

# BYZANTINE POLITICAL HISTORY

*Frederic Will, Ph.D.*

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## GOVERNMENT

**Overview** The Byzantine government was grafted on to a version of the western Roman Imperial government, at the time when Constantine first moved the Empire to Constantinople, but from that point on, following the sinuous curve of Byzantine history, the Byzantine government adopted an increasingly unique form of almost Oriental protocol, in which ceremony and diplomacy occupied important roles. The following will be notes on some of the traits of the distinctive government that Byzantium adapted, on the old Roman base.

**Early centuries: 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup>C.E.** At the beginning the administration of Byzantium made gestures toward adapting the formal government style of the early Roman Empire. Times however had changed, and from the start Byzantium had no way to replicate the republican institutions of an earlier age--and different place. The Byzantine government preserved a fiction of a senate, without legislative or executive power, but ascribed all power to the Emperor who--as was almost never the case in the Roman Empire--was taken to be an expression of divinity. The origins of a courtly bureaucracy, which was to be the later trademark of Byzantium, can be seen in the array of courtly eminences who begin to gather around the Emperor, each playing out roles in the closet drama of a self-involved empire.

**After the Islamic intervention** The Islamic incursions of the early 7<sup>th</sup> century convulsed the Byzantine Empire and decimated its treasury, but continuity was guaranteed, in Constantinople, by the durability of the civil service--the courtly office holders around the Emperor were a significant part of this retinue, as were the old office-holding aristocrats-, who were themselves both the lucky by birth, and the new land holding aristocrats.

**The theme system** By the seventh century C.E. the Byzantine government had, despite the constant pressure of assaults from outside, begun to master the art of controlling its own vast territories. A major step in this direction, already mentioned in our entries on Byzantine military matters, was the organization of the Empire into themes, or military government controlled divisions. These organizational units, each under the control of its own military/civilian governor, were not only to replace the former civilian administrative units, but were to form the nuclei of governmental outreach until the last days of the Empire.

**Meanwhile back at court** It would be hard to overstate the complexity and refinement of the court officialdom, which was meanwhile--as the theme system was developing and the 'barbarian' was constantly at the gates--developing into a network of checks and balances, and diplomatic manoeuvrings, by the hierarchies of functionaries who made up the court life of Constantinople itself. It would also be a mistake, we are coming to learn, to underestimate the underlying functionality of this hierarchical system, a ballet of protocols of which one purpose was to promote and receive complex diplomatic missions, mediating between the Emperor and the 'outside world'--there was a Bureau of Barbarian Affairs in the center of the capital, and there were spies at every foreign court--and, in the end, just 'keeping the machinery of government moving from one Emperor to the next.

## Reading

Haldon, John, *Byzantium in the 7<sup>th</sup> century: The Transformation of a Culture*, Cambridge, 1997.

Treadgold, Warren, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, Stanford, 1997.

### Discussion questions

The Emperor was viewed as 'related to divinity.' What was the role of the Church, and its higher authorities, in running the government of Byzantium?

Did the complex stratification of court personnel, in Byzantium, serve a useful purpose? What would it be, or have been?

What role did Justinian's law code, instituted in the sixth century C.E., play in the organization and direction of the Byzantine government?

### MILITARY

**Overview** As we meet it, in history, the Byzantine army is already simply a brother to and child of the imperial Roman army of the West. Though Byzantium was already a Greek city state at the time of ancient Athens, it was not until Constantine moved the Empire eastward to Constantinople, in 323 C.E., that the military history that meets us in these excerpts comes into flowering. What then flowers, in Byzantium, is a powerful army and navy based in every respect--organization, weaponry, strategic command--on the basic forms of the western Roman military. Those basic forms, though seriously altered, will persist in the Byzantine military forces through the millennium that follows Constantine's move.

### An historical glimpse

**The early stage** One can imagine that the military history of a vast Empire, over a millennium, is in a constant state of change. The Byzantine Empire was continually under military pressure from without, as was the western Roman Empire, especially in its last centuries. During the early centuries of 'Byzantium,' through the reign of Justinian (482-565 C.E.), one might generalize that the Byzantines fought like Roman soldiers, in all the familiar accoutrements, arranged by infantry legions, and supported by cavalry.

**The advent of Islam and foreign incursions** The advent of Muslim military forces, in the seventh century and after, meant that a new kind of military administration was required. It was not just a question of military strength, or powerful attack techniques, like the Greek fire mentioned in the entry under 'Byzantine innovations,' but a question of using effectively the resources of the fast growing population of the Byzantine Empire. The major military-administrative move here, top down from the Emperor, was to institute a system of *themes*, military districts, in which there would be win-win recruitment of free peasants, who serve as career military, while in the end receiving land in payment.

**After the Islamic interventions** The government's finances were ruined by the Muslim interventions, but land they had to offer until, at the end of the Empire, the feudal system began to eat away at the land available for recruitment. In the final centuries of the Empire, even after the (to the Byzantines) disastrous defeat at Manzikert (1071 C.E.) and the Crusaders' plundering of their capital (1204 C.E.), the Byzantine army was still able to stage major land grabs in the Balkans, Syria, Armenia, and even Italy. The careful use of mercenaries--who were clamoring for money and war on the borders of the Empire--was for a long time an aid to growth, though first the Seljuk, then the Ottoman Turks were to prove far too much for the shrinking Byzantine army, which folded in 1453.

### Reading

Dennis, George T., *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Military Strategy*, Philadelphia, 1984.

Martusis, Mark, *The Late Byzantine Army: Arms and Society 1204-1453*, Philadelphia, 1997.

### **Discussion questions**

Did the geo-political location of Byzantium make it vulnerable to eventual destruction? Or were the seeds of invulnerability latent in its social and economic inequalities?

How did Byzantine weaponry and fighting style change after contact with Arabic and Muslim fighting styles? Did the two opponents learn military technique from one another?

What was the *theme-system*, which the Byzantines used so effectively to recruit among the free peasantry, after the Muslim interventions? How did a late burst of Feudalism help to undermine the *theme system*?