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THE PROVINCE STRIKES BACK
IMPERIAL DYNAMICS
IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

edited by
Björn Forsén and Giovanni Salmeri

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Provincial Elites, Central Authorities: Problems in Fiscal and Military Management in the Byzantine State

John Haldon

There has been over the last 15 or 20 years an increasingly determined effort to come to terms with the evidence for the ways in which provincial populations, at all levels, experienced imperial government in a number of pre-modern state systems. In particular, the ways in which such populations were able to express their opposition to, or participation in, the imperial system of which they were or had now become a part, have generated important debate. But as often as not, this enterprise has involved a greater focus on élites than the ‘ordinary’ population, certainly in the earlier medieval western Eurasian world, for the simple reason that in most pre-modern states the nature of the evidence lies very much in favour of the former. Elites were usually literate, articulate and interested in their own affairs, or were seen as interesting to those who kept records, whether historians and chroniclers, or letter-writers, or whatever. Naturally, where there are archival documents or fiscal records, or forms of ‘popular’ literature, or at least, literature which addressed the interests of the mass of people in the provinces, such as hagiography or religious tracts and sermons and so forth, or where we have legal literature or texts which are concerned with property and inheritance and so forth, then we can say a good deal more about the non-élite. Where there is also material cultural evidence from archaeology or standing structures we can also say something about everyday life, about housing or family structure, for example, as well as about patterns of exchange of wealth in various forms. This chapter¹ will not deal with these topics, however, but will rather concentrate on the more general question of the relationship between state centres, however defined, and their élites, and of the structure of the power relationships which evolve.

The reason for my focus is straightforward. In looking at the elements which unite and which differentiate social and political systems, I have always found that a good starting point is to try to locate the structural constraints which determined how a particular formation evolved – in particular, the means through which their social élites maintained or tried to expand their control over resources, whether human or material. This is true of both the Ottoman or earlier Islamic states as well as the Byzantine state, and no less true of any other pre-capitalist state formation.

Before discussing élites, a brief comment on the way I understand the term ‘state’ is perhaps in order, since the word has a range of possible valences according to context. As with any definition, the notion of ‘the state’ must remain flexible if it is to generate explanations; it should function as a heuristic tool. A great deal of ink has flowed in attempts to generate all-embracing concepts of the state – from Marx’s various definitions of the state as both the embedded forms of property-relations and social power in social formations in which religious-ideological power was the form through which political structures were expressed (his ‘Asiatic’ mode, for example) and as the instrument of

¹ The text is based around my chapter, ‘Social élites, wealth and power’, in Haldon forthcoming.

domination by a ruling class, through to Max Weber's concept of the state as a system of institutions and impersonalised relationships evolving out of late medieval society, or as a territorial entity with a central power monopolising coercive power. Emphasis has also been placed by some, following the approach elaborated by Norbert Elias, on the processual cruxes around which state formation takes place, tracing the points or periods at which differential rates of socio-economic and institutional change attain a certain qualitative transformation, during which modes of resource-extraction and the evolution and transformation of the political forms through which these were achieved under varying conditions also change, and how these impact upon, yet are also affected by, the processes of socio-cultural class formation, awareness and conflict.² Modern discussion has tended to focus around efforts to reconcile these alternative and in many respects conflicting approaches – Mann's approach, for example, sees the state as both an instrument of coercive and ideological power as well as an organ through which élites may reproduce their domination, and which places emphasis on process as much as on structure.³

At one extreme of social-political organisation, the term 'state' can refer to a relatively short-lived grouping of tribal or clan communities united under a warlord or chieftain who is endowed with both symbolic and military authority – in anthropological terms, a 'Big-man' polity. Such 'states' rarely survive for long, however, and may reasonably be referred to as 'proto-states', since they have not yet attained a degree of institutional permanence. The majority of the 'nomad empires' which arose on the Eurasian steppe zone from the beginning of the first millennium BC and periodically re-appeared until the seventeenth century may exemplify such systems.⁴ At the other extreme are more-or-less territorially unified political entities, with an organizational 'centre' of some sort (even if it is in fact peripatetic) from which a ruler or ruling group exercises political authority, and which maintains its existence successfully over several generations. An essential element in the formation and degree of permanence of such formations is that the authority of the ruler or ruling group is recognised as both legitimate and exclusive. In this respect, the ideological aspect is absolutely fundamental to state-building.

Key identifying markers might therefore include a territorially demarcated region (although lands may well have been geographically dispersed and frontiers ill-defined or fluctuating, reflecting the process of formation – through amalgamation, conquest, inheritance and so forth), controlled by a centralised governing or ruling establishment of some sort, which may or may not have a monopoly over the use of coercion, but which usually has the coercive power to assert its authority over the territories claimed, at least on an occasional 'punitive' basis when needed. To some extent, assuming there exists a (theoretical) monopoly on coercive power, this fits Weber's 'ideal type' definition of the state.

In all pre-modern states there have been gaps in the extent of state authority – border or mountainous regions, for example, difficult of access and untouched by state supervision; 'tribal' groups nominally owing allegiance and occupying territory

² Elias 1969, esp. vol. II.

³ Weber 1921; Weber 1972, III, 619-630, 650-678; Mann 1986, 20-32. See the useful summaries of concepts and theories in Giddens 1993, 50-52, 308-311; and the discussions in Sanderson 1999; Trigger 2003. The general discussion in Bang and Bayly 2003, and Bang 2003, reflects the current diversity of approach.

⁴ See Runciman 1989, 152-153, for example.

claimed by the state, but not always easily brought under the state's authority or control. Where geography has favoured a tribal pastoral and/or nomadic economy, the nomads have frequently formed important elements in the armies of conquest states, certainly in the initial stages of their evolution. However, this has also meant that, because of the mobility of such pastoralists, their internal social cohesion and self-sufficiency, and the fact that their wealth is generally easily moved away from the reach of state officials, they are both able and sometimes inclined to resist any central authority that does not directly favour their own interests. By the same token, the relative patchiness of central control may represent a point on the line from local to supra-local state to empire (and back again). Ideological power can overcome this at certain times, but by itself generally remains a short-term means of cementing such power-relationships.⁵ The very different configuration of power-relationships within three late ancient/early medieval states, for example – late Rome/early Byzantium, Sasanian Iran, and the early Umayyad caliphate – provides striking examples of the ways in which these features combined.

One crucial aspect of state formation is the generation of fairly complex ideological and legitimating systems, on the one hand, and at the same time more impersonalised and institutionalised modes of surplus extraction than proto-states or clan or tribal groupings are capable of developing. In Weber's concept a focus around sacred monarchical/priestly authority is seen as one important initial stimulus to the formation of administrative-bureaucratic institutions evolved to secure the surpluses required for the temple and related religious-social functions. Administration based on kinship and lineage relationships, and the exploitation of kin-based modes of subordination, tend then gradually to be replaced by non-kinship-based bureaucratic or administrative systems (although kin and lineage are rarely entirely absent – the example of the later Byzantine Empire, with its close familial networks, provides a useful illustration). In most examples, a bureaucratic-administrative structure of some sort confers a clear advantage, and appears to be a necessity if the political system is to retain its non-tribal existence and cohesion. This point was made already by the Muslim philosopher and political analyst Ibn Khaldun, for example, who saw this process as generally following the initial formation of a supra-tribal political entity from tribal elements under a chieftain of some sort, in which a crucial role was played by religion as a unifying element providing a new, supra-kinship set of relationships, identities and loyalties. While Ibn Khaldun was clearly working on the basis of his knowledge of the evolution of Islamic states, his main point remains valid for any state formative process.⁶

For the purpose of this chapter, therefore, 'state' refers to a territorially coherent political formation dominated by a centralised court and associated administrative apparatus, the whole reinforced through an ideological system in which concepts of 'empire' and divinely-appointed rulership played a key role in legitimating both claims to territory as well as the right to extract and deploy resources in order to maintain the whole system, and which is furthermore able to reproduce itself on a continuing basis independent of the kinship interests of the ruling dynasty or of the vested interests of social élites.

How do we define the term élite? The first point is that élites are rarely monolithic – they usually comprise a number of separable elements or factions, distinguished by

⁵ This is not only a pre-modern phenomenon: see, for example, Fabietti 1982.

⁶ See Ibn Khaldun I, 247ff.

family and clan ties, by geographical location or origin, by political affiliation, functional position in the state system of which they are a part. The second point is that there are generally layers or levels of *élite* status and identity, involving also vertical as well as horizontal solidarities. All these elements have different values at different moments, so that there is generally a constantly-fluctuating overlap of vested interests, identities, alliances, networks of patronage and influence and so forth. We can see this very clearly in the example of the so-called senatorial *élite* of the later Roman world, and most particularly and clearly in Egypt, or in the Byzantine provincial and metropolitan *élite* of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Third, awareness of *élite* status may take very different forms – in many cases competing elements of what we may identify, structurally, as an ‘*élite*’, sharing certain key characteristics in respect of access to and control over resources of one sort or another, may themselves perceive no such common markers, and see themselves rather as independent, autonomous groups in competition with other similar groups. Indeed, the development of an awareness of shared socio-economic status and political interests generally marks a crucial transformative stage in social evolution, politics and the organization of resources. My main point, however, is that although I will be talking somewhat crudely of ‘*élites*’, these groups are neither monolithic nor simple, nor are they constant or stable in their constitution.

State *élites* have a powerful vested interest in the maintenance of those institutional relationships to which they owe their position, and conflict or tensions over the distribution of resources both within dominant *élites*, and between them and other elements in society, provide us with at least one dynamic element through which institutional and organisational change occurs, to the advantage of one group or another. There is in all pre-modern, tributary state formations a systemic tension or contradiction between the interests of those running and dominating the state or court – ‘the state’, in one sense – and those at any given point who stand outside that immediate group of families, clans or individuals. The history of the different elements which make up the Byzantine *élite* at any given time is, therefore, determined largely by the position they occupy in this framework, and what the options for them might have been with regard to securing their position (in terms of wealth, status, property, titles and so forth) for their successors as well as for themselves individually. Being a member of the late Roman or Byzantine *élite* was never, in consequence, a fixed or determinate quantity – on the contrary, it was to occupy a position in a complex set of social and cultural relationships, in which position, status and income remained both negotiable and fragile. Members of *élites* generally attempt to achieve economic and social security for themselves and their immediate kin by investing wealth in land on the one hand, and in the court or palatine or administrative apparatus of their state on the other, the first as a means of securing a regular revenue to fund their activities and promote their interests, the second in order to maintain their access to power and resources. Byzantium was no different.⁷

It is especially important to bear in mind the fact that in the context of both the later Roman as well as the Byzantine state, individuals saw service for the state as a means to an end – for their own individual and family interests – at least as much as, if not more than as a form of public service to ‘the state’ as an abstract entity or concept, although

⁷ For good discussion of the structure, form and history of different elements of the Byzantine *élite(s)*, see the essays in Cheynet 2006a; Haldon 2005; Kazhdan and Ronchey 1997.

such a concept was part of the symbolic universe of the élite, and brought with it a sense of certain duties and responsibilities, as well as rights. Office and title were aspired to as part of the process of realising such vested interests, even if being in the service of the emperor, at court or in the provinces, was in itself an esteemed and praiseworthy attainment.⁸ But while the administrative and military apparatus served the interests of the state, however conceived, it also needed to be paid or maintained in such a way and by such means as would secure its loyalty, or rather the loyalty of the individuals who comprised it. State salaries (regular annual payments to individuals, in cash and accompanying the tenure of specific functions and titles) and privileges, which increased in quantity and scope with rank and title, were the chief means of securing such loyalty, and thus were seen as desirable objectives of social and political competition. While in one sense the east Roman state was undoubtedly understood as essential to the fortune of individual members of the élite, it was largely and understandably taken for granted, so that what we might perceive as short-sighted over-exploitation of resources or inter-clan fighting at certain moments would have been far less obviously seen as a threat to the empire's continued existence. The factional competition and violence of the civil wars of the period from 1071 onwards provides a clear example. By the same token, the payment of enormous salaries on a yearly basis to the chief officers of the state was a pragmatic and taken-for-granted response to the need to secure the loyalty of these important and potentially dangerous individuals.⁹

From Late Roman to Byzantine forms

The term 'senatorial aristocracy' has been used to describe the late Roman élite up to the middle of the seventh century. This establishment, however, embodied a wide range of people of different economic statuses, and people not necessarily of similar social origins. The senatorial order, which represented the established landed and office-holding élite of the empire, had been enormously expanded during the fourth and fifth centuries. The emperor Constantine I (324-337) began to employ senators in the administrative machinery of the state in great numbers, in contrast to Diocletian (284-305) who for political reasons had introduced a number of restrictions on the posts senators could fill.¹⁰ In the middle of the fourth century there were perhaps three hundred senators belonging to the senate of Constantinople, although it was constituted somewhat differently, in both its political and its economic structure, from the older senate at Rome;¹¹ by the end of the century there were as many as two thousand, a result of the creation by the emperors of ever more senators, and the tying of increasing numbers of posts to senatorial rank. One result of this was, inevitably, the devaluation of senatorial status, and the consequent establishment of new grades of higher status to compensate for this movement. All senators held the grade of *clarissimus*, which was hereditary; but a regrading in the later fourth century introduced two new levels – *illustris* and, below this, *spectabilis*. Only the first title was hereditary, the two senior ranks being tied to tenure of an imperial office or post in either military or civil service, although the title of *spectabilis* rapidly lost its status

⁸ See the discussion in Schuller 1975; and that in Gizewski 1988.

⁹ Oikonomides 1989.

¹⁰ Heather 1994.

¹¹ Zuckerman 1998, 130-135.

and was limited to fairly humble posts by the end of the fifth century. As grades internal to the ranks of *illustris* were introduced, according to whether the holder held an active post or not, and whether he was based at court or in the provinces, so the system became increasingly complex, since functional posts could also be awarded on an honorary and inactive basis.¹²

‘Senatorial aristocracy’ thus refers both to those who held the title *clarissimus* hereditarily – a considerable number by the sixth century – as well as to all those who were awarded the higher titles of *spectabilis* and *illustris*, neither of which was hereditary, although the children of those who held these titles were automatically graded as *clarissimi*. Many of these would have been fairly modest landowners, some may even have been in quite straitened economic circumstances, while a substantial number were certainly extremely wealthy and owned very substantial estates. During the sixth century, a further refinement of the grading system occurred, by which new titles – *magnificus* and *gloriosus* – replaced *illustris* at the higher levels, so that most key military and civil posts were of these ranks.¹³ The term ‘senatorial aristocracy’ included also those who held high office in Constantinople and the provinces, men who actually exercised state authority at various levels, and whose salaries enabled them – if they were not already from a wealthy background – to establish themselves as members of this economically powerful élite. Once a senatorial family had established itself through imperial service, of course, it had the resources to further the interests of its own junior members and to build up a clientele, so that successive generations were assured of their membership of both a social élite and the ruling establishment.¹⁴ But it never became an aristocracy of birth, since the emperors were always able to make new senators and fill posts with men whom they preferred, for whatever reason. The composition of the élite was extremely varied.¹⁵

The late Roman élite, internally diverse and highly regionalised though it was, was also the bearer of late Roman literary culture and the guardian of the urban-centred cultural traditions of the earlier Roman and Hellenistic worlds.¹⁶ But the dramatic changes of the seventh century – changes in the role of cities, the huge losses of imperial territory, the narrowing of cultural and ideological horizons which the Persian and especially the Arab wars ushered in – affected this in many ways.¹⁷ Many of the hallmarks of late Roman culture vanish almost completely, along with much of the cultural capital it carried with it. And although many of these transformative developments existed long before the seventh century, the crisis of that time brought things to a head and promoted the development of new structures and responses. As the relationships of power to land and to office within the ruling élite change, so the nature of literary culture, and the bearers of that culture, change considerably. The old senatorial establishment, with much of the literary cultural baggage associated with it, faded away during the seventh century, to be replaced by a service élite of heterogeneous ethnic, social and cultural origins. The new élite incorporated many elements of the older establishment, especially in the metropolitan region and in the

¹² Jones 1964, 523-62; Overbeck 1973; Barnes 1974; Arnheim 1972.

¹³ Jones 1964, 529-35; Arsac 1969.

¹⁴ Näf 1995.

¹⁵ See now the detailed survey in Heather 1998; and for senatorial landowning, Kaplan 1992, 155ff., 169-183.

¹⁶ See Cameron 1998; Morgan 1998.

¹⁷ Brandes 1999; Brandes and Haldon 2000.

senior church hierarchy,¹⁸ but élite culture underwent radical change. The major shifts in urban culture meant that wealthy provincials turned to Constantinople, the seat of empire and source of wealth, status and power, and there they invested their social capital in order to become part of that system, although that might just as easily mean a post in their native territory. Only the Church provided an alternative and equivalent career structure, but that also was centred in Constantinople. The emperor and the court became, more than ever before, the source of social advancement. And while there were many minor routes to power that were not directly pulled into that nexus, the imperial court nevertheless constituted the dominant mode of entry.

The new élite thus owed its origins to the period of turmoil and re-organisation of state structures that occurred in the seventh century. The needs of the state in respect of finding persons competent to deal with both civil and military matters in the provinces in this period of crisis were a central consideration. The advantages an individual had over both local landlords and peasantry if he occupied a position of military or civil authority in the provinces were considerable – a monopoly of armed force, for example, the power to seize or confiscate food or other produce for the army, and so on. Persons appointed to such posts thus had every opportunity to further their own interests if they desired. Members of provincial élites hitherto overshadowed by local senators, or who had not been able to compete successfully at court but who had still been important in their own regions, now found themselves in a position to join state service and benefit therefrom. These tendencies are illustrated by the fact that many of the military commanders of the period appear to have been Armenians who took service with the empire, and serve as a useful reminder that the government was looking for people with the appropriate skills and resources for the tasks in hand, for such men – usually from the middling or upper nobility of Armenia – often brought their own personal armed retinues with them, thus further strengthening both their value to Constantinople as well as their local power.¹⁹ But what is particularly important is that the composition of both the senate in Constantinople and of the state's leading officials changes. Although there had always been a place for 'newcomers', under imperial patronage, in the state establishment during the later Roman period, the greater proportion of non-Greek names, for example, of officials known from all types of source, is very striking from the 660s and after. There seems to have taken place a considerable change in the cultural and social origins of key personnel in the imperial establishment at all levels.

At the same time, the old system of senatorial dignities and titles (the *clarissimi*, the *spectabiles* and the *illustres*) seems to drop out of use, only the leading category of the *illustres* group, referred to as *gloriosi* (*endoxos* or *endoxotatos* in Greek) retaining any significance. Titles that no longer corresponded to social or political realities become irrelevant, disappearing entirely or being fossilised at a lower level of the system of ranks and status. By the end of the seventh century a re-structuring of the whole system of titles and precedence had taken place, in which the importance of titles and posts dependent directly upon imperial service in the palace and at court increases, to the disadvantage of older titles associated in one way or another with the senatorial order. Power was

¹⁸ See Haldon 2005.

¹⁹ Armenians were not the only 'foreign' group to play a role: see Charanis 1959; Charanis 1961; Winkelmann 1987, 203-207; Gero 1985; also Ditten 1983. See also the comments of Cheynet 2006b, 12.

concentrated and focused more than ever before on the figure of the emperor and in the imperial palace, while the older, much more pluralistic system of rank, privilege, wealth and power disappears.

One effect of these changes was to make 'senatorial' titles and epithets part of the common system of titles based on service in the palace and at court. Their survival as 'senatorial' grades was still recognised in the ninth and tenth centuries.²⁰ The conclusion must be that, if senatorial grades had been reduced to one aspect of an otherwise entirely imperial and palatine hierarchy of ranks, and the older titles marking out membership of the senatorial order in the late Roman sense had fallen out of use, then the senatorial order as such no longer existed. 'Senators' were now imperially-appointed – there was no longer a hereditary *clarissime* – which in turn may suggest that the socio-economic and cultural elements which had constituted the older senatorial order in all its diversity no longer existed or, at the least, were no longer able to dominate the state and government. The senate in Constantinople – which continued to wield influence because it included high-ranking state officials²¹ – thus no longer embodied the economic or political interests of a broad stratum of landowners, an aristocracy of privilege whose urban-based municipal culture was also the *élite* culture of the late Roman world.

This does not mean that in the period from the middle of the seventh to the middle of the ninth century there were no wealthy, large-scale landowners; nor that their vested interests were unrepresented in the activities and politics of the ruling *élite* at Constantinople. On the contrary, there is just enough evidence to suggest that many leading families in the capital retained their properties, wealth and, in consequence, influence and access to the court through the seventh and into the eighth century and beyond; and that many of the important 'new' families or individuals of uncertain background who come to dominate the army and civil administration of the empire during the eighth century and afterwards came from well-off provincial families who had remained relatively invisible in the sources of the preceding centuries.²² But this element in society seems no longer to have dominated the state in the way it had previously, although lack of clear evidence for continuity at the upper levels of society make any firm conclusions difficult. Service at court and imperial sponsorship was now far more important to social and economic advancement. The collective political-cultural strength of the late Roman senatorial *élite* had lain in its monopoly of high civil office in particular, the civil magistracies, governorships, judicial posts and so forth, in both the provinces and in Constantinople. Many of these disappeared or were reduced in status and importance as a result of the changes in the role of cities and in fiscal and military administration that occurred over the period from ca. 640-650 on, a process which involved a re-concentration of supervisory authority in the hands of the emperor and a few close advisors, and a focus on service at court for promotion and advancement.²³

The incorporation of senatorial titles into a single imperial hierarchy appears to develop in parallel with the disappearance of the senatorial establishment and the system of grades that were its outward mark of identification. A more court-centred, imperial 'meritocracy' evolved, in which members of the old establishment competed on more-

²⁰ Winkelmann 1985, for a detailed analysis, 28-42, 48-49.

²¹ Beck 1966.

²² Haldon 2005; Cheynet 2006b, 10, 21-22.

²³ Kaplan 1992, 310-326; Kaplan 1981.

or-less equivalent terms, depending upon competence and patronage and connections. In the situation of sporadic near-crisis which characterised the empire's administration from the middle of the seventh century until the 720s, the culture of the old establishment was increasingly marginalised, a factor reflected most obviously in the reduction in the production of many genres of non-religious literature and other shifts in the cultural pattern of the period. As the importance of the court increased, so that of the senatorial order waned, as those who belonged to it came to depend more and more upon the court for their status. Birth and lineage also became less important: the hagiographical writings of the later seventh to ninth centuries, for example, have no commonly-employed vocabulary to describe persons of wealth and power, concentrating usually on descriptions of their wealth and status at the time, rather than their lineage (although this does also continue to be mentioned on occasion).²⁴

The result of all these changes was not simply that the dominance of the older aristocracy was broken. It was that the new 'pseudo-meritocratic' service élite depended, at least in its formative period, entirely upon the emperor. The shrinkage of the empire territorially, the centralisation of fiscal administration, the effective disappearance of cities as intermediaries, socially and economically, between the provinces and Constantinople, were all part of this shift in emphasis. It gave the imperial system a new lease of life, which was to last until the eleventh century.

The court, the élite, and the provinces

The Byzantine imperial court and the government defined their interests relatively narrowly – to protect the empire's territorial integrity, maintain an effective fiscal apparatus through which resources could be extracted for this purpose, maintain the imperial household, and maintain an international diplomatic network which likewise contributed to the preservation of the state. They were less interested in local society and economy – they achieved their aims pretty efficiently and successfully, but stopped short of taking an active interest in provincial affairs. Indeed, central administration was relatively apathetic and ignorant in this respect and, in the context of the ability of members of provincial élites to exercise influence, created a great deal of political space within which local affairs could be manipulated.²⁵

But the government – the state – was at no time a neutral observer and manager of the empire's resources. The imperial administration in the Byzantine world was embodied in individuals who occupied a multiplicity of social roles. On the one hand, as members of the state establishment bearing imperial titles, they were regarded as, and understood themselves as, members of the imperial household. On the other hand, they had roles in their own households and families – as heads of family, as landlords, as brothers or fathers or sons, and so forth. This meant the imperial system was highly flexible and malleable, since the people who made it up were members of frequently extensive networks of clientage and patronage, connected by family interest as well as local identities to a wide range of intersecting circles of influence. At the same time, prominent provincials could make use of personal connections at the capital among people who outranked the

²⁴ See Haldon 2005.

²⁵ This point is well brought out in Neville 2004, 99-135; see also the survey by Cheynet 2003b.

local state officials in respect of access to the emperor or one of his senior confidants. Friendship, social obligation and gift-giving were common forms of putting pressure on people or obligating them in some way, locally as well as at the capital. Social power was thus embodied in a series of overlapping networks, and is reflected in the vested interests and actions of various individuals and groups as they seek to negotiate their ways through these relationships. Social power was exercised to secure and improve one's situation in respect of the centre and the imperial household, in respect of one's family situation, and one's position in a hierarchy of associations with other individuals similarly connected and with access to greater or lesser sets of resources.²⁶ What this meant in practical terms was that for members of the Byzantine élite it was their position in a network of relationships dominated by their household and kin, and the prestige of court and imperial posts, which framed their actions and determined how they interacted with others in the different social contexts in which they found themselves.²⁷ The point is underlined by the ways in which emperors too – the most successful members of the power élite – surrounded themselves with relatives or associates of their families, and by the ways in which those outside this charmed circle strove to gain admittance.²⁸ This was hardly less true of outsiders who aspired to enter this élite at whatever level – most wealthy households maintained some servants and retainers, the wealthier sometimes considerable bodies of servants and armed retainers, and joining the ranks of such a retinue which, among the very powerful, was organised along the same lines as the imperial palace, could offer many advantages to someone who aspired to greater things. The stories of Leo, Michael and Thomas in the retinue of Bardanes Tourkos and later Nikephoros I, or of Basil I, among several, are illustrative, although it should be emphasised that none of these three were in fact of humble origins.²⁹

But however complex the actual forms of such networks, the importance of maintaining one's position in the imperial system and of retaining the approval of the emperor and his immediate household and advisers was always paramount to the sense of social worth and honour of members of the Byzantine élite in both the capital and the provinces. This gave the emperor a clear advantage in neutralizing competition for control over resources.³⁰ One outcome of the changes during the seventh century traced above was that up to the later tenth and mid-eleventh centuries, Byzantines identified no 'aristocracy' as such – they described their world in terms of those with state positions, the middling and private citizens or subjects of the emperor, and the poor, or in terms of those who held a palatine rank or state position, and the rest.³¹ But they certainly had a sense of 'noble lineage' or 'good birth', and a 'good' or 'well-born' family was recognised as a

²⁶ What is known of the history of various clans and families illustrates these points: see Cheynet 2003a; and in particular Krsmanović 2001; Cheynet 1990, 261-301; Vlyssidou 2001; and especially the careful study by Winkelmann 1987, 143-219.

²⁷ Magdalino 1984; Neville 2004, 85-93; Cheynet 2006b, 32-36 for the tenth-eleventh centuries.

²⁸ Cheynet 2006b, 13-14.

²⁹ Beck 1965b; Winkelmann 1987, 75ff. For Leo, Michael and Thomas, see Winkelmann 1987, 77-78; Cheynet 2006b, 12 and notes; 31-35. For Basil I: Winkelmann 1987, 79ff.

³⁰ See Kazhdan and McCormick 1997, 168-172, 195-197.

³¹ For the absence of lineage and family identity as significant social markers before the middle of the ninth century, see Guillard 1948; Guillard 1953; and for a brief discussion of the concept 'aristocracy' as it appears in the modern literature on the Byzantine élite, see Antonopoulou 2002.

³² Cheynet 2006b, 5ff. and sources.

desirable asset.³² The prosopography of the major office- and title-holders of the empire across the seventh to ninth centuries has shown how some of these networks functioned in practice. In particular, it has shown that the central authority managed to maintain a remarkably firm hand on the élite, rotating even the most powerful senior military officials on a fairly regular basis, able to isolate malcontents or potential threats and have them neutralised (exile, execution, imprisonment) and, time and again, to ward off challenges to central authority by rebellious provincials.³³ And this promoted the continuing vitality of the palatine hierarchy and the system of precedence from which social status, privilege and access to power and wealth flowed. The general Katakalon Kekaumenos was praised, reportedly, by the emperor Michael VI (1056-1057), himself a former senior government official, for achieving his success and high rank by his own merit and not by virtue of family connections, reinforcing the impression that lineage and ‘good birth’ were in fact well-established as markers of social distinction.³⁴

By the eleventh century there had evolved a substantial provincial aristocracy in the Byzantine world. Those who held state positions and who had invested a portion of their wealth in property in their native districts, for example, had married into other wealthy families and inherited land and other property. They were able to transmit this wealth to successive generations and at the same time to secure positions at court and in the army and administration through the exercise of patronage, connections, marriage and, just as importantly, the education available to those who could afford to acquire it.³⁵ Access to élite status and position remained open to those of more humble origins, but it was certainly becoming increasingly difficult by the later eleventh century. Yet still, in spite of the potential for such an élite to reduce its dependency on the court and palace (through the acquisition of economic resources in land independent of the court and the emperors), it remained to the very end firmly anchored in the palatine hierarchy. The values and self-esteem of individuals and families were determined always by their position within the system of court titles, ranks and administrative or military offices, and closeness to the throne. In consequence, the emperors were still able to exploit this situation to advance the careers of those of less privileged background who came to their attention. The system of yearly salaries or *rogai* paid to those who had invested a lump sum in return for certain titles and the social status they brought is an ample illustration of this (up to the later eleventh century, at least), for the return on such investments was often very small indeed and may often have meant an absolute loss, if measured in purely financial returns, to the investor.³⁶ But as an investment in status and esteem the purchase of such titles clearly brought very considerable benefits and was widely practised. This *ideological* identity of interests between those who joined or who were born into the social élite, and the palace, thus generated what we might call a systemic impasse, where in the end neither court nor élite could free themselves from one another, and where the élite could never assert an identity independent of the court in the way which western aristocracies were able to do.

³³ Winkelmann 1987, 99-142.

³⁴ Skylitzes, ed. Thurn 1973, 483.13f.

³⁵ Hendy 1985, 100-107 for some magnate lands, their extent, origins and their location; Cheynet 2006b, 7-12.

³⁶ See Lemerle 1967; Oikonomides 1997, 205; Neville 2004, 25-31. This system broke down in the second half of the eleventh century, however – see below.

Interests and conflicts

The structural tensions thus generated showed themselves in the political life of the empire in terms of the relationship between individuals or groups of magnates and their kin, and the imperial government, court, or individual emperor. As the *élite* became gradually less *economically* dependent on the court, and as it began to develop an awareness of its interests – reflected by an increasing use of family names and an awareness of social status, tradition and expectations from the later eighth, but more clearly from the early tenth century onwards – so there began to appear also a real structural tension between the economic interests of this increasingly independent, but internally fractured *élite*, dominating as it did at least certain key sectors of the machinery of the state, on the one hand, and the fiscal interests of the state itself and of the particular power *élite* or dominant faction which directed it at any given moment, on the other hand. This tension can be seen in the efforts of both parties, reflected in imperial legislation in particular, to maintain or increase its access to the surplus that could be appropriated from the producing population. Should that surplus go to the landed power-*élite* and magnates, as rent, or to the state (and thus, of course, indirectly, to the power *élite* of the moment) as taxes and other impositions?

We must be careful not to oversimplify. For ‘the *élite*’ was not a single or monolithic group, but consisted, as we have said, of a range of competing and sometimes hostile families, clans and individuals, each with specific cultural and political origins and allegiances. Each of these elements acted in its own perceived best interests, not as members of any co-ordinated body, and certainly not with any sense of common identity except at the level of peer respect and worth; in addition, the range of people identified in imperial legislation as ‘the powerful’, those who presented an actual or potential challenge to the imperial government for resources, was very wide and, in purely economic terms, represented people from very disparate positions in society – indeed, it has been noted that it represented a relationship of relative power and wealth rather than a distinct social grouping.³⁷ What they did have in common was an imperial position or rank, and therewith also an income derived from imperial service – whether as a soldier in the *tagmata* or guards regiments at Constantinople, at one level, or as a senior fiscal administrator and title-holder at Constantinople or in the provinces, at another. And this returns us to the point that it was primarily at and through the court, the imperial palace, and in the presence of the emperor, that social rank was conferred and wealth acquired. While this might have been inflected or nuanced by notions of family and lineage and so forth, the emperors were well aware – and exploited the fact – of the crucial importance of membership of and participation in the imperial system.

Nevertheless, the body of people who, in the imperial legislation of the tenth century, are collectively referred to as ‘the powerful’ did constitute, from a structural perspective, a focus of competition for resources in landed wealth and, perhaps more significantly and, for the state, more dangerously, in manpower, whether or not they were aware of their position in this respect. In particular, senior provincial officers who acquired lands and thereby some authority and patronage over the occupants of such lands, who might at the same time be the source of soldiers for provincial armies, were an obvious threat. The emperors tried to limit the length of service of individual officers

³⁷ Morris 1976; Neville 2004, 68-69, 79ff.

in particular regions to avoid the development of such personal ties of dependence and loyalty, and as noted already, in the eighth and throughout much of the ninth century appear to have been fairly successful in this respect.³⁸ The policies of the emperor Basil II (976-1025) in particular have been picked out as exemplifying this tension and the strategies available to emperors to address the problems they perceived.³⁹ During the eleventh century, and following the eventual failure of draconian legislation on the part of rulers such as Basil II, they seem to have been less able to maintain such a firm control, and their leading officials were more often than not also among those who were most likely to compete with the court for control over manpower and wealth. This is where the contradiction becomes most apparent – to preserve their own authority over resources the emperors issued legislation, which they then expected to be enforced by members of the very social élite against whose interests the legislation was in part directed. Naturally, they tried to select individuals whose immediate interests were closely allied to those of the ruling emperor, and thus generally from among those factions or families closest to them and most dependent upon them, but the point remains valid.

The parties to this struggle were conscious of this contradiction at the level of political vested interests, but differentiating between ‘the state’ and the social élite of the empire is to create an artificial separation between the two, since they overlapped in so many ways. It was to the emperor and the concept of the orthodox Roman *politeia* that individuals gave their loyalty. And while it was the emperor who recruited members to the élite, promoting the careers of individuals from a wide range of social backgrounds and thus inhibiting the development of a closed and aristocratic élite, the court was dependent upon the élite for all its chief civil and military functionaries, regardless of the distinct family and patronage factions that existed, each of which attempted constantly to use the state against their particular rivals, not only at the highest level of power-politics but also in provincial and local political competition.⁴⁰ In the course of the later eleventh century, a partial solution was for the emperors to concede revenue extraction to those upon whom it depended. As the tensions between the different poles of authority and power intensified, what had been a systemic paradox and potential opposition became open and political, yet doubly complicated by the factional rivalries between clans. The other part of the resolution was then the seizure of the state by the representatives of a particular faction of the ruling élite, and the establishment of a more openly dynastic and aristocratic system of administration, dependent upon a precarious network of clan alliances and patronage supported by the leading magnate families.⁴¹ As the historian Zonaras remarks of the system established by the Komnenoi, the emperor Alexios I (1081-1118) distributed state positions and state lands and the income derived therefrom among his kin and relatives by marriage, with the result that the Komnenos clan became the wealthiest family in the empire.⁴²

³⁸ Survey of the evidence in Winkelmann 1985, 72-140; Winkelmann 1987, 99-142.

³⁹ Cheynet 2006d.

⁴⁰ Neville 2004, 136-164.

⁴¹ As a good example of this see Cheynet 2003a. I use the term loosely, to refer to those families which shared a monopoly of key state positions, owned substantial private wealth, headed substantial networks of patronage, and were in a position to challenge the imperial family on matters of state policy.

⁴² Zonaras, ed. Böttner-Wobst 1897, 767.2-10. This whole process is analysed in Kazhdan and Ronchey 1997.

While by no means united ideologically, constituent elements of this group, made up of a number of dominant families with their clients and retainers throughout the provinces as well as in the central administration, eventually came into open conflict with those elements which dominated the state apparatus at Constantinople at given moments, especially during the first three-quarters of the eleventh century. This conflict was prefigured in the tenth century by the temporary dominance exercised over the imperial court by members of particularly influential clans, such as the Phokas family. But factional rivalry prevented any longer-term ascendancy at this point, and the exploitation of that rivalry by Basil II and his successor Constantine VIII (between 1025 and 1028) permitted the emperors to destroy this particular threat to their own dynasty and power.⁴³ The clash between the bureaucratic faction which dominated policy during the brief reign of the emperor Michael VI (1056-1057), and the leaders of the Anatolian armies, all members or associates of well-established 'military' clans, a clash which resulted in the rebellion led by Isaac Komnenos and Katakalon Kekaumenos and the deposition of Michael, reflected a more dangerous development from the point of view of the ruler. And it is, ironically, clearly reflected in the fate of the emperor Isaac I (1157-1159): as soon as he was on the imperial throne and confronted by the issues of resource control and expenditure from the perspective of the government, he began to legislate to re-establish imperial control, only to suffer a similar fate himself as the vested interests of the élites at both Constantinople and in the provinces allied together to cast him out.⁴⁴ Nevertheless the relations within and between the different elements which made up these groups remained fluid and subject to constant change, so that it is impossible to speak of clearly identifiable or long-term political solidarities. It is true that, by the middle of the eleventh century, contemporary commentators were speaking in terms of identifiable 'military' (provincial) and 'civil' (Constantinopolitan) factions, although it has been shown very clearly how much even this perspective was the product of a very particular and relatively short-term situation. The so-called military faction was identified with the great magnates of Asia Minor, an élite of birth, the metropolitan group with the central bureaucracy, to a degree at least an élite based on office and direct and regular access to the imperial household.⁴⁵

This does not mean that the latter did not also possess or invest in landed property in the provinces; nor that the demarcation between the two groups was not always very fluid and subject to a wide range of conjunctural pressures, factional alliances and individual personalities – indeed, interests were represented and embodied precisely in individual family histories and individual careers.⁴⁶ Competition for power and influence took place within the context of a patrimonial political structure, dominated by the formal hierarchies and system of honours and status of the imperial state, and between rival clans and families. While landed wealth played without doubt a crucial role in the consolidation of magnate autonomy, families and individuals invested also very heavily in the imperial system itself: posts and sinecures, state 'pensions' (annuities attached to the possession of specific ranks and titles in the imperial system, not necessarily active posts with functions attached), often amounting to considerable yearly incomes in gold and precious cloths, as

⁴³ Howard-Johnston 1995.

⁴⁴ See Attaleiates, ed. Bekker 1853, 60-62; and esp. Zonaras, ed. Böttner-Wobst 1897, 667-668.

⁴⁵ Cheynet 2006c, 16-19.

⁴⁶ Cheynet 1990, 191-198; Cheynet 2006b, 11.

well as thesaurised coin, jewellery, plate and so on. All members of the dominant social class, as well as their clients, invested and accrued wealth in this way. While many families thus consolidated their position economically over a number of generations through the acquisition of lands, equally large numbers seem to have possessed relatively little landed wealth, and were in consequence much more directly dependent upon the state or, more specifically, the particular ruler and palatine faction of the moment.⁴⁷

Such persons may be described, in fact, as clients of the state itself, and formed thus an important group of interests at the capital and in the palace. And it must be stressed again that even the more independent magnates – both individuals and clans – depended for titles, honours and, to a certain extent (depending upon distance from the capital, relationships with local society and similar factors) social status and respect on this bureaucratic, imperial system. In the tenth century there was still no real aristocracy, even if there were a number of élite families who remained consistently important in the state's affairs, military and civil; and the emperors were still able to isolate dangerous individuals and families and deal with them, make and break senior officers, bring in people of humble origins or outsiders to fulfil key roles in their governments. And eunuchs played a significant role as well, even if it is also the case that several of these did also favour their own relatives' economic and political interests, and thus cannot be said to be either genealogically or culturally deracinated or independent of the pattern of vested interests of members of the élite. Indeed, the significant positions achieved by many eunuchs is a clear illustration of the relative openness of the establishment and of the centrality of imperial patronage and choice, and at the same time of the absence of any consolidated élite groups at court or in government administration in general. Only during the later eleventh and especially during the twelfth century does the rise to power of the military aristocracy of the Komnenian era lead to the exclusion of eunuchs, among other groups, from the highest positions.⁴⁸

This was still, in many respects, a pseudo-meritocratic regime, in which connections, patronage, talent and opportunity played as important and sometimes a much more important role than birth. Symeon the New Theologian, writing in the early years of the eleventh century, noted that the élite fell into two groups – those who were present at court, who accompanied the emperor on campaign, devoted themselves to imperial service; and those who dwelt on their own lands, stayed at home in luxury. The former were the *archontes*, one of the generic terms used for those in power and authority, and hence for the social élite.⁴⁹ Only during the later eleventh and twelfth centuries did some of these families acquire sufficient wealth and resources on a secure enough basis to become, potentially at least, more independent of the court and its system of titles and precedence. And it was the successful rise to imperial power of one of them, the Komnenoi, and the system of clan and dynastic alliances they employed to cement their position, that facilitated and speeded up the process of aristocratisation that accompanied this.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ The best analysis of these relationships and the factional strife within the élite is Cheynet 1990.

⁴⁸ See Spadaro 2006; Cosentino 2006, both with further literature and valuable discussion. See also Sideris 2002; Tougher 1997; Ringrose 1994. Older literature: Kazhdan 1973; Seibt 1978, 145; Winkelmann 1985, 66.

⁴⁹ See Darrouzès 1967, 106.

⁵⁰ See Cheynet 1990, 339-377.

Elite power vs. central authority?

The growth in the power of the élite had been stimulated by two developments in the period from the middle of the tenth to the middle of the twelfth century. In the first place, the sources show the increasing subordination of the peasantry to both private landlords and, from the later eleventh century, to holders of state revenue concessions. This long-term process was hastened by the occurrence of a series of natural disasters affecting harvests in the first half of the tenth century, and exposed peasant smallholders in particular to pressure to convert their lands into tenancies in return for support through difficult periods. While the government enacted a number of laws to restrict the alienation of such lands to ‘the powerful’ (a loose term denoting most of those with the resources to buy up land, and thus not necessarily signifying the very wealthy alone), success was very limited, and in the end, and in spite of draconian measures enacted by the emperor Basil II, the state began to lose control of the fiscal resources which such independent producers represented.⁵¹ The peasantry, while they became increasingly liable to the depredations and encroachments of the big landowners and magnates (especially in the tenth century) as well as those who were also the tenants of large landlords, were all still subject to the fisc, that is to say, they were taxed directly (although some estate owners, particularly monastic or ecclesiastical, were exempted as a special privilege by certain emperors).⁵² At the same time the rapaciousness of some imperial officials, anxious to exploit their own positions, further exacerbated the problem of over-taxation, and the situation was further complicated by the fact that provincial landlords might also be the centrally-appointed representatives of the state, responsible for various fiscal duties, for example. The contradictions inherent in such a situation are graphically brought out in the ways through which provincial peasant producers were exploited by such officials, a situation made very apparent in the letters of archbishop Theophylact of Ochrid for the late eleventh century.⁵³

In the second place, from the later eleventh century the state conceded the right to receive the revenues from certain public (i.e. fiscal, or taxed) districts; or of certain imperial estates, and their tenants, along with part or all of the rents and taxes raised from them. Such grants – known as grants of *pronoia* – were made for a variety of reasons to individuals by the emperors, chiefly as an administrative and political tool designed to bind potentially antagonistic individuals or clans to the imperial family. They took the form of personal grants from the ruler, who represented the state in the institutional sense; and while there was also a more general meaning of the term *pronoia*, the most usual involved *pronoia* grants in return for military service. In order to maintain the loyalty of many magnates, emperors also granted increasing numbers of tax exemptions to individuals, who in turn benefited from the fixed rates of taxation in a context of rapid price inflation and devaluation of the gold currency. With the expansion of magnate landholding, a process of alienation of the state’s fiscal and juridical rights set in, although the extent to which the institution of *pronoia* contributed to this before the thirteenth century is open to doubt: such grants only seem to have become generalised from the middle of the twelfth century as a means of supporting soldiers, and many of them were very small – not major

⁵¹ Morris 1976; Howard-Johnston 1995.

⁵² A process summed up in Harvey 1989, 35-79.

⁵³ See Gautier 1986, esp. nos. 12, 17, 19, 21, 24, 26, 31, 55, 61, 85, 96, 98; and also Herrin 1975.

estates designed to support a mounted soldier and his retinue, but quite small revenues intended to maintain a soldier for a limited period.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, through obtaining fiscal exemptions of varying sorts, landlords – both secular and monastic – were able to keep a larger proportion of the revenues extracted from their peasant producers for themselves, as rent, while the government's hold on the remaining fiscal land of the empire was constantly challenged by the provincial élite.⁵⁵ This had important consequences, for, in conjunction with developments in the way the government recruited and financed its armies during the later tenth and early eleventh century, it meant that the overall burden placed upon the peasant producers grew considerably.⁵⁶ In the period before the changes of the later tenth century, it is likely that this burden was fairly evenly distributed across the rural population of the provinces, and that, although the transit of imperial forces did involve unusually heavy demands on the communities closest to the routes used by military detachments, such demands were neither frequent nor regular.

The divergence between the interests of those members of the landed and office-holding establishment outside the court power élite, and the central authority (or the 'state' as a political entity) and its allies, which begins to make itself felt during the later tenth and eleventh centuries, was resolved from the time of Alexios I and until the end of the twelfth century by the transformation of the empire under the Komnenos dynasty into what was, in effect, a gigantic family estate. While the process may well have begun to take form under the Doukai in the 1070s,⁵⁷ the Komnenoi ruled through a network of magnates, relatives and patronage that expanded rapidly during the twelfth century and, in uniting the vested interests of the dominant social-economic élite with those of a ruling family, re-united also the interests of the former with those of a centralised empire. This can be viewed from one perspective as a 'papering over'. But from another angle it was an efficacious way of recognizing a very different set of circumstances and of creating the space for the development of new solidarities and networks of patronage, which enabled the state to survive as a powerful eastern Mediterranean entity until the very end of the twelfth century.

The factional politics that led to these developments, in particular over who would control Constantinople and sit on the throne, become particularly apparent in the squabbles and civil wars that followed the defeat of Romanos IV (1068-1071) by the Seljuks in 1071, a situation resolved only by the seizure of power by Alexios I in 1081. By the same period, the élite had crystallised into a multi-factional aristocracy of birth, with a few very powerful families at the top, and a number of subordinate and collateral clans and families dependent upon them, often with strongly regional affiliations and identities. Under the Komnenoi, the imperial family and its immediate associates monopolised military and higher civil offices, while the older families who had been its former rivals dominated the bureaucratic machinery of the state, leaving local affairs and provincial administration to members of the local élites, who had benefited from the economic stability of the tenth and eleventh centuries and the revival of urban economies.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ The extent of grants of *pronoia* before the later twelfth century is still unclear. See Ahrweiler 1980; Khvostova 1988; Magdalino 1993, 172, 175-176, 231-233; and esp. Cheynet 2006b, 28-30.

⁵⁵ Harvey 1989, 68-69, 91ff.

⁵⁶ Harvey 1989, 35-79, 102ff.

⁵⁷ Cheynet 2006b, 5.

⁵⁸ Cheynet 1990, 413ff.; Magdalino 1993, 18-227; Kazhdan 1984.

Yet even with this aristocratisation, vertical mobility remained quite usual, because the absolute authority of the emperor at court made palatine service at once both highly desirable and remunerative, as well as insecure and potentially dangerous. Personal service on the emperor and proximity to him on a day-to-day basis meant influence and power. It also encouraged rivalry from competitors.⁵⁹ The rise to power and influence, and the fall from grace, of senior courtiers and palatine officers, whether well-connected outside the court or not, is a commonplace throughout Byzantine history, until the very end. There are many examples: in the late seventh/early eighth century the fate of those who failed to succeed in carrying out some of the policies of Justinian II (685-695 and 705-711);⁶⁰ in the eighth century the revolt of Artavasdos (741-3) against Constantine V (741-775) is itself an indication of the potential threat perceived by that great ally of Leo III (717-741) in the succession to the throne of his younger brother-in-law Constantine V; the discovery of a plot against Constantine V in 765-766 and the subsequent punishment of several senior military and civil officials and their clients at court;⁶¹ under Eirene (797-802) the competition between the eunuchs Theoktistos and Staurakios;⁶² the *vita Basilii* (a laudatory *Life* of the emperor Basil I, 867-886), however much elements may have been pro-Macedonian propaganda, reveals a court full of factional rivalries and jostling for position; the rise to power and subsequent removal from authority of Basil the *parakoimomenos* in the 980s,⁶³ and so on – up to and beyond the case of Theodore Styppeiotes and his disgrace through the plotting of his rival John Kamateros at the court of Manuel I (1143-1180).⁶⁴

Provincial and metropolitan elite society

But the structure and history of 'élite society' is more complex than the importance of the great magnate clans would suggest. Below the clans and families who came to dominate the imperial system during the tenth and eleventh century stood a much larger number of lower-ranking but still 'powerful' families and individuals, people who invested in the middling hierarchy of state and army, but who were also closely associated with the society and economy of their home districts and towns. From the later seventh and eighth centuries, the fiscal system had been focused on the village community, so that the revival of urban centres from the later ninth century onwards meant the appearance of a series of important towns which remained more-or-less independent of the imperial administration, except that they served as administrative bases and residences for the various local and visiting imperial officials whose business lay in the provinces. The local élites, who more and more preferred to live in their district town rather than on their estates (if they had ever dwelt outside the local towns, something which the lack of evidence on this issue makes impossible to decide), had a free hand in the running of such towns, in the governance and administration of which they, together with the local bishop and senior clergy, constituted the chief elements. The bishop, in fact, was generally a key member

⁵⁹ Kazhdan and McCormick 1997, 176-185, 189-195.

⁶⁰ Ostrogorsky 1968, 142-143.

⁶¹ Rochow 1991, 144-159, 191-192, 204-205.

⁶² Lilie 1996, 102-103, 279-291. See also for a general survey of stability and instability at court and in the imperial administrative establishment more widely, Winkelmann 1987, 98-142.

⁶³ Brokaar 1972.

⁶⁴ Kresten 1978; Magdalino 1993, 198-200, 254-256.

of this élite, and often had family connections with the middling and higher aristocracy of the town and its hinterland. Indeed, just as it seems likely that the bishop had remained throughout the period from the sixth to tenth century a major figure in local urban life, so it is just as likely that local élite families were likewise important figures, although we hear very little of them in the sources. The revival of local agriculture, increasing monetisation of exchange, increased market activity, all contributed to an improvement in their situation and a higher political as well as economic profile as they were able to take advantage of stable economic circumstances to invest in agriculture as well as markets.⁶⁵ This group of largely middling landlords supplied also many of the local state officials in both the civil and military administration, so that the interests of the families who were thus represented could be furthered with little real opposition. Indeed, the term used to describe them – *archontes*, a term which may be loosely translated as ‘lords’ – meant also an official or holder of an imperial post of some sort, and points to their origins. Their income came from both land as well as from town property – the recovery of urban markets and economies meant that town properties increased in value, with the result that substantial incomes could be drawn from urban rents and the commercial activities that may have been associated with many of them.⁶⁶

The emergence during the eleventh century of provincial urban élites who had the interests of their own town, as much as a career at Constantinople, as the centre of local society and economic activity, created a new element in the pattern of relations between capital and provinces. It meant that local interests could now be represented more vocally than hitherto, and also created a basis for opposition to the activities of fiscal officials sent from the imperial capital. The development of ties of patronage and dependence between these archontic families and their tenants and clients reinforced these local solidarities, generating an additional barrier between both central government and the major aristocratic families, and local tax payers. But the relative apathy about non-fiscal provincial matters on the part of the government meant that a high degree of local autonomy was the norm, with prominent households or groups of allied families able to exercise influence through their networks of patronage and contacts at the capital and in the central administration.⁶⁷ As a result, when the central administration did attempt to get more involved – either in changing fiscal rates or in other respects – the possibility of armed opposition to government officials also arose. One or two examples of local revolts which were clearly inspired by popular or communal hostility to imperial fiscal policy are recorded in the sources. A good example is the rebellion, during the reign of Constantine X (1059-1067), of the townspeople of Larissa, a small *kastron* in Thessaly in Greece. Led by their *archontes*, they wished to protest against the imposition of extra taxes by Constantinopolitan officials. Even though one of these local lords, a certain Nikoulitzas Delphinas, tried to warn the emperor, he was ignored, and eventually ended up at the head of the rebels. The revolt ended peacefully, by negotiation, but signalled an important change in the relationship between Constantinople and the provinces.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ See Neville 2004, 83ff.; Harvey 1989, 207ff., 226ff.; Angold 1984c, 236-253; Cheynet 2006c, 21-23.

⁶⁶ For the local ‘gentry’ and their relationship to the expanding urban and rural economy in the eleventh century and after, see esp. Angold 1984c; Neville 2004, 66-98; also Harvey 1989, 261; Magdalino 1993, 150-156.

⁶⁷ Neville 2004, 39ff.; Angold 1984c; also Cheynet 2003b.

⁶⁸ See Harvey 1989, 113-115; Hendy 1985, 297.

New elements were introduced into the élite during the middle years of the eleventh century as emperors such as Contantine IX Monomachos (1042-1055) and his immediate successors opened senatorial membership, and thus access to senior state positions and titles, to individuals from hitherto excluded groups such as merchants and lower-ranking administrative personnel. This was partly to boost the state's income, since the titles thus awarded had to be paid for; and it may also have served factional political aims, creating a body of venal dependents on the emperor who would support him against other factions at court and at Constantinople. Since some of these newcomers also held imperial posts as tax-collectors or similar in the provinces, it also impacted upon the ways in which the state collected revenues and is associated with the increasing farming of revenue contracts and oppressive exploitation of rural taxpayers.⁶⁹ But it changed the composition of the metropolitan, civil élite – much to the chagrin of some contemporary observers⁷⁰ – and had important consequences for the structure of the élite as a whole. It contributed likewise to an inflation of titles and the need to generate new strata within the existing hierarchy to accommodate the changes, a tendency exacerbated by the declining value of the devalued imperial gold coinage – since imperial *rogai* were paid in a depreciating currency, the élite and the palace generated more and more senior titles with correspondingly higher *rogai* attached to them as a means of safeguarding their income and investment.⁷¹ At the same time, as the eleventh century drew to a close, the upper strata of the metropolitan, predominantly 'civil' establishment and the provincial, largely 'military' families became increasingly differentiated, with the Komnenos clan favouring a select group of leading military landowning clans, more-or-less closed to newcomers, and actively discouraging the social advancement of people of middling origins. The shift is accompanied by a downgrading of what had by this time become designated as 'senatorial' – which is to say, 'civil' – titles, and the creation of new 'imperial' titles founded less on functional attributes than on connections to the imperial family. It also appears to have entailed the exclusion, to a greater or lesser extent, of both eunuchs, who had played a significant role in élite and palatine politics from the seventh until the middle of the eleventh century, and of foreigners, especially in the army. Vertical mobility, while remaining possible primarily as a result of imperial sponsorship and patronage, becomes less possible; and while there were certainly a few individual exceptions, the civil élite also suffered in status and esteem.⁷²

From the middle of the twelfth century at the latest – at the height of what has been dubbed 'the Komnenian system' – the élite of the empire can truly be said to be dominated by this militarised aristocracy of birth. In contrast with the earlier period, when relatives of emperors occupied very few senior posts, it has been noted that almost 90% of senior military positions were held by the Komnenoi or their relatives and kin during the reign of Manuel I.⁷³ And although strong and politically-sensitive rulers like Manuel I were able to maintain imperial authority very effectively through manipulating the different interests of these families and by using outsiders, it is also clear that while individuals from outside

⁶⁹ See Lemerle 1967, 84-90; Lemerle 1977, 287-293; Hendy 1985, 570-582.

⁷⁰ E.g. Michael Attaleiates' contemptuous remarks: ed. Bekker 1853, 275.12-19.

⁷¹ Weiß 1973; Hohlweg 1965, 34-39; and esp. Cheynet 1983.

⁷² For these tendencies, see Kazhdan 1974; and the detailed analysis of the Komnenian system in Magdalino 1993, 180-192; also Lemerle 1977, 309ff.

⁷³ Kazhdan and McCormick 1997, 170; Magdalino 1993, 186-188.

this class can be brought in and raised up to positions of power by an emperor or a senior patron at court, the dominance of the major families, through a combination of dynastic alliance and a near-monopoly on key positions, could no longer be challenged. The results of the Fourth Crusade (1203-1204) and the recovery of Constantinople in 1261 merely reinforced these tendencies. Imperially-bestowed titles and posts, presence at court, and membership of the palatine system in general remained a *sine qua non* of social life for anyone in the élite or who aspired to join it, and incorporated all the major routes to achieving high social status.

Some possible comparators

The relationship between metropolitan élites and the court, on the one hand, and between the court and its current dominant faction on the one side, and the provincial élites, on the other, is one determining or structuring element in the distribution of political power and access to resources, therefore, which is of absolutely central consequence to the ways in which tributary state formations work. But this is not the only element: in many state formations, there are then further distinctions between different élites – between centrally-appointed provincial governors and locally-embedded élites, for example. If we compare the Byzantine case with that of the early Ottoman state, or with the Mughal state, a number of systemic similarities appear which are belied by the surface appearance of central authority and administration. The Ottoman example is the case par excellence where a state élite which is nominally neither hereditary nor representative, nor drawn from a pre-existing socio-economic élite, dominates or appears to dominate a political formation headed by an absolute ruler. The state must thus appear autonomous from the society in which it is rooted, but over which it appears to stand. But the appearance of this structure, perhaps because of its very strangeness to the predominantly European historical or sociological observer, belies the nature of the relationships it embodies. So wherever we look, whether at the centralised empires of central and South America, or the ancient states of China and Asia, the relationships between state élites, ruling classes and rulers are complex, dialectical and determined ultimately by the question of control over resources.⁷⁴ Most importantly, the relationship between metropolitan and provincial élites, the overlaps between them, and the interaction between their vested interests at court, on the one hand, and on the other their local interests in non-metropolitan society, inflects their political as well as their economic options. The political economy of such relationships is presented through an ‘ideological’ lens, as kinship or religious or political values, of course. But behind and below these lie the relations of production or of distribution of surplus, and it is these which underlie and are given expression through the dominant forms of political-ideological organisation.⁷⁵

This tension between different sectoral interests focused on the political relations of appropriation and distribution of surplus is true of all pre-modern state systems dominated by what I have termed tributary production relations, from Merovingian and Carolingian

⁷⁴ See the contributions in Alcock *et al.* 2001, for example; also Southall 1965; Marcus 1976.

⁷⁵ The point is not new – see, for example, Anderson 1979, 15-16. For a detailed comparative survey which looks at the whole of the late Roman world and the successor systems up to the ninth century, see Wickham 2005.

France, through the early Islamic states, to the Mughal and Ottoman Empires.⁷⁶ The problem of equilibrium and the nature of direct state intervention in the political relations of distribution are especially clear in the case of the cyclical transformations which distinguish Chinese states and their evolution from the earliest times, for example. Both in the long period preceding the Sung dynasty (960-1279) and thereafter, political power depended upon a complex balance between the interests of the centre and those of the (potentially) independent provincial élites. With the development and extension of the power of the middling and lower gentry under the interested patronage of the Sung, in the form of the meritocratic bureaucracy for which China is well-known, the state was able to maintain its pre-eminence more easily. The system that evolved was designed to fragment any opposition to the state's economic and political/ideological control by integrating the middle and lower gentry into the state apparatus and by increasing their dependence on the emperors, in respect of both incomes and social status/titles and so on, while at the same time reducing the hold of the wealthier class of magnates on the machinery of state in the provinces. Systemically, this is very similar to the way in which the Byzantine imperial court 'integrated' its potentially oppositional élite.⁷⁷ But, as has been pointed out, even in China, and in spite of the ideological pre-eminence of the notion of the imperial state and the single emperor, key elements of the mandarin state in the provinces were still able to usurp state power and revenues at the local level, with only occasional interference from the central government. And this did not threaten the federal unity of the empire directly.⁷⁸

As I have noted already, these relationships are rarely expressed through economic categories, but are voiced through symbolic systems and ideologies in which authority and power are the terms of reference, whether earthly or divine.⁷⁹ Most importantly, power is not an abstract, nor is it a disembodied quality of political personalities and relationships. It is rooted in the differential access of individuals, groups and classes to resources, and hence is inscribed within economic relations – a point which, I would argue, applies equally to forms of charismatic power exercised at an individual level. For this is in itself the expression of the mobilisation of emotional narratives and contexts, in which the question of access to or exclusion from social resources (however this might be expressed in specific cultural formations) is at stake. Social resources, in other words, which permit control or lack of control over the process and means of reproduction of spiritual and material life.

⁷⁶ For a comparative analysis, see Haldon 1993, chaps. 2-5; Haldon 2003.

⁷⁷ E.g. Eberhard 1977, 205ff.

⁷⁸ See Beattie 1979.

⁷⁹ The question of the specific forms of modes of distribution of power is particularly the concern of Runciman 1989, vol. II, especially as set out in his opening sections, 1-86. Poulantzas' detailed morphological analysis of power (1978, 99-119) combines both a useful critique of the numerous non-Marxist sociological attempts to define power in social theory; but it is constrained by a structuralist paradigm (structures – practices – overdetermination) which I do not find particularly helpful in generating a dynamic analysis of historical change; and by a class-centred method which tends to ignore the graded and emergent nature of the cline from constituted and constitutive social subjectivity to group and class ideologies and practices, and thus renders empirical analysis one-sided – structures become detached from human subjects (who remain their 'agents' or 'bearers') in a way which makes causal explanation in which human motivations play a role difficult.

The search for power, as has been cogently pointed out,⁸⁰ is a search for a means to an end – the (more) effective control or mobilisation of (certain) resources in order to facilitate the achievement of certain goals: the maintenance of political authority, for example, and thus the reproduction of a particular set of social, and hence also economic, relations. Examining the relationship between metropolitan centre and province, between local and regional élite society and court power élite, offers a fruitful approach to the dynamic underlying such phenomena.

80 Mann 1986, 5-7.

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