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An introduction

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Microstructures and Mobility in Byzantium: An Introduction

The movement of individuals, groups, and peoples has always been part of human history. Indeed, the key texts that shaped the thinking of medieval Byzantium – the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Homer’s *Odyssey* – are built on the premise of movement. The book of Exodus recounts the movement of the ancient Israelites out of Egypt, where they had been of inferior civic status and, according to their story, performed forced labour. Under the leadership of Moses, they reached the promised land of Canaan after forty years of wandering, hardships, and internal strife. Following Jewish tradition, the Byzantines interpreted this as a tale of liberation brought about by divine guidance, but we can also read it as a tale of mass migration in search of better working and living conditions. The Gospels depict Jesus of Nazareth as a wandering preacher and miracle worker with extraordinary powers, who shunned societal conventions and a sedentary lifestyle. As modern readers, we observe (although the Byzantines apparently did not) that the element of mobility is underlined by the fact that Jesus was born in a temporary shelter in Bethlehem, and later grew up in Nazareth with his mother Mary and her husband Joseph, and the need of his family immediately afterwards to seek refuge in Egypt from King Herod’s persecution.

The Old Testament stories and the Gospels were familiar to everyone in Byzantium, regardless of social status, as they would have been heard in the liturgy or in sermons and seen in pictorial representations on the walls of churches. Those who were privileged enough to receive a higher education were taught to read and interpret the verse epics of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, the protagonist of the latter, was shipwrecked after the Hellenes succeeded in capturing Troy (ancient Ilion). He spent ten adventurous years of moving from place to place by sea, until he finally returned to the island of Ithaca where he was reunited with his faithful wife Penelope. The Neoplatonists, who deeply influ-

enced Byzantine theology, saw in Odysseus' meanderings a metaphor for the human soul in search of union with the divine.¹

These stories from the deep wells of the history they considered their own were well known to the Byzantines. But the movement of an entire people of shared language and religion in search of better living conditions, the need of safety that forces a family to move, and the long way home of an individual in the aftermath of warfare – these are events that we still see today.

Writing these words in the spring of 2023, in the midst of the destruction wrought by Putin's war on Ukraine that has resulted in the displacement of several millions of people (mostly women and children), eight years after hundreds of thousands of people tried to make their way to the safety and prosperity of Europe in the wake of the wars in Syria and Afghanistan (mostly young men), one cannot help but wonder whether the word 'migration' has by now become a politicised term loaded with specific connotations (largely negative).

Yet, migrations as a distinct phenomenon have been an object of study in their own right for several decades. Much has been written on the slave trade that supplied the Caribbean and South and North America with African workers and transatlantic labour migrations from Europe to North America. Migrations of this kind do not appear in the historical record of Byzantium, though any large-scale construction project would have required mass migrations of skilled artisans and unskilled labourers. Instead, earlier generations of Byzantinists have been mostly concerned with migration *within* the Byzantine Empire, whether as a result of an imperial policy of forced re-settlement or by religious and ethnic groups acting on their own initiative, although often under duress.² Internal migration (German: 'Binnenmigration') was the key word, and this often included the in-migration of Armenians from the eastern borderlands, which was presented as a success story of resourcefulness and social advancement.³

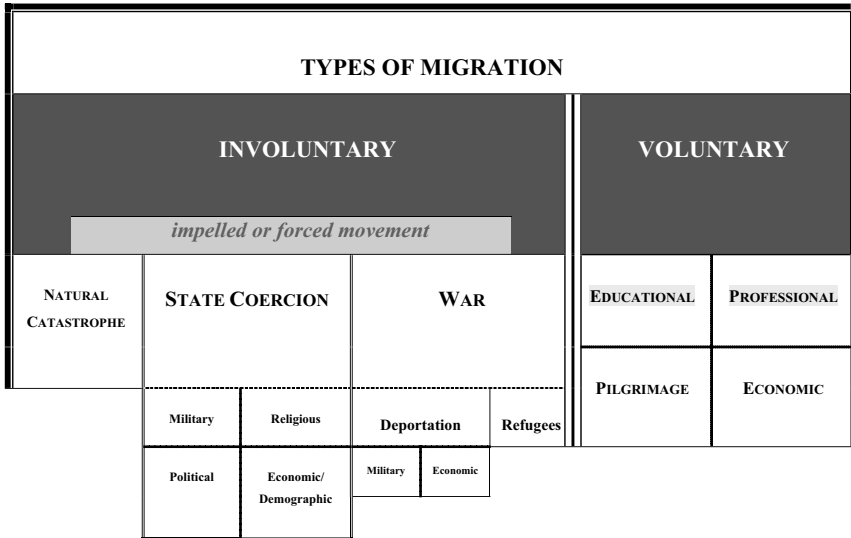
Yannis Stouraitis has created a useful diagram based on the reasons for migration, distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary migration, with various sub-categories.⁴ What such a diagram cannot show is the issue of scale: involuntary migration as a result of warfare or due to imperially-ordained forced re-settlement affects larger numbers of people than voluntary migration required by one's station in life. Both, however, were an integral part of the history of Byzantium across the centuries.

1 Lambertson, *Homer the Theologian*.

2 For forced migration, see, for example: Rapp, *Zwangsmigration in Byzanz*; Stouraitis, *Migrating in the Medieval East Roman World*; Ditten, *Ethnische Verschiebungen*.

3 Charanis, *Armenians in the Byzantine Empire*; also his collected essays in Charanis, *Studies on the Demography of the Byzantine Empire*; Ahrweiler and Laiou, *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*; Ditten, *Ethnische Verschiebungen*.

4 Stouraitis, *Migrating in the Medieval East Roman World*, 143.



Like the medieval historians whom we depend on as sources of information, the perceptions of modern scholars are all too often determined by scale. When large groups of people labelled with ethnonyms (the Armenians), identified by their regional origin (the Cypriots), or compartmentalised as heretics (the Paulicians), are described by Byzantine historians as moving from one region to another, scholars commonly identify this as ‘migration’.⁵

But there are other, smaller-scale constellations of people who moved to a different location. Hagiographers report on families leaving for more- or less-distant parts under the pressure of invasion or piracy. Chronicles mention (and art historians confirm) the movement of artisans to new locations where their skills were in demand. The movement of individuals is frequently mentioned across a wide range of written sources, while archaeology and material culture offer tangible evidence for the movement of objects, carried across long distances by their owners, or brought by traders and diplomats. Individuals often moved for professional reasons. Imperial or elite women (often at a very young age) became brides to husbands in distant regions and moved there with their own entourage. Re-location was required of newly-appointed bishops, metropolitans, or patriarchs. Rising through the ranks of the military meant a lifetime spent in training or on campaign. Acquiring the high level of education that was the prerequisite for an advantageous position at the court, in the imperial administration, or in the higher clergy necessitated a move to the large urban centres,

5 For general context, see now Preiser-Kapeller *et al.*, *Migration Histories of the Medieval Afroeurasian Transition Zone*.

such as Constantinople and Thessaloniki, and in the early Byzantine period also Alexandria, Antioch, Athens, or Berytus. In contrast to the large groups mentioned above, however, scholars seem hesitant to identify the movement of smaller groups or of individuals as ‘migration’.⁶

This is where the concept of ‘mobility’ comes in. Employing the concept of ‘mobility’ allows us to widen our perspective and to include a much wider range of people within our purview, whether they moved as individuals, families, clans, or smaller or larger groups. It also shifts the emphasis to the agency of those who move, rather than assuming that they are passive victims of circumstance, warfare, or imperial policy. With such an approach, mobility becomes more visible as a constant element throughout the long history of Byzantium. As a result, Byzantium appears as a much more mobile – and hence dynamic – society than previous generations of scholars have been able to acknowledge.

The term ‘mobility’ has a further advantage: it allows us to imagine movement not only in geographical terms, from one point on the map to another, but also, in our perception of a hierarchically structured society, as vertical mobility across social strata. Indeed, there is an intrinsic relation between the two: upward social mobility, as we have noted, often requires geographical mobility.

If we wish to study people who are moving, we cannot neglect these social aspects. Here, too, we can benefit from recent trends in modern migration studies that not only bring into focus the fact of movement or displacement from one location to another, but also seek to understand the agency of individuals on the move as they continue to interact with their social networks in their locations of origin while building new networks at their destinations. In fact, the latter is often an extension of the former, as people who have recently arrived in a new place depend on support systems for the exchange of information and a helping hand, and these are most readily offered by the people to whom they are already connected, i.e. migrants of the same background. The emphasis on personal agency in conjunction with mobility thus invites a closer look at microstructures, i.e. groups defined by a common origin, shared language, joint profession, or similar goals.⁷

This is the approach that we were able to explore with an international and multi-generational team of scholars thanks to the award of the Wittgenstein Prize that was granted by the Austrian National Research Fund to Claudia Rapp in 2015 (FWF P-Z288-G25). Yannis Stouraitis was a member of the Vienna team from 2015 to 2017 and has remained an Associated Scholar since then. In addition to

6 Relevant passages by Byzantine authors have been assembled in Claudia Rapp *et al.*, *Mobility and Migration in Byzantium*.

7 For an overview, see Harzig and Hoerder, with Donna Gabaccia, *What is Migration History*; Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact*; Hahn, *Historische Migrationsforschung*.

many events in Vienna, this funding enabled us to invite scholars to join us for dedicated sessions at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds. A special session at the International Congress of Byzantine Studies held in Belgrade in 2016 also explored ‘Mobility and Microstructures’. The chapters of this volume represent a cross-section resulting from these conversations.

The current book does not represent an exhaustive treatment of microstructures and mobility within Byzantine society. The small collection of case studies presented here is, rather, intended as an introduction to the study of those topics, and as stimulation for further research and dialogue. The book consists of chapters which span different periods of Byzantine history between roughly the seventh and the fifteenth centuries, focussing on different regions and paying particular attention to the provinces and the periphery of the empire. Within this broad chronological and spatial framework, the authors explore practices of social advancement of persons from the lower to the higher social echelons, as well as the building of horizontal and vertical solidarities and the interconnectivity of persons and social groups both in Constantinople and the provinces. Moreover, they pay particular attention to the physical mobility of individuals and objects.

The chapter by Christos Makrypoulias explores a rather under-studied social group: the infantry commanders during the later period of the so-called Macedonian dynasty.⁸ It offers fresh insight into personal agency and social mobility in the lower echelons of society, because service in the infantry as a means of social advancement pertained predominately to low-born men, in contrast to the high-ranking officers who have been the focus of the most important studies on social advancement and were, more often than not, men born into well-established families.⁹ Such cases of social mobility become visible from the tenth century onwards, when authors started to pay more attention to the infantry.¹⁰

Makrypoulias examines the social position of infantry commanders based on the evidence of the lists of precedence and sigillographic material that testifies to their court titles, which reveal that they could advance considerably in the social hierarchy. In this context, he seeks to clarify the ways in which these men were able to climb the social ladder, bearing in mind also the sudden appearance of information about the infantry in the sources. The beginning of this process can be traced to the relationship between the infantry units and the high ranks of the *doukata* or *katepanata* that begin to be mentioned in the late tenth century.¹¹ Moreover, the position of infantry commander – given that it could function as a

8 On the Middle Byzantine armies, see Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*.

9 Haldon, *Social Élités*; Cheynet, *Byzantine Aristocracy*.

10 McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth*, 198–211; Makrypoulias, *Boots on the Ground*.

11 On the military reform of the *doukata/katepanata*, see Kühn, *Die byzantinische Armee*.

stepping-stone for further advancement in the military hierarchy – emerges as a prestigious reward which members of the power elite used as a means to attract supporters to their cause or convince people to change sides in the course of coups d'état and the great civil wars of that period. The position of these 'new men' as members of the provincial elite is confirmed by their roles as donors. By the middle of the eleventh century, infantry commanders appear to be part of the upper social strata, the office being a starting point even for the establishment of new military aristocratic families.

Efi Ragia's chapter shifts our attention to the question of the formation of micro-solidarities within Byzantine society, focusing on four kinds of groupings in a provincial context: the community of the village; the *phratriai/phatriai*; the 'confraternities'; and the monastic/church communities. Beginning with the community of the *chorion* (village), Ragia goes beyond the well-studied image of the *chorion* as the basic fiscal unit from the late-seventh century onwards.¹² She scrutinises the social aspect of the village as a microcosm of various bonds and interactions that found their expression in the forging of a coherent community which was recognised by the state in legal terms and is often seen as acting by itself as a unit. The latter is made explicit in the case of legal acts where all members of the village community, irrespective of their social status and professional capacity, appeared as a single body. Within this framework, the question of violence exercised between the members of the village community is addressed. Particular attention is paid to the role of the soldiers as a group that acquired power and social prestige within the local community, and was often able to impose its will by force of arms.¹³

Another kind of grouping addressed in the chapter are the *phratriai* or *phatriai*, extended networks usually based on bonds of blood kinship and marriage built around persons of elite status, as well as on clientele relationships.¹⁴ Ragia argues that the *phatriai* were groupings that promoted attachments that cut across the boundaries of local communities. The elite status of the heads of such networks made them vehicles of social advancement for their clients and supporters, conveying social capital and political power to their members. The *phatriai* could acquire considerable influence both at the local level as well as at the level of imperial society.

In contrast to the political aspect of the *phatriai*, the 'confraternities' represented a kind of grouping with different characteristics and goals. Ragia delves

12 Kaplan, *Les hommes*, 95–101; Laiou, *Byzantine Village*, 31–54; Kyritses and Smyrlis, *Villages*, 439–445.

13 On soldiers and their relationship to land and village communities, see Haldon, *Recruitment and Conscriptio in the Byzantine Army*; *idem*, *Military Service*.

14 The classic study on the topic of the retinues of elite families is Beck, *Byzantinisches Gefolgschaftswesen*.

into the terminology of the Byzantine sources in an effort to clarify which terms apply to the phenomenon of ‘confraternity’ and what information may be deduced about their internal function and social action. These ranged from activities related to the support of the poor to the organised cult of icons and practices of public piety. The last part of the chapter is devoted to monasteries and churches as *loci* where Christians could come together and engage not only in religious practices, but also in socio-political activities. The foundation of churches and/or monasteries by members of the local community offered a meeting point where donations were collected and distributed, fairs were organised, and the poor could seek various kinds of support. Besides being a sacred space where communal religious identity was reasserted, the village church was also a space where transactions took place and people from all social strata could come together and interact as a collectivity.

The chapter by Yannis Stouraitis is dedicated to the microstructures of social action during revolts in the capital of the empire in the High Middle Ages. It begins with an analysis of the literary image of the people as a political body with a leading role in popular uprisings against emperors and takes issue with modern approaches that have tended to accept that image uncritically.¹⁵ Using the iconic revolt of 1042 as a case study, Stouraitis analyses the ideological agenda of elite authors, pointing to the inherent contradictions and inconsistencies of the projected anthropomorphised image of the people, presented as if they acted like a single body with a single will towards a common goal. By deconstructing that literary image, he shows how elite authors instrumentalised the generic elite perception of the commoners as imprudent and fickle in order to present them as the only part of the populace able to commit acts of violence and capable of dragging all other social strata into a conflict with the emperor. This image served to mitigate the central role of members of the senatorial elite and the higher clergy in instigating the violent deposition of an emperor.

The second part of the chapter goes beyond the literary image of ‘people vs. emperor’ in order to scrutinise which social groups participated in unrest and with what agenda, as well as how and why different social groups took action on such occasions. Stouraitis shows that different groups of people such as the marketplace mob, mercenaries residing in the city, the members of the guilds, the senatorial elite, and the higher clergy could take part in a revolt with different roles and without having the same ideological motives or the same goals. In this context, the group that aimed to depose an emperor needed to have the necessary

15 There exist number of modern studies on popular revolts in Constantinople during the Late Antique and Medieval periods: see Cameron, *Circus Factions*; Whitby, *Violence of the Circus Factions*; Garland, *Political Power and the Populace*; Bell, *Social Conflict in the Age of Justinian*; Cheynet, *Colère du peuple*.

networking and economic capacity in order to organise a strong military force capable of overwhelming the defenders of the imperial palace. This was the crucial element that usually distinguished an unsuccessful from a successful attempt at usurpation. The latter was the outcome not simply of popular dissatisfaction, but of the well-planned and organised escalation of unrest into a small-scale civil war within the capital.¹⁶

Ekaterini Mitsiou's chapter scrutinises the relationship between mobility and crime, in particular murder, during the first half of the thirteenth century in one of the Byzantine Empire's successor states, the so-called despotate of Epirus. Based on an explanatory model derived from modern criminology, Mitsiou seeks to analyse murder in relation to the movement of perpetrators and victims in the areas of western Greece in the transitional period that followed the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders. Within this framework she offers an overview of how criminology and forensic science have been applied to the exploration of criminal behaviour in the Middle Ages with examples from western Europe and China.

The main part of the chapter is devoted to the exploration of the micro-structures of murder at the level of the lower social strata, a topic that has previously received little attention in modern research.¹⁷ The main sources of information are court decisions made by church officials, which shed light on the identity of perpetrators and victims and their motives, the crime scenes, and the ways people committed murder or were murdered. The evidence shows that murder often occurred at the place of work, and that perpetrators and victims worked together and knew each other. Trespassing and illegal use of one's land, forests, or grazing areas appear to be among the main reasons that could lead to altercations that ended with killing, an aspect that points to how movement within a geographical area could play a role in the act of murder. Other cases of killing pertained to domestic abuse and strife among family members, or were a result of a strained relationship between lords and peasants.

Christos Malatras deals in his chapter with the question of personal agency in the process of social advancement in Late Byzantine society.¹⁸ Beginning with the period after the Arab conquests, higher social status had been increasingly linked to good ancestry in Byzantium, a development that culminated with the emergence of the Komnenian elite in the twelfth century, which was an elite based on kinship relations to the imperial family.¹⁹ In Palaiologan Byzantium, aristocratic

16 On a typology of Byzantine civil wars see Stouraitis, *Civil War*.

17 The focus has instead been on the murder of emperors, see Markopoulos, *Αίμα στο παλάτι*: Stouraitis, *Mord als Mittel zur Machtergreifung*.

18 On the structure of Late Byzantine society, see Matschke and Tinnefeld, *Gesellschaft im späten Byzanz*.

19 Magdalino, *Empire of Manuel I Komnenos*, 320–321.

status by birth was not confined to those related to the family of the ruling dynasty. Higher education remained a main vehicle for the acquirement of a higher social status. However, persons of good ancestry had greater access to wealth and thus better chances to achieve such an education than members of the lower strata. Within that framework and in the absence of a rigid stratification system based on hereditary or legal divisions, upward mobility in Late Byzantine society still remained a possibility for people who were not born to elite families.

In this context, Malatras scrutinises the role of patronage in facilitating upward social mobility. He shows how adherence to a patron, in the form of friendship or political alliance and support, or in the form of entering a powerful person's service, were the main avenues open to people who wished to improve their social and economic status. Offering service to a powerful person was the most popular and effective way to achieve social advancement in Late Byzantium. The bonds of allegiance between a servant and a patron were strong and created a reciprocal relationship where the one party improved their social position and the other secured long-lasting loyalty. However, persons who profited from a relationship of patronage could also distance themselves from their patron once they had achieved a certain social status. Upward mobility often required more than one patron, as exemplified by the career of Michael Gabras which Malatras presents as a case study. The most successful form of patronage was, of course, patronage that came from the emperor himself.

The chapter by Florence Liard shifts our attention to material culture and a relatively new area of research, namely the pottery traditions of the Late Medieval Mediterranean, which can shed light on social boundaries and microstructures in Byzantium. The case studies she presents offer insights into a bottom-up approach to glazed pottery traditions in Constantinople, the provinces, and on the periphery of the Byzantine Empire in the transitional period between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. Based on archaeological and archaeometric evidence, Liard seeks to reconstruct workshop production outputs, pottery commercial networks, and local demands. She enquires about the modalities of sharing aesthetic tastes and decoration techniques both at the regional and the long-distance level.

The evidence of the practices of production and distribution of glazed pottery provides important information on craftsmen and pottery consumers with regard to their everyday life, social behaviour, and the social and cultural bonds between them. Moreover, it provides insights into the process of re-negotiation of collective identities and social cohesion, as well as into social interactions and boundaries in a world that had undergone major changes in political, territorial, and cultural terms. Liard shows that this changing world was marked by internal flexibility and diversity, with Byzantine traditions being adopted, adapted, and

perpetuated by Latin groups across Europe and western Asia in the period after 1204.

The chapter by Bruno de Nicola takes us to Mongol-dominated Anatolia in the second half of the thirteenth century, which represented a peripheral region from the viewpoint of the contemporary centres of power in Constantinople, Tabriz, and Baghdad. This region was inhabited by Greek-speaking Christians, semi-nomadic Turkmen, and Persianised urban elites.²⁰ The author makes use of a collection of twenty-four letters in order to complement the scarce information we have about this region, which is treated only marginally in the major contemporary Byzantine and Persian chronicles. The evidence of that compendium of letters, probably written in the mid-thirteenth century, allows for the reconstruction of the journey of a physician named Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Ḥaqq to Kastamonu, Sinop, and a number of other cities in northern Anatolia. The account offers insights into the mobility of people from certain social classes in Islamic Anatolia and sheds light on various aspects of the social, cultural, and economic life of the region.

De Nicola pays particular attention to the itinerary of the trip, the physical landscape, and the anthropogeography of the locations visited by the traveller. The physician appears to have been offering his services to a society where the co-existence between Christian and Muslim communities facilitated the movement of professionals across religious and cultural boundaries. Professional ambition as well as personal and spiritual interests appear as the main motives for the movement of individuals in thirteenth-century Anatolia. Within this framework, the letters testify to the multicultural environment of commercial locations such as Sinop and highlight the networks that promoted the interconnectivity of cities such as Kastamonu, Sinop, Sivas, Niksar, Samsun, and the region close to Trabzon.

The concluding chapter of the book, the afterword written by John Haldon, provides some general methodological observations about mobility, microstructures, and personal agency in the Byzantine world against the background of the various insights offered by the individual chapters. Haldon’s remarks are intended to bring to attention the important gains that current research has made so far and to point towards potential fruitful avenues for future research. It is our hope that the chapters of this volume serve as a contribution to this process, as they draw on a wide range of evidence, from material culture to documentary texts, and from legal treatises and epistolography to historical narratives. They demonstrate that investigating microstructures and personal agency through the

20 The classic – but now rather outmoded – study on Late Medieval Anatolia is Vryonis, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization*.

lens of mobility can offer valuable insights into the inner workings of Byzantine and neighbouring societies.

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