BACKGROUND: FROM LATE ANTIQUITY TO THE MIDDLE AGES

RESTRUCTURING THE EMPIRE: THE SEVENTH CENTURY

No state titled Byzantium by either its population or its government ever existed. This conventional label appeared only in the sixteenth century, well after the fall of the empire. The people who inhabited the empire’s towns and countryside in the Middle Ages continued to use the tradition-honored title, the Roman Empire (basileia ton Rhomaion), as their self-designation. The term Byzantium was applied only to the empire’s capital, but even that usage was an affected anachronism, alluding to the remote past, since in 330 A.D. the old city of Byzantium on the Bosporus had been rededicated by Constantine the Great to his own glory as Constantinople. Contemporaries usually referred to the capital as “the imperial city” or, literally, “the queen of cities,” the Greek word for “city” (polis) being feminine. The state was called Romania by its western neighbors and Rum by some of its eastern ones. And there are still scholars who prefer “the East Roman Empire” to “the Byzantine Empire.” Since, then, no emperor, senate, or band of audacious rebels ever abolished the Roman Empire and introduced in its stead a new Byzantine state, any date chosen as marking the transition from Roman antiquity to medieval Byzantium remains as conventional as the name Byzantium itself. In their yearning for strict definition and exact chronology, scholars have identified this transition with certain events of political history, such as the inauguration of the city in 330 or the division
of the Late Roman Empire in 395. But neither date satisfactorily fixes a moment of transition. The division of the empire in 395 was by no means final, and Constantinople remained an imperial residence rather than the capital of the empire until at least the mid-fifth century. The essence of the matter is that the Late Roman Empire, despite all its alterations, remained an ancient state, with life focused on the city—the polis or municipium. Culture remained predominantly urban in character. The seventh century was more critical to the evolution of medieval society than was the fourth. It was then that, by and large, this ancient, urban way of life disappeared. Of course not all cities ceased to exist in the seventh century. Nor was urban decline limited to the seventh century; already in the sixth century, city life was losing its cultural importance. Moreover, the crisis of the ancient polis took different forms in different regions. The seventh century is simply a crude demarcation for this shift, though one with a rationale: the Byzantine Empire was differently clad after the seventh century than it had been before.

Many basic changes in the culture of the eastern Mediterranean occurred during this period. Numismatic evidence suggests that during the second half of the seventh century and throughout the eighth century a barter economy became increasingly important, as it did in the West over the significantly longer time that has been disdainfully labeled the Dark Ages. Archaeologists have demonstrated the desertion of many provincial cities from the mid-seventh century onward. Even in Constantinople building activity was limited to modest repair work. The gap in literary production is particularly appalling: not only were historians silent after the middle of the seventh century, but even the hagiographers, writers in the dominant genre of the Middle Ages, cannot claim any notable literary achievements until the end of the eighth century.

Perhaps an analysis of the social background of the heroes of hagiography will shed some light on the shift in the seventh century. Many saints of the fourth to sixth centuries originated in an urban milieu—both in large cities such as Constantinople, Alexandria, and Antioch, and in smaller poleis like Emesa, Apameia, Perge, Edessa, and Chalcedon. Very few saints of this period can be shown to have been connected with the peasantry. Theodore of Sykeon, who died at the beginning of the seventh century, is harbinger of a change: he was a peasant himself, and

his vita shows a close concern with the problems of the country life. Among saints of the seventh to ninth centuries a few may be associated directly with Constantinople, and fewer still with Thessaloniki. Smaller provincial towns rarely appear in the hagiographic scene. Theodore of Edessa and Elias the Younger of Heliopolis seem to be the only genuine townspeople within this group, but, quite typically, both of these saints lived beyond the imperial frontier. During the same period a significant number of saints stemmed from peasant families (e.g., David, Symeon, and George of Mytilene, Demetrianos of Cyprus, Euthymios the Younger, Ioannikios the Great, Philaretos), were children of country priests, or belonged to the country gentry. The provincial polis, so picturesquely described in the vita of Symeon the Fool, virtually disappeared from hagiography after the seventh century; its absence corresponds to the disappearance of city life on the periphery of the empire.

The microstructures and cultural values of urban civilization similarly went into abeyance. Ancient civilization was open and public. City life concentrated on the marketplace, the theater, and the circus. It was found in the broad porticos flanking the main streets. In Byzantium all public forms of life were radically recast. Traditional city planning based on the Greco-Roman gridiron system was abandoned, and trading often centered on the narrow, organic alleys of medieval sites. The last defense of the theater was voiced in the sixth century—thereafter the theater was equated with paganism and with moral decadence. The circus, too, was abandoned, or at least it lost its social significance. Public baths ceased to function. Not only were public libraries and "universities" closed, but the book itself acquired a new shape, the codex, better fitted for reference work and for individual use than the ancient roll, which required two hands to hold and which for the most part was read aloud. Silent reading without lip movement began to become more common around 400—St. Augustine was still amazed when he saw St. Ambrosius reading a book silently to himself.

Concurrently, basic social structures also changed. The family, so loose and feeble during the last centuries of the Roman Empire, became


increasingly tightly knit from the sixth century on, functioning as the
nucleus of society. The ancient gens, or clan, lost any significance, and
even the usage of the nomen gentile, or family name, was abandoned.
Practically, the nuclear family was the essential social microstructure,
but ideologically the Byzantines went even further, proclaiming celibacy
and virginity as the highest social ideal.

Life became increasingly constricted. In antiquity the typical upper-
class dwelling had been open to nature. Even urban houses had cen-
tered on an impluvium, which introduced fresh air and rain into the in-
terior; a small garden had also usually been part of the house, and,
further, naturalistic floor mosaics and frescos had shown plants and ani-
mals indoors. In Byzantium the open habitat was apparently replaced by
two- or three-story buildings with little interior open space. The only
courtyard appears to have been that cut from the space of the public
street, although the roof may have been used for domestic purposes.
The ground floor seems to have been given over to utilities—storage
rooms or even a donkey-drawn mill. 4

Increasing self-isolation is also evident in the Byzantines’ spiritual
life. Religious ritual was progressively deprived of its public features.
With the popularization of Christianity, religion was transferred from
the open space of the public altar to the enclosed space of the church
building. Perhaps to compensate, the church interior came to be inter-
preted by theologians and probably the people too as a microcosm; the
annual, weekly, and daily liturgies represented the cyclical nature of
time. Early ecclesiastical entries that had moved between the exterior
and the interior of the church were incorporated within the structure.
The scale of sanctuaries changed equally dramatically. The voluminous
monuments of the sixth century had no counterparts of equal size in
later centuries.

To condemn the seventh and eighth centuries as a Dark Age of
decline and collapse would be misleadingly simplistic. Basic internal
changes occurred under the tumultuous surface of history, processes so
broad that they largely escaped the attention of contemporaries and still
remain unclear to modern scholars. For instance, it may be plausibly
suggested that the crisis of the urban civilization of the seventh century
coincided with an upsurge of the importance of villages. Unfortunately
the archaeological study of the countryside in Asia Minor or in Greece is

4. See the description of an urban mansion in Michael Attaleiates’ typikon
of 1077 (MM 5:297f.). On two-story houses in medieval Cherson, see A.L.
Jakobson, Rannesrednevekovyj Chersones (Moscow and Leningrad, 1959), 185f.
in its infancy; work in the Crimea, however, indicates that the decline of Late Roman Cherson was concurrent with the flourishing of local villages in the eighth century.\(^5\)

Diet and agriculture may also have changed. Little evidence survives concerning Byzantine food consumption. Nonetheless, a comparison of the figures established by E. Patlagean for bread consumption in the Late Roman Empire with those for the eleventh and twelfth centuries shows a sharp decrease in the amount of bread eaten.\(^6\) This reduction may have been at least in part due to Byzantium’s loss of Egypt and North Africa during the seventh century; these had been the two most important sources of grain in the Roman Empire. Other Byzantine granaries were also lost. Sicily was seized by the Arabs by the ninth century, and the steppes on the Black Sea coast were also removed from imperial control for a time. Did these changes lead to food shortages and an increased danger of starvation, or was the diminishing grain supply replaced by other varieties of nourishment? We can only speculate on the answer. Several registers available for Late Roman Asia Minor and neighboring islands show serious underdevelopment in sheep and cattle breeding. Yet at a later medieval date foreigners expressed surprise at the number of cattle in Byzantium and especially at the large herds on the Aegean islands.\(^7\) If a change did take place, is it possible to determine when?

The Farmer’s Law may provide significant reflections on change, although the document is notoriously problematic.\(^8\) We know neither the date nor the place of its promulgation nor what its exact nature was. Whether the Farmer’s Law was a state regulation or a collection of local customs is unclear. Exactly how broad or narrow was the geographical sphere of its application is also unknown. It is generally recognized, however, that the Farmer’s Law was issued sometime in the seventh or the eighth century. Since olive trees are not mentioned in the text, it is likely that the Farmer’s Law related to inland areas (of Asia Minor?). The lack of any mention of horses and the frequent references to wild beasts and forests suggest a mountainous region. In any case, the Farmer’s Law

7. See below, Chapter 2.
does apply primarily to those peasants engaged in cattle breeding. Not only does the number of entries dedicated to cattle breeding outstrip those related to farming, but also it occupies a privileged position: cattle breeding is the only occupation still involving slave labor. Further, in the case of damage caused by a domestic animal, the law protects the owner of the animal rather than the owner of the field or vineyard. This has a parallel in the Western *leges barbarorum*, which also favored livestock owners. Bulgarian excavations provide some further evidence of increased cattle breeding in Byzantium (see Chapter 2, pp. 29 ff.).

Along with the crisis of urban life and the basic economic shifts in Byzantium there occurred a simplification of the social structure. The *curiales*, the elite of provincial cities, disappeared after the seventh century; moreover, there is no evidence from the eighth century of the continued existence of large estates. The only document that can be cited in this connection is the *vita* of St. Philaretos, written by the saint’s nephew Niketas of Amnia.9 From information in his *vita*, Philaretos appears to have been a wealthy landlord: he is said to have had about fifty estates (*proasteia*) and numerous herds of cattle (the figures are slightly different in the two surviving versions of the *vita*). If these *proasteia* had been comparable to later estates, and if his herds had been large, then Philaretos would indeed have been a rich man. But the fact is, all fifty of Philaretos’s estates were located within a single village, Amnia, and all his herds grazed on the grass around the same village. Further, although Philaretos possessed the roomiest and the most beautiful house in the village, his life was not one of leisure. He appears in his *vita* plowing his allotment along with other members of the village. Any evidence of wealth provided by saints’ *vitae* must be treated cautiously.

Not only are provincial elites and their estates absent from eighth century sources; so also are the dependent peasantry (*paroikoi*). An *argumentum ex silentio* is always very weak; a decline, however, in the number of dependent peasants in the eighth century is suggested by a general unfamiliarity with the terms for them when they do reappear in the second half of the ninth century. When Byzantine legislators tried to reintroduce Roman law (as discussed below, p. 16), they used Roman designations for dependent peasants without understanding their original meanings. Even the term *paroikoi*, known during the Late Roman period and eventually used for the major group of dependent villagers, was conceived in the eighth and ninth centuries only in its Biblical sense, “stranger” or “tenant.”

While provincial urban life disappeared and rural society was simplified, there was some continuity of social organization in the capital. Most notably, elements of the state bureaucracy survived. The ruling class seems to have been unstable, loose, and fraught with the insecurities of vertical mobility. Only rarely did children inherit their fathers' administrative positions. At least within the imperial circle relatives were regarded as competitors rather than as—later—the natural supporters of the ruler. Thus it appears that the first concern of an emperor was to mutilate his brothers and uncles in order to frustrate their ambitions. The history of the seventh century is full of the bloody maiming of imperial relations. Among the more bizarre instances of this habit is that of Justinian II, whose nose was cut off after his deposition, but who managed to regain the throne and take his revenge on those who had de-throned and mangled him.

It is very hard to determine the values held by this unstable elite officialdom. Neither noble origin, nor martial prowess, nor fealty, nor large landholdings, nor trade profit were regarded in themselves as virtues. Saints' *vitae* sometimes mention the noble origin of their subjects and the wealth of their parents, but this may be a *topos*. Theophanes, the leading historian of the early ninth century, is very careful in his use of the term "noble" (*eugenes*). According to Maximos the Confessor's *vita*, the saint belonged to an ancient and noble family, yet this noble heritage is not mentioned by Theophanes. In contrast, Theophanes calls Muhammad's spouse *eugenes*, although he could not have intended to flatter the wife of the Moslem "pseudo-prophet." Nor was Theophanes enamored of military heroism; for instance, he did not hesitate to describe victories won by Constantine V, whom the historian styled "dung-named" (*kopronymos*), the "worst" among the hated Iconoclast emperors. Mercantile activity was also regarded as valueless. In the mid-ninth century Emperor Theophilos ordered the ship of his wife, Theodora, to be burned with all its freight. He was disgusted with the empress's trading interests and wished to avoid being called "shipowner" or "captain."

Contemporary definitions of the Byzantine elite are very rare, especially in this period. Therefore an edict issued by Empress Eirene that classes elites is particularly valuable. She included in her group of "honorable" persons the clergy, two strata of officials (the *archons* and the so-called *politeuomenoi*), soldiers, and those who lived in piety. In fact, piety remained the only universally acknowledged value of social ethics; it tended to be substituted for all the fragile, mundane values of

the ancient world. The image of the holy man as an ideal of social behavior acquired tremendous significance. Although this image was a creation of an earlier age, it had grown enormously in stature by the eighth century, even overshadowing the image of the ideal emperor.\(^\text{11}\) Concurrently, the eighth century witnessed the expansion of the cults of relics and of icons—a veneration that at times took peculiar and exaggerated forms.

Because urban centers contracted and the provincial “small aristocracy” practically disappeared, there was no stable layer between the bureaucratic elite of the capital, supported by salaries, imperial grants, extortions, and bribes, and the working population, which consisted largely of legally independent peasants. Peasants formed the village community, but the integrity of the Byzantine village community remained rather loose. The Byzantine countryside, which is for the most part stony and hilly, supported labor-intensive agriculture (vineyards, gardens, olive trees).\(^\text{12}\) With irrigation rarely and poorly used and trans-humance common, conditions did not favor any form of collective labor or collective supervision of fields. Peasants’ lots were surrounded by ditches and stone walls; there is no hint of an “open-field” system. The plow was light and wheelless, of the so-called ard-type, requiring only two oxen (in contrast, eight-oxen teams were common in northern Europe). In the East, consequently, peasants had no reason for pooling their efforts to till the soil. The basic social unit of the countryside was the nuclear family supported by close relatives and neighbors. Neighbors might even obtain an enlarged usufruct, including the rights to mow grass or collect chestnuts on neighboring allotments. The village could act communally at fêtes and in danger, but this unity was not organic, and the community was atomized, consisting of isolated families.

The wealth of Byzantium was dependent largely on the peasants. Of course, no figures exist by which their agricultural contribution to the Byzantine economy can be calculated, but the general impression is that from the seventh century the role of craft and trade diminished significantly. The number of coins, especially copper pieces, in circulation, di-

\(^{11}\) P. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), esp. 103–52 and 251–301.

minished as well, suggesting that Byzantine country life from the seventh to the ninth centuries was based more on a barter economy than on money.

The peasants were both the taxpayers and the protectors of the frontier. The Roman fiscal machine seems to have decayed by the seventh century; how taxes were collected after that time is unclear. At any rate, municipia ceased to be centers of fiscal organization, and representatives of the Constantinopolitan administration assumed the responsibility of gathering taxes. Since revenues were collected primarily in coin, of which there was a severe shortage, peasants often had recourse only to usurers; consequently, tax collectors and moneylenders became the principal objects of the people's hatred. Many peasants further supported the empire as soldiers. Despite the fact that the empire was almost continuously at war, there was no professional army. The bulk of the rather large Byzantine army consisted of the so-called stratiotai, whose duty it was to serve during military campaigns or enemy invasions. They supplied their own horses and weapons. During periods of peace, however, these same men worked their fields and vineyards. Their property was not significantly larger than a peasant's; this made their burden particularly onerous. Even the scanty surviving sources occasionally preserve the complaints of poverty-stricken warriors.

Other social and political forms show a general trend toward simplification. During the seventh and eighth centuries Byzantium was divided into new territorial units called themata, or themes. The themes coincided neither territorially nor administratively with Late Roman provinces. In contrast to the sophisticated network of civil and military officials in Late Roman provinces, themes were ruled by a single governor (strategos) who functioned as judge, tax collector, and commander of the local militia. Restrictions were imposed to limit the powers of the governor: the post could not be inherited, the strategos was not allowed to acquire lands within his theme, and the central government tried to move strategoi constantly from one theme to another. Nevertheless, by the beginning of the eighth century, these governors had managed to assume considerable independence and influence. The political chaos of the beginning of the eighth century was apparently caused principally by the strategoi of the larger themes, who emboldened the empire in civil wars in their lust for the throne. Especially powerful were the great themes of Anatolikon, Armeniakon, Thrakesion, and Opsikion.

The Byzantine peasantry of the eighth and ninth centuries had also become uniform. Whereas Libanius in the fourth century might assert
that slaves were ubiquitous, and John Chrysostom, in his treatise *On Vainglory*, used terms for slaves more frequently than those for God, slaves had evidently become quite rare at the time of the Farmer’s Law. Nor is there any trace of *coloni*. Some peasants were richer, some poorer; some could not till their lots and instead let them to more substantial villagers for a sort of rent; some preferred to work on the soil of another, usually as shepherds. Although these hirelings, *mithioi* or *mithotoi*, had a low social status, they were nevertheless free people. Their lack of dependability was notorious: the verse of Saint John’s Gospel 10:13, “The *mithotos* fleeth because he is a hireling, and careth not for the sheep,” was often quoted by Byzantine authors.

This period of disruption of old social links was simultaneously one of titanic external menace. While the invasions of the Germanic tribes and the Huns, however, destroyed the western half of the empire, Constantinople survived this bitter initial onslaught. Later invaders from the north, such as the Avars, Slavs, and Bulgars, were less a threat to Constantinople. The Avars disappeared unexpectedly; some Slavic tribes invaded, settled on Byzantine territory, and were subsequently slowly hellenized; other Slavs created independent states on the frontier of the empire. From the seventh century onward, the greatest danger to the empire came not from the north, but rather from the east. First, the Persians threatened the existence of Byzantium, and just when that danger had been repulsed by Emperor Heraclius, the Arab invasions began. The Arabs conquered the Byzantine provinces of Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Cyrenaica, and Africa, and even attempted to seize Constantinople itself. In eastern Asia Minor between the empire and the Caliphate a large no-man’s-land was inhabited by an ethnically and religiously mixed population. Here Moslems, Orthodox Christians, Monophysites, Arabs, Syrians, Greeks, Armenians, and Georgians lived side by side.

All these invasions changed the character of the provinces but did not destroy the empire itself. Byzantium emerged from the crises of the “Dark Ages” more rapidly than did the western part of the ancient Roman Empire. It was never completely overwhelmed by the barbarian onslaught, and consequently the old political, economic, and cultural traditions were less thoroughly disrupted there than in Gaul or in Spain. While there is no reason to assume absolute continuity in Byzantium, fragments of antiquity were more available in the East than in the West. Nevertheless, although the military dangers of the seventh and eighth centuries did not end in collapse, they contributed both to the political chaos of the empire and perhaps also to a consolidation of the most resistant social structures.
RECONSOLIDATION: THE NINTH AND TENTH CENTURIES

Numismatic evidence indicates that an economic revival began in the first half of the ninth century, primarily in Constantinople and the coastlands of the Aegean Sea.13 Culture began to revive around 800. One of the signs of its revival was the invention of a new, more rapid means of writing, the minuscule script. The introduction of a faster mode of lettering reflected an increased demand for literature. The milieu of this cultural revival was consistently monastic: among the intellectuals of the first half of the ninth century, the vast majority were “professional” monks and nuns, that is, persons who assumed the habit in their youth, usually in their twenties, rather than on the verge of death. Theophanes, Theodore of the Studios, Joseph of Thessaloniki, Kassia, Niketas of Aminia, Patriarch Methodios—almost all the great names of the time (perhaps with exception of only Patriarch Nikephoros and Deacon Ignatios) belong to this category. The Monastery of Studios was probably the most important center of this early revival.

This monastic revival—which cannot in any way be called a renaissance—seems to have developed in reaction to Iconoclasm, an anti-image movement lasting between 730 and 843 that embodies ideological and political perspectives then current in Byzantium. Concern over the worship of icons is expressed as early as the fourth century A.D. Already at that time the principal positions of the debate had been defined; the arguments relating to images were derived from the ancient philosophers. Both the Iconoclasts (“image-breakers”) and the Iconodules (“icon worshipers”) of the eighth and ninth centuries adopted the fourth-century formulas; the most notable feature of the controversy was not the originality of the opinions expressed but the emotional tension and violence of the debate. What in the fourth century had been an academic question became from 730 onward a locus of social and cultural confrontation. Why?

Iconoclasm of the eighth and ninth centuries was directed, first and foremost, against monastic institutions. Leo III and Constantine V, the great Iconoclast emperors, along with their followers, did not seek to acquire monastic lands, since there was no extensive monastic landownership at the time. Nor did they desire the accrued wealth of the monasteries. New regulations were not directed at the confiscation of gold, silver, and precious stones but rather were aimed at the abolition

of the monastery as an institution. The Byzantine monastery as established by Pachomius and Basil the Great in the fourth century and developed by Theodore of the Studios about 800 was a koinobion, a community of brethren who not only slept, ate, and prayed together but also worked together. Theodore's regulations describe minutely the vineyards and kitchen gardens, ateliers, and scriptoria that belonged to the Studios; the monks themselves provided the labor. In the atomized Byzantine society of the eighth century the koinobion formed an odd social group bound internally by stable and perpetual if not organic links. It contradicted Byzantine social order.

The Iconoclasts did not simply attempt to abolish the institution of monasticism, they obviously tried to replace the koinobion by the most individualized microstructure possible—the nuclear family. When Michael Lachanodrakon, the strategos of Thralesion and one of the most enthusiastic supporters of Constantine V, closed the monasteries in his theme, he pressed monks and nuns to marry each other. Theophanes relates that Lachanodrakon gathered all the monks and nuns of Thralesion in the plain of Tzykanistrion near Ephesus, ordering the monks to clothe themselves in white and immediately choose wives. Those who would not obey he threatened to blind and exile to Cyprus. He also ordered the sale of monastic possessions, including lands, holy vessels, books, and cattle; the wealth thus gathered was presented to the emperor. Those books that dealt with monastic customs, including the stories about Egyptian and Syriac founders of monasticism (paterika) were burned along with the relics of the saints. Many of the "stubborn" monks were whipped and mutilated (Theoph. 1.445f.). Although it is hard to determine to what extent Theophanes exaggerated out of hatred for the Iconoclasts, the marriage ceremony did in fact take place. This was not simply a sort of mockery; it reflects the structural urge for social atomization.

The veneration of icons and relics was in essence a collective experience: icons and relics were not only adored by the mass of believers, they also excited collective emotions. Pope Gregory the Great stated that icons were "books" for the mass of illiterate Christians. The veneration of icons in Byzantium was very different from the quiet contemplation of sacred images assumed on the basis of the religious habits of the twentieth century. The power exhibited by icons through miracles, like that shown by relics, was predominantly public. The icon participated in

battles, defending Byzantine cities and extending the empire's territories; icons were carried by armies, paraded by clergy and populace around the walls of beleaguered towns, and prominently displayed in the triumphs of victorious emperors. The communal nature of the icon was apparent in the first Iconoclastic gesture of Emperor Leo III: the removal of the image of Christ from above the so-called Brazen Gate, the main entrance to the Great Palace—the most public of places. His action caused a riot. Emperor Michael II, a lukewarm Iconoclast, noted in his letter to Louis the Pious that icons were not to be destroyed, but rather reset higher in the church so that in their frenzy the pious would not worship them as idols. This again is indicative of the communality of the image as well as of its potential power. Thus, not surprisingly, it was during the struggle over the veneration of icons that the emotions of the people reached a crescendo. In contrast, the act of Communion, on which the Iconoclastic idea of salvation concentrated, was highly individualistic. By taking the consecrated elements, the celebrants partook individually of the Lord's flesh and blood. They were each isolated from the throng; they each personally merged with the Divinity.

Individualization of worship and, accordingly, of salvation, is only one side of Iconoclasm. Another major consequence of the movement was an increasingly important role for the emperor both in civil administration and in ecclesiastical matters. During a period of political and military difficulties, the problem of imperial power acquired great significance. Leo III, who initiated Iconoclasm, wrote to the pope that he considered himself not only an emperor, but also a priest (Reg. 1: no. 298). The elevation of the authority of the emperor over that of the church was combined with a campaign against the cult of saints. The image of the holy man created in late antiquity as a denial of Greco-Roman values and virtues was a dangerous rival for imperial propaganda; his veneration was to be restricted. In their attack on icon worship, the Iconoclasts accused their adversaries of the Nestorian heresy, averring that worshipers of icons venerated the human aspect of Christ, His divine nature being inconceiveable and undepictable. No such charge could be raised against the veneration of the icons of saints; nevertheless the Iconoclasts strove also to abolish the cults of the icons and of the relics of saints.

In 843 the government of Empress Theodora restored the veneration of icons. But the Iconodules were only apparent victors. Certainly images were returned to the churches, but it was the Iconoclasts' social

principles that became increasingly dominant. This is particularly clear in intellectual life: formerly controlled by monks, Byzantine culture in the ninth and tenth centuries became predominantly secular. After George Hamartolos, the historian of the 860s, there was not one significant monastic figure among Byzantine writers until Symeon the Theologian, about 1000. Significantly, also, the Byzantine monastery was losing its cenobitic form. The monastic community of working brethren gave place to individualistically structured lavras (gatherings of hermits) and small monasteries dependent upon state grants in kind and in money (solemmia). The ideal of the poor brotherhood was very popular in the tenth century, when Emperor Nikephoros Phokas supported the recently founded communities on Mount Athos, with their ideal of the monastic denial of property. He could not have imagined that these lavras would eventually accumulate immense estates and numerous paroikoi. The tendency toward individual isolation was also reflected in the emphasis on personal means of salvation that developed during the tenth century. The teachings of Symeon the Theologian epitomized this disposition. Symeon proclaimed a vision of divine light and personal inspiration, somewhat minimizing the efficacy or sufficiency of the sacraments. Further, he rejected basic social ties such as friendship and even the family, considering mortals as standing lonely and naked before the majesty of God and of the emperor (see Chapter 3, pp. 90ff.).

It might well be suggested that it was the emperor who gained most from Iconoclasm. The Byzantine church was made subject to imperial power. After the end of the ninth century, emperors twice placed the patriarchate within the imperial family. Leo VI set his brother Stephen on the patriarchal throne, as did Romanos I Lakapenos his son Theophylaktos. The idea of the emperor-priest as expressed by an Iconoclast emperor found its realization, albeit in a slightly altered form, after the defeat of Iconoclasm.

The emperors of the ninth and tenth centuries not only won a victory over the monastery and the church; they also assumed a fundamental role in the consolidation and reorganization of the empire after the chaos of the seventh and eighth centuries. The ninth and tenth were “imperial” centuries; their intellectual character has been appropriately titled “encyclopedic” by Paul Lemerle. An enormous effort was made to systematize the received intellectual tradition. Initially, there was a phase of transmission: ancient manuscripts were collected and recopied in minuscule script. Editions of the Greek classics, including Homer,

tragedians, Plato, and Aristotle, were produced at this time. Concurrently the ancient heritage was surveyed. Encyclopedism can be dated from Photios’s Myriobiblon, a bibliographical description of more than three hundred works of ancient historians, geographers, philosophers, theologians, rhetoricians—only poets did not gain a place in his collection. This phase ends with a famous lexicon preserved under the conventional title Souda. There were further collections of fragments gathered for Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus: On Embassies, On Virtue and Vice, On Plots against Emperors, and so on. An anonymous author produced the Geoponika, a compilation from Greek writers on agriculture also sponsored by Constantine VII.

The encyclopedism of the ninth and tenth centuries also fulfilled more practical tasks. A great many works considered the administrative system. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, with the help of learned aides, produced three major books—on the themes of the empire, on the goals of Byzantine diplomacy, and on the ceremonies of the imperial court. The last subject was also elucidated in a series of the so-called taktika, whose authors are anonymous, excepting a certain Philotheos who finished his Kletorologion, a manual of court life, in 899. This literary genre first appeared around 842 and did not survive beyond the end of the tenth century. Lists of officials, whose authors attempted to reconcile the administrative tradition with the late Byzantine reality, appeared again only in the fourteenth century. The same chronological limits apply to military taktika and strategika. Emperor Maurice or an anonymous contemporary was the last of a series of Late Roman writers on military science. After a silence lasting from the seventh through the ninth centuries, Leo VI revived the genre in about 900 by producing his Taktika in imitation of Maurice’s work. Throughout the tenth century the genre of military manuals continued to flourish; some of these treatises may be ascribed to Nikephoros Phokas, some remain anonymous. Nikephoros Ouranos, a courtier and military commander under Basil II, was probably the last to write about the military arts: after 1000 this genre disappeared, as did the taktika of the imperial court. Similarly, although the two surviving instructions to tax collectors are not precisely dated, they too may best be assigned to the tenth or early eleventh century. 17

Important also was the reconsideration (reception) of Roman law, or as the Byzantines put it, the "cleansing" (apokatharsis) of the law. Leo III in 726 attempted to substitute his brief Ekloge for the voluminous Corpus of Justinian. He introduced substantial changes in both the marriage and the penal code. Legislators of the ninth and tenth centuries condemned and rejected the Iconoclast emperor's efforts, even though several principles presented in the Ekloge, particularly the new approach to marriage and the family, were generally accepted. In contrast to Leo III's concise codification, Leo VI promulgated a gigantic bulk of sixty books, the Basilika, which consisted largely of translations from Justinian's Corpus, including even some obsolete legislation. Minor legislative works of the epoch (Procheiron, Epanagoge, and others) were also based more or less on Roman law.

Ecclesiastical setting and ritual were probably also regularized. While regional variations continue to be found, church architecture and decoration acquired a greater homogeneity in form and scale after 900. Ecclesiastical structures were small, often with tripartite sanctuaries, and commonly of the so-called cross-in-square plan. This plan, which remained popular in Byzantium throughout the High Middle Ages, had a square nave divided internally into nine bays covered with a central dome, lower barrel vaults over the transverse and longitudinal bays, and groin vaults or cupolas over the corner bays. The pyramidal space thus constructed was adorned with images of the Godhead, the Virgin, angels, prophets, and saints, arranged hierarchically according to their status. The liturgy also became more consistent. One of the major civil administrators of the end of the tenth century, Symeon Metaphrastes, compiled a monumental collection—again, a collection—of saints' lives for ecclesiastical feasts.

Imperial regulation was generally extended throughout the empire during this period. This is reflected in attitudes toward state lands. While Late Roman imperial estates have been repeatedly investigated by scholars, there has been as yet no thorough examination of the scattered sources concerning imperial property in the tenth century. In theory, the Byzantines drew a strict line between state and royal property, though it cannot be assumed that this strict distinction existed in practice. Leo VI in his Novel 51 differentiated quite clearly between basilikon, demosion, and private land. But the distinction disappeared when it came to practical problems. For instance, law required that a treasure found on private soil should be divided equally between the proprietor and the finder; if, however, the land on which the treasure was discovered belonged to the state or to the emperor, it was in both cases the demosios,
the treasury, that received half. Thus, at least in this case, no real distinc-
tion was made between the basilikon and the demotion.

There is unfortunately no way to calculate what percentage of the
cultivated land in the empire belonged to the imperial demesnes. It
seems likely, however, that imperial possessions increased during the
second half of the ninth century and throughout the tenth century. Em-
peror Basil I is said to have been bequeathed eighty estates (proasieia) by
Danielis, a rich widow in the Peloponnese (Theoph. Cont. 321.9); per-
haps she was an independent ruler there. When in 934 the Byzantine
army moved eastward and conquered the region of Melitene, Emperor
Romanos Lakapenos ordered the newly acquired territory be trans-
formed into an imperial curatory, from which he received considerable
silver and gold (Theoph. Cont. 416.23). Imperial estates are commonly
mentioned in various sources of the tenth century. For instance, in the
vita of St. Paul of Latros imperial estates in Thrakesion are mentioned as
being administered by a certain protospatharios; the title had extremely
high status at that time, being awarded to theme governors. New cura-
tories were created around 900: Basil I, according to his panegyrist and
grandson Constantine Porphyrogenitus, was not inclined to spend state
resources on his private needs; he therefore decided to establish the “cu-
ratory of Mangana,” which provided special agricultural revenues des-
tined for imperial feasts (Theoph. Cont. 337.1–10). Probably during Ro-
manos Lakapenos’s reign the “curatory of the palace of Lord Romanos”
was created for much the same reason. Numerous officials were kept
busy administering imperial estates: curators, ktematinoi, episkeptitai,
and epion oikeiacon, among others.

Further, in the tenth century the Byzantine state proclaimed its su-
preme right over all the lands of the empire. Leo VI in his Novel 114 as-
serted that property throughout the Byzantine Empire (pan akineton)
was hypodemosios, that is, literally, “put under the treasury” or “due to
taxation.” Did Leo consider pan akineton to be in some sense state prop-
erty, or simply taxable property? He clarified his position further by state-
ing that private property was allowed to individuals who fulfilled state
“burdens.” Basil II in the Novel of 996 affirmed that the claims of the ex-
chequer could not be denied through reference to praeceptor longis tem-
poris: the emperor had the right to reclaim all lands that had at any time
belonged to the state, even if they had been in private hands since the
time of Augustus (Zepos, Jus 3: 315.20–23). Whether or not the notion of

18. P. Noailles and A. Dain, Les nouvelles de Léon VI le Sage (Paris, 1944),
197.21–24.
19. AB 11 (1892), 138.18.
the *dominium directum* could be applied to the Byzantine concept of state ownership of land is controversial. Two important points, however, are evident: the Byzantine state possessed rights to most of the taxes on the population, and the state could confiscate estates of any magnate, whether lay or ecclesiastical.

The levies collected by the state did not differ essentially from those of private lords: state *corvées* included the building of fortifications and ships, construction of bridges and roads, and the cutting of forests. According to the *cursus publicus*, or imperial post—special stations provided with horses were situated throughout the empire. In addition to various other services the Byzantine peasantry was also obliged to supply both the emperor and the administration with a variety of stores such as fish, fodder, grain, and cattle. Storehouses were built under the supervision of *oriarpoi*. Notable among the numerous seals of Byzantine *oriarpoi* of the tenth and eleventh centuries is that of the *notarios* Constantine, titled “*oriarios of holy [i.e., imperial] wares*” in the town of Kios in Bithynia. Finally, the state demanded tax payments in cash, most particularly the so-called *kapnikon*, a levy on each house or fireplace.

To fulfill state requirements, the population was divided into several special categories according to their rent or service, both military and agricultural. Some sense of these divisions was conveyed by the twelfth-century historian Zonaras in his criticisms of Emperor Nikephoros Phokas’s exorbitant taxation. The emperor’s tax collectors, wrote Zonaras, wrongly forced people into tasks above their station. Peasants had to assume the duties of the *cursus publicus*; those obliged to serve the *cursus publicus* were listed as sailors, the sailors as infantry, the infantry as plain cavalry, and the plain cavalry as armored cavalry, the *kataphraktoi*. By so doing, summed up Zonaras, the state increased the burden on each taxpayer (Zon. 3.502.5–9).

The last four groups mentioned in Zonaras—sailors, infantry, plain cavalry, and *kataphraktoi*—were all known by the common term *stratiotai*, “soldiers.” In the imperial edicts of the tenth century, *stratiotai* appear as holders or owners of special plots, so-called soldiers’ holdings. This

---


form of property is not mentioned in any source of the previous century and therefore may be regarded as an innovation. The law of Constantine VII describing these holdings as the basis of the soldiers' livelihood and their means of equipping themselves prohibited alienation. Constantine added that sailors of the imperial navy should possess allotments valued at no less than two pounds of gold, while cavalry soldiers and the marines of the themes should have plots at least twice that size. But their landholdings were not enough to assure security; the loss of a horse could mean the ruin of a soldier's family. Theophanes Continuatus related the story of a general who seized the horse of a stratiotes as a gift for the emperor; the soldier, deprived of his most substantial property, died and left his children beggars (Theoph. Cont. 92f.). Though Leo VI's Taktika (PG 107.672–1093) characterized stratiotai as well-to-do (para. 4:1), in fact they were hardly better off than the normal peasant. Leo made it clear that agriculture was the main occupation of the stratiotai. If they were summoned for a military expedition, they were required to arrange for someone else to till their soil in their absence. Leo emphasized further (para. 20:71) that stratiotai had to pay state tax as well as the aerikon, a special judicial payment; they had to be compensated, however, if they were drafted for construction corvées. Thus while the distinction between the soldier and the peasant was vague, it did nevertheless exist. Leo's Taktika (para. 11:11) put this distinction in social terms, stating that there were two occupations necessary for the flourishing of the state: peasant labor, which nurtured soldiers, and military activity, which defended the peasantry. A similar formulation is found in Romanos Lakapanos's Novel of 934: the payment of taxes and military service are the two pillars of the state (Zepos, Jus 3:247.9–13). Basically the stratiotai were soldiers; the peasants, georgoi, were the taxpayers.

The peasantry, like the military, was divided into several categories. Zonaras wrote of the people whose duty was the service of imperial post (dromikai strateiai), dromos being a technical name designating the state postal service. Peasants obliged to provide means for the imperial post were called in eleventh-century sources exkoussatoi dromou. The term exkoussatoi, without the clarification dromou, is found in various texts of the tenth century as well. Its literal meaning is "exempted from the principal taxes," but the question arises, who were these "exempted" ones? Since some exkoussatoi were included in grants to mighty landlords, scholars tend to regard them as dependent tenants. An unexpected reference, however, in a work by Basil the Younger, archbishop of Caesarea

in the tenth century, shows the fallacy of such an assumption. In his marginal notes on the works of Gregory Nazianzus, Basil mentions imperial armorers, "who in our Caesarea are called exkoussatoi." 23

The next category of the peasantry, although omitted by Zonaras, is identified in two imperial charters of 974 and 975: 24 they are called prosodiarioi. If it can be assumed that prosodion, mentioned in a charter of 995, was a tax in kind, then perhaps the prosodiarioi were those peasants obliged to supply the state or the emperor with various goods. The term exkoussatoi could have been employed also for these peasants obliged with payments in kind. One such case occurred in the village of Tembroi, where there were exkoussatoi whose duty it was to catch fish for the imperial table. 25

Exkoussatoi and prosodiarioi are mentioned very infrequently, mostly in tenth-century sources. More often, references are found to the lowest class considered by Zonaras, the poor (ptchoi). In the imperial legislation of the tenth century the term ptochoi was commonly applied to peasants—taxpayers as opposed to soldiers. In the charters of the tenth century another term was repeatedly used: demosiarioi. The term is usually thought to designate tenants of imperial estates, but this interpretation has little evidence to support it; perhaps demosiarioi, like georgoi and ptochoi, was a technical term used by the treasury for the common peasantry. All these distinctions, in any case, suggest that, in contrast to a generally uniform rural population in the eighth and ninth centuries, by the tenth century a series of fiscal distinctions was being made within the peasantry. Not only were there different terms in use for each category; they may have been officially strictly recognized: Nikephoros Phokas's attempt to sidestep these categories was regarded by the later Byzantine historian Zonaras as illegal.

The Byzantine government also attempted to stabilize the categories it imposed on the population. A considerable amount of tenth-century imperial legislation was aimed at preserving the village community:


24. Laha 1, no. 6.5; Joakeim Iberites, "Sigillation peri ton monon Kolobou, Polygyrou kai Leontias," Gregorios ho Palamas 1 (1917), 787.5. On these documents, see G. Ostrogorsky, Quelques problemes d'histoire de la paysannerie byzantine (Brussels, 1956), 17.

25. Constantine Porphyrogenitus. De cerimoniis, ed. 1o. 1a. Reiske (Bonn, 1829), 488.18. Escusati Ducatus in Venice of the ninth century (L. A. Muratori, Rerum Italicarum Scriptores 12 [Milan, 1728], 188) were probably to supply the doge with fish and game. On prosodion, see F. Dölger, Aus den Schatzkammern des Heiligen Berges (Munich, 1948), no. 56.13, as well as the chrysobull of 1074 (Laha 1, no. 36.15).
powerful persons and institutions—high officials in the bureaucracy, army commanders, bishops, and *hegoumenoi* (abbots)—were restricted in their right to buy peasants’ and soldiers’ holdings. Family members and neighbors had so-called *protimesis*, preemption rights: any villager inclined to sell his allotment was obliged to offer his land to his relatives and neighbors in an established order of precedence. Only after all these had refused might a *dynatos* (powerful man) buy the property.

Conversely a peasant was responsible in general for his neighbors. As early as the beginning of the ninth century Emperor Nikephoros I enjoined the *ptochoi* to acquire military arms with the assistance of their neighbors (Theoph. 1.486.24). A tenth-century regulation required that soldiers who were unable to equip themselves should receive aid from so-called *syndotai* (literally, “those who give together”).26 These *syndotai* were members of the same community who supplied the soldier with a coat of mail, spear, sword, and horse. The first evidence that the peasants were obliged to pay the tax arrears of their neighbors if they died or fled is dated to the first half of the tenth century: Symeon Metaphrastes mentions this regulation as existing (or introduced?) during Romanos Lakapenos’s reign.27 The Byzantine treatise on taxation provides a name for this regulation, *allelengyon*.28 In certain cases neighbors were not subjected to this burden; the escheated holding formed a special category of land, the *klasma*, which might be sold by the treasury after thirty years. According to a law issued by Basil II, only the *dynatoi* were subjected to the *allelengyon* and had to pay taxes for missing or deceased neighbors.29 Also reflecting state concern for the countryside was the concept of *justum pretium*, “just price,” which was widely operative in tenth-century Byzantium. If a peasant was forced by circumstances such as a bad harvest or coerced by the *dynatoi* to sell his holding for a price considerably lower than the just price, he could reclaim his allotment.

The state attempted to regulate not only agrarian but also commercial conditions. Usury was a problem in Byzantium: although condemned by the Church Fathers, it was an important part of the Byzantine economy. The number of insolvent debtors was so high that in the late ninth or early tenth century Patriarch Euthymios begged Leo VI to free them of their debts.30 Romanos Lakapenos was forced to bow to this

---

demand: the treasury paid all the debts in Constantinople regardless of
the social status of insolvent debtors; the vouchers were burned. It was
Leo VI’s father, Basil I, who had most radically attacked the problem of
usury. The collection of interest was prohibited completely—only mi-
nors and orphans were allowed to use their money for this purpose.31
Mortgages were also restricted: the mortgage debt was to be repaid par-
tially in produce. In addition, Basil’s lawbook, the Epanagoge, prohibited
the peasant from mortgaging his field. Basil’s legislation failed. His son
and heir, Leo, abolished the law because, he wrote, it badly afflicted the
economy of the whole country. Leo, however, established the legal ceil-
ing on interest at 5.5%.32

Emperors also tried to regulate the trade activity of Byzantine mer-
chants and craftsmen. Again the only known collection of trade regu-
lations, the so-called Book of the Eparch, was promulgated by Leo VI.33 The
purpose of the regulations in the Book of the Eparch was to protect the
members of the trade guilds in Constantinople from the competition
both of the dynatoi and of the non-guild craftsmen and peddlers, who
were not admitted to the privileged trade organizations of the capital. At
the same time, the Book of the Eparch outlined the rights of the state in
respect to the guilds. In some cases direct services were stipulated. But
more important was the exercise of state control over the trades. It was
the state, not the guilds and their administrators, that checked the quality
of products, the size of workshops (ergasteria), the wages of the journey-
men or hired workers (misthioi), and market prices. Members of the ela-
brate staff of the civil governor of Constantinople (eparch) could poke
their noses into every nook of the ergasterion, where the master worked
with his family and—relatively seldom—with a couple of misthioi.

The ruling class of the Byzantine Empire was the higher officialdom
of the capital. According to the taktika discussed above, it consisted of
various ranks, among which magistroi, anthypatoi, patricians, and pro-
tospatharioi were regarded as forming the highest body politic—the sena-
te. Titles were not inherited, but granted by the emperor; in some cases
they could even be purchased. Though in practice unstable and chang-
ing because of imperial favoritism, this system was rigid in theory and in
ceremony: a specific place at the imperial banquet was assigned to every
official rank. The bureaucracy consisted of several dozen central depart-
ments and tribunals administering frequently overlapping judicial and

33. The best edition, with a Russian translation and commentary, is by
fiscal tasks. Conversely, one department might perform functions that from our perspective appear quite different. Thus, the department of the dromos directed not only the imperial postal service, but also foreign affairs and political security. No general head of all departments existed; the emperor was regarded as head of the whole administration, as well as the supreme judge, ultimate legislator, and commander-in-chief. The relative independence of the provinces was eliminated: the major themes of the eighth century were divided into smaller units, and the power of the strategoi was restricted by thematic judges and tax collectors.

Thus the whole economic, social, and intellectual life of Byzantium was systematized during the ninth and tenth centuries. Byzantium became a state rigidly governed from its center by the imperial court and by the multibranched bureaucracy. Under this surface, however, two important processes began to develop at least by the tenth century: the growth of provincial towns and the emergence of a semi-feudal seigneurie. The state seems to have been ultimately centralized, but in fact new forces were evolving that were destined to shatter the monolithic structure of the Byzantine Empire. These forces came to the fore in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.