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Lycia in the Byzantine Period (Fourth-Tenth Century)

Historical Background

Lycia is a peripheral region in the southwestern corner of Asia Minor. Unable to support a big population, this mountainous region had no really large cities. However, the numerous harbors along its long coastline and its favorable location on the maritime trade route between the Orient and the West brought the region great prosperity from trade.

From early times, the small and medium-sized cities in Lycia were leagued together against Greek and other emigrants, allowing the region to develop a character unlike that of other parts of Asia Minor, where the populations were more mixed.¹

Whereas Lycia retained relative independence under the Hellenistic rule and even as part of the Roman Empire,² it underwent major political, economic and cultural changes beginning in the fourth century. The Later Roman Empire unified its system of government throughout its domain, and the recognition of Christianity as the state religion was of more than minor influence in the area. But the greatest impact came from the Islamic invasion of Asia Minor in the seventh century. It is against such a background that this paper examines the administrative and military changes wrought on Byzantine Lycia between the fourth and tenth centuries.

I

Under Diocletian (284—305), the Roman Empire modified its administrative organization, resulting in the separation of the state's

military and civil authorities, and the setting up of a hierarchical bureaucracy with the emperor at the top of the huge governmental apparatus.

During his reign, Constantine I (324—337) extended the new system throughout the empire. Large provinces were split up into smaller units, the civil administration of which was the exclusive concern of the governors. Some provinces composed an intermediate diocese (*diocesis*) and some dioceses formed the largest administrative unit prefecture (*prefectura*). As part of this reorganization, Lycia became a separate province.

The army, meanwhile, was organized into two basic groups, the mobile field armies or *comitatenses* under the *magistri militum*; and the permanent frontier garrison units or *limitanei* under the *duces*. While the main force of the imperial field army was the cavalry stationed near large cities in preparation for large scale expeditions, local military affairs were in the hands of the garrison units at frontiers or combat zones and their commanders.³

The new system, the so-called Diocletian-Constantine Regime, was characterized by peace and prosperity in Asia Minor. There was no need to displace a regular army in the *Asiana* diocese which included Lycia. Forages by barbarous Isaurians in the southern area were quelled in the reign of Anastasius I (491—518).⁴ And it was not until the sixth century that the system needed adjusting to meet a changing political scene. Emperor Justinian I (527—565), who led reconquering Italy and northern Africa, applied a measure of flexibility in certain regions, permitting discrepancies in the required separation of civil and military jurisdiction. Thus, in Asia Minor, some civil governors of Isauria, Pisidia, and Lycaonia were granted military power in the interests of peace.⁵

Most remarkable of Justinian's reforms was the establishment of the *quaestura Justinianus exercitus*, comprising the five provinces of Scythia, Moesia II (along the Black Sea coast), Caria, Cyclades and Cyprus

(in the Mediterranean). The *quaestor*, who was the commander of this troop, also had civil authority. Although it has been stated that *questor* obtained supplies and secured a base in the devastated frontier region, his exact function is unknown. While the *quaestura* did not include Lycia, it does seem that the district nevertheless was closely linked to the foundation of the imperial navy *Carabisiani* and the maritime *thema Kibyrriaïotai*⁶ in the seventh century.

In spite of the above-mentioned political changes, loss of autonomy, and the plague in the 540s, Lycian cities flourished in the sixth century. The center of prosperity was the old colonial city of Myra, which attained importance as the metropolitan city where the legendary Saint Nikolaos worked as a bishop in the reign of Constantine I. As a sanctuary, Myra attracted a lot of worshipers from throughout the empire. A church had already been built for the saint near the city in the fourth century, and a new basilica was quickly rebuilt after collapsing due, perhaps, to an earthquake in 529.⁷

One can learn of the prosperity of Myra from the *Vita* of Saint Nikolaos of Sion, who served as a bishop in Pinara in his later years. When he wanted to go to Jerusalem from Myra, Nikolaos Sionites arranged a ship from Ascalon in Palestine which was anchored in nearby Andriake. Other harbor towns in Lycia were also active in the sixth century. Thus, on his second trip to Jerusalem, we are told he left on an Egyptian ship from nearby Tristomon on Kekova Island, and on his return on a Rhodian ship he asked to be put off at one of the small neighboring cities of Phoenix, Tristomon, or Andriake. Since ports were the empire's trade centers, Lycia flourished by commercial activities of these coastal cities. Travelers could go almost anywhere from there, east or west, by sea.⁸

The Sion monastery is in a mountain village outside Myra. When Nikolaos Sionites planned its construction, he ordered the bretheren not to commence work until he had returned from his second trip to Palestine.

On his return, he hired stonemasons from nearby villages and set them to work under his direction. Although no mention is made of the reason for his having requested a delay in the commencement of work, it may be that he had intended to bring back from Palestine either builders or technical information. It is attested that other churches or monasteries were built in the environs of Myra in the sixth century.⁹

II

The seventh and eighth centuries were the Dark Ages of Byzantine history. The Arab invasions that started in the 730s divested the empire of its eastern provinces of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, and left it with only Asia Minor. In the 670s, Constantinople had been besieged for five years, and internal political disorder brought about another violent attack in 717—718. Although the capital was barely able to survive the crisis, Arab incursions continued in the eighth century, many old and famous cities in Asia Minor being plundered.¹⁰

The Byzantine fleet also came under attack from the Arabs. The imperial navy, commanded by Emperor Constans II (641—688), was defeated off Phoenix in Lycia in 655, the emperor escaped by changing his clothes with a soldier. Then in 672 the Arabs, with a view to attacking Constantinople, set up bases in various regions of Asia Minor including Lycia.¹¹ In 715, the Caliphate dispatched an Egyptian fleet to Phoenix in preparation for the capture of the imperial city. Emperor Anastasius II (713—715) also sent a fleet, but the Byzantine army revolted against him in Rhodes, allowing the Arabs to make deep incursions into the empire. In 717, the people of Constantinople again had the Arab army and navy at the city wall.¹²

As the Roman Empire had formerly held naval supremacy in the Mediterranean, it had not maintained a large naval presence there. But the emergence of the Arabs in the region prompted the Romans to reorganize the navy into provincial defensive districts or *themata*

(themes). Lycia belonged to the theme *Kibyrrhaiotai*, as did the other southwestern provinces of Caria and Pamphylia. This was the only maritime district the commander or *strategos* of which had not only military, but also civil power, until the naval themes of the Aegean Sea and Samos were established in the ninth or tenth centuries. In the later seventh and eighth century, imperial domains remained in Asia Minor and the Balkans were integrated into these military districts or themes. This fact marked the end of the Diocletian-Constantine system that had functioned since the fourth century.¹³

Archaeological evidence confirms that the Lycian cities suffered heavy damage during the Arab invasions. Cities that had gradually developed from being fortresses on hilltops to being more spread-out settlements in Hellenic and Roman times were once again forced to become fortified strongholds. And so, by the eighth century, even Myra had shrunk in size. The church of Saint Nikolaos was walled and transformed into a complex structure with a cupola. Similar changes took place in Lycian cities such as Xanthos, studied by French archaeologists; the ancient shrine of Leto; the religious center of Tlos, on a hill in the Xanthos valley; Apollonia and Kandyba; Pinara and Patara, the birthplace of Saint Nikolaos.¹⁴

Arab fleets continued to raid Lycia in the eighth century and Myra was attacked in 807, according to *The Chronographia of Theophanes*. Khoumeid, the commander of the fleet sent to Rhodes by Caliph Harun al-Rashid, went to Myra on his return and plundered the sanctuary of Saint Nikolaos. Although he could not manage to damage the saint's coffin, legend has it that his attempt was greeted by a ferocious storm that scattered his forces, destroyed a large part of his fleet, and forced Khoumeid to acknowledge the power of the saint.¹⁵

It seems that Lycia was still a peripheral district of the Byzantine Empire in the eighth century. When Constantine V (742—775) intensified his iconoclastic persecution, according to *The Life of St. Stephen the Younger*,

St. Stephen persuaded his monks to take refuge in such safe regions as the north coast of the Black Sea, Epirus, Cyprus and Lycia.¹⁶

The Arab incursions, it is true, did not completely destroy the Byzantine navy, and people were still able to find ships sailing in the Mediterranean. But sea travel became less than safe after Arab forces based in Spain conquered Crete in 827, using the island as a launching pad for raids on Greece, Aegean islands and the coast of Asia Minor.¹⁷

III

In spite of a decrease in population and devastation by the repeated Arab invasions, it appears that numerous Byzantine cities in Asia Minor survived the crises of the seventh and eighth centuries. The reduced urbanization of the Byzantine Empire in the ninth century was due not so much to a lack of developmental continuity but, rather, to the fact that the Arabs had occupied its most urban provinces.¹⁸

Many sources suggest that most of the old towns continued to be inhabited. So, for example, Constantine VII (945—959) refers in his *De Thematribus* to the Lycian cities of Termessos, Patara, Xanthos, Myra, Phoenix and Phaselis.¹⁹ But while they continued to exist, Lycian cities had undergone drastic change by the ninth century, having become more compact, with less area set aside for public activity and residential zones limited to areas that could be protected by the city wall.²⁰

There are no signs that communications along the southern coast of Asia Minor were cut off by the Arab fleets based in Crete, although travel in the Mediterranean was increasingly threatened. For this reason, *The Life of Constantine Judaeus* tells us, the hero traveled overland from Nicaea to the shrine of Saint Nikolaos at Myra during the reign of Emperor Basil I (867—886). St. Joannicus, who also visited Myra at about the same time, likewise went overland.

The contrast with the ease of travel in the sixth century is underlined by stories such as the one relating that Constantine Judaeus had to travel

from Myra to Attaleia, the capital of the theme, to board a boat for Cyprus. Saint Nikolaos of Sion had not only found ships bound for Palestine at two nearby harbors, but had disembarked from a Rhodian ship at a third Lycian port. This leads one to believe that the provincial center had shifted from old commercial cities like Myra to the political and military city of Attalia. Myra clearly reduced its maritime role in the ninth century.²¹

With Arab control clamped tight on what had long been the Byzantine Empire's eastern provinces and main trading regions of Egypt and Palestine, many Lycian cities became impoverished. However, despite military tension, shipping was not only not interrupted, but it was provided with new trade routes.²²

The military balance between Byzantium and the Arabs decisively changed in the second half of the ninth century and the empire gained supremacy in the eastern frontier of Asia Minor. After the fall of Crete, the imperial army and navy made expeditions to recapture the island, in which the theme Kibyrrhaiotai played an important role. In the campaign of Admiral Himerios in 911, for example, 31 warships and more than 6,000 sailors and rowers were mobilized from this theme. In another expedition in 949, under the reign of Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (945—959), the Kibyrrhaiotai also devoted all its strength.²³ But it was not until 961 that a Byzantine army successfully retook the island under General Nicephorus Phocas, later Emperor Nicephorus II (963—969). There followed a period of renewed naval supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean and territorial expansion.²⁴

* * * * *

At the beginning of the eleventh century, The Byzantine Empire was perhaps most prosperous than it had been since the time of Justinian I. But change was once more afoot. As peace returned to the eastern Mediterranean, the Byzantine navy was gradually disbanded. The

primarily defensive system of themes collapsed in the wake of the age of conquest, which had deprived it of its significance. Thus, for example, there is no reference to the district of Kibyrrhaiotai after 1043. Moreover, the battle of Mantzikert in 1071 dealt the imperial army its death blow, with the greater part of Asia Minor, except Lycia, falling to the Seljuk Turks. And, though Lycia flourished briefly under Komnenoi, it was conquered by the Turks in the later twelfth century.²⁵

Notes

1. S. Aisaka, "Die Stadt und der Städtebund in Lykien", in the present volume.
2. A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*, 2nd ed., Amsterdam 1971, pp. 95-109.
3. G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. by J. M. Hussey, 2nd ed., London 1968, pp. 33-36, 42-44.
4. W. Brandes, *Die Städte Kleinasiens im 7. und 8. Jahrhundert*, Amsterdam 1989, p. 46.
5. J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, Cambridge 1990, p. 210.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 210, 217, 220.
7. Brandes, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-98; E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the later Roman Empire A.D. 312—460*, Oxford 1984, pp. 50-82.
8. Ševčenko, 1984, pp. 28, 30, 50, 62, 64; Brandes, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-98; D. de F. Abrahamse, "Hagiographical Sources for Byzantine Cities, 500-900 A.D.," Ph. D. dissertation, University of Michigan 1967, p. 275.
9. Ševčenko, 1984, p. 68; Abrahamse, *op. cit.*, pp. 294-295.
10. Ostrogorsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-146, 152-157,
11. *Theophanis Chronographia*, C. de Boor, ed., Leipzig 1883, vol. 1, pp. 345-346, 353, 385; R.-J. Lilie, *Die byzantinische Reaktion auf die Ausbreitung der Araber*, München 1976, pp. 67-68, 75-77.
12. *Theophanis Chronographia*, p. 385; Nicephoros, Patriarch of Constantinople, *Short History*, C. Mango, ed., Washington, D.C. 1990, pp. 116, 117 n. 39; Lilie, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

13. Haldon, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-220; H. Ahrweiler, *Byzance et la mer*, Paris 1966, pp. 389-390.
14. Brandes, *op. cit.* pp. 96-101.
15. *Theophanis Chronographia*, p. 483.
16. Vita Stephani Junioris, *Patrologia Graeca*, 100, cols. 1117 CD.
17. Abrahamse, *op. cit.*, pp. 308, 311 ff.
18. *Ibid.* p. 345.
19. *Constantino Porfirogenito De Thematibus*, A. Pertusi, ed., Vaticano 1952, pp. 78-79.
20. Abrahamse, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-335.
21. Vita Constantini olim Judaei, *Acta Sanctorum*, Nov. 4, cols. 628-656; Abrahamse, *op. cit.*, pp. 311-313, 332-331.
22. Abrahamse, *op. cit.*, p. 342.
23. *De ceremoniis aulae byzantinae*, J. J. Reiske, ed., vol. 2, Bonn 1829-30, pp. 651-660, 664-678.
24. Ostrogorsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 283-315.
25. *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 2, Oxford 1991, pp. 1127, 1257-1258.

(Koji Nakatani)