

Defenders of the Empire: The Byzantine State Intelligence Communications, Agent, and Intelligence Management Apparatus

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Abstract

The Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire endured almost a thousand years longer than its Western Roman counterpart. Central to the longevity of the Byzantine Empire was its state intelligence gathering capabilities; but what were those capabilities and how were they organized? Answering these questions will require discussion of the challenges conducting Byzantine studies using secondary sources, literature review of English-language intelligence sources and qualitative analysis to summarize the structure and function of the Byzantine state intelligence apparatus. The Empire endured as long as it did due to a decentralized intelligence apparatus that could nevertheless be undermined by corruption and treason.

Introduction

The Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire endured almost a thousand years longer than its Western Roman counterpart. Understanding its intelligence gathering capabilities requires evaluation of the most relevant literature, an understanding of its communications system, and an exploration of its system of agents and intelligence administration as the Latin tradition was slowly subsumed by Greek. Corruption was a recurring weakness of the Byzantine intelligence apparatus; however, its capabilities appear to have largely met the needs of Empire throughout its existence.

Literature Review

A variety of challenges exist for researchers conducting Byzantine studies. Attribution of sources must be carefully considered by scholars due to anonymous authorship of primary sources or attribution to an important official as opposed to the original author. Some important intelligence-related sources exist as do a variety of military, government and private texts from the Byzantine era. Intelligence-specific material presents challenges in extracting appropriate case study examples from secondary sources in addition to the relative dearth of intelligence-specific materials in the Byzantine Studies field. Byzantine-specific intelligence literature can be obtained two ways: a) Information and insights derived from related non-specific sources such as political and military histories, and b) specialized

literature. Specialist literature on Byzantine intelligence studies is relatively rare with only three titles addressing one or more aspects directly.

Three sources particularly contribute to Byzantine intelligence studies: *Origins of Intelligence Services* by Francis Dvornik, S.J. (Dvornik), *Espionage in the Ancient World: An Annotated Bibliography* by Dr. Rose Mary (R.M.) Sheldon (Sheldon), and *The Master of Offices in the Later Roman and Byzantine Empires* by Arthur Edward Romilly Boak (Boak). Dvornik's and Sheldon's books span a variety of ancient and medieval cultures but they contain important chapters on Byzantine intelligence studies. Boak's book is a specialized title that summarizes important details about the Master of Offices and the importance of the functionary to Imperial intelligence gathering.

Dvornik's work provides rich details about the different offices and major features of Byzantine intelligence organization. It is worth noting that Dvornik's inspiration for writing *Origins of Intelligence Services* comes from General William O. Donovan, the late Director of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services of World War II era fame and precursor organization to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Dvornik's close association with the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection further solidifies his scholarship. *Origins of Intelligence Services* certainly provides a compelling read for historians and intelligence professionals alike; however, the book is not without its problems with attendant consequences for intelligence scholars.

First, Dvornik does not footnote or endnote but instead only offers a bibliography following each chapter in the book. This may force scholars to research Dvornik's facts against his bibliography in order to further scholarly research. Second, Dvornik is the only secondary source that surveys Byzantine intelligence organization and capabilities. All other secondary sources tend to specialize in one related facet of the topic. The implication is that Dvornik will likely form the substantial basis of any summarization of Byzantine intelligence capabilities and organization as is the case with this study.

Sheldon's bibliography of ancient espionage sources is a survey of Western language sources. Some sources are uncommon and published in other languages like French, German or Greek but tantalizing nevertheless. An example is an article written by August Audollent in 1889 entitled 'Les Veredarii emissaries imperiaux sou le Bas Empire' in a journal named *Melanges d'archaeologie et d'histoire*.¹ The description provided by Sheldon indicates that Audollent's article describes the importance of the *veredarii* couriers of the Western Empire and their continued use in the Eastern Empire and to the *agentes in rebus* of the Eastern Empire.² Sheldon's footnoting and bibliography provides useful sources for scholars to investigate and perhaps incorporate into their own work.

Boak's contribution to understanding the importance of the Master of Offices, one of the most senior and important offices in the *Consistory* - the Imperial Court - cannot be overstated for two

reasons. First, similar to Dvornik, Boak's work is the only book dedicated to the topic. Second, although published in 1919, Boak's work provides scholarly understanding complimentary to Dvornik's work of how Byzantine state intelligence was coordinated between the Emperor and his most senior functionaries. The Master of Offices held a variety of responsibilities later subsumed by the Logothete of the Post but for the purposes of this study only the Master's and Logothete's responsibilities for intelligence will be explored.

The *Cursus Publicus*

Intelligence collection and dissemination rely almost entirely on an effective communications system. The *cursus publicus* or Imperial Post provided an essential communications function that supported Imperial intelligence collection and dissemination activities. Communication in the ancient and medieval world was courier-based. In the case of official messages an appointed low-level civil service functionary, the *veredarius* (pl., *veredarii*), filled the courier role. Couriers, in their role as messengers, were in a perfect position to collect intelligence on behalf of the Empire because they had access to messages and because they traveled in the provinces and could report on occurrences far from Constantinople.

The *cursus* was created early in Imperial Roman history. Augustus (r. 23 BCE - 14 CE) created the *cursus* to further his Imperial ambitions.³ Augustus's innovation in Imperial communications was a dramatic improvement over the experiences of his immediate predecessor, Julius Caesar, who reported that he frequently arrived before advance messengers sent to announce his arrival.⁴ The *cursus* was necessarily a complex system that permitted the transportation of messages and cargo while allowing for the care of horses, pack and draft animals, their riders and passengers.

The *cursus* was initially setup by Augustus as a relay system where a courier would hand-off messages to another courier in a chain of couriers. According to historian Adam J. Silverstein the couriers would make their exchanges at relay-stations (Latin: *mutationes*) and rest at rest stations (Latin: *mansiones*).⁵ The relay and way stations would also have staffs of attendants, grooms, carpenters, veterinarians, and other people necessary for system operation.⁶ The average speed of the *cursus* was considerable. Silverstein, citing the Roman historian Suetonius, writes that a courier could travel approximately 75 kilometers daily.⁷ Silverstein, citing A.W. Ramsey, writes that in time of emergency, distances of 300 kilometers could be travelled daily depending on prevailing circumstances.⁸ Daily average and emergency speeds convert to approximately 46 miles and 186 miles respectively.⁹

The *cursus* also evolved over the span of Roman history. Augustus's courier relay system was replaced by a system where mounts would be exchanged and the courier would proceed to his final

destination.¹⁰ This new system had two effects: first, a single courier required layover time for food and rest at appropriate intervals, and second, the speed of the *cursus* was necessarily limited to what one courier could manage unless a relay system was implemented for the sake of urgency. A second modification of the *cursus* in the third century CE was the creation of a two-tiered system of what Silverstein refers to as “ordinary and swift branches.”¹¹

The *Cursus Clabularis*, *Cursus Velox* and Expense

The ordinary branch, the *cursus clabularis*, was reserved for messages or cargoes that did not have to be expedited. Because the *cursus clabularis* relied on wagons and oxen for hauling freight its use necessitated travel by paved roads.¹² The swift branch, the *cursus velox*, was intended for messages or lightweight cargoes that could be carried by a single horse and rider who could travel off of paved roads if necessary.¹³ According to Silverstein, the *cursus clabularis* should be considered the standard reference relative to the term ‘Imperial Post’ throughout later Western Roman and Byzantine history whereas the *cursus velox* was not fully implemented throughout the Empire.¹⁴ The *cursus velox* could be discarded or revived as Imperial fortunes or necessity waxed and waned.

The expense of the Imperial Post was considerable and ripe for official abuse. Use of the *cursus publicus* was notionally limited to holders of *evectioes* which entitled the bearer to have messages transported on the Imperial Post, or *tractiones* which entitled the bearer to full services from the Imperial Post. Constantine the Great (r. 306 CE – 337 CE) and Constantius (r. 337 CE – 361 CE) extended the privilege of using the *cursus publicus* to dignitaries and bishops traveling to synods the volume and frequency of which deepened Imperial expenses.¹⁶

Various attempts to control the expenses of the *cursus publicus* and its official abuse were made after Constantius. Julian the Apostate (r. 361 CE – 363 CE) stopped most of the official abuse of the *cursus publicus* and its expenses however such concerns did not stop him from using the *cursus publicus* to transport St. Basil I, his tutor, to Constantinople.¹⁷ Theodosius I (r. 379 CE – 395 CE) further regulated the *cursus*. Theodosius’s laws were published in the Codex Theodosianus by Theodosius II (r. 408 CE – 450 CE) in 429.¹⁸ The *cursus* was limited to conveyance of Imperial messages and cargoes only. Personal messages were not permitted use of the *cursus*. Regardless of the restrictions, historian Francis Dvornik writes, “The use of the *cursus* was available also to people acquainted with the emperor or other high level functionaries at court.”¹⁹ The right of issuing *evectio* or *tractionae* in the Eastern Empire would be limited by Justinian to only the Emperor, the Praetorian Prefect, and the Master of Offices.²⁰ An important final measure to detect and reduce if not eliminate abuse of the *cursus* was inspection of *cursus* facilities and accounts

by Imperial agents – the *agentes in rebus*, the *curiosi* in particular.

Couriers and Agents – The *Frumentarii*, *Agentes in Rebus*, the *Curiosi* and the *Notarii*

The Byzantine intelligence system utilized several classes of agents because of the variety of sources available: the *frumentarii*, *agentes in rebus*, the *curiosi* and the *notarii*. The *frumentarii*, and the *agentes in rebus* could be prototypical couriers but their vested authority and proximity to the Imperial Court and the Emperor made them atypical. The title of official couriers varied through the span of Roman history. Until the late third century CE official couriers were called *frumentarii* (sing. *frumentarius*, ‘grain-provider’).²¹ Boak writes that “The *frumentarii* were originally soldiers sent into the provinces to supervise the transportation of grain for the provisioning of the army...but had developed into secret agents of the imperial administration”.²² The *frumentarii* were never numerous – there are estimated to never have been more than 200 *frumentarii* throughout the Empire.²³ Into the early centuries CE *frumentarii* were increasingly associated with official corruption for personal gain such that their information gathering capabilities became compromised. Diocletian (r. 284 CE - 305 CE) reorganized the *frumentarii* into a new office called *agentes in rebus* (‘those active in affairs’).²⁴

Agentes were typically assigned to provinces and they were responsible for affairs in their assigned province and for reporting acquired information to higher authorities. The *agentes* were civil servants but they were organized as a *schola*, or regiment, of the Imperial Guard.²⁵ Their numbers varied widely from less than two dozen under Julian the Apostate to 1,248 during the reign of Leo I (r. 457 CE - 474 CE).²⁶

The *curiosi* were somewhat more specialized because they were tasked with oversight of the *cursus publicus*. Also known as *curagenarii*, the *curiosi* were *agentes* appointed from the *agentes schola* by the Master of Offices with a preference toward higher-ranking or senior *agentes*.²⁷ The appointment to *curiosi* was for one year only and appointments were made on the Emperor’s birthday.²⁸ The ‘*curiosi*’ appellation came from one of their duties which was inspection and proper use of *evectiones* and *tractiones* in their assigned province. The *curiosi* were never numerous. In 357 two *curiosi* were dispatched to every province; however, in 395 one *curiosi* per province.²⁹ In 412 the limitation was lifted.³⁰ The reaction according to historian Rose Mary Shelton, citing Marcellinus Ammnanus, was that the ambitions of the *agentes* and *curiosi* peaked and their affiliation with corrupt and treasonable practices increased.³¹

Between the sixth and eighth centuries CE the position of *notarii* (‘secretary’) gained more importance in Imperial administration and for intelligence collection due to the proximity of secretaries to their superiors in the bureaucracy and to the Imperial Court. Through this

period the role of the *agentes* started to be redefined in favor of secretarial roles while the *notarii* assumed more 'field' responsibilities traditionally held by the *agentes* and *curiosi*.³² The *agentes* and *curiosi* remained a feature of the Byzantine intelligence collections capability until the government reorganization in 700 CE.³³ In the Late Empire the intelligence collection capabilities shifted more fully to the *notarii* due to their proximity to Imperial officials, the Imperial Court and the Emperor and to official and unofficial secrets.

Intelligence Administration –The *Praefectus Praetorio*, *Magister Officiorum* and Logothete of the Drome

Intelligence administration similarly evolved through the course of Roman history. The *frumentarii*, as military officers, were employed by and acted under the orders of the *Praefectus Praetorio* or praetorian prefect.³⁴ The *agentes in rebus*, as civil servants, answered to the *Magister Officiorum* or Master of Offices until the eighth century CE. From the eighth century CE forward the Magister title was subsumed by the Logothete of the Drome.³⁵

The praetorian prefect was a multifaceted role that included command of the Imperial Guard and administration of justice. The position was created as part of the Augustinian reforms and remained in use through at least the seventh century CE although the importance of the praetorian prefect position waxed and waned during the period. During the rule of Constantine the Great the praetorian prefect acted as a first minister second only to Constantine. At other times the praetorian prefect's military duties in a bodyguard role were emphasized.

The *Magister Officiorum* was also a multifaceted role. According to Boak the title magister appears in the 1st century CE although it is uncertain why the title 'Master' was used other than possibly for its adaptability to administrative offices.³⁶ Boak also writes of the creation, domination, and decline of the Magister that the office was created, incrementally acquired a broad portfolio of powers and responsibilities only to lose those powers and responsibilities over time. In the Late Byzantine era the title was an honorific shortened to the diminutive 'Master'.³⁷

The Logothete of the Drome, or Logothete of the Post, represented a turn away from the Latin Roman tradition towards the Greek tradition of the East but as a continuation of the Roman Empire. Dvornik writes that "[Constantinople's] inhabitants, and the population of the eastern provinces, continued to think of themselves as Romans, or '*Romaioi*' (Ρωμαίοι) in their native Greek language."³⁸ In about the middle of the eighth century CE, as Greek began to replace Latin in official terminology and offices, the *cursus publicus* that the Logothete of the Drome was responsible for becomes known as the '*demosios dromos*'.³⁹

Other Avenues of Inquiry

Multiple avenues of additional inquiry remain although it is possible that these may be limited by the availability of scholarly translations. The relationship between the intelligence administration and the provinces remain ill-defined other than evidence of the provincial collection orientation of the *agentes* and *notarii*. The relationship between intelligence agents and local law enforcement may also be worth investigation. Byzantine intelligence in the late Empire, particularly in the last century of the Empire's existence with its diminished territory and resources, would also be an intriguing line of inquiry to pursue. The role of Byzantine intelligence capabilities in episodic expansions of Byzantine power under notably successful Emperors like Nikephoros II Phokas (r. 963 CE - 969 CE), John Tzimiskes (969 CE - 976 CE) or Alexios Komnenos (r. 1081 CE - 1118 CE) would also be a useful line of inquiry.⁴⁰ Further research into Byzantine 'technical methods' beyond Greek Fire to include possible ciphers and secret writing would also be worthwhile to research. The importance of military intelligence including naval capabilities should also be explored further.

Conclusions

The Byzantine intelligence structure was decentralized in the sense that agents operated with some degree of freedom in the provinces with the direction of higher administration from Constantinople. The degree of freedom agents enjoyed was also a two-edged sword for the Empire as official abuses and corruption forced intelligence reorganizations. The slow evolution of the Eastern Empire toward the Greek East resulted in a continuation of Roman intelligence capabilities under Greek names and titles. Byzantine intelligence institutions remained remarkably consistent in terms of functionality for almost a full thousand years after the fall of the Western Empire and contributed greatly to the continuance of the Eastern Empire.

Notes

¹ R. M. Sheldon. *Espionage in the Ancient World: An Annotated Bibliography*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2003.

² Ibid.

³ Adam J. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 30.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ No Author, *Metric Conversions Kilometer to Miles*. 2013. <http://www.metric-conversions.org/length/kilometers-to-miles.htm> (accessed 3 May 2013).

¹⁰ Adam J. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 31.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Francis Dvornik, S.J. *Origins of Intelligence Services: The Ancient Near East, Persia, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, the Arab Muslim Empires, the Mongol Empire, China, Muscovy* (Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1974), 123.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. 124.

²¹ Adam J. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 36.

²² Arthur E. R. Boak, *The Master of the Offices in the Later Roman and Byzantine Empires* (London: Kessinger, 1919), 68.

²³ Adam J. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 37.

²⁴ Ibid., 32.

²⁵ Arthur E. R. Boak, *The Master of the Offices in the Later Roman and Byzantine Empires* (London: Kessinger, 1919), 68.

²⁶ Ibid., 69.

²⁷ Arthur E. R. Boak, *The Master of the Offices in the Later Roman and Byzantine Empires* (London: Kessinger, 1919), 74-75.

²⁸ Arthur E. R. Boak, *The Master of the Offices in the Later Roman and Byzantine Empires* (London: Kessinger, 1919), 75.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Sheldon, "Ancient Rome" 262.

³¹ Ibid., 263.

³² Adam J. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 37.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 36.

³⁵ Ibid., 37.

³⁶ Ibid., 15.

³⁷ Arthur E. R. Boak, *The Master of the Offices in the Later Roman and Byzantine Empires* (London: Kessinger, 1919), 1.

³⁸ Francis Dvornik, S.J. *Origins of Intelligence Services: The Ancient Near East, Persia, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, the Arab Muslim Empires, the Mongol Empire, China, Muscovy* (Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1974), 122.

³⁹ Adam J. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 40.

⁴⁰ A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, Vol. Two* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952), 730.

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