

Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 28 (2018)

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 28



Book Review:Sylvain DESTEPHEN, *Le voyage impérial dans l'Antiquité tardive. Des Balkans au Proche-Orient (De l'archéologie à l'histoire 67)*, Éditions de Boccard, Paris 2016.

Maria LEONTSINI

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.19046](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.19046)

Copyright © 2018, Maria LEONTSINI



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

LEONTSINI, M. (2018). Book Review:Sylvain DESTEPHEN, *Le voyage impérial dans l'Antiquité tardive. Des Balkans au Proche-Orient (De l'archéologie à l'histoire 67)*, Éditions de Boccard, Paris 2016. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 28, 431–436. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.19046>

Sylvain DESTEPHEN, *Le voyage impérial dans l'Antiquité tardive. Des Balkans au Proche-Orient* (De l'archéologie à l'histoire 67), Éditions de Boccard, Paris 2016, pp. 480. ISBN 978-2701804965

The aim of the book is the study of the imperial expeditions and travels between the Balkans and the Near East from Constantine I (330-337) to Theodosios II (408-450). The prologue presents publications dealing with issues related to the study of the imperial journeys, initially inspired by romanticism and exoticism and later explored within the disciplines of historical geography and institutional history. Introductory remarks are particularly effective in the understanding of the subject's historical context and the complications resulting from the fragmented, heterogeneous and selective nature of the sources; attention is drawn also to the bias through which imperial travels were projected in patristic texts, historiography, epistolography and hagiography ("Introduction historiographique", pp. 21-27, "Prologue: rumeurs et lueurs", pp. 29-35). Of importance are the remarks on the active images and sounds recorded in texts describing the mobilization of the emperor's escort that mainly focused on the distinguished personalities of the imperial entourage rather than the lower officials or the auxiliary groups assisting the convoys. The connotations of the shifting of the imperial court from Rome, to Constantinople, the new center of power, are also discussed extensively. Furthermore, emphasis is put to the new trends of the era like the imperial charity addressed not only to the public who attended the imperial processions, but also to ecclesiastical institutions. The emperor's long stay in the capital and the gradual decrease of the imperial déplacement in the provinces is also announced as a key challenge for defining the various stages that have strengthened imperial power and manifested Constantinople as the unique seat of authority.

The book is divided into four main parts, structured on the thematic perspectives that promote the main topics related to the imperial voyage: the

first examines the spatial dimensions of the movement and presents the stations and routes taken during the imperial travel, the military campaigns or journeys conducted for recreation (baths or hunting) or pilgrimage (“L’itinéraire”, pp. 37-107); the second part deals with the imperial retinue of the imperial convoys, also the members of the emperor’s family and the court, and even the clergymen, intellectuals and doctors who took part in the movement (“La suite”, pp. 109-181); the next part covers issues related administrative staff, who was in charge of the imperial chamber (“L’escorte”, pp. 183-255), while the supporting infrastructures such as the personnel and the resources that supplied the locomotion as also the hosting facilities are presented in the last part of the book (“Le train”, pp. 257-341).

The first part, subdivided into three sections, analyzes the impact of changes in the orientation of movements after the founding of the imperial capital on Bosphorus. The establishment of the state services in Constantinople and thereupon the departing from the new capital towards other major urban centers, of either the western or the eastern part of the empire, eventually shifted the balance from Rome to the benefit of the new metropolis. With time, imperial departures from Constantinople were recorded more frequently in areas nearby the capital and far less in remote destinations until the beginning of the 7th century. However, as is noted, the itinerant emperor, who devoted part of his reign in campaigns, continued to be considered the ideal ruler by the elites and the intellectuals (p. 91, 95). The transformation of the imperial long distance travel into short visits in areas nearby the capital is evident in the spatial distribution of the palatine residencies in Thrace and Bithynia or even more close to the vicinity of Constantinople.

The second part of the book examines the administration, the fiscal services and the elite military units serving the imperial family and the court on the move. The emperor was frequently accompanied by the *Augustae* who, as wives or mothers of the heir to the throne, constituted the supreme members of the royal house; even royal offsprings such as Valentinianus Galates, the son of Valens, were born on the way of such a mission. Royal wives with the consent of the emperor were free to move for recreational or therapeutic purposes. The pilgrimage to the Holy Land, inaugurated by the pioneering religious mission of St. Helena, became soon the only long distance journey away from the capital permitted to the female members of the court. The members of the imperial escort, the *comitatus* mentioned in early sources, referred to as the *comites* of the consistory in the time of Diocletian, consist the main subject investigated in the third part of the book. The legal documentation was proven a useful tool for locating and dating the imperial expeditions and the

reconstitution of the imperial itineraries; it was mandatory for the *questor*, the high-ranking legal official, or at least a part of his subordinates to partake in the imperial escort. Constantine I set out legal provisions for the compensation of the palatine officials on the move as equal to the officers that joined the campaigns. The activation of a large body of clerks in the imperial expeditions is documented by the mass production of official documents and legislation indexed in detail in the appendix (Appendice chronologique, pp. 355-397); quite a number of testimonies on the the imperial sorties are furthermore provided in literature of the era, like the autograph works of emperor Julian. The financial administration that ensured the monetary revenues and payments in silver and gold and the control of the precious goods, such as the imperial silk garments, was placed under the control and supervision of the count of the *sacred largesses*, who had its headquarters in Constantinople; his subordinates presence is nonetheless attested in the cities proximate to the campaigning emperor. The requirements of these large convoys led in fact to the establishment of warehouses in the provinces that ensured the safety of luxury and expensive goods, and was aimed at avoiding their long-distance transport.

Among the chief dignitaries, that took the title of count (*comes*) when accompanying the emperor, was the *magister officiorum* who was gradually established as an intermediary functionary authorized for the contacts between the palace and state officeholders as well as the reception of diplomatic envoys. His supremacy among the members of the imperial consistory and the court was maintained when the emperor was outside the capital; officials under his auspices were escorting the emperors on the move. The military protection of the imperial escort was ensured by the elite force of the *scholae* (after the guard room/*schola*). Ammianus Marcellinus, former member of this elite body, testifies the existence of the *scholae* in the oriental frontier already around the year 350, while this corps, called *praesentales*, was reported in the Balkans and Asia Minor; members of the *scholae* were also mentioned in Latin and mostly Greek funerary inscriptions (5th-6th c.) in the vicinity of Constantinople; different seats of this unit were mentioned in Bithynia, according to the *Chronography* of Theophanes, although as it is noted, the region was not found on the imperial itineraries of this period. These developments had probably led to the reorganization of the imperial garrison in the reign of Leo I, who presumably placed a new unit, the *excubitores*, within the palace premises.

The next part of the book deals with the communication and transportation infrastructures and capacities that, as is rightly pointed out, were continually undermined by the impoverished urban density. The milestones (*miliaria*) showing formerly the distance from the imperial center of Rome, turned over time into an outdated display medium of the public road system; a few sets of *miliaria* revealed in southwest Asia Minor, commemorating Theodosios II, have a dynastic character as they mention also his father, Arkadios, or other members of the royal family. However, despite the limitation of the imperial movements to the suburbia of Constantinople after the death of Theodosios I, and to regions more close to Bosphorus' shores, after Theodosios II, imperial expeditions nevertheless mobilized numerous officials and guards and developed mechanisms of cooperation with the local authorities to secure the supplying of the convoy. Suggestive evidence, provided by imperial honorific monuments and ivory diptychs, depicting imperial processions, conveys information on the exceptional context of celebrations or triumphal public processions. Luxurious and elegant vehicles (chariots) were used by the emperor and his suite and carriages and litters for the aristocracy.

The research material presents an impressive selection of testimonies on parading horses that had essentially gained importance for the cavalry escorting the emperor and on the same time been part of the imperial processions' visual imagery. Several details drawn from the sources show the ever-increasing need to ensure the breeding and the supply of equidae to the imperial services and generally certify the role of this animal in the imperial movements. The donkey and the mule were also essentially contributing to transportation; the first served to the carriage and delivery of agricultural products, while the second was often used as traction animal for the carriages of the emperor and the elites. The priority given to the supervision of the imperial escort's movements and the inspection of the transportation of raw materials and equipment is evident in the state network of the *cursus publicus* and the *angaria* planned to support the state needs. Examples provided by the legal sources make obvious the priority given to the provisioning of the imperial baggage train and the care for the unhindered operation of the public stopping places on the strategic routes linking Constantinople to the ancient centers of power, Milan, Sirmium, Thessalonike, in the West and Antioch, in the East.

Operational and postal stations were located not only in the provincial capitals but also functioned in a number of positions confirmed also by archaeological

research which is presented and discussed extensively in the book. The stopping posts (*mansiones*) and changing stations (*mutationes*) that serviced vehicles and animals were under consistent supervision by the state. Gathered minutely and properly commented information on the travel itineraries, reveal that station posts were most often unknown humble positions situated in minor settlements. Among other examples, instructive is the case reported by the Anonymous of Bordeaux (*Itinerarium Burdigalense*), who probably confused the Latin *pandocium* with Pantichium and transformed it to Pandicia (between Constantinople and Nikomedeia). Interesting is moreover the note on the development of the term *palatia* (palaces) that implied imperial mansions, which with time ceased to be in use. The Great Palace mentioned as such for first time in the reign of Theodosios II, became the only distinguished imperial residence unlike any other, for its uniqueness and majesty. During the military campaigns, emperors and their suites were sheltering in tents, usually of leather (*tabernaculi*). Such movable habitation was settled in barracks and often covered large surfaces with separated accommodations was, depending on the circumstances, either comfort and luxurious, or simple and adapted to the particular spatial conditions of the camp. The stay of the emperor and his accompaniment in the provinces was under the auspices of the praetorian prefect who exercised his jurisdiction within the area. The refueling of the expeditionary forces burdened the local rural economy and was supervised by the regional administration services that were actively functioning until the ninth century.

As an epilogue before the general conclusion, the author renders an excursus on the emperor's final convoy and funeral rituals which reveal a strong tendency to concentrate the state apparatus in the capital. The ceremony of imperial burial in Constantinople acquired a solemn character following the amplification of the emperor's permanent presence in the capital in the reign of Theodosius I. The general conclusion recounts the historical gravity of the movements that took place during the formation of the Byzantine state and led to the establishment of the imperial power in Constantinople. The book is completed with the appendix which registers and corrects earlier similar directories and reconstructs the geography and chronology of the travels with references to the primary sources. The bibliography, two indexes of places and proper names, lineage charts of the dynasties of Constantine I, Valentinian I and Theodosios I, maps and photos from the Arch of Galerius in Thessalonike and of Constantine I, in Rome, provide useful tools for the study of the places and the personalities and complement the rich

documentation. The book is an important reference work for the Early Byzantine period and offers abundant clarification on the processes that defined the imperial institution. As the author correctly concludes, the institutional formation of the imperial power was shaped by the emperor's progressive establishment in Constantinople which manifested a concentration of power that in no way implied instability or weakness.

MARIA LEONTSINI
Institute of Historical Research/NHRF
Section of Byzantine Research