

studies



Some Remarks on the Economic Development of the Komnenian Byzantium

JAN BRANDEJS

The Komnenian period of Byzantium (1081–1185) constitutes a curious era of social and economic development. Often regarded as the period of the so-called feudalization, the regime of Komnenoi was often blamed for creating a social situation which was prone to internal destabilization. An era of diminishing resources and unfulfilled hopes, the 12th century was presented as the last chance for revival, which ultimately turned to naught with the sack of Constantinople in 1204. In recent decades, however, a new approach based on expanding archaeological evidence suggests quite a different picture – the expanding cities and once again burgeoning trade certainly brought a new era of prosperity into Byzantium.¹ Put into contrast with the eventually triumphing western civilization, the logic of continuous decline suited well the

¹ The most influential is possibly M. HENDY, *Byzantium, 1081–1204: An Economic Reappraisal*, in: Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Vol. 20, 1970, pp. 31–52. There are various works analysing the development from multiple angles (church, army, culture...) or dealing with a detailed topic (particular emperor, relations with the Crusader states and/or the West). If there is any overview of the 12th century period, it is often a part of a monograph of a wider chronological scale. See among others: M. ANGOLD (Ed.), *The Byzantine Aristocracy, IX to XIII Centuries*, Oxford 1984.; M. ANGOLD, *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni 1081–1261*, Cambridge 1995; M. ANGOLD, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025–1204: A Political History*, London, New York 1997; J. W. BIRKENMEIER, *The Development of the Komnenian Army: 1081–1180*, Boston 2002; J.-C. CHEYNET, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)*, Paris 1990; J. HALDON, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565–1204*, London 1999; J. HARRIS, *Byzantium and the Crusades*, London 2003; A. HARVEY, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire, 900–1200*, Cambridge 1989; J.-D. HOWARD-JOHNSTON (Ed.), *Byzantium and the West, c. 850–c. 1200*, Amsterdam 1998; A. P. KAZHDAN – A. J. WHARTON, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1985; R.-J. LILIE, *Byzanz und die Kreuzzüge*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2004; P. MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*, Cambridge 1993; M. MULLETT – D. SMYTHE (Eds.), *Alexios I Komnenos*, Belfast 1996; D. M. NICOL, *Byzantium and Venice: A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations*, Cambridge 1988.

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meta-narratives trying to explain the so denominated ‘special’ way of western historical development.

The purpose of this article is to identify some of the factors which contributed to this economic revival and rectify the image of Byzantium in the 12th century (although much of this work is nearly finished and as far as modern Byzantinology is concerned, the currently projected concepts of Komnenian Byzantium are already fundamentally different from those imagined by great historians of the older era, such as Georgij Ostrogorsky).² Although most of the topics concerned with social development in this époque were widely described in various works, a modern comprehensive analysis containing the findings and imbuing this knowledge with political development is still absent. The author does not intend to fill this, albeit increasingly reduced, void with an article of such humble proportions – the main aim is to identify certain factors in the socioeconomic development of Komnenian period which were often a major source of confusion in older literature and point out various interesting developments which render Byzantium a unique social system among its peers, so as to prepare grounds for a future comparison between the Byzantine Empire and state formations of various other ‘civilizations’.

With the death of Basil II in 1025, during whose reign Byzantium achieved notional peak of its middle époque, comes an era of rapidly changing emperors.³ Often regarded as the time of weakening of the state, this approach might be rectified. In a sense, the administration still worked, though many times it became pawn of both local and higher political elites which used riches accumulated by state or their position for their

² More specifically: G. OSTROGORSKY, *Pour l'histoire de la féodalité byzantine*, Brussels 1954; G. OSTROGORSKY, *Observations on the Aristocracy in Byzantium*, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 25, 1971, pp. 1–32.

³ Although the era of Basil II is often considered extreme, as the emperor held almost unprecedented power due to his victory in civil war and army of Varangian guard. M. ANGOLD, *Belle époque or crisis? (1025–1118)*, in: J. SHEPARD (Ed.), *Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire*, Cambridge 2008, p. 585.

own benefits.⁴ Nevertheless, the edicts and political decisions decided by emperors were still widely implemented.

The problem laid in the fact that these measures were often contradictory as emperors were exchanged before they could implement their policy in full and were not simply able to grasp the situation adequately to implement much needed reforms. The resulting strife then led to a long-lasting civil war between 1071 and 1081, which was ignited by the battle of Mantzikert in 1071, during which the reigning emperor Romanos IV Diogenes was, in the first time of Byzantine history, captured by the enemy. Subsequent rebellions turned any decision proclaimed by the new government ruling in the name of Emperor Michael VII futile, as different pretenders were warring with one another or with armies loyal to the emperor most of the time.⁵ This was brought to an end by the member of the foremost Byzantine family, Alexios Komnenos, who ascended on throne to rule the next almost 40 years, during which the governmental and administrative system was stabilized, although with significant changes.

Instead of evaluating one's position based on office he held (or the institution of an honorary title, which by this time inflated in numbers to such an extent that it became virtually hollow), the social standing of an individual would be from that moment on based on his kinship relation towards the emperor. Alexios then proceeded to present most of the offices of the state to loyal family members. Although even in Komnenian period (1081–1185) a high position could be achieved on merit alone, this was mostly supplemented by marrying into one of the noble families. This system, however, was prone to misuse as those who were affiliated with the emperor in such a way tried to acquire parts of territories for themselves or tried to overthrow the ruling regime for their own benefits, particularly after the death of Manuel I Komnenos in 1180.⁶

⁴ P. STEPHENSON, *Byzantium Transformed*, in: *Medieval Encounters*, Vol. 10, Is. 1, 2004, p.186.

⁵ M. ANGOLD, *The Byzantine Empire 1025–1204: A Political History*, New York 1997, pp. 115–124.

⁶ See M. ANGOLD, *The Road to 1204: The Byzantine Background to the Fourth Crusade*, in: *Journal of Medieval history*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 257–278.

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This observation might lead to a semblance that the internal situation of the state was fragile – but none could be farther from the truth. In fact, Byzantium experienced major economic boom for the most of the Komnenian period. The roots of this rise of economy in the 11th and 12th century can be traced to the developments occurring hundreds of years earlier. In the 8th century, the époque of periodically repeated epidemics came to a conclusion and, gradually, the population of the Byzantine Empire experienced a new revival. Similarly to the development in Western Europe, the more favourable climate conditions coincided with the dwindling of hostile raids – in Byzantium’s case, Arabic annual raids into Asia Minor’s interior, which prevented the creation of larger estates and thus forestalled the increase of social inequality.⁷ As Byzantine power reached new heights and was able to mount a successful drive towards acquiring new territories, the countryside began to reshape its internal structure in a profound way. The vast landholdings rose and with them powerful provincial élite came into existence. Furthermore, as the society increased in numbers, new land was colonised and in doing so additional resources were brought into circulation within the Byzantine economy. This development manifested the most potently in the 11th and 12th centuries.

One single example can manifest the power of this economic revolution – whereas in 1025 the Empire had roughly 19 million of inhabitants, Byzantium reached the same level towards the last decades of the 12th century. Given the fact that during this period the Byzantine state suffered profound territorial losses – losing the whole of Armenia as well as most of Asia Minor, which used to constitute Byzantium’s core provinces and the most vital source of manpower – the Komnenian revival can be described as anything but a void. Some estimates put Constantinople’s population at 400,000, while Thessaloniki with 150,000 inhabitants remained the second most important. Other cities

⁷ Although substantial decrease in raids occurred after the capture of Melitene and Theodosiupolis in 934 and 949 respectively. J. SHEPARD, *Equilibrium to Expansion (886–1025)*, in: J. SHEPARD (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire*, Cambridge 2008, p. 509.

such as Korinth and Monemvasia, Ohrid, Thebes, Ioanina, Euchatia and Amorion remained administrative and military centres but in contrast to the most of the era of Macedonian dynasty they now constituted important and thriving commerce hubs.⁸

However, this revival of commerce did not necessarily influence the elite, which perceived the trade as more or less a necessary evil but certainly not a venture enhancing one's social prestige. Although merchant families themselves successfully attained a degree of influence over policy-making process, particularly during the 11th century, this came generally to a halt due to Komnenoi's utilization of family-oriented system of government. Instead of conducting long distance trade, the elite facilitated clearing new swaths of land in order to be utilized for agricultural purposes. This was further exacerbated by the trade treaties concluded with Italian maritime republics, namely Venice.⁹ The basis of these treaties was reduced custom rate on Italian merchants' goods. Although these were not as catastrophic as they were portrayed in older historiography and in fact facilitated the Empire's economic growth in early years, in long term the treaties reduced Byzantium's economic competitiveness.

Due to the Byzantine élite's relation towards merchant ventures, the development of fiscal apparatus did not mirror the vast increase in trade. Instead, the further exploitation of land supplemented enough profits and in the 11th century also contributed to the increase of Emperor's property. However, any such development was often countered by donations of land to monasteries and landowning élite or issues of tax exemptions to individuals or institutions.¹⁰ Although the donations were a common practice, they reached

⁸ A. LAIOU – C. MORRISON, *Byzantine Economy*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 130–131, 138.

⁹ A. LAIOU, *Exchange and Trade*, in: A. LAIOU et al. (Eds.), *The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh Century Through the Fifteenth Century*, Washington 2002, pp. 751–752; STEPHENSON, p. 203.

¹⁰ J. W. BIRKENMEIER, *The Development of the Komnenian Army*, Leiden, Boston, Köln 2002, p. 174. Due to absence of purgatory in eastern Christianity, the effort to retain God's grace and the fascination with monastic life was a typical feature of Byzantine society. In an

an unprecedented scale in tumultuous years of the 1070s and 1080s.¹¹ Both Nikephoros III Botaneiates and Alexios I Komnenos were forced to distribute large swaths of state land in order to strengthen their regime. Once Alexios managed to regain internal stability, the tides have turned and the Byzantine administrative apparatus started vigorously obtaining taxes once again.¹²

In order to improve the state of the fiscal apparatus, the Emperor turned to a thorough reform of the taxation system. Instead of taxing land based on its quality and collective responsibility of village communities, the burden of tax toll was passed onto each individual, more precisely the owner of the so called praktikon, a register of all his possessions. Although such system did not possess the effectiveness of the preceding one, in times of financial insecurity and only gradually improving economic situation the new tax system did not require such complexity and therefore allowed the state to obtain much needed taxes with relative ease. Fiscal assessments were conducted regularly, from the time Alexios I under the auspices of Sekreton ton oikeakon, an office originally designated to administer Emperor's personal holdings.¹³ Furthermore, the state still possessed enough means and authority

environment full of intrigue and political struggle, the aristocracy sought support and council from monastic communities. Extensive donations of land to monasteries were of widespread occurrence. R. Morris, *The Byzantine Aristocracy and Monasteries*, in: M. ANGOLD (Ed.), *The Byzantine Aristocracy, IX to XIII Centuries*, Oxford 1984, p. 117. The monasteries, most prominently the largest ones of Athos, were often granted tax exemption, *exkousseia*, by the Emperor. STEPHENSON, p. 190. Similar privileges were often given to great landholders. Apart from few exceptions, the tax exemptions were however limited to secondary taxes. LAIOU – MORRISON, p. 156.

¹¹ A. HARVEY, *The Land and Taxation in the Reign of Alexios I Komnenos: The Evidence of Theophylakt of Ochrid*, in: *Revue des Études Byzantines*, Vol. 51, No. 1, 1993, pp. 140–141.

¹² The pressure applied by the state was substantially difficult to avoid, even for large landholders and high ranking ecclesiastics. Harvey refers to the case of Theophylakt of Ochrid, who despite having vast connections reaching to the highest echelons of Byzantine society was not able to obtain tax privileges for his office. HARVEY, *The Land and Taxation*, p. 153. As soon as Alexios I's position was sufficiently strengthened, he did not hesitate to utilise even confiscations as means to consolidate the position of his family and limit financial capabilities of potential opponents. P. FRANKOPAN, *Land and Power in the Middle and Later Period*, in: J. F. HALDON (Ed.), *A Social History of Byzantium*, Oxford 2009, p. 115.

¹³ STEPHENSON, p. 202. For additional reforms of Alexios I Komnenos, see P.

to confiscate property if the government desired so, most often when the proprietor owned more land than he could cultivate.¹⁴

As the increase of economic activity gained momentum during the 11th century, the state was presented with various obstacles, particularly in regard to monetary policy. The main purpose of currency in the eyes of Imperial administration was to constitute a payment to administrative officials and soldiers. The currency was for a long time maintained in Imperial coffers and then in fixed point of the year given to various servants of the state, thus eliminating its possible circulation. The understanding of currency as means of exchange or a tool with which further support of economic growth is possible was not completely unknown in the circles of Byzantine intellectual elite, but was considered of secondary importance.¹⁵ Paradoxically, it was the very growth of economy which presented a problem for Byzantine state – the increase in trade exchanges required a greater amount of currency in circulation, which the state was not capable of providing.¹⁶ Despite quite successful implementation of new currency hyperpyron replacing the devalued nomisma, the state simply could not rigidly hold on to the vast portions of

MAGDALINO, *Justice and Finance in the Byzantine State*, in: A. LAIOU – S. DIETER (Eds.), *Law and Society in Byzantium, 9th–12th Centuries*, Washington 1994, p. 108–111.

¹⁴ HARVEY *The Land and Taxation*, p. 147. M. ANGOLD, *Church and Society in Byzantium under the Comneni*, Cambridge 2000, p. 318. Indeed, the confiscations based on fiscal survey occurred quite regularly. HARVEY, *The Land and Taxation*, pp. 150–151.

¹⁵ STEPHENSON, p. 191. It is difficult to discern to what extent Byzantines understood the functions of currency and what consequences such action could cause. According to Angeliki Laiou, the monetary system of Alexios was one of the most sophisticated in the whole history of the Byzantine Empire and mirrored an effort to accommodate the needs of the market. There were a number of educated men in Komnenian Byzantium who were interested in the function of economy, market and currency. One of the most important was Michael of Ephesus, the author of commentaries on one of Aristotle's treatise on the role of currency and trade in society, mostly mentioned in Nicomachean Ethics. LAIOU – MORRISON, pp. 151, 162.

¹⁶ STEPHENSON, pp. 191, 196. Bearing in mind the concept of Komnenian monetary policy, it is a question whether this could not have been rather inability instead of unwillingness. For the fiscal stability of Byzantine state, see M. HENDY, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy*, Cambridge 1985, pp. 221–224.

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money as before (which then could have been dispersed in the form of *roga*).¹⁷ This might have been one of the motivations behind the creation of the *pronoia*, a new fiscal system in which a soldier controlled certain part of land with *paroikoi*, non-proprietary peasants settled there and paying rent in kind or in cash. Similar arrangements were often conducted when a tax from certain city or region was promised to high-ranking officials in exchange for their services. Consequently, *pronoia* should not be understood as the basis of feudalisation of the Byzantine Empire. In fact, the state controlled this institution via its administrative apparatus and soldiers receiving *pronoia* did not facilitate the constitution a new social order.¹⁸

During the course of 11th and 12th centuries, the *paroikoi* became the prevailing feature of the Byzantine countryside. As the great landholders, high-ranking state and ecclesiastic officials, called *dynatoi*, asserted an influence in provinces, the free peasants of the preceding centuries slowly disappeared. This process was often described as a brutal institution of larger estates and binding a peasant to the land. The reality was naturally much more complex. The landholding élite often used reserves of wealth acquired in service to the state to buy agricultural land from minor farmers in times of crop failure. This land was subsequently rented to peasants, who thus lost property and were in state of economic dependence on a landholder. This was paid in cash or the owner and peasant signed deals dividing the crop among them.¹⁹ On the other hand, the peasant could not be forced to leave the land if he fulfilled his obligations. Such a larger domain was often under supervision of *epitropos*, an administrator who acted as a deputy for a landlord who resided in a city, where they often held position in administration or served in army.

¹⁷ N. OIKONOMIDES, *Title and Income at the Byzantine Court*, in: N. OIKONOMIDES – E. A. Zachariadou (Eds.), *Social and Economic Life in Byzantium*, Aldershot 2004, p. 213.

¹⁸ For the institution of *Pronoia*, see most recently M. BARTUSIS, *Land and Privilege in Byzantium: The Institution of Pronoia*, Cambridge 2012.

¹⁹ LAIOU – MORRISON, pp. 106–112. Furthermore, paid labourers or slaves were also often utilized by the landholder. J. LEFORT, *Rural Economy, Seventh–Twelfth Centuries*, in: A. LAIOU (Ed.), *The Economic History of Byzantium*, p. 241.

The estate itself did not operate as one compact venture but was divided to smaller parts rented to peasants. The dynatoi were in possession of beasts, of draught, mills and threshing floors which they gave for use to the paroikoi. In so doing, they reduced financial demands necessary for agricultural activities. Furthermore, the landlords organized the clearing of forests and the preparation of uncultivated land for the colonization.²⁰ Quite paradoxically, whereas the free peasant of the 9th century was to pay lower taxes and dues than the non-proprietary peasants of the 12th century, these parokoi had often higher standard of living than their free predecessors. This was caused by the demographic expansion which caused the growth of the market, where the parokoi could sell their surplus. Average farmer capable of obtaining at least a pair of oxen could grow enough surplus to sell it.²¹ To increase revenue, wine and olives were often cultivated, as well as silkworm moth, followed by honey and wax.²² Though we cannot discount the possibility of landholders misusing their position, the main model of rented fields seems to be beneficial to both the peasant and the landholder. While the paroikos sought to cultivate the land and pay rent, the landholder possessed necessary equipment for paroikos to use.

Although 12th century Byzantium certainly offers a curious sight as far as socioeconomic development is concerned, the increasingly volatile security situation, both internal (uprisings) and external (invasions) left Byzantium in increasingly weakened state. In the end, not effectively controlling most of its territory and facing series of coups and rebellions, the Byzantine Empire could not successfully defend itself against the forces of the Fourth Crusade, which in 1204 sacked Constantinople and created several domains dominated

²⁰ LAIOU – MORRISON, pp. 102–105, 239; LEFORT, p. 240. Colonization was also supported by the state, which granted tax exemptions to the peasants settled on the new soil. LAIOU – MORRISON, p. 114.

²¹ LAIOU – MORRISON, p. 111. Laiou and Morrison also claim that further economic growth was caused by technical innovation(s) and higher effectiveness of labor. Frankopan disputes this cf. FRANKOPAN, p. 130.

²² LAIOU – MORRISON, pp. 108 –110.

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either by “Latin” elites or by mixed elites consisting of both Byzantine and Western descent. The internal weakness of the state thus brought onto the Empire such a blow which cemented the separation of the Byzantine state into various entities with lower probability of revival.²³

But can we consider Byzantium a state of perpetual decline, increasing volatile internal situation and for various reasons defunct society long due its existence, as was once claimed? The economy certainly thrived, which can mirror similar development in Western Europe from the 11th century forth. This could lead us to an interesting conclusion that the overall economic thrive might have affected quite wider area, certainly including the provinces of the 12th century Byzantium. Naturally, further study is required, although certain factors (the increase of commerce being certainly quite potent) must have had far reaching consequences not only in Western Europe itself, but in various other areas as well.

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present various socioeconomic developments which occurred during the era of the Komnenian dynasty in Byzantium (1081–1185). The work follows the most basic concepts of economy and introduces modern interpretation of recent historical research focused on this period. The themes include the development of trade, taxation, social composition of the countryside and analysis of the status of non-proprietary peasants, paroikoi.

Keywords

Byzantium; Aristocracy; Peasantry; 12th Century; Komnenian Dynasty; Fiscal Policy; Medieval Trade; Rural Economy

²³ M. ANGOLD, *Turning Point in History: The Fall of Constantinople*, in: *Byzantinoslavica: Revue Internationale des Études Byzantines*, Vol. 71, No. 1/2, 2013 p. 23.

