roman empire possessed the capacity to respond to the very difficult and constantly evolving circumstances in which it found itself. From within the context of the particular social, economic, and cultural conditions prevailing, this system of beliefs was able subtly to shift the angle from which the world was perceived, understood and hence acted upon, by focusing on aspects of the “symbolic universe,” the “thought-world” of the Christian East Roman world, which were better suited to bear new interpretations and alternative ways of thinking about the changed conditions in which people found themselves—although in its final years, and in spite of the intellectual dynamism shown by Plethon or Palamas, no corresponding explanation emerged for the massive divergence between the political realities of the rapidly dwindling Byzantine state and the ideological pretensions to which it was the heir (Dvornik 1966; Haldon 1997).

Through much of its history, the Byzantine symbolic universe was able to absorb the challenges thrown up by the transformed circumstances of its existence, and indeed, in the end, outgrow and outlast even the state which had nurtured it. Yet this flexibility was

founded on a solid footing. Their identity as Roman and Orthodox, together with the Hellenistic and classical Greek cultural heritage in literature in particular which Byzantines cherished as a key symbol of their cultural identity, provided them with a certainty which nothing could shake. And this was true even if educated Byzantines in the ninth and tenth centuries spent a great deal of time pondering the questions raised by their recent history and searching for the historical roots they needed in order to furnish themselves with a clear image of the purpose of the events that had affected them.

It is a paradox that the relative social flexibility and openness of Byzantine society is founded in its late Roman social and political order, for it contrasts in this respect, at least until the fifteenth century, very strongly with the medieval West. Here, a group of successor states and principalities had sprung up on Roman ground, intermixing and integrating quite rapidly with the original elites, on the one hand, and more gradually with the mass of the ordinary indigenous population, on the other. The social relations which eventually evolved out of this produced by the twelfth century a society that was increasingly rigidly hierarchized, in which movement from one social level to another was achieved with great difficulty, if at all. In the Byzantine world, by contrast, it was possible to move from very humble status to that of mighty lord; and although the possibilities varied across time and according to the situation and, especially, the situation and power of the magnate elite, there are examples of several such characters throughout the period.

Identity was essential to survival. Byzantine identities were shaped not in a vacuum, but in the context of both the relations between different elements within society, and of neighboring cultures and peoples. There were two strains or tendencies in particular within Byzantine culture which made a particular contribution to the Byzantine identity, elements which had been combined, not always comfortably, through much of the empire's history, and which finally came into open opposition in the last century or so of the empire's existence. Hellenistic rationalism, and the classical literary and philosophical heritage that accompanied it, had always lived in uneasy co-existence with the religious anti-rationalism and piety of the "fundamentalist" strain of Christianity. In the seventh century, as noted already, this conflict or tension had revealed itself in the debates over issues of causation and faith, resulting in an uneasy compromise. The empire had no serious rivals in the "barbarian" West until the later tenth and eleventh centuries; while in the East the Islamic Caliphate replaced the Sassanid Persian empire as the other major power. The difference between the two was that while the Caliphate was Muslim, it was also civilized; the west was a barbarous region. But when western military and economic strength began to affect this comfortable view of things, the Byzantines coped only with difficulty. Already in the later ninth century pope Nicholas I had humiliated the emperor and his advisers by demonstrating that they were relatively ignorant of their Roman heritage and its traditions, contributing at least in part to an imperially-sponsored revival of interest in Roman law, amongst other things. Western Christianity and its different ways, on the one hand, and the existence of Christian neighbors in the Balkans with whom the empire was often at war, on the other, made a simple identity of Roman empire with (Orthodox) Christianity difficult, if not impossible. Rival political formations which could effectively challenge Byzantine power on land and at sea, and the very public rejection by western powers of Byzantine claims to hegemony, heightened the tensions

and brought home the contradictions in the imperial ideological claims to universal imperial authority. And the simple fact was that, as a result of the missionary activity noted already, after the ninth century the Orthodox Church exercised effective authority over a far wider territory than the Roman emperors themselves. As the empire shrank territorially and politically after 1204 this became even more marked (Angold 1984; Magdalino 1993; Nicol 1972; 1979).

The result was, beginning already in the eleventh-twelfth century, a retreat into “hellenism,” the search for the Greek roots of east Roman culture. Yet ironically, this conceded just the point that had in the first place so outraged Byzantine sensibilities, when in the ninth century western rulers began to refer to the Byzantine emperor as ruler “of the Greeks.” To an extent, the flowering of Greek literature and classicism which marks the period from the twelfth century signals a retreat toward a form of cultural isolationism, through which Byzantines could continue to believe in their own superiority and difference, in their right to be the Chosen People, and in their destiny as the true representatives of God's kingdom on earth, regardless of the political realities.

These tendencies, both in their metropolitan and their provincial forms, became even more marked as the empire shrank and fragmented. After 1204, the patronage of an imperial court disappeared, to be replaced by the much less generous support, for a more limited range of cultural activities, of the various small successor states, and even after the restoration of the empire in 1261, the provincialization of much cultural production as well as the reduction in expenditure is apparent. But by this time the realities of Byzantine politics and economic life and the formal ideology of the empire could no longer be comfortably matched. The empire became a small and dependent state, its rulers impoverished, its treasury empty, its defences dependent upon foreign goodwill or hired soldiers. At the same time, the power and authority of the Church which, of course, now exercised authority over more territory than the imperial government, grew in proportion as imperial authority declined. In the last century of the empire's life, indeed, it was often the Church, with its greater resources and greater authority, which paid for or maintained defensive structures and the soldiers to man them. And as the Byzantine state declined, so the retreat into a Greek and Orthodox identity independent of the earthly empire became an increasingly prominent feature of late Byzantine thought.

It was in this context that a clash of ideas took place between the Hellenistic rationalist tradition, so recently revitalized, and the so-called hesychastic movement, with its anti-rationalist emphasis on personal sanctity, contemplation, and the power of prayer. There had long been a tradition of mysticism in the eastern Church, in which it was open to any Christian to attain a momentary union with the divinity through meditation and spiritual devotion. This tradition had co-existed alongside the Hellenistic elements of Byzantine culture, and a substantial theological literature evolved around the issue of contemplation. But the advent of hesychasm, with its alien modes of posture and meditative practices, caused both concern and ridicule among many traditional thinkers. The two perspectives were embodied in the politics of the time, with the hesychasts able to dominate the imperial court during the period of civil war of the 1340s and to retain considerable authority thereafter. To what extent the hesychastic movement reflected also a response to the political decline of the empire and a flight from the concerns of a secular and religious tradition that appeared to be doomed to extinction, is impossible to say. But the effects of this influence in cultural terms is not hard to see—a real reduction in the study

of the natural and physical sciences (mathematics, astronomy, music) as well as of history and classical literature, and a corresponding rise in the amount of virulent anti-Latin polemic. Scholars of this classical heritage there continued to be, but in far fewer numbers and working in a more isolated cultural environment.

Yet an extreme version of the alternative, Hellenistic, tradition also found its protagonists, most notably at Mistra in the southern Peloponnese, in the person of George Gemistus Plethon, who moved to the opposite extreme by rejecting Christianity and proposing a Hellenic religion in which the moral precepts of Plato would predominate, and in which an ideal state, ruled by a philosopher-king and guided by the rule of law—modeled on Plato's *Laws*—would provide the Greeks with a new future. But his more extreme ideas were never taken up, while his more moderate notions on reforming the state could not have worked in view of the inevitable opposition they aroused from the landowning and ecclesiastical elite.

The appearance of these two variant aspects of the Byzantine tradition nicely illustrate the ways in which Byzantines tried to come to terms with the dramatic changes their society was undergoing in its final years. It is ironic that, in the end, the last Byzantines, who increasingly had begun to call themselves *Hellenes*, Greeks, rather than *Romaioi*, Romans, turned their back on the Roman part of their heritage in order to maintain their delusion of superiority and to preserve the force of the imperial ideology. They sought to preserve their identity through a quest for a lost Hellenic—a classical Greek—identity, on the one hand, or a mystical spiritualism which largely ignored the realities of contemporary politics, on the other. Political leaders retreated into literary and artistic pursuits and interests. From the point of view of Hellenic culture and imperial ideology, it was the Church which became the heir to the Roman empire in the East.

Although the secular state of Byzantium disappeared, the culture which it had nurtured and represented for so long continued to exist through the study of patristic and Byzantine theological literature within the Orthodox world, particularly in monastic contexts; and in the study of the classics and history, especially in Italy, to which many learned Byzantines removed prior to or shortly after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The influence of Byzantine learning in all fields, as well as of the classical tradition in Byzantine painting, was fundamental to the shaping of the Italian Renaissance thereafter. And even within the new Ottoman world a number of Greek historians were able to chronicle the last years of the empire, some espousing a pro-Ottoman perspective, others remaining studiously neutral in their account of the disappearance of what had been the foremost power in the East Mediterranean and Balkan region. This historiographical inheritance along with many other facets of Byzantine civilization, was then transmitted to the European Enlightenment scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and so on to our own time. But it is an inheritance that concerns not simply the transmission of a culture and its forms to our own forbears. It has had a direct impact both on western European responses to the history of the Balkans and the Levant up to the present day, and it has even more directly (through the school syllabus, the structures and traditions of the modern Orthodox Church, the political agendas of politicians from the later eighteenth century into the twenty-first century) affected the political and cultural evolution of Greece, Turkey, and their neighbors.

Conclusions: models and methods

I have approached the evolution of the structures that made up “Byzantium” from two perspectives, although they have remained more or less implicit. On the one hand, I have chosen to foreground purely “economic” categories, looking chiefly at patterns of resource use: how were resources appropriated, distributed, and consumed, and what were the points of conflict between different social-economic groups, or classes, generated by these relationships? Naturally, one must begin by defining “the economic.” But from this point of view, any explanation of the course of Byzantine history and the fate of its state and social institutions must recognize and give explanatory priority less to any tension or contradiction between the interests of “exploiters” and “exploited,” than to those between the two chief elements of the social-political elite, i.e., the power elite which dominated the central government at any given moment, and the provincial elite which derived its power from land and the resources they provided (and bearing in mind that the two were rarely clearly separable, frequently overlapped, and depended for their constitution on very short-term vested political-ideological—including kinship—interests). Such tensions are systemic, that is to say, they are unavoidable aspects of the ways in which elites extract resources from producers, and can be found without exception in all pre-modern state systems.

The different fiscal institutional arrangements evolved in the Byzantine empire over the period from the fourth to the fifteenth century reflect both the government's need to maintain control over enough resources to assure its economic and political dominance, and such conflicts of interests. They also reflect the international situation in respect of changing degrees of competition for natural and man-made resources, including people and territory. I have also built into this model all the cultural factors outlined above, so that political praxis as well as notions of “efficiency” are obviously to be understood as culturally circumscribed by the “common sense” of the culture. Thus it is possible to resolve the issue of whether or not Byzantine society was “feudal” at some periods firstly by redefining what this term is meant to imply from the point of view of economic relationships, and secondly by seeing shifts in the social and political relations of surplus distribution, which produce changes in the institutional arrangements of state and society, as one aspect of this tension. It is thus tensions and contradictions in the basic economic structures which play the fundamental role in determining how the society evolves and responds to shifts in its external circumstances and its internal constitution (Haldon 1993).

On the other hand, I have also employed a more explicitly Darwinian approach, following Runciman, for example, in seeing the history of the empire as determined by the results of the competitive selection of social, ideological, and political-institutional practices. This again helps to locate those points within the social structure and across time at which certain developments, including developments within the ideological sphere, begin to generate effects which can be seen (from the historian's perspective) to lead to specific negative or positive results, why they were originally “selected,” and how that process occurred. The combination of practices which generated Byzantine attitudes to the production of wealth, for example, and the resultant responses of both individuals, on the one hand, and ruling or governing elites, on the other, to the issues of commerce and trade, can be shown to have had important positive consequences for the survival of the empire in the period up to the ninth century. But in the context of a somewhat

different international economic and political situation, after the tenth century especially, it is their negative results for both ruling elite and imperial government which become apparent. In the late period, it is true, and under the influence of different circumstances, certain groups were able successfully to challenge these practices; but by then the economic context had already altered sufficiently for the resultant changes to be ineffectual. By the same token, the statist or dirigist fiscal and monetary régime which the empire inherited from the later Roman world, and which it refined during the seventh through ninth centuries, clearly contributed to the survival of the empire and its ability to consolidate and even expand thereafter. Yet it was these very institutional patterns which led to the collapse of the monetary and fiscal system in the middle and later eleventh century, paradoxically at a time when the non-state economic sector was flourishing (Harvey 1989; Hendy 1989). One of the most valuable aspects of Runciman's theorization of the competitive selection of social practices and emergence of systactic structures is that it automatically assumes the instrumentality of beliefs, which traditional materialist approaches frequently neglect.

Neither approach excludes the other. On the contrary, I would argue that, while the first provides a framework or metatheory within which to ask general questions about dynamics and evolutionary potentials, the second offers a valuable model for the microstructural analysis of these dynamics and their evolution. Together, they help to make some sense of an extremely complex array of sources, including textual, archaeological, and representational materials. This explicit methodological pluralism may thus appear to abandon a single metatheory in favor of a more particularist heuristic framework; in fact, I would argue that it is possible still to work within a single overarching theoretical strategy and employ second-order theories to tackle specific issues—as long as the two share a common philosophical basis (in this case, epistemologically realist and materialist) (Bhaskar 1978, 1987; Hillel-Rubin 1979; McLennan 1989). Since the questions we ask must inevitably determine the shape of the theories we generate to provide answers, this seems to me a reasonable way to avoid both methodological relativism and monocausal determinism.

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