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Rethinking Empire

Symposiarchs: Dimiter Angelov and Paul Magdalino

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ABSTRACTS

INTRODUCTION

Defining Empire

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How have empires defined themselves? What is the relationship between their chosen designation and their territorial and constitutional reality? To what extent does their self-designation distinguish between empire, kingship, and statehood, and how meaningful are these distinctions? We apply these questions to a selection of states that succeeded, directly or indirectly, to the Roman imperial system in Europe and the Near East. In the first part, Paul Magdalino looks at the imperialism of the European Great Powers that were at war with each other one hundred years ago. In the second part, Dimiter Angelov turns the focus back to Byzantium, the most direct successor and continuation of the Roman Empire in the medieval world.

The First World War, which effectively put an end to the "Age of Empire," involved six great European powers—the Ottoman Empire, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, France, and Great Britain—whose common feature was their imperial status. This derived in part from their political structures, and in part from their political self-designation. All were multiethnic, highly centralized states that had emerged from the agglomeration of smaller

polities and that were held together by the imposition of an aggressive nationalism. All were, or had recently been, monarchies. All were de facto heirs to the Roman Empire and, except for the Ottoman Empire, reflected this in their titulature. Yet it was precisely in the adoption of imperial terminology that they varied most significantly. A comparison of usages by the different European powers will help to clarify what the concept of empire, as distinct from other notions of state authority, signified in European political culture at the most imperial moment in modern history.

The Byzantines defined their statehood through a Greek conceptual vocabulary that they inherited from antiquity and that persisted, with minor modifications, over the centuries. An analysis of this conceptual vocabulary goes beyond traditional studies of the emperor's titulature and pertains to the cultural translation of Latin political terminology, the influence of the scriptures, the coexistence of semantic variations conditioned by historical and discursive contexts, and the carryover of concepts and ideas through rhetorical education. Key political concepts and their relevance to empire will be examined: *basileia, kratos, autokratoria, politeia, politeuma, exousia, tyrannis, oikoumene.* While Byzantium's identity as an empire should always be approached on its own terms, it cannot be fully understood today through its own terms. A comparative perspective is particularly valuable, because it allows us to study the peculiarities of Byzantium as an imperial polity constituted on the Roman model and leads us to new and potentially enriching angles of analysis. With this view in mind and pursuing questions of definition, this introductory paper inquires whether, and in which ways, the Byzantine state in the later centuries of its existence merits the designation of "empire."

Jennifer Davis

Rethinking Empire: The Carolingian Perspective

In 806, the Frankish emperor Charlemagne drew up a plan to divide his empire after his death between his three sons by his favorite wife. The document recording the plan uses the language of both empire and kingdom. This makes a great deal of sense, as the plan proposed in 806 was, in keeping with Frankish tradition, to divide Charlemagne's territory into three pieces, one for each son. The imperial title was not to be passed on, and each son was to receive his own kingdom, a *regnum*. Charlemagne's plans were thwarted by his own long life and the fact that, by 811, only one of the three designated heirs was still alive, and his least favorite at that. Accordingly, Charlemagne bowed to the inevitable and recognized the future Louis the Pious as his sole heir, crowning him coemperor in a ceremony in Aachen in 813 (a rare direct borrowing from Byzantine practice, albeit reworked in a Frankish idiom).

This anecdote about Frankish succession politics reveals some of the key dynamics for studying empire in the Carolingian context and, indeed, some of the reasons why the Carolingian polity is not always studied as an empire. First of all, for much of its existence, the Carolingian realm was ruled as a series of kingdoms, not as one empire. After the death of Louis the Pious in 840, the full empire was only united under one ruler for a few short years at the end of the ninth century. Second, under Charlemagne, the most powerful of the Frankish rulers, the imperial aspect of rule was quite muted. The imperial coronation in 800 had virtually no effect on how he actually ruled, and the title that continued to define his power was the traditional one: king of the Franks, *rex Francorum*. Moreover, the Carolingian empire lacked some of the structural features often used to define empires, like a regular

system of taxation or a standing army. For all these reasons, one could argue that the Carolingian polity was a group of linked kingdoms, and not an empire.

Yet, such a vision would limit our understanding of the Carolingian world. Despite the multiple kingdoms, Carolingian sources evince a clear sense of Frankish unity and of connections that transcended the divisions among the kingdoms. The concept of empire remained important, and increasingly so during the ninth century, as an essential component of the Carolingian ideology of rulership. While Charlemagne himself may have been little interested in empire as a concept, he in fact created one in practical terms, and his techniques of rule were deeply shaped by the exigencies of ruling an empire. In this sense, the Carolingian empire was not as different from its contemporaries, like the Byzantine and Abbasid, as is sometimes assumed. To understand fully the nature of the Carolingian polity, we need to follow Charlemagne's 806 succession plan and characterize it as both kingdom and empire at once. In analyzing the balance between kingship and empire in the Carolingian world, this paper will seek to explore how the combination shaped Carolingian society. By placing this atypical empire into the context of other empires, like the Byzantine, it is hoped that the particular nature of the Carolingian empire will emerge more clearly, and that some further light might be shed, through the process of comparison, on the range of possibilities for how early medieval empires worked.

Emma Dench

Learning from the Past, Learning from the Future: Contemporary Approaches to the Earlier Roman Empire

Approaches to the Roman empire have traditionally been atomized along disciplinary, methodological, regional, and, above all, chronological lines. The "earlier Roman empire" has been splintered three ways: the "imperialism" of the formative period of expansion in the Republic (particularly from the late third to early second century BCE), focusing more or less exclusively on "the Romans" as military and political actors; the "Roman government of the empire of the Caesars," with its anatomies of taxation and provincial structures; and "provincial cultures": regional, material-based studies of housing, religion, urbanization, etc.

Although these divisions still stand to some extent, especially in syntheses and student collections, recent decades have seen the success of experimenting with innovative approaches that have worked well for other periods. For example, the response model of the empire of the Caesars (rooted, ironically, in Fergus Millar's polemically anti-theoretical *The Emperor in the Roman World*), if applied to the Republican empire, encourages us to take seriously the authority, dynamism, and bargaining power of local structures.

But sometimes we might want to do the opposite, to disentangle teleological thinking. My short case-study of this phenomenon might be called "Waiting for Monotheism." It considers the history of thinking about the earlier Roman empire as a singular belief system, and about empire as a conversion process. I hope participants will be able to help with the question of how far these models of belief and conversion are even appropriate for the Eastern Roman empire.

Sylvain Destephen

From Moving Center to Centralization: The Foundations of Byzantine Imperial Government

The foundation of Constantinople as a new or second capital of the Roman Empire brought about a change in the orientation of the movements of the imperial court. These movements are mainly known to us through legal documentation, since emperors on the move enacted a large number of laws. A small part of this activity has been preserved in the two legal compilations of late antiquity: the Theodosian Code and the Code of Justinian. Even though these laws do not necessarily represent the emperors' day-to-day activities, they are nevertheless the primary source of information for reconstituting the geography and chronology of their travels. Constantinople, poised exactly between the Danubian and Euphrates frontiers, was the hub of these travels. By the end of the fourth century, official trips were limited to the regions close to the capital and, after 450, to the vicinity of Constantinople. This progressive sedentarization of imperial power represented a concentration of authority and did not in any way manifest its impotence.

Niels Gaul

Recording, Writing, and Enacting Empire: Officeholders as Agents of Empire in the Middle and Later Byzantine Periods

My paper examines the role of civil servants in the Eastern Roman imperial system from the seventh century to the end of the Byzantine polity in 1453. In search of a workable definition, it categorizes as civil servants those who held office in the imperial administration, often in conjunction with a dignity (a distinction that disappears, for the top offices, in the late period), as well as the patriarchal hierarchy. Officeholders thus overlapped to a significant degree with at least two other (also overlapping) social groups, courtiers and literati, without being entirely identical with either of these. Among imperial and patriarchal officials, the paper examines those who worked in the center, in one of the central ministries or the clergy

of the patriarchate; in the provinces as provincial judges (*kritai*) or tax-assessors and collectors; and across the empire, as metropolitan bishops.

The argument to take these two groups together derives from the comparable secondary education (*paideia*) in classicizing Greek—the imperial language—they received in the schools of the capital to make them fit for office, and from otherwise blurred distinctions between the two. For example, the correspondence of the tenth-century "anonymous schoolmaster" makes clear that his pupils pursued either of these career paths; at the same time, patriarchal officials such as the master of rhetors were imperial appointments. These educational structures, including the oft-neglected role of legal education, will be briefly traced through the centuries; in particular, the surviving evidence for (oral) entrance examinations into the ranks of officeholders will be analyzed. At the same time, the centralized education ensured that there was less cultural, and also ethnic, diversity among officeholders than other groups of imperial agents. This is perhaps best encapsulated by the reemergence of a Hellenizing discourse within, and on the fringes of, this very group from the twelfth century onward.

The spatial aspects of Byzantine officeholding and its role in creating cohesion across the empire have rarely received the attention they deserve, and will form the second part of this paper. It will sample the social backgrounds and careers of civil servants who hailed from the capital and were born into the existing imperial elite, as well as those who stemmed from the provinces and climbed socially through officeholding. It will examine especially the shift from the former to the latter, from a first-tier to a second-tier elite as it were, that becomes visible in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Recruitment into the civil service played a role in creating an empire-wide second-tier elite circulating through Constantinople and in

facilitating social mobility for the sake of (social) cohesion. The question to what degree this recruitment replaced other social features that tied the provinces to the center, such as eunuchism, will be addressed.

The final part examines the roles these officeholders, through their learning and its display, played in the Byzantine culture of empire, especially in two respects. The first is written political culture and record keeping (what Catherine Holmes has productively dubbed "political literacy") and its enactment in the political culture of empire. The second is the display of imperial and patriarchal (and, by extension, the first-tier elite's) glory in rhetorical performances (*theatra*), especially, but not only, in the capital: part of Byzantium's unique rhetoricized imperial culture. While the former embodied imperial traditions and visualized the workings of empire in ink on papyrus, parchment, or, later, paper, the latter—extolling the Eastern Roman cultural archive of the sophists, the fathers, and the classics beyond both—impressed on their audiences the cultural capital of empire (*basileia*) in both the worldly and spiritual spheres. It is not least in the circulation of these officeholders of all ranks to and through Constantinople, and from Constantinople to the provinces, that I see the empire come to life as a territorial polity. In the absence of *limes*-like borders, the Eastern Roman *politeia* extended as far as its *politai*—in the sense of agents of empire, with a vested interest in its survival—traveled in order to record and display empire; in this regard, officeholders played a key role.

John Haldon

Empire and Territory: Perceptions and Realities

We speak of the Byzantine or medieval Eastern Roman "empire," but do the political and geographical realities of its long existence merit this description? In this paper and in

reference to both medieval and modern notions of what constitutes an empire, I will compare the realities of the Byzantine experience with its self-image. How far did real or imaginary or ideal borders match political and cultural realities? How was pragmatic geographical knowledge constituted and how was the intellectual and ideological shape of the Byzantine world reconciled with such knowledge? And finally, how did these relationships change and mutate over time, and under what circumstances? These are big questions and this paper will not be able to supply satisfactory answers to all of them, but I hope to sketch in the basic framework for such an investigation and to open up some trajectories for future work.

Cemal Kafadar

The Long and Winding Road to Empire: The Sublime State from the Late Fourteenth to the Mid-Sixteenth Century

Although it is conventional to speak of the Ottoman state graduating from a frontier principality into an empire under Mehmed II, and there are good reasons for doing so, one could develop an alternative and likewise plausible narrative of a long and winding road to empire from the late fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century. This paper will investigate the merits of each of these narratives from the perspective of Ottoman self-representation as embodied in Ottoman history-writing, chancery documents, and architecture. Criteria such as scale, territoriality, diversity, coercive power, and imperial heritage(s) will be considered as they are taken into account in Ottoman sources, particularly in an official chronicle (ca. 1600) that ventures a comparative evaluation of the "Sublime State" against all empires past and contemporaneous.

Anthony Kaldellis

Was Byzantium a "Multiethnic" Empire?

Recent theoretical discussions of empire as a transhistorical phenomenon define it as the conquest and rule by one ethnic or religious group of a number of others: imperial rule entails the management of that difference. Every empire is therefore by definition a multiethnic empire. When historians refer to Byzantium as an empire, however, they do not always have this definition in mind. The term is often used as a gesture to the ancient *imperium* from which Byzantium arose, or in reference to its ruler's titular pretensions, as being greater than a mere "king." But was Byzantium a multiethnic empire in the sense defined above? There is a tradition of calling it that, yet no study has ever sought to ascertain whether the label is accurate, because we have no study of ethnicity in Byzantium. Did a minority ethnic group in Byzantium rule over a number of others who were the majority of the population, thereby making the empire multiethnic, comparable in this sense to the Achaemenid, early Roman, and Ottoman empires? Can we identify the alleged ethnicities that made Byzantium a multiethnic empire, or are we really talking about a mostly homogeneous ethnic state that (at times) ruled over a small number of smaller minority groups?

Based on a first-ever "ethnic inventory" of the Byzantine empire, this paper argues in favor of the latter alternative. Yet here we also have to be sensitive to modern theoretical discussions of the nature of ethnic identity and reject the racialist thinking that has prevailed, and continues to persist, in many areas of Byzantine studies. Ethnicities must be postulated on the basis of discursive claims, though historically they are not constituted solely by such claims, which may, in addition, be misleading rhetorical artifacts (for example, referring to geography rather than ethnicity, or in an antiquarian sense to ancient, long-extinct groups). Moreover, ethnicities are not immutable or immortal, and one of the most distinguishing

marks of the Roman-Byzantine imperial tradition was its ability to absorb initially foreign

groups into its mainstream culture and cause them to shed differentiating ethnic affiliations.

Armed with these distinctions and the database of ethnic attributions (both emic and etic),

this paper will survey the changing ethnic articulation of the empire between ca. 950 AD and

1050 AD and assess the degree to which it can be called a multiethnic empire—to wit, an

empire at all.

Paul Magdalino

Rethinking Theocracy

This paper addresses the religious dimension of empire by discussing, with respect to

Byzantium, the value of the concept of theocracy as a constitutional description for a certain

type or phase of imperial statehood. Political regimes throughout history, until the French

Revolution, acknowledged the sovereignty of a supernatural power, and attributed their

successful hegemony to divine favor and intervention. Yet the rise of monotheism introduced

a new degree of submission to an all-powerful deity, and the political articulation of this

obedience can appropriately be described as theocratic. Theocracy may thus be considered to

have begun in the nation of ancient Israel and to have peaked, in different ways, in the early

Islamic Caliphates and the Reform Papacy.

Between its ancient beginnings and its medieval culmination, theocracy was undoubtedly

central to the transformation of the Roman Empire, with the adoption of Christianity by

Constantine and his successors, which enhanced the majesty, universalism, and centralization

of the Roman state apparatus. The Empire became progressively associated with, and

assimilated to, the notion of an eschatological Kingdom of God that Christianity derived from

Jewish messianic thought; the perception of the earthly court constantly enriched the conception of its heavenly counterpart as a model for imitation. This tendency to theocracy became explicit in the seventh century, as the universalism and even the future existence of the Christian Empire was challenged by other monotheisms: the Empire identified directly with the Kingdom of God, the emperor claimed cosovereignty (*symbasileia*) with Christ, and the Roman people were designated as the Elect Nation of God. These three notions infused imperial ideology during the crisis and revival of the Byzantine state from the seventh to the eleventh century, and remained implicit in official rhetoric thereafter. However, the theory of theocracy was limited by its rhetorical formulation, by the persistence of Roman constitutional tradition, and by the implications of Christ's statement that his kingdom was not of this world.

Angel Nikolov

The Imperial Project of Symeon I of Bulgaria (893–927): Byzantine Frameworks and Aftermath

This paper discusses the ways and means of Bulgaria's transformation into an Orthodox empire at the turn of the tenth century. During the reign of Symeon I, the renewed Bulgarian political and military confrontation with the Byzantine Empire gave rise to a new and unprecedented phenomenon: the first Bulgarian emperor's bid to take on the role of one of God's elect, destined to single-handedly wield power over the Bulgarians and *Rhomaioi*. Symeon's ideas ripened gradually in the context of the religious and cultural policies of his father, Boris-Michael, who converted the Bulgarians to Christianity. Young Symeon's stay in Constantinople in the 870s played a key role in the shaping of this project. There he gained intimate knowledge not only of imperial propaganda and ceremony, but of Byzantine

political thinking as well. Unsurprisingly, a major aspect of Symeon's policy for two decades was his urge to turn Bulgaria, through various means, into a new center of Eastern Christendom. These means included the intensive translation of patristic works from Greek into Slavonic, large-scale church construction, the transfer of holy relics to the new capital of Preslav and other local centers, and the attempt to establish a religious cult for Boris-Michael very soon after his death on May 2, 907. Altogether, this suggests that Symeon regarded his imperial project not as a new instrument to continue the expansionist policy bequeathed by his pagan predecessors, but as a mission to formalize his position as a great ruler chosen by God to take the reins of the Eastern Roman Empire.

Vivien Prigent

One for All, All for One? Provincial Elites and the Empire

Byzantium was a very atypical empire. Most polities meriting the designation "empire" flourished during their expansion phase when growing in resources and experienced difficulties as the initial momentum faded out. By contrast, Byzantium was something like a bonsai empire, especially good at managing a relatively small pool of resources from a limited territory and experiencing difficulties when it overstretched itself, for example, under Justinian or during the eleventh century. These resources stemmed from the provinces, and their sound management required an efficient base from among the local elite. But the nature of the local elite was far from uniform and the degree of control exercised by the emperor on the resources of different provinces varied accordingly. For our topic, the most important differentiating factor was the degree of dependence of this elite on the empire for the sake of perpetuating its own dominant position. Given the comparative nature of the symposium, we should keep in mind that the most stable of all states in history has been the Japanese

Tokugawa shogunate, whose origin lies in a compact between an autocrat and provincial aristocrats who accepted his authority in exchange for protection against their own underlings in the context of endemic civil wars.

Was the status of Byzantine provincial elite achieved within the framework of the empire or outside of it? Could aristocrats maintain their elite status without the backing of the empire? Could they do so when they were uprooted from a given geographical area? And, if so, at what cost? These questions allow us to trace diverse provincial elite profiles, ranging from the properly "imperial" Sicilian aristocracy born of traumatic events to the defiant Armenian dynasts of eleventh-century Cappadocia, from the Latin-speaking, economically fledgling Lombard gentry craving for pensions to the proper Constantinopolitan gentlemen longing for the City by the *zarzakon* fire in what they perceived to be cultural backwaters.

A key factor to consider is the growing internal hierarchy of the aristocracy. An accumulation of resources, whether political or economic, and a swelling up of the ranks of the imperial aristocracy accompanied expansion. Numbers mattered a great deal. Even when the emperor was lauded as the sun around which every grandee orbited, many of the grandees were able to attract minor aristocrats as their faithful satellites. Ultimately, the growing dependence of the local, second-tier aristocrats on their patrons for the sake of perpetuating their own status could impact their fidelity toward the empire and the ability of the empire to control the provinces effectively.

Michael Puett

Comparative Reflections on Empires in Chinese Late Antiquity

Much fruitful work has been undertaken comparing the Han dynasty of China with

the Roman empire. Surprisingly, however, very little work has been done on the immediately subsequent periods—comparing the early Byzantine empire with the empires of Chinese late antiquity. This paper will attempt to sketch such a comparison. I will look at how both the Byzantine empire and the empires of Chinese late antiquity positioned themselves vis-à-vis earlier empires, and how we might think about these empires in terms of a larger understanding of Eurasian history.

Annabel Wharton

Imperial Peripheries and Holy Sepulchres

This paper considers the periphery of empire. In common discourse, "periphery" may suggest passivity, referring to a line that forms a boundary and delimits a space. It is familiarly used to describe those territories that are most distant from their cultural or political center, provinces exploited to maintain the wealth of the core. But "periphery" may refer more aggressively to the zone that both defines the center and challenges its power. This periphery is not linear, like a border, nor is it necessarily territorially distant, like an outpost; rather it is unevenly distributed resistance, with enclaves of alien acts that disrupt the dominant authority.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was one such enclave on the imperial Ottoman periphery. Because of its associations with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Sepulchre was a site of intense Christian veneration and, consequently, desire. The passion for possessing the Holy Sepulchre was most often realized through its reproduction in the form of texts, diagrams, drawings, and models. But in the Middle Ages and even into Early Modernity, that craving was occasionally expressed in calls

for a violent military occupation of Jerusalem: a crusade. Through an exploration of the building's body and a few of its fractious progeny, this paper describes how the Holy Sepulchre and its apparently pacific replications contributed to the incitement of violence at the edge of empire.