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BYZANTINE RANK HIERARCHY IN THE 9TH–11TH CENTURIES

When considering Byzantine rank hierarchy – the phenomenon as a whole or any of its specific aspects – during the period indicated in the title, we must bear in mind the general intricacy and tangible polysemy of the very term in itself. 9th–11th century Byzantium knew not one but several distinct, relatively independent official hierarchical systems; all of them, however, were mutually interconnected to varying degrees and thus formed a single, pan-imperial hierarchical construct, expressed through the so-called system of palace precedence of ranks in the empire. It is this global and more general paradigm that reflects the Byzantine hierarchical model of the 9th–11th centuries; consequently, it seems fitting to refer to it as the rank hierarchy of the classical Middle Byzantine period, in the era preceding the reforms of Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118)¹.

The two pillars of Byzantine secular rank hierarchy during the 9th–11th centuries were the hierarchy of honorific titles and the hierarchy of offices. For the Byzantines, these two kinds of hierarchy – along with another ranked construct, i.e. the ecclesiastical hierarchy – provided the three cornerstones of the harmonic organization of the empire (and the Christian world in general) under the auspices of the Byzantine *basileus*. Let us bear in mind, among other things, that – from the viewpoint of Byzantine imperial ideology – the empire and the Christian world

¹ The present publication is based on an open lecture on the same topic, delivered by the author at the University of Lodz in November 2015; it also summarizes a part of the author's doctoral dissertation, entitled *Titles and Rank Hierarchy in Byzantium in the 9th–11th Centuries* [Н. КЪНЕВ, *Титли и рангова йерархия във Византия през IX–XI в. (по данните на сфразистиката)*, София 2007 (unpublished doctoral dissertation)]. There exist numerous works which, to a larger or lesser extent, deal with particular aspects of Byzantine rank hierarchy and the system of palace precedence in the 9th–11th centuries; similarly, there is no dearth of studies focusing on the institutions of the Middle Byzantine era (such as e.g. L. BRÉHIER, *Le monde byzantine*, vol. II, *Les institutions de l'empire byzantin*, Paris 1970). However, the number of comprehensive investigations of the Byzantine hierarchical model in the period is considerably smaller – cf. especially N. ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΗΣ, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IX^e et X^e siècles*, Paris 1972, also J.B. BURY, *The Imperial Administrative System in the Ninth Century*, London 1911 and Н. КЪНЕВ, *Византийският йерархичен модел от IX–XI в. (Общ вид на системата на средновековната рангова йерархия и видове йерархии във Византия през IX–XI в.)*, АДСВ 39, 2009, p. 142–163.

were treated as virtually synonymous; this underlying entity was the source not only of the postulate concerning the universal dimensions of Byzantine imperial power, but also of the axiomatic understanding of Byzantine rank hierarchy.

The Byzantine concept of hierarchy entirely excluded the possibility of two or more positions being ascribed identical weight (similarly, it was inadmissible for two or more persons to occupy positions in the imperial hierarchy that would be fully equivalent their importance). At the same time, for the *Romaioi*, the meaning and content of that very hierarchy were inseparably connected, emanating from the persona of the emperor. The latter was in charge of the earthly world in accordance with divine providence; and this world, in turn, could only be harmonious as long as it represented a mirror copy of the celestial one. From this point of view, nothing could symbolize (and simultaneously express) the universal Christian hierarchy of the empire more effectively than the arrangement of Byzantine dignitaries in the palace ceremonial, in particular – the order in which they were called at imperial receptions. On a concrete level, this principle was realized through taking into account both the importance of the honorific title and the office-related status of each Byzantine dignitary. These factors determined the spot he occupied in the system of rank precedence, i.e. in the overall structure of the pan-imperial rank hierarchy; his position at imperial receptions, holidays and banquets was calculated accordingly².

As far as the hierarchies of offices and of titles were concerned, the latter was the more important of the two for the Byzantines. It was the honorific titles that showed their holder's personal, hierarchical link to the sacred, super-hierarchical persona of the *basileus*, manifested on earth mirroring the heavenly arrangement centered around Lord God Almighty. While the title hierarchy was strictly personal (it is no coincidence that the titles involved were awarded for a lifetime), the office hierarchy only had functional significance: each official rank gave a Byzantine functionary a temporary (and effectively non-personal) kind of importance. The latter was derived not from the intrinsically hierarchical position held by a given person relative to the emperor, but solely from the duties performed for him in a particular capacity. Consequently, this ephemeral and essentially purely functional significance of a particular official could expire at any given moment, with the duties transferred to another person³.

Honorific title distinctions occupied a particularly important spot in the socio-political structure of the Byzantine Empire and the ideological model of the *Romaioi's* supremacy over the ecumene, presided over by the God-appointed *basileus*

² Cf. N. ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΗΣ, *Les listes...*, p. 22–23.

³ For a full overview of the official ranks employed (as part of the system of precedence) during the period in question in Byzantium, cf. N. ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΗΣ, *Les listes...*, p. 302–348. On Byzantine office ranks and duties, as well as on the office hierarchy in general, cf. also J.B. BURY, *The Imperial...*, p. 36–119.

in Constantinople. The hierarchy of titles in Byzantium underwent considerable development in the 9th–11th centuries. The aim of this specific hierarchical scheme of honorific distinctions, where the emphasis was on the person and not on the functional characteristics, was to both illustrate and – no less importantly – to institutionalize the personal importance of the relevant dignitaries and their direct, special link to the sovereign of the Christian ecumene, i.e. the Byzantine *basileus* (a link that existed at least on a theoretical level). Because of this, the title hierarchy was supposed to constitute – to the fullest possible extent – an earthly reflection of the heavenly, angelic hierarchy, and thus to embody the all-embracing harmony of God's chosen, unitary, universal Byzantine-Christian Empire. Just as the celestial, angelic rank hierarchy was centered on God, the Creator and Omnipotent Ruler of the universe, thus – according to the Byzantines – the earthly title hierarchy had to revolve around the God-appointed and God-inspired emperor.

From this point of view, the honorific title hierarchy under discussion was both Byzantine and simultaneously universal in nature, since its essential perception was based on treating the Empire and the ecumene as inseparable, overlapping notions. This also explains why Byzantine honorific titles could be bestowed on foreigners, including sovereign rulers. In such cases, the aim was to integrate the individuals distinguished in this way into the personal, hierarchical arrangement of the ecumene, as well as to 'situate' them appropriately within the earthly *taxis* (which reflected the heavenly one). This procedure determined their distinct position relative to the *basileus* as the highest commander of the civilized Christian world. In this sense, the very granting of a Byzantine title to a foreign ruler or prince was a 'personal act' of sorts, without legally fixed consequences for the state or the dynasty from which the distinguished ruler hailed. This indicates a personal-level – rather than state-level – kind of connection and dependence, with no bearing whatsoever on the status of the relevant polity⁴. From the point of view of how world harmony and the God-appointed earthly *taxis* were construed, however, the hierarchy and universal arrangement according to honorific titles outweighed any state-level hierarchy of monarchs. It was so because the latter was reducible to a mere temporary constellation, with no roots in the earthly *taxis* as a faithful copy of the celestial Kingdom of God; accordingly, its existence was not originally sanctioned by the divine design of the ecumene (the more so because the very ecumene was supposed to achieve an ultimate, finished and eternally unified state one day, under direct rule of the Christian *basileus* in Constantinople as God's sole earthly deputy and servant).

Four groups of ranks may be distinguished in the hierarchy of Byzantine honorific titles: senior, first-class, second-class and lower-class titles. Besides, an

⁴ Cf. Н. КЪНЕВ, *Византийският...*, p. 151–153; ИДЕМ, *За значението на кесарската титла на българския владетел Тервел*, [in:] *Историкии*, vol. II, *Научни изследвания в чест на доц. д-р Стоян Танев по случай неговата 70-годишнина*, Шумен 2007, p. 67–68.

important feature of the typology was the distinction concerning titles meant for eunuchs and those for non-eunuchs, i.e. the so-called 'bearded ones'. Finally, yet another typological divide distinguished titles connected with the senatorial and the military classes, respectively⁵.

The senior group of titles included those honorary distinctions which could only be borne by members or close relatives of the imperial family; accordingly, the class in question can also be termed the imperial one⁶. In the early stages of the period under discussion, this category included three titles: in the first place, *kaisar*, in the second – *nobelissimos*, and in the third – *kouropalates*⁷. These titles could not, in principle, be combined with others; in the absence of a co-emperor, especially in the first half of the relevant period, they carried certain presumptive rights regarding the succession. For this reason, they were rarely held by more than one person at any given time, although the rule was not without exceptions. Each of the above-mentioned titles was accompanied by a most generous state pension. In the case of a *kaisar*, for instance, it could reach the exorbitant 128 *litrai* of gold (i.e. over 9200 *nomismata*!).

During the reign of emperor Theophilos (829–842), another title was added to the imperial group – that of *zoste patrikia*, the only specifically feminine title in the Byzantine hierarchy. The distinction under discussion, which likewise could not be borne by more than one person at a given time, was created especially for the emperor's mother-in-law; during the following two centuries, it could only be bestowed on women who were relatives of the *basileus*.

Senior titles in 9th–11th Byzantium, with their clearly defined general characteristics, formed the topmost layer in the rank hierarchy of the period. All of the titles belonging to this group were, in principle, reserved for the members and closest relatives of the imperial family; at least until the mid-9th century, they were awarded exceedingly rarely. Their bearers enjoyed the exceptional privilege of sharing the table with the Emperor of the *Romaioi*, thus having access to him personally. All of these titles, including *zoste patrikia*, belonged exclusively to the hierarchy of the 'bearded ones', and bestowing them on eunuchs was regarded as absolutely unthinkable until the 1040s. All of them were singular honorary distinctions; before the second half of the 11th century, it was rarely allowed for any of them to be borne by two people at a given time. In view of their superior status

⁵ Cf. IDEM, *Титли...*, p. 27–29. On the crucial role of eunuchs and their peculiar status in the Middle Byzantine period, cf. e.g. R. GUILLAND, *Les Eunuques dans l'Empire byzantin. Étude de titulature et de prosopographie byzantines*, REB 1, 1943, p. 197–238. On the categorization of Byzantine titles into those meant for members of the senate and those meant for the military class, clearly attested already in the *Klētorologion* of Philotheos (εις συγκλητικούς and εις προελευσιμαίους or εν τοις βασιλικοις κατατάττονται κωδιξιν), cf. N. ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΗΣ, *Les listes...*, p. 86–87, 98–99, as well as J.B. BURY, *The Imperial...*, p. 22–23.

⁶ On the senior group of titles, cf. H. КЪНЕВ, *Титли...*, p. 105–184.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 81–82.

in the hierarchy, combining them with other titles was not admissible (in contrast to other honorific titles in Byzantium); only the title of *kouropalates* was sometimes exempt from this rule.

For the same reason, until the middle of the 11th century, the titles in question were normally not combined with administrative or court offices. The process of their devaluation began markedly later than in the case of other Byzantine titles. On the whole, with the exception of *zoste patrikia*, the senior titles survived the demise of the hierarchical system of rank precedence at the end of the period under analysis and continued to be employed in the age of the Komnenos dynasty, albeit with a considerably different status.

The second group was that of *first-class titles*, which encompassed the highest honorary distinctions available to individuals not belonging to the imperial family⁸. Granted to members of the highest elites of the empire, these titles were associated with remarkable prestige, importance and social desirability throughout the period under discussion. At the outset of the Middle Byzantine era, the highest accessible title was perhaps that of *patrikios*. This and several other titles that arose later (but which did not belong to the imperial class – normally reserved for the family of the *basileus*, as described above) formed the group of first-class titular ranks in Byzantium. For a long time, the highest reachable title, topping the group under discussion, was that of *magistros*. In the 960s, it was surpassed by the newly-created title of *proedros*; still, taking into account the fact that the latter was reserved for eunuchs, the title of *magistros* remained the highest achievable level in the rank promotion of ‘bearded ones’ until as late as the mid-11th century.

The strict differentiation between the titulature available to ‘bearded ones’ and to eunuchs, respectively, was adhered to until the 1040s. Accordingly, it is also reflected in the group of first-class titles, among which the ranks of *proedros*, *vestarches*, *vestes* and *patrikios* were available to eunuchs, while ‘bearded ones’ could attain those of *magistros*, *vestes*, *anthypatos* and *patrikios*. In the mid-11th century, however, the division under discussion disintegrated. Slightly later still, new derivative titles started to appear, formed from previously existing ones by means of the prefix *proto-*. This was, first and foremost, a corollary of the generally intensifying devaluation of Byzantine titles in the 11th century (on which process see also below); beginning from the third quarter of the century, it gradually led to their far-reaching depreciation and loss of prestige⁹. The titles of the group under analysis did not persist following the transformation of the rank hierarchy dur-

⁸ On the group of first-class titles, cf. *ibidem*, p. 185–315.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 185; cf. also IDEM, *The Contribution of Sigillography in Elucidating the Devaluation of the Byzantine Honorific Titles in the Hierarchy of the so-called System of Precedence in the Mid-Byzantine Period (turn of the VIIIth/IXth – turn of the XIth/XIIth Centuries)*, [in:] *Proceedings of the 22nd International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Sofia, 22–27 August 2011*, vol. III, *Abstracts of Free Communications*, ed. A. NIKOLOV, E. KOSTOVA, V. ANGELOV, Sofia 2011, p. 110–111; J.-C. CHEYNET, *Dévaluation des dignités et dévaluation monétaire dans la seconde moitié du XI^e s.*, B 53, 1983, p. 453–477.

ing the reign of Alexios I Komnenos; most of them fell into disuse no later than in the early decades of the 12th century. The ranks of *proedros* and *protoproedros* were the only ones to survive as long as until the mid-12th century.

The third group in the rank hierarchy was that of *second-class titles*. Towards the end of the 9th century, it encompassed (in descending order) the dignities of *praipositos* (exclusively for eunuchs), *protospatharios* (accessible both to 'bearded ones' and to eunuchs), *primikerios*, *ostiarios* and *spatharokoubikoularios* (all three for eunuchs only), *spatharokandidatos* and *dishypatos* (both for 'bearded ones' only), *koubikoularios* (for eunuchs only) and *hypatos* (for the 'bearded ones' only). This is the most massive group; numerous bearers of the titles belonging here were figures who, particularly in the 9th–10th centuries, simultaneously occupied the chief palace-related, administrative and military posts, both in the provinces and in the capital. Needless to say, the most crucial offices were still primarily held by those bearing first-class titles; nevertheless, at least until the beginning of the 11th century, it was possible even for posts such as *strategos* of a theme or *logothetes* of one of the central offices to be occupied by a person with the title of *protospatharios*.

Finally, the fourth group is that of *lower-class titles*, which included, in descending order, the dignities of *strator*, *kandidatos*, *basilikos mandator*, *nipsistarios*, *vestetor*, *silentarios*, and – at the very bottom – *apoeparchon* and *stratelates*. From among these titles, it appears that only *nipsistarios* was meant for eunuchs.

A phenomenon testifying to the importance of titles in the Byzantine world was the widespread practice of one and the same person bearing a range of different titles. The phenomenon was quite characteristic of the period under discussion. In Byzantium, being awarded a higher-ranking title did not necessarily entail forfeiting the ranks already held at that moment, or the honors and benefits connected with them – be they financial gains or privileges related to the system of palace precedence. In this way, a single individual could accumulate a number of titular dignities at the same time, which was, in a number of cases, reflected in that person's position in the arrangement of the court ceremonial. It could also mean receiving the total sum of the yearly pays deriving from each of the possessed titles (in the form of a *roga*, i.e. pension; cf. in more detail below).

At the same time, the accumulation of titles was not an across-the-board principle; a number of restrictions were in effect. First and foremost – as mentioned above – the titles that were by origin directly related to that of the emperor (i.e. *kaisar* and *nobelissimos*) were not subject to conjoining with other dignities, at least in the Middle Byzantine period. Neither Byzantine lead seals nor the available narrative sources nor the currently known documents from the period attest the combination of the titles *kaisar* and *nobelissimos* with any other. Evidently, in the eyes of the Byzantines, these titular distinctions were connected with imperial power and dignity (and accordingly topped the hierarchy, precisely because of their extraordinarily elevated status and their direct reflection of the

imperial *sacrum*). Therefore, they remained outside of the scope of – or perhaps even above – the tradition of accumulating titles; their conjoining was disallowed due to the same reasons that barred the very title of emperor to be combined with any other rank. By and large, the same applied to the remaining two senior titles in the hierarchy, generally restricted to the imperial family's close relatives – *kouropalates* and *zoste patrikia*, despite the fact that their origin was different from that of *kaisar* and *nobelissimos*. The title of *zoste patrikia* – the only one intended for women – quite simply could not be subject to the rule of title accumulation, given that no other feminine titles (with which it could have theoretically been combined) were in existence. The conjoining of the title of *kouropalates* with other dignities could only occur under exceptional circumstances; still, cases in which the bearer simultaneously held other, lower honorific titles are attested. One such example is furnished by the brother of emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (963–969), Leo, who bore the titles of *kouropalates* and *magistros* at the same time¹⁰.

The accumulation of several honorific titles by one person was fully allowed – and even considered a routine practice – as far as the groups of first-class and second-class titles were concerned, although it appears that this was not the case with lower-class titles.

The analysis of the available sources from the period – in particular, the sigillographic material of the 9th–11th centuries – shows that a number of additional restrictions obtained as regards title accumulation, in addition to the ones described above. Thus, for example, in the 9th–10th centuries the title of *kouropalates* could be combined with that of *magistros* alone – as opposed to the preceding centuries, when a *kouropalates* was free to retain the previously held title of *patrikios*. It seems that the constraints regarding the dignity of *kouropalates* likewise pertained to the ranks of *proedros* and *protoproedros*, which arose later, since the latter two titles are usually attested alone, combined with no others.

Similarly, as regards first-class titles (with parallel restrictions applying to *proedros* and *protoproedros*), it seems that they could only be combined with lower titles within the limits of the same group; if the process of accumulation transgressed this boundary, this was strictly limited to the very highest titles of the second-class group (*protospatharios* for 'bearded ones' and *praipositos*, *protospatharios* as well as *primikerios* for eunuchs). 'Bearded' *patrikioi* could – albeit rarely, and presumably only exceptionally – further accumulate the titles of *dishypatos* and *hypatos*.

It should also be pointed out that the titles formed through the addition of the prefix *proto-* to already existing ranks normally could not be combined with the titles from which they were derived. Conceivably, this constraint was connected

¹⁰ Cf. *Ioannes Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, 4, p. 250, 50–52; 1, p. 284, 11–12, ed. I. THURN, Berolini 1973 [= *CFHB*, 5]; *Leonis Diaconi Caloensis Historiae Libri Decem*, III, 8, ed. C.B. HASE, Bonnæ 1828 [= *CSHB*, 3], p. 49.

with the traditional, original interpretation of such titles – pictured as the ‘first’ among a given rank level. However, combining them with other, unrelated titles was entirely possible, in accordance with the above-mentioned rules.

Roughly until the 1140s, it was absolutely unacceptable to accumulate ranks belonging to the hierarchies designed for the ‘bearded ones’ and for eunuchs simultaneously.

As has already been pointed out, one of the rationales behind the tradition of accumulating ranks in Byzantium was the possibility of accruing the benefits that came with them. It was an important characteristic of Byzantine titles of the period under discussion that, although in principle hardly connected with performing any official duties, they provided their bearers with the entitlement to a fixed income in the form of a yearly pension disbursed from the state treasury, called a *roga* (ρόγα). In some instances, however, being awarded an honorific title did not entail being granted a *roga*. Such cases arose when the title was not bestowed on a given person in view of their merits or as a token of imperial grace, but when it was obtained through payment (on which see below) – i.e. whenever the recipient only paid the amount of money that constituted the price of the title itself, not accompanied by the right to a corresponding *roga*. Similarly, receiving a title may not have been tantamount to being awarded a *roga* when the recipient was a foreign prince or aristocrat. The prestige of Byzantine honorific titles, both within the Empire and in other states within the sphere of Byzantine cultural and political influence, was usually sufficiently large in and of itself – consequently, the titles were often regarded as sought-after and precious gains even when not connected with financial benefits in the form of a *roga*.

The *rogas* accompanying each title amounted to rigorously defined sums, which, in all probability, remained generally unchanged during almost the entire period under discussion. For example, the *roga* of a bearer of the dignity of *protospatharios* totaled 1 *litra* (i.e. 72 *nomismata*) a year, while that of a *magistros* was tantamount to 16 *litrai* (i.e. 1152 *nomismata*)¹¹. In fact, during the analyzed period, the *roga* largely ensured the financial well-being of Byzantine title-bearers, not infrequently providing them with a sole source of stable income. As such, it was an essential instrument of influence in the hands of the *basileus*. On the other hand, the total number of title-bearers was quite vast, the more so because it had been rising steadily (particularly during the 9th century). If we take into account the fact that the *roga* was also paid out to the holders of assorted offices in the central and provincial administration (e.g. some of the *strategoi*), it follows that the yearly payment of the *rogai* must have constituted one of the principal expenses in the imperial budget.

¹¹ Cf. J.-C. СНЕУНЕТ, *Dévaluation...*, p. 469; Н. КЪНЕВ, *Титли...*, p. 61; ИДЕМ, *Византинобългарски студии*, Велико Търново 2013, p. 235–236, an. 23.

Theoretically speaking, titles in Byzantium were considered as lifetime honorific distinctions. As testified by Philotheos at the end of the 9th century, they were a sign of divine benevolence and were distributed by emperors in accordance with God's will on particular holidays; as a result, legally speaking, they could never be the object of buying or selling in any form. Fairly often, however, the reality was quite the opposite. Especially in the 10th century, trading titles was by no means rare – be it by directly breaching the existing legal norms or by circumventing them. As observed by French historian Paul Lemerle *Byzantine history abounds in alternating testimonies concerning the practice of buying offices and titles – with or without salary or pension [...] – and concerning the disadvantages of this practice*¹². However, the practice in question – involving the selling and buying of titles – only concerned honorific titles of the lower and middle echelons of the hierarchy; the highest hierarchical position subject to this kind of trade was that of the *protospatharios*. In some cases, the phenomenon was sanctioned at the highest levels – certain periods even saw the existence of fixed tariffs, so that the prices of the particular titles were precisely delineated. Furthermore, titles could be purchased with or without the corresponding *roga*. Emperors often turned a blind eye towards the practice; at times, they would tolerate it openly and even benefit from it directly.

Still, as mentioned above, the phenomenon never affected the senior and first-class titles: these remained unscathed, and the very acquisition of such a title in the above-mentioned way would have made it illegal and void, besides potentially leading to harsh consequences for the illicit bearer. As noted before, the highest honorific distinctions were in principle reserved for the members and direct relatives of the imperial family, while first-class titles were only available to the members of the topmost aristocratic layers and the holders of elite offices (being granted one of such titles was a token of particular grace and benevolence on the part of the *basileus*). Consequently, the relevant social circle and the total number of bearers of these titular ranks were at all times rather limited; thus, the potential acquiring of one of these highest-ranking titles by purchase could not have remained unnoticed (and consequently unpunished).

The principal exclusion of senior and first-class titles from the (no doubt real) practice of trading ranks in the empire supports the conclusion that these titles furnish a palpable and relatively objective criterion for determining a given person's role and prominence, as well as their belonging to the highest layers of the aristocratic, palace- and government-related elite of the Byzantine state.

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¹² P. LEMERLE, *Roga et rente d'état aux X^e–XI^e siècles*, REB 25, 1967, p. 77.

The Byzantine rank hierarchy achieved its most expanded form in the 11th century. In the same period, particularly from the 1030s onwards, it slowly – but steadily – developed a marked ‘devaluation potential’¹³. Starting from the time of the Doukid dynasty, the process of rank inflation proceeded faster and faster, achieving levels jeopardizing the existence of the system during the reign of Michael VII Doukas (1071–1078) and Nikephoros III Botaneiates (1078–1081). But already in the time of Michael V Kalaphates (1041–1042), and particularly of Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055), the unrestrained, widespread distribution of honorific titles was fully underway; before long, this resulted in a strong devaluation of a number of titular distinctions, as well as of the Byzantine rank hierarchy as a whole. These, incidentally, were some of the most glaring symptoms of the profound crisis that the empire succumbed to in the 11th century. Michael Psellos, though generally favorable towards Constantine Monomachos, does not hide his indignation when reporting on the emperor’s violation of the laws concerning rank hierarchy (Constantine tampered with the established order of the titles and made some of them available even to persons of low standing): *The doors of the senate were thrown open to nearly all the rascally vagabonds of the market, and the honour was conferred not on two or three, nor on a mere handful, but the whole gang was elevated to the highest offices of state by a single decree...*¹⁴ The above-described tendency continued into the following decades, culminating in the 1070s and early 1080s.¹⁵

In a way, the system of honorific rank hierarchy had reached its limit already in the late 1050s: the existing possibilities had been depleted, so that new ranks (intermediate between and superior to the existing levels) had to be created. This explains the emergence of titles which included the prefix *proto-* (save for the case of *protospatharios*, a title which had already existed for a considerable time). The first such creations were *protoproedros*, *provestiarios* and *protovestis*; in the late 1070s and early 1080s, *protokouropalates*, *protonobelissimos* and *protoanthypatos* followed suit.

It is during the reign of Constantine IX Monomachos that the title of *sebastos* (σεβαστός) – or, to be more precise, its feminine form *sebaste* (σεβαστή) – first entered the scene. According to eminent Byzantinologists such as e.g. Nicolas Oikonomidès, the introduction of the title of *sebastos* during the administration of the above-mentioned emperor constituted the most far-reaching innovation

¹³ On the accelerating process of devaluation of Byzantine titulature during the 11th century, cf. e.g. N. ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΗΣ, *L'évolution de l'organisation administrative de l'empire byzantine au XI^e siècle (1025–1118)*, TM 6, 1976, p. 125–152; J.-C. CHEYNET, *Dévaluation...*, p. 468–477; H. ΚΩΝΕΒ, *Τιτλι...*, p. 91–94.

¹⁴ MICHEL PSELLOS, *Chronographie ou histoire d'un siècle de Byzance (976–1077)*, VI, 29, vol. I, ed. et trans. E. RENAULD, Paris 1926 [= CB], p. 132; *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers. The Chronographia of Michael Psellus*, trans. E.R.A. SEWTER, Harmondsworth 1953, p. 125.

¹⁵ Cf. N. ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΗΣ, *L'évolution...*, p. 126.

in Byzantine rank hierarchy in the 11th century before the comprehensive Komnenian reform. However, the term *sebastos* (which translates as ‘venerable’) was, in fact, the Byzantine rendition of the Roman imperial title of *augustus*. Until that moment, *sebastos* and *sebaste* had existed solely in the capacity of imperial epithets, forming part of the titulature of the emperor and empress, respectively. In what constitutes the first two cases of the title being employed with reference to persons other than the imperial couple, the dignity of *sebaste* was bestowed on two of Constantine IX Monomachos’s favorites (Maria Skleraina and subsequently her Alanian successor, the emperor’s mistress during the second half of his reign). In both cases, by calling his favorites *sebastai*, Constantine IX in a way strove to equate them with the legitimate empresses Zoe and Theodora, or at least to approximate the latter’s status to the greatest possible extent. Although Psellos claims in his *Chronographia* that the new title of *sebasta* was coined during Constantine IX Monomachos’s reign for Maria Skleraina, it cannot be considered certain whether this novel title did not simply result from applying the dignity of *augusta* to a person who had not been crowned Empress of the *Romaioi* (i.e. that it was an attempt to grant the status of *augusta* to a woman who was not an empress either by birth or by marriage, and consequently could not be considered one in accordance with the law). In view of this, it is not illogical to presume that the new title under discussion had not yet been integrated into the hierarchy in the mid-11th century. Similarly, it is possible that the subsequent bestowals of the title *sebastos* before Alexios I Komnenos’s 1081 reforms – to wit, on Constantine Keroularios towards the close of the reign of Michael VII Doukas¹⁶ as well as on Alexios and Isaac Komnenoi (possibly also Philaretos Brachamios) by Nikephoros III Botaneiates¹⁷ – were not connected with awarding an actual senior title belonging to the hierarchy of the ἀξίαι διὰ βραβείων (a status that *sebastos* probably only reached after 1081). Rather, these acts may have been meant to underscore the high and distinguished status of the persons involved, in particular their proximity to the *basileus*. Thus, being called *sebastos* hinted at imperial status to a certain degree, though without any factual legal status or prerogatives.

It goes without saying that we cannot exclude the possibility of *sebastos* being used as a full-fledged title already before the administration of Alexios I. In this case, however, a number of questions would have to remain unanswered, at least for the time being: Why is the creation of the title not reflected in the sources adequately? Furthermore, where exactly should the rank of *sebastos* be positioned in the title hierarchy? (Possibly, the correct location would be below *kaisar* and

¹⁶ Cf. N. OIKONOMIDÈS, *L'évolution...*, p. 126, an. 6–7; R. GUILLAND, *Recherches sur les institutions Byzantines*, vol. I, Berlin–Amsterdam 1967, p. 575; N. OIKONOMIDÈS, *Le serment de l'impératrice Eudocie (1067). Un épisode de l'histoire dynastique de Byzance*, REB 21, 1963, p. 119–120.

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. G. ZACOS, A. VEGLERY, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, vol. I, pars 3, Basel 1972, Seals, I/3, nos. 2701 bis, 2707, 2707 bis; V. LAURENT, *Les sceaux byzantins du Médaillier Vatican*, Città del Vaticano 1962, p. 119, as well as N. OIKONOMIDÈS, *L'évolution...*, p. 126, an. 7.

above *nobelissimos*, at least if we were to follow the logic behind the hierarchical position of the title 1081). In view of the scanty source material, drawing any more detailed conclusions concerning the dignity of *sebastos* (including its practical and legal ramifications as well as its position in the Byzantine rank hierarchy before the reforms of Alexios I Komnenos) would be no more than pure speculation. After all, it should not be forgotten that the title of *sebastos* is primarily associated with the hierarchy of the Komnenian era, not of the period under discussion.

It is, however, beyond all doubt that the escalating process of devaluation of titles in Byzantium (which is seen at work for most of the 11th century, and which could apparently no longer be compensated for by the creation of new titles within the existing hierarchical structure in the third quarter of that century) was one of the two¹⁸ principal reasons that led emperor Alexios I Komnenos to reform the rank hierarchy by replacing the existing model with a new one.

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¹⁸ The other one, of course, was of a financial nature: the empire was no longer able to expend the colossal sums of money required to sustain the thousands of pensions paid each year to Byzantium's numerous title-bearers.

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Abstract. The aim of the article is to present the Byzantine secular rank hierarchy of the 9th–11th centuries. During the above-mentioned period of time Byzantium knew not one but several distinct, relatively independent official hierarchical systems. All of them, however, were mutually interconnected to varying degrees and thus formed a single, pan-imperial hierarchical construct, expressed through the so-called system of palace precedence of ranks in the empire. It is this global and more general paradigm that reflects the Byzantine hierarchical model of the 9th–11th centuries; consequently, it seems fitting to refer to it as the rank hierarchy of the classical Middle Byzantine period, in the era preceding the reforms of Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118).

Keywords: Byzantine rank hierarchy, Middle-Byzantine administration, Byzantine aristocracy, Byzantine court, Middle-Byzantine state organization

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