

Transformations of City and Countryside in the Byzantine Period

Beate Böhlendorf-Arslan · Robert Schick (eds)





Byzanz zwischen Orient und Okzident | 22

Veröffentlichungen des Leibniz-WissenschaftsCampus Mainz/Frankfurt



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Redaktion: Martin Dennert; Stefan Albrecht, Claudia Nickel (RGZM)
Satz: Stefan Albrecht (RGZM)
Umschlaggestaltung: Claudia Nickel (RGZM); Coverbild: Messene, wiederverwendetes römisches Architekturteil aus der frühbyzantinischen Basilika (Foto Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies)

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

ISSN 2626-9392 (Print)
ISSN 2629-2769 (Online)
ISBN 978-3-88467-338-6

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Druck: Memminger MedienCentrum Druckerei und Verlags-AG

Contents

7 Detlef Gronenborn · Rainer Schreg
Preface

9 Beate Böhlendorf-Arslan · Robert Schick
Introduction

Spatial Transformations

13 Ine Jacobs
»Urbanised« Villages in Early Byzantium. An Overview

25 Myrto Veikou
Encroachment, Subdivision, and Expansion:
a Cultural Interpretation of Byzantine Spatial Transformation (6th-9th Century)

39 Nikos Tsvikis
Messene and the Changing Urban Life and Material Culture
of an Early Byzantine City in the Western Peloponnese (4th-7th Century)

55 Beate Böhlendorf-Arslan
Changes in the Settlements and Economy of the Southern Troad (Turkey)
from the 4th to 15th Century

67 Rainer Schreg
Land Management as a Factor in the Transformation of Rural Landscapes.
Comparative Case Studies with Special Attention to the Early and High Middle Ages

Economic Transformation

85 Albrecht Berger
Konstantinopel als Zentrum von Wirtschaft und Handel

93 Konstantinos D. Politis
The Economic Transformation of Zoara in Eastern *Palaestina Tertia*
from the »Late Antique« to Early Islamic Periods (6th-11th Century)

Transformations in the World of Faith

105 Jean-Michel Spieser
The World of Pictures in Late Antiquity: Changes and Mutations

Bearers of Transformations

- Cécile Morrisson
Behind Early Medieval Economic Transformation in Byzantium, East and West:
»Active« and »Passive« Agents?
115
- Miriam Steinborn
Gelebter Wandel – Alltag als Beobachtungsebene von Veränderungsprozessen
127
- 141 List of Contributors
- 143 Sigles Used

Preface

The present book »Transformations of City and Countryside in the Byzantine Period« is the outcome of a conference at the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, as part of the Museum's research field »Processes of Social Change and Dynamics«, and the Leibniz ScienceCampus Mainz »Byzantium between Orient and Occident«, held in Mainz in November 2016. The edited volume focuses on the later periods of the RGZM research field – Late Antiquity and the Byzantine period to the Early and High Medieval periods – covering regional studies from the eastern Mediterranean, and even incorporating a short excursus into Central Europe.

Core topics of both themes of the research field are treated, namely questions about agglomeration (urbanization and deurbanization/ruralization) and about socio-ecological developments in landscapes. Economic aspects are also covered, all from a process-based perspective incorporating change and internal dynamics.

The conference, and the resulting volume, therefore not only mark a stepping stone in Byzantine studies, but also for our RGZM research field. As the former and present heads of this research field we congratulate the editors for this innovative publication.

*Bamberg and Mainz, October 2020
Rainer Schreg, Detlef Gronenborn*

Introduction

We live in a time of immeasurable possibilities, a time in which living conditions are changing faster than ever before. Over the past 250 years, pioneering scientific and technical innovations have fundamentally transformed our everyday lives, created new ways of communicating, networked our world and made distances shrink. The primacy of free enterprise has opened up borders and created disparities, triggered migrations and led to the emergence of new social groups. These processes have not only led to the emergence of other forms of social coexistence, but have also shaped entirely new ideas of ethical and social values that are closely linked to the great ideologies of modernity. The extreme speed with which social transformations are taking place today makes it almost impossible to assess their prospects for the future or to observe them with any degree of simplicity. Only in retrospect can causes and effects be recognized; only in retrospect can an attempt be made to crystallize which transformations helped societies to resist the adversities they faced from outside and within, and which led to their demise. The Old World experienced a similarly hot phase of innovation and social transformation two millennia ago. The Roman Empire brought the blossoms of the Hellenistic cultures of the Mediterranean region to full bloom: science, technology and philosophy flourished in the service of the economy, culture and society. Under Roman rule, people of very different origins, cultures and religions lived together – it was an early pluralistic society. This period was so significant that it still resonates in many aspects of our lives today, so that the Roman Empire could become the cornerstone of our Europe today. However, the loss of the heartland with the decline of the Western Roman Empire in the late 5th century by no means meant the end of the Roman Empire, as it is often understood.

The following Byzantine Empire in the eastern part of the Roman world lasted more than a thousand years. During this time between the foundation of the new capital of Constantinople in 330 and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the ancient world was fundamentally transformed, and with these transformations the foundations for modern-day Europe were laid. The political, economic, social and cultural processes of change were closely interconnected in multiple ways and frequently affected all levels. Hence transformations can be recognized in many sources, in writings, images, objects and architecture. Archaeology has long sought to determine the social dynamics behind changes in urban and rural life. Landscapes were also subject to processes of trans-

formation in their function as economic spaces and zones of contact between centers. Changes in landscapes are conditioned above all by the type of settlement and utilization of resources and still reverberate today (for example in the stages of degradation that characterize the vegetation of the Mediterranean today).

The Byzantine Empire thus was a continuation of the Roman Empire that lasted until the beginning of the early modern era. This long existence was only possible because the empire continuously adapted and reinvented itself to the demands of the time. Thus, it transformed itself into a Christian state of the Middle Ages, which managed to maintain an inner coherence and a cultural continuity that lasted for centuries despite all the changes.

The Byzantine Empire is an ideal object for the study of social transformation processes, their triggers, underlying factors and courses, not only because of its long history and its formative significance for the medieval and modern cultures of the Old World, but also because of its wealth of information. Here, many aspects that are significant for contemporary societies around the world can be rediscovered on a smaller scale and their social implications can be observed over the long term. Some examples are the effects of widely networked flows of goods, technical innovations, manorial power, financial and economic crises, demographic changes, processes of agglomeration and ruralization, strategies of intensive resource and landscape use, the rapid spread of diseases transmitted from animals to humans or even religious reforms.

The available sources are diverse and complementary: while the written sources and art reflect contemporary observations from within Byzantine society as well as from outside, bringing the perception, social values and crystallization points of cultural identification into the light of history, the archaeological finds are material manifestations of the everyday life of the population, about which the written sources are largely silent. Everyday life, however, is an important scene of social change: No matter how important the head of the centralized state may have been, the population with all its levels, milieus, and strata was a no less important agent of social change.

The concept of »transformation« or simply »reshaping« contains the elements of what remains, the conservative, the kernel of what continues, as well of what changes, the innovative. In the framework of this publication, we seek to

draw attention to this dichotomy and investigate the extent to which change in daily life can be detected by archaeology, history and art history. Who were the agents of transformation and how did they and their environment change? To what extent did the state or its citizens, for example, show themselves to be flexible in handling external and internal pressures of innovation? In what manner and to what extent were the Byzantines able to preserve their identity and the internal cohesion of their empire in the course of these processes of adaptation? We would like to draw attention to the dichotomy between the conservative and the changing by examining processes of change or the consequences of transformations in the Byzantine Empire.

From 16th to 18th November 2016, the Leibniz Science-Campus Mainz »Byzantium between Orient and Occident« organized a conference on this topic together with the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Leibniz Research Institute for Archaeology. The focus was placed on »Transformation of City and Landscape«, »Economic Transformation, »Processes of Transformation in the World of Faith« and »Bearers of Transformation«. The publication of the conference papers was delayed for various reasons. We are pleased that some of the conference participants are presenting the results of the discussions in this book.

The contributions illuminate the transformations in different ways and with different approaches. Under the heading »Spatial Transformation«, Ine Jacobs gives an overview of the relationship between city and country. She observes that from the 5th century onwards architecture normally associated with »cities« can be found in villages. In her contribution she discusses the reasons for these urban contexts in villages. Myrto Veikou brings archaeology together with historical texts to examine spatial practices from a socio-cultural perspective. She demonstrates a new approach to explain the profound change from the decline of the old urban elite and the emergence of a new upper class with new rules of use and a changed management of space. Messene, studied by Nikos Tzivikis, give an excellent view on the multiple transformations that a city could undergo. Even if agriculture took place inside the city after the 6th century, Messene never lost the structure and organization of a city. In her contribution to the transformation of a landscape, Beate Böhlendorf-Arslan points out the close interdependence between natural disasters and economy in the settlements of the Troad region in Turkey. In his article, Rainer Schreg examines a new method of research into spatial transformations, the examination of

Byzantine agricultural land by geoarchaeological studies. To illustrate the ecological perspective, which is necessary to understand the complex interaction of a various factors involved in landscape transformation he refers on better known examples from medieval Southern Germany.

In the chapter on »Economic Transformations« Albrecht Berger gives an overview of the key role of economy and trade in Constantinople. Many foreign traders were involved, especially in long-distance trade and trade with luxury goods. Using this example, he can reconstruct the changes in trade goods and structures of foreign relations. Konstantinos D. Politis shows the economic transformations in the Byzantine Near East with the example of Zoara – modern-day Ghor al-Safi in Jordan in a region where the rapid change in political systems brought much movement to the general structure. The economic situation of the city is intricately linked with changes in agricultural practises.

In the context of »Transformations in the World of Faith« Jean-Michel Spieser focuses on changes of images in Late Antiquity. Statuary became unfashionable, while mosaics and painting gained importance. According to Spieser, images were now migrating from the private environment to churches while representations with ancient origins were often adapted to the new world of faith.

In the field of »Bearers of Transformations« Cécile Morrison gives an overview of the agents. According to her, private agents make their decisions according to their economic, political and physical environment, building directly on the social life in the village community. Miriam Steinborn focuses on everyday life and thus to the »household«. In the households the users act. Households therefore offer the opportunity to look at the possibilities of individuals and their function in the process of transformation.

The editors of this volume wish to thank the RGZM and its former director Falko Daim and present director Alexandra W. Busch for their support of the conference and publication of this volume. We would like to thank Rainer Schreg, Detlef Gronenborn, Miriam Steinborn, Henriette Baron and all other participants for the countless fruitful and helpful discussions in the research field »Processes of Social Change and Dynamics« from which this conference emerged. Martin Dennert was responsible for copyediting the papers, to whom we also express our sincere thanks. Furthermore, we would like to thank Stefan Albrecht and Claudia Nickel from the RGZM publishing house, who were in charge of the printing.

*Marburg and Amman, October 2020
Beate Böhlendorf-Arslan, Robert Schick*