

BYZANTIUM GOVERNMENT

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

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: 4th to 7thC.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 7th 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 7th 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?