

From servants of the empire to dominant coalition. The emergence and transformation of elites in the Byzantine Empire, 8th-11th centuries

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The (Eastern) Roman Empire of the 4th-7th centuries CE was characterised by a clearly distinguished and hierarchically structured elite of “honestiores” (vis-à-vis the “humiliores” of the bulk of the population), represented in the senate of Constantinople and equipped with large land holdings. Nevertheless, various career avenues (especially in the military) allowed for the rise of non-elite individuals, even to the imperial throne (with Justin I and his nephew Justinian I in the 6th century as telling examples). The dramatic political, demographic and economic upheavals of the mid-6th to mid-7th century, however, and the loss of two thirds of the empire’s territories (and revenues) to the Arabs contributed to a collapse of the traditional power basis of these late Roman elites.

In the reduced empire, elite status depended on service for and access to the imperial centre in Constantinople and its distributive apparatus as never before. The stabilisation of the state in the 8th century, however, and its renewed expansion from the late 9th century onwards allowed an increasing number of individuals and clans to transform positions of power into large land holdings and more sustainable elite status across several generations. These new elites included both families from the provinces as well as a significant number of migrants from beyond the borders (e. g. Armenians, especially in the military). Elite status, however, was not longer legally defined and hereditary; its preservation depended on constant access to the core networks of power around the imperial court. The imperial office or at least a share in its inner circle thus even more became a highly contested price for elite clans aspiring for a stabilisation of their fragile power basis in the 10th and 11th centuries.

These competitions eventually resulted in full-blown civil wars, which in combination with foreign invasions (Seljuks, Pechenegs, Normans) led to the almost-collapse of the empire in the 1070s and 1080s. Only the formation of a “dominant coalition”¹ of some leading clans who agreed upon a new distribution of power and the establishment of the Komnenos family on the throne (in 1081) allowed for a stabilisation of the state, at least for the next century.

The paper explores the emergence, composition and dynamics of these elites (in the capital and in the provinces) and their share in and interplay with the institutions of the state, combining traditional methods of source analysis and prosopography with concepts of social network analysis and New Institutional Economics.² This combination equally allows for a comparison with other pre-modern empires and their elite configurations across disciplinary and terminological borders.

¹ For this term see Douglass North/John Joseph Wallis/Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History*. Cambridge 2009.

² For an example see Johannes Preiser-Kapeller, The Ties that Do Not Bind. Group formation, polarization, and conflict within networks of political elites in the medieval Roman Empire. *Journal of Historical Network Research* 4 (2020) 298-324.