POTVRZENÍ O PŘIJETÍ ČLÁNKU DO Graeco-Latina Brunensia – GLB

Potvrzuji přijetí článku Marka Meška, Ph.D. „How to reverse decline of an Empire? Two Byzantine case studies: Heraclius and Alexios Komnenos.“ do časopisu GLB. Příspěvek bude do GLB zařazen dle redakčních možností: buď do čísla 20/2, nebo do čísla 21/1, tj. vyjde nejpozději na jaře r. 2016.

V Brně dne 17. 6. 2015

[Signature]

Katarina Petrovičová
výkonná redaktorka
How to Reverse Decline of an Empire? Two Byzantine Case Studies: Herakleios and Alexios Komnenos,*

* This work was supported by the Program of „Employment of Newly Graduated Doctors of Science for Scientific Excellence“ (grant number CZ.1.07/2.3.00/30.0009) co-financed from European Social Fund and the state budget of the Czech Republic.

Abstract:

Empires tend to have similar lives to those of the living organisms. They are born, they grow, they prosper and flourish, and then they eventually decline and fall. The same observation applies to the Byzantine Empire whose history is composed of succession of periods of growth and decline. Yet the Byzantine Empire, or Eastern Roman Empire, outlasted its Western counterpart by roughly one millennium. There were several deeply critical moments during this time span that threatened its very existence, but somehow the Byzantine Empire recovered and existed until 1453 when it was finally extinguished by Ottoman Turks. Thus, two questions arise: how did Byzantines manage to survive in spite of all those reverses and crises? What could be possibly learned from the Byzantine experience with crisis management even today? In an attempt to answer these questions two crucial periods of Byzantine history are shortly discussed. First is an extraordinary crisis occurred during the reign of Emperor Herakleios (610-641), and second is an attempt for renewal that took place during the reign of Alexios Komnenos (1081-1118). Both emperors managed to stop and reverse the effects of decline that plagued the Byzantine Empire during their agitation reigns, and were even capable to restore its fortune for a while.

Key words: empire, decline, renewal, Byzantium, Herakleios, Alexios Komnenos

The Byzantines strongly believed that there is much to learn from their own history as this short quotation from the introduction of the chronicle of early 9th century Byzantine historian Theophanes Confessor clearly demonstrates:

"… for I believe that one who reads the actions of the ancients derives no small benefit from so doing."¹

Also the sheer amount of Byzantine history writing is more than impressive², and further corroborates this quotation, which in fact represents a variation of Roman well-known axiom

¹ Theophanes (1839: 5-6): "...ο郤 γ郤ρ郤 μακ郤ρ郤 ὧφ郤λ郤τα郤, ὡ郤ς郤 ὁ郤μ郤κ郤, κα郤ρ郤ⲟ郤ν郤τα郤 ς郤 τ郤ῶ郤ν郤 ἄ郤ρ郤χ郤ί郤ο郤ν郤 τά郤ς郤 π郤ρ郤ξ郤ε郤ς郤 ἄ郤να郤γ郤ι郤ν郤ύ郤ς郤κ郤ε郤ν郤."; MANGO - SCOTT (1997: 2).
historia magistra vitae or even older traditional passion for history passed down to the Byzantines from ancient Greek historians. It seems that this positive attitude towards history is being more and more overlooked nowadays. Most of the today’s elite are politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats whose education in history is questionable or inadequate. Moreover, the world as we know it is seemingly plagued by constant crisis of various kinds; economic, political, cultural, etc. There is urging need for crisis management skills in our world of today. Contemporary historians should be able to use the potential of their occupation and show that history is not just an antiquated deviation of few individuals, but on the contrary that it can actually provide directions and offer time proven measures that did always work in the past and therefore will work in the future as well.

From this point of view history of Byzantine Empire is a perfect place to look for such indications. Byzantium, after all, lasted almost one millennium. It survived not just one or two, but several deeply critical periods during its life; following three generations after the IVth crusade of 1203-1204 it was in fact virtually non-existent, then in 1261 it came suddenly back to historical scene, and it was only terminated in 1453 because of crushing superiority of the Ottoman Turks. Therefore one could unequivocally and rightly suggest that the Byzantines had talent for survival and for dealing with calamities of all kinds. When taking into account the whole span of the existence of Byzantine state two examples of such a remarkable capability known from historical sources shine above all others. The first example is the reign of emperor Herakleios (610-641) and the second is represented by equally important reign of emperor Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118).

The case of Alexios I Komnenos

When Alexios I Komnenos became emperor in spring of 1081 after his successful military coup, situation in Byzantium was severe. The Byzantines have lost almost all of the

---

2 It suffices only to study the list of Byzantine sources compiled by great Greek scholar I. Karayannopoulos to realize how extant the amount of history sources really is. See: ΚΑΡΑΓΙΑΝΝΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ (1987: 87-453).
3 ΚΑΡΑΓΙΑΝΝΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ (1987: 52).
4 It could be therefore justly called as “Byzantine millennium”, compare e.g. with H.-G. Beck who not surprisingly entitled his classical book about Byzantium Das Byzantinische Jahrtausend.
5 According to our knowledge, the first researcher who compared achievements of Alexios I Komnenos to those of Herakleios was Michael F. Hendy, see: HENDY (1969: 3).
territories in Asia Minor to Seljuk Turks following the fateful battle of Mantzikert in 1071, northeastern part of the Balkans was constantly threatened by nomadic Pechenegs, and the western approaches of the Empire were soon to become an area of Norman invasion masterminded by energetic and resourceful Robert Guiscard (1059-1085). In addition to a truly horrific “international” situation also the internal affairs of Byzantium were in the state of chaos and disorder. Because of decades of negligence the state finances were scarce, the golden currency of Byzantium debased down from 24 to 8 carats (keratia) and there were at least six variations of golden coin with different fineness in gold in circulation. As a result of recent territorial losses the tax collection was equally disrupted and the state apparatus was breaking down. The Byzantine Empire was nearly bankrupt.

According to the extensive narrative found in the Alexias by Anna Komnene, Alexios took several very important steps right at the very beginning of his reign. To reassess his control over administrative apparatus inherited from his less competent predecessors Alexios created only three months after his ascension to imperial throne (in July 1081) a brand new position of logothetes ton sekreton. In order to control the expenses in issuing honorific titles and salaries connected to them which were defining who in Byzantium was a member of the elite and who was not, Alexios in one stroke just simply cancelled lower ranks and placed a new block of titles above the rank of sebastos, henceforth reserved to the members of his family, his close personal followers and allies. This particular step brought about the accusation voiced by John Zonaras that Alexios Komnenos was running the state as his family household and no longer as an empire. There is some measure of truth in this nearly contemporary critique, for Alexios

---

6 The whole complicated process has been recently described in full detail and thoroughly analyzed by G. Leveniotis, see: ΛΕΒΕΝΙΩΤΗΣ (2007). For the battle of Mantzikert, see: CHEYNET (1980); HALDON, (2000: 112-127); NICOLLE – HOOK (2013).
7 For the Pecheneg threat and subsequent war (1083-1091), see: БАШУЛБЕВСКИЙ (1872: 155-165, 243-285); DIACONU (1970: 112-134); MEŠKO (2012).
8 For the war against the Normans (1081-1085), see: BUNEMANN (1997: 112-165); KISLINGER (2009); THEOTOKIS, (2014: 143-184).
12 The elevated court title of sebastos (lat. augustus) was most probably created by emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (1042-1055) and it was very rarely bestowed by Konstantine IX’s successors. OIKONOMIDES (1976: 126). In fact Alexios Komnenos belonged among its rare recipients before his rise on the imperial throne.
14 Zon. (1897: 766).