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# The Politics of the Gate: Byzantine City Walls and the Urban Negotiation of Imperial Authority

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**The Politics of the Gate: Byzantine City Walls  
and the Urban Negotiation of Imperial Authority**

A Thesis Presented to  
the Faculty of the Department of History  
Bates College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By Samuel Slattery  
Lewiston, Maine  
March 21, 2014

*Keep thee far from the man that hath power to kill; so shalt  
thou not doubt the fear of death: and if thou come unto him,  
make no fault, lest he take away thy life presently:  
remember that thou goest in the midst of snares, and that  
thou walkest upon the battlements of cities.*

*ECCLESIASTICUS (SIRACH) 9.13*

*BIBLICAL APOCRYPHA*

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Outline.....	16
Statement of Thesis	
Chapter Summaries	
Conclusion	
3. Literature Review and Methodology .....	19
4. Chapter One .....	25
The Imperial Assertion upon the Wall: The Emperor as Creator and Guardian of Walled Space	
5. Chapter Two.....	34
The Limits of Imperial Power and Civilian Defense of Walls	
6. Chapter Three.....	53
The Contractual Nature of Urban Defense	
7. Chapter Four .....	73
The Negotiation of Imperial Authority: Political Theater at the City Gates	
8. Conclusion .....	101
9. Works Cited .....	103
10. Works Consulted.....	107

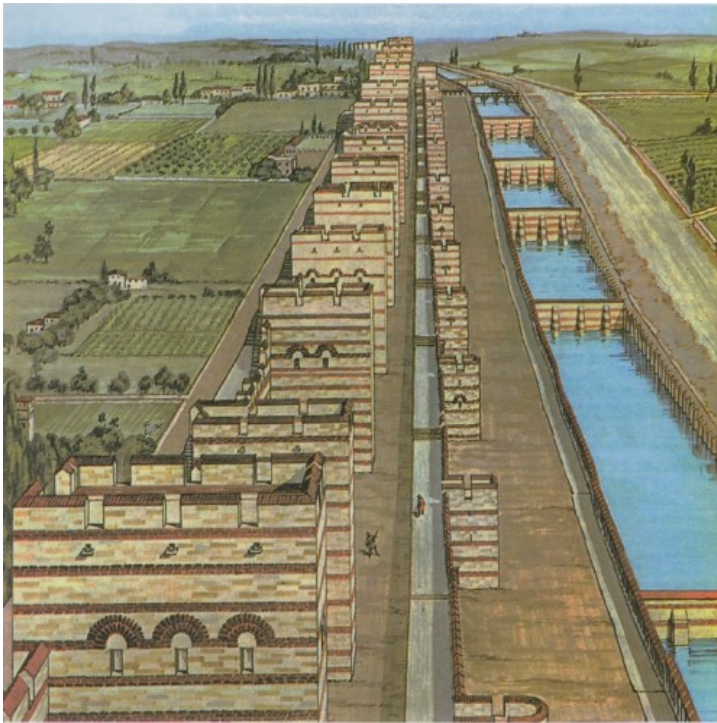
## 1. Introduction

From its violent birth as the surviving portion of a civilization engulfed by invaders to its violent death as a lone city overwhelmed by irresistible assault, the Byzantine Empire was a state walled against perpetual siege. Byzantine fortifications are a diverse and fascinating but also ill-studied subject. Over time, as the empire weathered internal and external warfare, its fortified settlements changed and developed to endure the storm. The relationship between habitation and fortification is often difficult to discern, and varied greatly from place to place and over time. In some places, city walls encompassed a great area, even when only a vestigial community remained inside. In others, small hilltop towns found themselves so packed with activity that the grand open spaces of their Roman heritage were transformed into crowded bazaars. Cities were sometimes divided into upper and lower, other times the city relied upon a citadel, all to provide a more defensible refuge while retaining a larger area for daily life.

However, it was the great cities of the empire that boasted the mightiest stone circuits. Thessalonica, Nicaea, Antioch, Ancyra and Alexandria were all secured against assault by a higher class of ramparts and even when waves of invaders could wash over the lesser defenses of the hill towns around them, these cities could hold out against all but the most sophisticated and relentless besiegers. The grandest and most impregnable fortifications in the medieval world crowned the landward side of the “Queen of Cities” herself, Constantinople: a six-kilometer, three-layered masterpiece of military engineering that was breached by force only twice in over a millennium.<sup>1</sup>

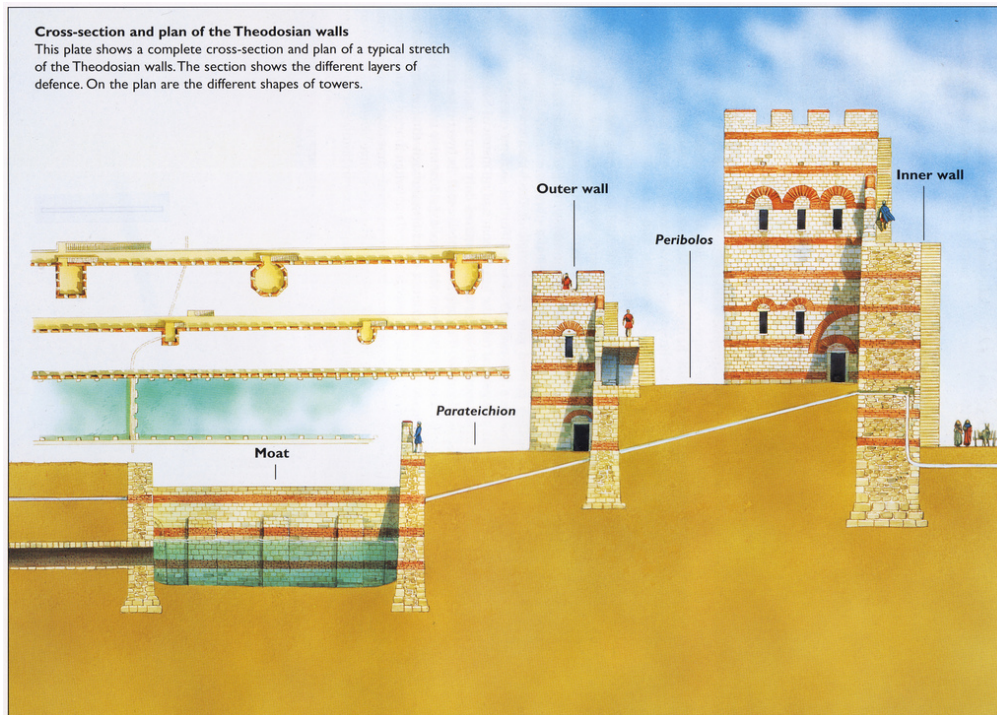
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<sup>1</sup> Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 67-77.



**Figure 1.** The Theodosian Land Walls of Constantinople (artist's reconstruction)

<http://weaponsandwarfare.com/?p=26940>



**Figure 2.** A cross-section of the same walls, showing its three layers

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/21711359@N08/3971839210/in/photostream/>

What role did these structures play in Byzantine civilization? Historians have disagreed somewhat about the relationship between walls and the cities they enclosed. For some, it was primarily positive and protective, and walls are understood to have preserved Roman civilization from barbarism. For others, the relationship was negative and constrictive: walls are understood to have choked the life out of the classical polis and reduced it to a martial husk. For some recent historians, walls are understood as regulatory structures used to control commerce, movement and political action. John Haldon, Mark Whittow, Wolfgang Liebeschuetz and Cyril Mango have all offered complex analyses of the social, economic and political dynamics walls imposed upon cities.

But regardless of whether historians see walls as benevolent, toxic, intrusive or some combination, almost all historians agree that walls were the product of the imperial state, and whether fortifications were gifts, nooses or restraints, all agree that they were imposed upon the passive urban body by the imperial state.

In “Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society, 950-1100,” Leonora Neville contends just this, asserting that, “on the balance, it seems the imperial administration should be credited with maintaining a monopoly upon fortification.”<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, Mark Whittow argues in “Rural Fortifications in Western Europe and Byzantium, Tenth to Twelfth Century” that no equivalent to the private aristocratic fortifications of western medieval Europe (castles) existed in the east, and that “the Byzantines clearly regarded most *kastra* [fortified settlements] as essentially imperial or public fortresses.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Leonora Alice Neville, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society, 950-1100*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Whittow, “Rural Fortifications in Western Europe and Byzantium, Tenth to Twelfth Century”: *Byzantinische Forschungen* v. 21 (1995), accessed 2013, <http://deremilitari.org/2013/09/rural-fortifications-in-western-europe-and-byzantium-tenth-to-twelfth-century/>, 69.



Historians base this conclusion upon a degree of hard evidence, such as the jealously guarded imperial monopoly over wall construction and patronage, and the fact that there are few examples of any non-state actors disputing it by claiming to possess some walled settlement independently of imperial authority. Historians also argue that the fortification of cities transformed autonomously governed population centers into military-administrative nucleuses used to control the countryside. This argument goes farther than reducing urban communities to a passive position by removing them from the equation entirely.

Most Byzantine emperors would have been happy to hear that historians have so resoundingly affirmed their sovereignty over city walls. If they indeed held such a monopoly, they did not trouble to keep it a secret: Byzantine monarchs widely publicized their special relationship with urban defenses, celebrating triumphal entrances through splendid ceremonial city gates, unobtrusively promoting their patronage of them in propagandistic literature and enshrining the emperor's role as urban protector in political theory, theology and law. Walls were understood to be physical embodiments of the political power of the emperor.

This ideal must have been of small comfort to the craftsmen, merchants and landowners of Thessaloniki when they found their city enmeshed in a violent struggle between the armies of two imperial claimants jockeying for the throne. In *The Alexiad*, Anna Komnena describes how, after being defeated by her father, the future emperor, Alexios Komnenos, his rival, Basilakios, fled to the city of Thessaloniki.

When they reached Thessaloniki, the townspeople immediately received Basilakios but barred the gates to [Alexios]. But even then my father did not relax: far from taking off his breastplate, or removing his helmet, or undoing the buckler from his shoulders, or laying aside his sword, he actually pitched camp and warned them that he would attack their walls and completely ravage the town. Nevertheless, he was anxious to spare Basilakios and to ensure this made proposals for peace through his companion, the monk Ioannikos (who had a good reputation for integrity). He promised him that if Basilakios surrendered himself and the town, he would suffer no ill-treatment. Basilakios was having none of it. However, the inhabitants of

Thessaloniki were afraid that the town would be taken and something terrible would happen, and so they allowed Komnenos to enter.

But Basilakios, seeing what they were doing, went off to the citadel—from the frying pan into the fire. Although the *domestikos* gave his word that he would suffer no irremediable ill, Basilakios still refused to forget fighting and war; despite the dangers, hard-pressed though he was, he showed himself to be a true hero. Unflinching, always courageous, he would not yield an inch until the inhabitants of the citadel and the guards drove him out by force and handed him over to the *me gas domestikos*.<sup>4</sup>

While Anna is primarily concerned with the virtues and deeds of her aristocratic protagonists, her narrative also describes a community forced to make a weighty political decision with their collective survival potentially at stake. This decision is explicitly tied to the city's walls and the townsfolk's decision of what passages to allow or deny through those barriers.

However unsought the choices they face were, and however inferior their position, Anna does present the citizens of Thessaloniki as possessing political agency tied to their use of their walls, a power entirely out of step with the idea of unquestioned imperial authority over all the uses of walls.

On the other side of the equation, Emperor Andronikos I could probably be forgiven for doubting the validity of his untrammelled monopoly over fortifications when, according to the early thirteenth century historian Nicetas Choniates, he received the following reception from the walls of Nicaea, one of the largest cities of the empire and then risen in revolt against his reign.

The defenders were insolent, not only when Andronikos was absent, but when he was present; appearing on the wall; they defended themselves with weapons and delivered blows of vulgarities, sparing neither missile nor obscenity. The gates of the city were shut and securely bolted, but the gates of the lips opened wide, and the defenders'

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<sup>4</sup> Anna Komnene, E. R. A. Sewter and Peter Frankopan, *The Alexiad*, (London; New York: Penguin, 2009), 28-9.

tongues issued forth from the breastworks of the teeth to discharge missiles of scurrilities against Andronikos.<sup>5</sup>

These accounts and many others in the same vein severely complicate a simplistic image of the imperial state as the undisputed master of Byzantine fortifications and the civilian population as their passive beneficiary or victim. While the imperial state certainly succeeded in maintaining its authority over the cities and territories of its vast domain through its armies, bureaucracy and the centrifugal nexus of the imperial court, the relationship between the security and the loyalty of a given city to a given emperor was a complex business.

Even when it is backed up with hard contemporary evidence, the concept that walls are inherently tools of the state used to control individuals and communities falls conveniently in line with very modern assumptions of what a wall is. To the twentieth or twenty-first century eye, a wall is inescapably an ugly thing. Walls sever space and limit horizons, imprisoning people and cutting communities apart. They are built by the powers-that-be to impose authority upon ordinary people, to isolate minority groups and to fortify the gated space of the privileged against the common man. In our cultural vocabulary, “breaking down a barrier” is an inherently good thing to do. At their best, walls are unfortunate necessities that compromise freedom in the name of security and at their worst, they are physical symbols of how a society can dehumanize its members and of the ruthless small-mindedness of “civilized” people.

In his New York Times op-ed, “The Walls that Hurt Us,” Marcello Di Cintio provides an example of such a perspective.

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<sup>5</sup> Choniates, Nicetas, *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. Harry J. Magoulias, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 156.

Through technology, barriers to trade, travel and communication keep falling, and yet our world has never been more physically divided by the geometries of bricks, barbed wire and steel.

The political and economic ramifications of the walls are oft-discussed and well understood. So, too, is the psychological trauma suffered by those living in the shadow of the walls. In 1973, an East German psychiatrist even coined a term for the disorder: Mauerkrankheit, or Wall Disease.<sup>6</sup>

As an indictment of modern border walls, Di Cintio's article is penetrating and well supported. However, the article's careless use of the term "wall" identifies walls in general with the very specific types of walls present in the modern world. As Di Cintio is writing in a modern context, examining the dehumanizing use of barbed wire, this slip is perfectly understandable. However, if historians of earlier periods make a similar mistake and are unable to detach walls-in-general from their own contemporary context, they can fall into dangerous anachronisms. Prison walls, concentration camp walls, border fences and the Berlin Wall, all these modern walls were indeed designed to sever communities, imprison individuals and control the passage of people. But that these are the only purposes walls were ever turned to, and that these are inherent capacities of any wall is simply an inaccurate statement, as we will see later on.

With this in mind, many historians view Byzantine walls in the context of a great historical tragedy: the decline of the Roman *polis*. Whether walls are seen as culprits or symptoms of the process, the fortification of cities was certainly an integral part of cities' transition from population centers to fortified refuges.

Historians have generally concluded that Byzantine cities lost the political autonomy of their Roman ancestors. Indeed, while Roman cities were self-governing, commercially

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<sup>6</sup> Marcello di Cintia, "The Walls that Hurt Us," *New York Times*, January 23, 2014.

vibrant population centers, it is demonstrable that the crises of Late Antiquity reduced many Byzantine cities to mere fortified refuges. As John Haldon writes in “The Idea of the Town in the Byzantine Empire,” the Roman *polis* was defined by “ideological, juridical and institutional attributes.”<sup>7</sup> Specifically, Roman cities had “a body of councilors drawn from a local landowning elite, a set of rights enshrined in the term *dikaion poleos*, publicly-funded buildings and services supported by locally-raised taxes and subscriptions or donatives, including water-supply and baths, theaters, market-places and temples, for example; not to mention autonomy of administration, and so on.”<sup>8</sup>

Over the course of Late Antiquity and the Byzantine period, however, this urban organism was battered and ultimately ruined by the pressures of taxation, political instability and above all endemic warfare. Many new cities not only acquired walls, but also shrank as the desperate government sought to defend a smaller perimeter or occupy only the most defensible ground. Many cities were reduced to tiny hilltop fortresses, retaining space only for military and ecclesiastical administration.

Even when walls didn’t constrict urban space, they drained away wealth that had once been spent to maintain classical urban infrastructure. Wolfgang Liebeschuetz argued in “The End of the Ancient City” that the great expense and reduction of the urban perimeter necessitated by wall construction choked the life out of the classical cities, leaving them bankrupt, poorly populated and consequently heavily dependent upon the government.<sup>9</sup> For Liebeschuetz, walls were a “mark of the changed and more utilitarian role of cities in Late

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<sup>7</sup> John Haldon, “The Idea of the Town in the Byzantine Empire,” in *The Idea and Ideal of the Town between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. G.P. Brogiolo and Bryan Ward-Perkins (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Haldon, “Idea of the Town,” 3.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Liebeschuetz, “The End of the Ancient City” in *The City in Late Antiquity*, ed. John Rich (London and New York: Routledge 1992)

Antiquity.”<sup>10</sup> The great classical public buildings that had expressed a high ideal of civilization and political development had been replaced by a fundamentally functional structure.

While Byzantines might continue to use the word *polis* to evoke this past, or to refer to surviving elements of it, a new word gradually began to appear in reference to the city’s role as a fortress: *kastron*. For Haldon, “The term *kastron*, in contrast, represented day-to-day values and realities. Its use says something of what people associated with it: a fortified refuge, a place of security.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, even those cities that retained a substantial population and commercial importance, such as Thessaloniki and Nicaea were often defined as *kastrons* because security had become the central attribute of a settlement. Only Constantinople might deserve consideration as a true *polis*.

While historians might debate exactly how this process occurred, its regional distribution or its rate, placing the moment of transition in one century rather than another, few would deny the basic distinction between politically active *polis* and politically passive *kastron*. If any Byzantine city retains political vitality, it is understood to stem from its retention of public buildings, local self-government by landlords and civic identification, not from its walls. Security is understood to be a task in which the city engages only as a passive recipient, not as an active participant.

However, this argument relies on a narrow definition of political power, understood only in terms of formal self-government administered in judicial, financial and cultural matters by the local aristocracy. Walls provided a very different kind of power: the power to regulate and control movement. Recently, a number of cultural historians have made the bold

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<sup>10</sup> Liebeschuetz, “The End of the Ancient City,” 7.

<sup>11</sup> Haldon, “Idea of the Town,” 18.

and necessary step of considering walls as membranes that separate spaces and regulate passage between them. While these scholars are rarely Byzantinists, many of their studies are highly relevant to Byzantine history. For example, Hendrick Dey's "The Aurelian Wall and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome" examined the late-antique walls of Rome not only as a fortifications, but as a source of legal divisions, economic regulation and divisions of sacred and non-sacred space.<sup>12</sup> In "Knowledge, Constraint and Power in Inaction: The Defenseless Medieval Wall," the contemporary medieval historian Ross Samson goes as far as to say that by separating spaces, fortifications convey power to those who control them.

Walls separate space into the inside and outside, each rife with symbolic meaning, defining areas of authority or symbolizing possession. Walls constrain movement, and through the physical obstacle created, walls remove ambiguity from passage; they impart knowledge of "illegal" entry or exit. Such knowledge is power, but more power is conferred by the ability to control movement, whether of political foes or merchants wishing to trade.<sup>13</sup>

However, far from disputing the established argument that walls harmed urban autonomy, cultural historians actually take it a step further arguing that the power of walls to regulate passage was one wielded only by rulers and elites, and that walls were instruments of state domination used to regulate, monitor and control urban people.

For example, for Ross Samson, the ability of walls to regulate and control the passage of movement exclusively benefits rulers and elite at the expense of the common masses: "rulers, lords and masters" gained power at the expense of slaves, peasants and civilians.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hendrik W. Dey, *The Aurelian Wall and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome, A.D. 271-855*, (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011)

<sup>13</sup> Ross Samson, "Knowledge, Constraint and Power in Inaction: The Defenseless Medieval Wall," *Historical Archaeology*, Vol. 26, No. 3, (1992) 26-44, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Samson, "The Defenseless Medieval Wall," 34.

These elites occasionally turn their walls upon each other or lose control of their walls, but in general, elites use barriers to control the body of the people.

Indeed, for Samson, common civilians gain power only through breaking and violating walls. Samson backs this up with examples from throughout European history, discussing how peasant revolts in France begin with “the almost symbolic destruction of manorial gatehouses.”<sup>15</sup> Nuns rebel against an abbess by escaping over the convent wall or tossing the abbess off that wall.<sup>16</sup> The handful of “extreme” cases in which walls were subverted only confirms the general rule: namely, that “most of the time barriers were erected and used in the manner originally foreseen with the appropriate forms of powers and sources of authority.”<sup>17</sup>

Samson’s diagnosis might be correct when applied to the cases he chooses to examine, but if we examine Byzantine history, we suddenly find a great number of examples in which it was Byzantine communities who controlled their city walls, regulated the movement of armies and even dictated the passage of rulers. Byzantine sources are rife with examples of Byzantine towns using this power for their own purposes independently of imperial authority.

That is, Byzantine evidence shows that defending a *kastron* was actually a politically charged task in which complex, grave choices had to be made by whoever manned the walls. In the Byzantine world, as the city became increasingly integrated into the military environment, local inhabitants became participants in military affairs as defenders of their walls. Whether as civilians, militias, local thematic units or simply garrisons that had become

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<sup>15</sup> Samson, “The Defenseless Medieval Wall,” 37.

<sup>16</sup> Samson, “The Defenseless Medieval Wall,” 37.

<sup>17</sup> Samson, “The Defenseless Medieval Wall,” 32.



a little too cozy with their hosts, local populations very much possessed a will of their own independent of the imperial state. While the state indeed impressed its will on the fortified settlements through the provision of garrisons, generals and governors, local populations were invariably important participants in military affairs. Especially as time went by, the Byzantine state simply did not possess the financial, manpower or administrative resources to maintain an imperial garrison in every city of the empire, and to shift those garrisons often enough to prevent their intermingling with the local population. Indeed, the state often relied upon locals to defend their own walls partially or entirely on their own, holding their fortresses against invaders at least until the central military could relieve them.

Imperial propaganda did not acknowledge this self-reliance and conserved the Roman ideal of an emperor who entirely insulates his people from warfare without their participation. The imperial narrative presented walls as protective gifts that were one way the emperor fulfilled this responsibility. Nevertheless, while the emperor indeed built and sometimes even paid for fortifications, walls required human bravery and judgment to be effective, and while the emperor attempted to provide this factor with garrisons and commanders, in many cases, local populations had to supply this deficit themselves. War forced cities to make choices at and with walls, despite the emperor's firm assurance he would bear the entire burden of military and political decision-making himself.

While imperial ideology indeed demanded the emperor receive absolute loyalty in exchange for the provision of absolute security, the involvement of local populations in warfare as defenders of their fortifications made imperial oversight of urban security partial and limited. Whoever controlled the walls of a city held the power to surrender to a foreign attacker: to abandon the attempt to repel hostile ingress in favor of a negotiated entrance upon specific terms that might preserve local lives and livelihoods. Where urban

communities possessed such agency, the provision of security promised by the state became to some degree contractual—a community’s loyalty conditional upon imperial capacity to bolster urban defenses and ultimately relieve a settlement with the full might of the government.

This relationship held a great deal of tension because the state was often unreliable and distracted. In many cases, the prospect of relief was little more than a hope, and cities truly had to defend themselves with their own resources.

In fact, the state was not only occasionally unreliable, but also often divided against itself in brutal civil wars for the throne. Under such circumstances, the contractual relationship between emperor and urban defenders acquired an additional layer of ambiguity. Indeed, when both the besieger and potential reliever claimed to hold sovereign autocratic authority, cities were placed in a deadly zero-sum game in which their choices could mean radically different things depending on which contender was ultimately victorious.

In the mercurial, treacherous game of Byzantine politics, when the imperial state was neglectful, hostile or divided against itself, communities used their walls as they saw fit to protect their own vital interests. Whether faced with foreign invasion, civil war, tyrannical ambition or some unholy combination of all three, Byzantine towns lived or died by the choices they made with their walls. However inferior a position towns were confined to by the power of the imperial state’s ideological and administrative resources, walls gave them a lone bargaining chip, a stage upon which they could negotiate with, subvert or even defy the power of emperors.

During civil warfare, it was emperors and rulers who sought passage into cities and cities who chose whether to allow or deny them passage and what reception to give them. When Ross Samson writes that walls made passage “unambiguous,” criminalizing “illegal,”

unregulated entry, he has in mind landowners shaming poachers or guilds regulating commerce. But when an emperor demanded recognition of his legitimacy at the city gates, it was the people on the walls who held the power to recognize him or not. In ceremonial and military engagements alike, at walls, emperors and state representatives played the role of the passer-through and the town community the role of the passage-regulator. However mighty the emperor, the community had the power to choose the reception to give him.

The willingness of cities to discard their power to restrict the imperial authority was directly proportionate to an emperor's ability to live up to his own stated ideal of protective guardianship. When an emperor demonstrated his power and ability to defend his citizens, cities acquiesced and celebrated imperial power over walls. But when an emperor failed to demonstrate his capacity to defend the city, or worse, actually threatened urban security, cities used their walls to defy and subvert his authority, bestowing their loyalty on a more palatable competitor. The emperor could indeed simply overcome this power by overcoming the wall, but in doing so he risked transforming himself into a wall-violating threat to society and impoverishing his ideological legitimacy. In practice, engagements at city walls were not clear-cut, rather, they were ambiguous performances in which force, rhetoric and legitimacy were promiscuously intermingled.

I find civilian participation at city walls in the Byzantine Empire fascinating precisely because it occurred in direct violation of the imperial state's loudly proclaimed and feverishly enforced monopoly upon military-political activity. Regardless of what emperors built walls to accomplish, towns were perfectly capable of using walls for their own purposes when the situation became desperate.

My general goal is to assert the presence of Byzantine communities upon the historical stage as military-political agents, and to locate the site of their activity in the spatial

context of the interactions, engagements and conflicts that took place before Byzantine city walls. While these interactions and the local agency they reflected are staples of Byzantine literary evidence, historians have largely neglected them. I believe my focus upon the narrow ground of the specific interactions excuses the broad chronological and topographical scope of this thesis. I believe that this specific set of evidence demonstrates that in the civil conflicts that fractured the empire, a wall was an asset to rather than a burden upon a Byzantine city, an instrument citizens wielded to protect their own interests.

My story is not a happy one: I do not aim to prove that Byzantine communities were serenely secure, or to fish for some lost period of virtuous democratic communal identity. Byzantine citizens lived in a dangerous world that often threw them upon their own resources. The imperial state was seen as awesomely powerful but not necessarily reliable: Byzantine citizens hoped that mighty soldier-emperors would smite the barbarians and keep their lands and homes safe, but they suffered under an often burdensome imperial yoke and often felt the worst ravages of foreign invasion ill-prevented by the state. During periods of civil war, communities watched the great imperial edifice turn viciously against itself and picked sides as best they could. I am often dealing with desperate, frightened people making hard choices with everything at stake. But it is important to remember that they *did* make choices, and that walls were the platforms that allowed them to do so. While the wealth and freedoms of the classical *polis* may have vanished under the pressures of war and monarchy, living, breathing people continued to inhabit the fallen world of the Byzantine Empire, exercising an anxious freedom upon the battlements of their *kastrons*.

## **2. Outline**

### *Statement of Thesis*

My thesis makes the claim that Byzantine city walls were instruments of collective urban political decisions that provided Byzantine communities a stage upon which to negotiate their relationship with the imperial state.

### *Chapter Summaries*

My first chapter will lay out the role of city walls as envisioned by imperial propaganda and critically analyze in what ways the imperial state attempted to realize this vision. Emperors claimed absolute power over imperial security, asserting that they held the power to realize this vision. They presented walls as part of this responsibility: as barriers insulating communities from warfare.

My second chapter will qualify and challenge this picture by demonstrating that in practice, while walls were effective barriers, they had to be manned and managed. Byzantine military strategy relied upon most communities to defend themselves behind their walls with minimal state assistance in the form of support, evacuation and direction while the state attempted to compel the departure of the enemy. The urban community was brought into contact with the battlefield not as a passive victim but as a participant.

My third chapter will assert that communal participation and even management of urban defense granted communities substantial military agency, transforming the relationship between subject and state from an exchange of total loyalty for total security into a contractual arrangement dependent upon both the decision to hold out on the part of towns and the decision to relieve on the part of the emperor. Thus, while emperors remained in

overall control of imperial defense, their relationship with towns depended upon trust, loyalty and communication, rather than simple passive obedience.

My fourth chapter will severely complicate the relationship between towns and emperors by examining how this relationship was affected by the politics of civil war and usurpation. While during a foreign invasion, a city had to weigh the risks of surrendering to the besiegers against the ability and willingness of the emperor to relieve them if they resisted siege, during civil wars, in which an emperors besieged and relieved cities alike, legitimacy was thrown up in the air, to be reclaimed by whoever could best act the part. While urban defense against invaders was politically charged, during civil war the character of every engagement at a wall became incredibly ambiguous, determined by the interaction between the performance of the imperial claimant and the reception given him by the inhabitants manning the walls.

### ***Conclusion***

In these interactions, Byzantine cities did not seek to use their power over walls to deny the imperial narrative of the benevolent wall-protecting king or repudiate imperial authority, but rather that they sought to renew their ordinary contractual relationship with an imperial protector, and used their power when an emperor proved himself incapable of living up to his ideal of guardianship and relinquished their power when he proved that he could. Thus, engagements between cities and the representatives of the state at city walls were not about resistance to an imperial narrative or the assertion of a contradictory narrative of urban freedom, but rather, were tests of an emperor's ability to perform, persuade and prove to the audience on the battlements his fidelity to imperial ideals.

While force was one element of this process, it was often difficult for an emperor to assert his ideal by force, because to violate a city wall contradicted any claim of the besieger to be a wall-defender and indeed painted the violator a heathen, tyrannical enemy of society. An emperor could indeed seize actual power through siege warfare, but he risked the loss of the ideological power that was so fundamental to the game of Byzantine monarchical legitimacy. All of these elements were in play before Byzantine walls, and my goal is to demonstrate that the politics of the gate constituted a special theater for the exercise of Byzantine statecraft by rulers and/or subjects, just as did the palace, the hippodrome, the military camp or the church.

### **3. Literature Review and Methodology**

My thesis will demonstrate that city walls were a crucial arena for internal political conflict in the empire, and indeed that the partitioning of society into a series of defensible walled nuclei informed the basic structure of Byzantine politics.

I did not set out looking to write a paper about walls as political tools of urban interests. I was originally far more interested in the religious aspects of walls, and later the relationship between walls and emperors. However, as I trawled through primary sources for references to walls, certain patterns became difficult to ignore. References to people, sometimes “soldiers” and “garrisons” but quite frequently “civilians,” “inhabitants,” “citizens” and “townsfolk” making choices with walls were intriguing. While many of these choices would seem to be so basic that they require little explanation (i.e. if a city runs out of food it will have to surrender), I was increasingly struck by the immense complexity of these interactions and of the diverse elements at play.

Moreover, when I turned to scholarly works on Byzantine cities or fortifications, I was surprised by the lack of discussion of such interactions. Indeed, a good number of works directly covering the relationship between warfare, cities and fortifications, while they might reference the consequences of some siege upon the city, failed to analyze the course of such interactions in any detail. Such analysis might be found in a discussion of the social and economic functions of walls (market days, the exile of heretics) but rarely for military or political actions. My thesis aims to rectify this gap by corralling the rich body of these events together and analyzing the basic dynamics and concerns at play.

My argument is based above all upon primary sources. Analysis of narrative sources such as chronicles and histories reveal that political activity often took place at city walls.



Specifically, such sources relate a number of standoffs not only between invader and defenders but internal parties.

My primary sources include a number of chronicles and histories from across Byzantine history such as Michael Psellus's *Chronographia*, Theophylact Simocatta's *History*, John of Nikiu's *Chronicle*, Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* and Nicetas Choniates's *Annals*. I have also examined a number of Byzantine military manuals relevant to siegecraft and city defense, including a sixth century treatise on strategy, a ninth century treatise on skirmishing, the famous sixth century *Strategikon* of Emperor Maurice and an anonymous tenth century manual on urban defense. I have also examined several works of the prolific scholar-emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, particularly his *On Imperial Administration*.

A criticism that might be leveled against my use of these sources is that they are geographically and chronologically disparate: I make use of sources from every corner of the empire and from the earliest to the latest periods. This is defensible because my purpose is not so much to examine whether a given siege or triumph actually occurred, but to reveal and examine the relatively stable cultural judgment of the wall as a particular species of political arena in which a specific set of interactions occurred. Sources demonstrate that Byzantine authors had a standard view of how the theater of the gate worked, who the players were and what was at stake. While elements certainly evolved over time (a development I have tried to capture) certain elements recur often in these written sources throughout the centuries:

1. *Repeated descriptions of standoffs involving two Byzantine parties at city walls.* I have accounts of rival claimants jockeying for power, small towns rejecting imperial officials, breakaway cities rejecting imperial authority, emperors offering to relieve non-imperial cities in exchange for submission, towns battling each other and garrisons resisting commanders all taking place at city walls. At the very least, such

- sources prove that internal conflict frequently took place at city walls.
2. *The decisive agency of the local population in many interactions taking place at walls.* Narrative sources and military manuals alike, while occasionally formally arguing in favor of military control of walls, provide numerous examples in which the interests and actions of the civilian population were the determinant of whether a siege would continue, a claimant would be allowed entrance, etc.
  3. *The fluidity between military and non-military activity at the walls.* For example, historians have traditionally placed triumphal entrances and sieges into different categories of historical discipline: political/ideological and military history, respectively. In these sources, however, the two events are often not so far apart. Sources provide the example of both an emperor who besieged Constantinople but rejected the chance to break inside by force in the hope of a legitimate, semi-triumphal entrance and of an emperor who chose to chance a forceful entrance and suffered a degree of public disgrace as a consequence. Sources show that the forceful rejection and the honorable acceptance of a ruler's request for ingress were two sides of the same coin, a choice that a walltop commander could make, not two totally distinct phenomena. Triumphal ceremonies featured many elements of actual military surrenders including a ritual declaration of submission by representatives of the city to the ruler.
  4. *The performative aspect of all interactions taking place at walls.* On the crudest level, sources describe confrontations at walls as invitations for jeering and mockery between sides. Sieges often took the form of testosterone-fueled tests of will centering upon risky gestures of contempt or bravery. On a more refined level, sources describe confrontations at walls as stages for rhetoric and argument in the

best classical traditions: we have records of a wide variety of speeches including detailed requests for surrender, elaborate paeans of welcome and at least one principled speech by a messenger, who although offered bribes and threatened with death by the besiegers nevertheless informs a besieged city that imperial relief is on the way, an act which is depicted as a true display of ancient civic virtue. While it might be debated whether these specific events took place or speeches were made, this evidence reveals that Byzantines saw walls as places for both verbal and physical confrontation or welcome.

I believe that I can trust many of my sources because my questions strike very close to the basic interests of Byzantine authors. Most chronicles and histories are enormously interested in how one achieves success in interactions at walls, or at the very least in loudly proclaiming how their favored protagonists achieved their victories in them. This deep concern with the fundamental dynamic of the politics of the gate makes Byzantine descriptions likely to be relatively reliable sources, at the very least for the formation of a basic understanding of what the players and the goals were as a rule. Above all, what is most convincing about these examples is their consistency. The theater of the gate is almost a literary trope in Byzantine literature. When nothing unexpected occurs in such an interaction a narrative will simply state that city X opened or closed its gates to army/ruler Y as shorthand for describing the whole interaction. Often, the only time we receive detailed descriptions of interactions at the wall is when something extraordinary happens: some act of divine intervention, exceptionally heroic deed or particularly reprehensible example of foul play.

The other main reason why it is acceptable to use such a wide range of sources is that

siege warfare did not change a great deal in the Byzantine Empire, and a static literature might reasonably be expected for a static art. Archaeology shows some interesting developments in siege defense and we know of certain famous innovations in offense, such as Greek fire, but for the most part the preponderant bulk of archaeological evidence shows that siege warfare changed little. Walls were effective barriers that while they could be overcome, certainly gave a great advantage to defenders and put even relatively inferior defenders on at least a level playing field with a strong force of besiegers. Starvation and trickery were the preferred ways to achieve surrender and although siege warfare proper appears in major campaigns it was an expensive, dangerous and time-consuming business. This basic dynamic changed very little from the reign of Constantine until Ottoman cannons breached the walls of Constantinople.

While I have already outlined the basic progression of historiography relevant to my topic in my introduction, several specific works informed and influenced the direction of my research, arguments and conclusions.

Although it does not cover Byzantine history, Paul Bentley Kern's "Ancient Siege Warfare" offers an extremely productive methodology for how a historian might study the relationship between warfare, walls, communities and rulers. Kern examines Middle Eastern and Mediterranean siege warfare in a chronological fashion, concentrating on well-documented or developmentally important periods. What makes Kern's text unique is his pairing of the technical, military-historical analysis of siege warfare with the social, cultural and even psychological effects of it. For example, the first section of Kern's chapter on early Greek siege warfare examines the composition of polis walls, the relative incapacity of Greek citizen-soldiers to surmount them and provides a chronological narrative of siege warfare in the Persian Wars. His second section, however, examines the treatment of captured cities in

social and economic terms, the cultural constructs of domesticity and gender enforced by the wall and examines literature such as the *Illiad* or the play *The Trojan Women* to document contemporary views on these subjects. Overall, Kern's synthesis of military and cultural history analyzes in depth the connections between different aspects of walls, forming a coherent total picture.

Hendrick Dey's "The Aurelian and the Refashioning of Imperial Rome, AD 271-855," is a perfect example of how postmodern cultural historians are enriching the study of fortifications. Dey focuses upon a single fortification in particular: the Aurelian Wall of Rome, concluding that it has been neglected as a cultural, religious, economic, social and political as well as military structure. While the specific focus of my own analysis, the military-political interactions between rulers and communities at city walls, is not one of Dey's primary issues, his book does provide a much-needed perspective on how city walls can affect and direct human affairs. In a similar vein, "The Practice, Perception and Experience of Byzantine Fortifications," by Nikolas Bakirtzis provides a synthetic analysis of all aspects of a single fortification, the walls of Byzantine Thessaloniki. While I only discovered Bakirtzis's article recently, it provides another example of how cultural-minded synthetic history of all aspects of a single wall can be intensely productive.

Leonora Neville's *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society, 950-1100* provided me with a crucial piece of my puzzle by exploring how the political activity of communities operated under the imperial radar, and how communities avoided strict power structures in favor of broad, anonymous collective consensuses. Neville also excellently summarizes the totalizing, zero-sum nature of imperial authority. However, Neville (surprisingly for me), fails to explore the way these dynamics would relate to the experience of siege warfare. For me, seeing how her ideas of communal power relations applied to the evidence on urban

defense was a natural next step.

#### 4. Chapter I: The Imperial Assertion upon the Wall: The Emperor as Creator and Guardian of Walled Space

Imperial ideals of fortification patronage and military activity cast the emperor and his government in the role of a benevolent protector of cities, the custodian of sacred urban space. Byzantine emperors argued that walls were inherently imperial structures and walling a monarchical responsibility, part of the emperor's general role as ultimate protector of society.

The emperor presented a very particular vision of this relationship: society is comprehended as a walled city surrounded on all sides by hostile, monstrous, barbarian forces. The emperor is understood to be the one true protector. Walls are his creations and under his authority. The imperial relationship to the protective power of walls was publically displayed and enhanced by triumphal imperial entrances.

Patronage of city walls (as well as other fortifications) was a fundamental element of the Byzantine ideal of rulership.<sup>18</sup> Byzantine literature placed responsibility for protecting civilization in the hands of one individual human being: the holy emperor of the Romans. Monarchist political theorists held that all authority had been delegated to the emperor by God, and that the legitimacy of all states, officials and armies emanated down from the imperial person and were thus subordinate to him as he was in turn subordinate to Christ. As the deacon Agapetus reminded Justinian, the latter had "been entrusted by God with the empire of the world."<sup>19</sup> The basic nature of this authority was the emperor's responsibility to

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<sup>18</sup> Neville, *Authority*, 125.

<sup>19</sup> Agapetus and Paul the Silentiary, *Three Political Voices from the Age of Justinian: Agapetus, 'Advice to the Emperor'; Dialogue on Political Science; Paul the Silentiary, 'Description of Hagia Sophia'*, trans. Peter N. Bell (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, c2009), 110.

maintain, uphold and protect Christian Roman civilization against enemies internal and external: from the internal with laws and from the external with armies and fortifications.

The scholar-emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus encapsulates the awesome scope of the emperor's responsibility in his account of the ritual prayer for urban protection the emperor made when leaving the capital city of Constantinople.

When the emperor is a sufficient distance from the imperial harbor, so that he can look upon the City, he rises from his couch and stands looking eastwards with his hands raised to heaven; and making the sign of the Cross three times with his hand over the City, he prays to God and says: "Lord Jesus Christ, my God, I place in Your hands this Your city. Defend it from all enemies and misfortunes which approach it, from civil strife, and from the inroads of the heathen. Guard it impregnable and unassailable, for we place our hopes in You. You are the Lord of forgiveness and Father of compassion and God of every supplication, and Yours is the power of mercy and salvation and deliverance from temptation and dangers, now and always and forever more. Amen."<sup>20</sup>

In the absence of the emperor, only Christ could serve as a suitable custodian. With the aid of priests or churchmen, the emperor was believed to hold the power to place a city under divine protection.

More specifically, the divine nature of the emperor's authority made the protection he promised correspondingly unassailable. As the above prayer shows, walls were only the most mundane element: as many Byzantine clerics held, only spiritual fortifications could be truly impregnable, and these the emperor promises. As the deacon Agapetus assured Justinian, "A citadel secured by unbreachable walls looks down on the enemies who besiege it. Your pious empire, walled by acts of charity with prayers for towers, becomes impregnable to the missiles of your foes."<sup>21</sup> As will be demonstrated, the emperor conveniently left the distinction between spiritual and material protection vague: the overall point was that the

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<sup>20</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *On Imperial Ceremony*, 115

<sup>21</sup> Agapetus and Paul, *Three Voices and Dialogue*, 117.



security was to be airtight, cocooning the cities of the empire from violence. Patronage of walls was one element of this responsibility.

In much of Byzantine literature, the Byzantine emperor emerges as a miracle-working saintly figure, although also possessing the martial traits of a warrior-hero. Byzantine apocalyptic narratives, a relatively popular genre, replace the narrative of overthrown imperial tyranny offered by the Biblical Book of Revelations with an epic of imperial heroism against savage barbarian hordes. In the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, in the last days barbarians would break free and ravage the settled lands, devastating farmland and tearing down walls, finally forcing their way into Constantinople itself.<sup>22</sup> However, at this point, the emperor, formerly mired in decadence and ill-council, would suddenly “bestir himself as one rising suddenly awake from a drunken stupor,” take up his sword and smite the barbarians, driving them out of the city and obliterating them utterly.<sup>23</sup>

While apocalyptic stories paint perhaps an overly hysterical, exultant portrait of imperial power, it is important to keep the deep-seated mass appeal the emperor held as a superhero that might ride to the rescue even in the darkest hours.

This political and religious ideal of the emperor as a mighty guardian of cities fundamentally informed and was in turn reinforced by imperial patronage of fortifications. All fortifications were understood to be proof of imperial benevolence and physical embodiments of the imperial state’s commitment to defend its communities.

Political theorists and imperial propagandists offered that the provision of fortifications was an integral part of the responsibility laid upon the emperor to defend his

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<sup>22</sup> E. Sackur, trans., “Revelations of the Pseudo-Methodius,” Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, accessed February 2014, <http://http-server.carleton.ca/~jopp/3850/3-3.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> Sackur, “Revelations of Pseudo-Methodius,”

subjects. In his *The Buildings*, the historian Procopius praises the various defensive works of the Emperor Justinian I by comparing them to the famous pyramids of Egypt. While the pharaohs “expended labor on a useless show,” Justinian, (evidently a far more responsible monarch) “preserved the Empire, walling it about and frustrating the attacks of the barbarians on the Romans.”<sup>24</sup>

Of course, *The Buildings*, which aggrandizes Justinian by attributing to him a number of the fortifications built by his predecessor Anastasius and exaggerates their number and quality, was far more a work of imperial propaganda than a disinterested military engineering treatise. In Procopius’s narrative, Justinian is a giant, a sympathetic and attentive guardian who examines the particular defensive needs of each settlement in his empire and devises novel engineering solutions, all while keeping in mind the value of a given site to the empire as a whole.

The basic power Justinian possess in this narrative is his ability to make space secure or even impregnable through his fortifications. As mentioned, the space he secures is both the space of the individual city or fortress, and the space of the empire as a whole.

Procopius describes how in regard to the fortresses in the mountains between the cities of Daras and Amida, “which had previously been fenced about in most ridiculous fashion, he rebuilt and made safe, transforming them to their present aspect as to both beauty and strength, and making them impregnable, so that actually they are thrown out as a mighty

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<sup>24</sup> Procopius, “Procopius: Buildings,” edited and translated into English by H. B. Dewing, transcribed by Bill Thayer, University of Chicago, accessed February 2014, <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Buildings/home.html>, Book 2 Part 1.

bulwark to shield the land of the Romans.”<sup>25</sup> He likewise “made the defenses of the city [of Constantine] impregnable to the enemy.”<sup>26</sup>

Procopius places equal stress upon the divine aspect of Justinian’s effort adding to the scope and legitimacy of the emperor-as-builder. When the city of Circesium’s walls were in a dilapidated state and its riverward side was left completely open, “then appeared the Emperor Justinian, entrusted by God with this commission, to watch over the whole Roman Empire and, so far as was possible, to remake it.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Procopius records that Justinian occasionally profited from direct divine intervention, such as when one of his builders, grappling with a difficult defensive problem, received a solution in a dream. Thus, according to Procopius, “God becomes a partner with this Emperor in all matters which will benefit the State.”<sup>28</sup>

While propaganda might exaggerate the scope and quality of a given ruler’s contribution, the construction and maintenance of fortifications was certainly a responsibility Byzantine emperors generally sought to fulfill. Historians have demonstrated that while local officials might be responsible for routine maintenance and even occasional repairs, direct imperial patronage lay behind the most impressive walls and most expansive regional schemes that remain for archaeologists to study. According to James Crow, the fortifications of Amorium and Dyrrachium, two key Byzantine cities, were the result of the careful patronage of emperors Zeno and Anastasius respectively.<sup>29</sup> The Theodosian land walls of

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<sup>25</sup> Procopius, “Buildings,” 4.14

<sup>26</sup> Procopius, “Buildings,” 5.2

<sup>27</sup> Procopius, “Buildings,”

<sup>28</sup> Procopius, “Buildings,”

<sup>29</sup> James Crow and Neil Christie, “Fortifications and Urbanism in Late Antiquity: Thessaloniki and Other Eastern Cities”; “War and Order: Urban Remodelling and Defensive Strategy in Late Roman Italy.” *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series* 42, 89-105, 101.

Constantinople were the product of Theodosius II's administration specifically (although the emperor himself was merely a boy at the time.)<sup>30</sup> Emperors had no successful competitors in this arena, and no one attempted to build non-imperial types of fortresses such as private castles and on the whole, the "imperial administration should be credited with maintaining a monopoly upon fortification" and preserving the Justinianic ideal of the wall-building ruler.<sup>31</sup>

While the emperor was held responsible for the defense of the whole empire, he claimed a special relationship with the security of one city in particular: Constantinople. From the reign of Constantine, "Christian Constantinople ... became a second Rome in the eyes of the Christians of the East."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the city's very founding embodied the fusion of Rome, Christianity and imperial monarchy: according to legend, Constantine sketched in the dirt the boundaries where the city walls would be built with his spear point, echoing the ceremonial tracing of the walls that had been performed to dedicate Roman cities since Romulus consecrated the future walls of Rome. However, according to legend, at least, Constantine did not sanctify the boundary to pagan deities, but rather was directed by angels or God.<sup>33</sup> Regardless of Constantine's true motives and the probable pagan elements to the dedication of this supposedly Christian city, in later times the immaculate founding of Constantinople by the first Christian Emperor was the great foundation legend of Byzantine culture, cementing the connection between God, ruler, walls and civic safety.

It is fitting that the story of Constantinople, the heart of the Christian Roman Empire begins at the walls. The inviolability of Constantinople, secured by the emperor's contract

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<sup>30</sup> A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, 324-1453 Volume 1*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952), 103.

<sup>31</sup> Neville, *Authority*, 44, 125.

<sup>32</sup> Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, Volume I*, 54.

<sup>33</sup> Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, Volume I*, 54.

with God, Christ and the Virgin Mary as well as the city walls, was one of the most distinctive traits of Constantinople's spiritual and social identity.



**Figure 3.** Emperor Constantine's donation of the city of Constantinople to the Virgin Mary (from the Hagia Sophia). Note the enormous visual prominence assigned to stylized city walls.

<http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-bzJfn>

Byzantine emperors translated their ideological responsibility over walling into an administrative and legal monopoly over fortification patronage. The Justinian Codex preserved the idea of walls as religious structures falling entirely under the authority of the emperor, and shows how ideology was coded into law. According to the *Digest*, the collection of ancient Roman laws considered to retain legal validity, city walls and gates are “sanctified” and “sacred” structures, and since “a public place only becomes a sacred one when the emperor has dedicated it or granted the power of dedicating it” the religious quality of walls is placed firmly under imperial control.<sup>34</sup> More explicitly, the *Digest* states, “It is

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<sup>34</sup> “Digest of Justinian, Vol. 1,” revised by Alan Watson, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), accessed February 2014,

unlawful to rebuilt the walls of municipalities without authorization of the emperor or the governor.”<sup>35</sup>

The Byzantine ideal of imperial fortifications was founded upon ancient traditions of wall-building sacred kingship, and upon a distinction between positive walled space and negative unwallled space fundamental to walled city civilizations throughout history.

The relationship between emperors and walls was publically entrenched by triumphal ceremonies of imperial entrance. The reception of an important imperial dignitary at the city gate was a political ritual with a pedigree stretching back to the Roman Republic. In ancient Rome, citizens were forbidden to enter the city walls in their capacity as soldiers unless the city was actively besieged. The splendid exception to this sacred rule was the triumph: a grand ceremonial entrance by a general at the head of his troops granted by the senate only in the case of extraordinary military victories. When Julius Caesar and his descendants violated this barrier, they nevertheless retained the usefully spectacular ritual of the triumph. The triumph soon became more and more a propaganda tool of the reigning ruler, who increasingly reserved it for the wearers of the purple, rarely granting it to generals. The most politically charged element of the triumph, the declaration of welcome by the representatives of the Senate and the commoners at the city gate, degraded first from a ritual welcome to a ritual submission and by the Byzantine era was little more than a weightless formal rubberstamp.

In the Byzantine era, triumphs remained an important political ritual, and were traditionally celebrated whenever the emperor returned to Constantinople from a successful

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<http://zv6dg7y18g.search.serialssolutions.com/?V=1.0&L=ZV6DG7YL8G&S=JCs&C=TC0000645503&T=marc&tab=BOOKS>, 26.

<sup>35</sup> “Digest of Justinian,” 26.

campaign. Indeed, virtually every entrance by a reigning emperor was a ceremony, the pomp corresponding to the duration and success of his absence.

The imperial state founded its monopoly over fortifications upon the promise that the emperor could provide absolutely undivided and absolutely effective security. The problem was, while omnipotent and unitary in theory, the imperial state was often ineffective and divided in fact. Imperial propaganda confronted the reality of military dangers to society by positing the emperor as a wall-building rescuer. However, while the emperor did oversee patronage of walls, he left cities to defend their walls themselves.

## 5. Chapter II: The Limits of Imperial Power and Civilian Defense of Walls

The great paradox of Byzantine city walls is that while they were undeniably the product of the state's patronage, they were generally in practice manned by their own citizens. While imperial propaganda founded the state monopoly over fortifications upon the emperor's sacred responsibility to insulate his people from warfare, the very idea that the emperor was maintaining a strict separation between soldierly and civilian space was a legal fiction, a relic of the day when Roman strategy restricted invaders to the distant frontiers. The increasing reliance upon defense-in-depth strategies, founded upon city walls rather than border defenses, brought cities violently into the military environment, and threw them upon their own devices during enemy invasions. During actual warfare, the survival of cities depended not only upon the state's fortifications, but upon the local population that manned them.

In modern warfare, cities are extremely vulnerable to military violence. Tactically, the "urban environment" favors the defensive, as the Battle of Stalingrad demonstrated, and can be difficult to occupy, but no particular barrier prevents warfare from spilling into urban space. Moreover, no amount of preparation can prevent the total annihilation of even the largest city by modern airborne ballistics. In military terms, the modern city is a passive stage for warfare relatively undistinguished from the surrounding terrain. In the modern world, civilian population centers present no resistance to the movement of armies. Even the most impressive modern fortifications, such as the Israeli border walls, are designed to repel infiltration, immigration and guerilla activity and would be incapable of withstanding for a minute the pulverizing assault of the artillery, tanks and aircraft of a modern mechanized



army. In this context, modern societies are extremely reliant upon the protection provided by standing armies to provide security.

Similarly, in the ancient Roman world, the citizens of the empire's vast hinterland relied entirely upon the imperial military to provide security at the borders. In the early empire, military resources were almost entirely concentrated upon the empire's most defensible frontiers, such as the Rhine and Danube rivers.<sup>36</sup> No penetration of imperial territory was to be allowed: enemies were to be repelled at the borders. Border fortresses and the odd frontier city were stoutly walled, but no effort was made to fortify provincial cities, and any walls they possessed were either relics of pre-imperial times or symbols of civic pride.<sup>37</sup> However, over the course of the Roman Empire's history, Roman defensive arrangements became less and less consistent with the state's promise to insulate its citizens from warfare. Specifically, the exposure of fortified cities to warfare became more and more common over time as more and more enemy penetration of imperial territory was accepted.

In the Late Roman Empire, the somewhat increased exposure of cities to warfare resulted in the construction of fortifications and some involvement of civilians in military affairs. Over the course of the third and fourth centuries, in response both to the inflexibility of this arrangement and the politically vulnerable position it left central rulers, emperors, while maintaining substantial bodies of border troops (*limitanae*) on the frontiers, created new field armies to accompany the emperor and his immediate subordinates, allowing them to respond reactively to threats without withdrawing armies from some other portion of the border.<sup>38</sup> In practice, this arrangement allowed or at least accepted that the enemy would

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<sup>36</sup> Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe, AD 350-425* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 199.

<sup>37</sup> Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe*, 168.

<sup>38</sup> Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe*, 200.

penetrate the frontier, invading at least the immediate frontier provinces. To this end, the imperial state took steps to fortify cities throughout the empire in the fourth and fifth centuries, although many in the central provinces were left unwalled.<sup>39</sup> Fortified refuges were built for rural civilians to retreat to, although these were simple constructions better suited to defending against bandits than soldiers.<sup>40</sup> Overall however, civilians assumed and the government assured that these walls were largely precautionary measures, and that the imperial field armies would quickly intercept and destroy any invaders even before they reached the city gates.<sup>41</sup>

While urban exposure to warfare remained low in the third and fourth centuries, whenever and wherever it occurred the willingness of citizens to defend their walls became an important political issue.

In the context of condemning the Emperor Jovian's decision to surrender a string of fortified centers to the Persian king in 363, the fourth century historian Ammianus Marcellinus describes how the citizens of the city of Nisibis had long defended themselves against the Persians. Of course, in this early era of relatively "hard" defense, only a frontier city such as Nisibis would come into contact with enemies. Nevertheless, Ammianus asserts that where cities came into contact with warfare, citizens defended their walls. According to Ammianus, Nisibis was an "impregnable city" and "the strongest bulwark of the East."<sup>42</sup> He goes so far as to assert that, "It was generally held that the eastern world could have fallen into the hands of Persia but for the resistance of this well-placed and strongly fortified

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<sup>39</sup> Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe*, 168.

<sup>40</sup> Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe*, 172.

<sup>41</sup> Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe* 169.

<sup>42</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus and Walter Hamilton, *The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354-378)*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1986), 306-7.

town.”<sup>43</sup> Ammianus establishes that while Nisibis may or may not have had a garrison, it was its own “inhabitants” who formed the city’s primary and if necessary sole defenders.<sup>44</sup> When the citizens were ordered by the Roman Emperor to evacuate the city so that the Persians might occupy it, the “council and the people” entreat Emperor Jovian

That they should not be compelled to go, declaring that they were strong enough to defend their homes by themselves without support from the state in provisions and men, and that they were sure that justice would come to their help in their fight for their birthplace, as so often in the past.<sup>45</sup>

Ammianus goes on to emphasize the civilian status of Nisibis’s defenders with a moving description of their exodus from the city walls, detailing the laments of women and children. Of course, Ammianus has his own agenda, using the example of Nisibis to highlight the difference between Jovian and his predecessor, Ammianus’s hero, Julian. Ammianus emphasizes that Nisibis had never been surrendered by an emperor without a fight, but glosses over the fact that city had in fact exchanged hands several times over the centuries. But while the impregnability of the city and the martial virtue of its citizens certainly serve the historian’s general purpose, Ammianus is a reliable enough source for us to accept the basics of his narrative. For Ammianus, while the virtue of the citizens is certainly important, it is the great walls of the city that allow such civilians to defeat the large, disciplined armies of the Persians.

However, civilian unwillingness to man their walls could create on an imperial headache just as easily as civilian pugnacity. Fifth century sources record with frustration the unwillingness of Italian citizens to defend against barbarians in favor of the dying,

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<sup>43</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, 306.

<sup>44</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, 306.

<sup>45</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, 308.

burdensome and unreliable Western Roman Empire, even possessing strong fortifications. While they might have been provided with strong walls just like the veteran citizens of Nisibis, the civilians of the Italian heartland were unprepared for and highly demoralized by the appearance of barbarian invaders, and for the most part unwilling to protect themselves without substantial encouragement and support by the state.<sup>46</sup>

In the Byzantine Empire, over the course of its history, cities were fully integrated into the military environment as fortified strong points and civilian refuge centers, resulting in intense civilian participation in warfare. While the Late Roman military system proved incapable of preventing the collapse of the western empire, the surviving Eastern or Byzantine Empire retained the distinction between *limitanae* and field armies and devoted enormous resources to the construction of a fence of fortresses on the empire's most important borders. However, the empire, reduced in size and surrounded by foes, founded its strategy even upon the ability of cities to resist behind their own fortifications rather than frontier defense. Major and minor urban centers alike were provided with increasingly expensive and powerful walls, and expected to survive for longer and longer periods without assistance from the central field armies.<sup>47</sup> The character of relief that cities could expect also changed from the fourth to the sixth century: the empire increasingly aimed not to destroy invaders outright, but to use diplomacy, harassment and scorched earth policies to speed their withdrawal.<sup>48</sup>

The fortification and garrisoning of the city greatly transformed the relationship between urban populations and the emperor. When the emperor's armies had guarded the

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<sup>46</sup> Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe*, 174.

<sup>47</sup> John F. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565- 1204*, (London: UCL Press, 1999), 64.

<sup>48</sup> John F. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 63-4.

frontiers and cities were unfortified in the Roman period, the security promised by the state required virtually no civilian participation.

While the emperor continued to claim a provision of total protection to go with his total power, from the perspective of the inhabitants of a Byzantine city, the security provided by the imperial state had become far more complex and limited. The state had indeed provided fortifications to contain invaders outside of urban space and provide refuge to rural inhabitants. However, these walls had to be manned and managed to provide effective security. While the state attempted to provide this component in the form of military garrisons, in many occasions the state often relied upon local civilians to defend their own cities with little or no assistance.

Byzantine sources present roughly three ways for a besieger to successfully conquer a city: force, starvation and treason. A successful defender must counter against all three of these threats by successfully resisting the efforts of the enemy to breach the wall, by stockpiling enough resources to outlast them and by maintaining the loyalty of all those within the city. While their exact view shifts slightly over time with the fortunes of the empire and the character of cities, Byzantine manuals as a rule pronounce the civilian population as integral to all three elements of siege defense.

*Maurice's Strategikon*, written in the sixth century by or for Emperor Maurice, advocates that the population of cities be “invited” to defend their own walls. While the garrison ought to command the defense, for the *Strategikon's* author, the “civil population” of the city is an important group that plays a determinative role: capable both of bolstering defense or rebelling against the garrison and undermining defense completely. The *Strategikon* advises that while the all-important gates, storehouses and cisterns should be kept monitored by loyal soldiers, civilians should be encouraged to defend their walltop.

If the civil population stays in the city, they too must join with the men distributed along the wall to help the soldiers. This keeps them too busy to plan an uprising, and it also entrusts them with some responsibility for the defense of the city and makes them ashamed to rebel.<sup>49</sup>

In *Maurice's Strategikon*, inviting civilians to defend the walls is as much about ensuring loyalty to prevent treason as it is to prevent the breach of the wall. While the *Strategikon's* author advocates the provision of garrisons to provide the best possible security and political control, the civilian body certainly has military capacity as wall defenders. The *Strategikon's* author makes it clear that any defenders, even civilians, ought to be enough to ensure a city's basic safety requires only the full manning of the city wall, "It is obvious that as long as there are enough men the wall will be secure, but if one point is given up, all the rest will be endangered."<sup>50</sup>

In the judgment of the *Strategikon's* author, the civil population of a city possessed the capacity to defend itself, if not as effectively as a military garrison. Indeed, there are several examples of civilians defending city walls with virtually no state assistance.

In the bleak seventh century, while the government's focus was turned eastward due to devastating Arab conquests of Byzantine territory, many cities in the Balkans were left poorly garrisoned. While many settlements fell to invasion, several well-fortified cities such as Thessaloniki survived due to the efforts of their populations.<sup>51</sup> Even Constantinople itself, the core of Byzantine defensive strategy, several times had to rely on civilians to defend its walls: "in 559, 601, 602, and 610, citizen corporations including the Blue and Green racing fans were mobilized to man the walls—and in 559 even the senators, or at least their retinues,

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<sup>49</sup> Maurice, *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*, trans. George T. Dennis, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 109.

<sup>50</sup> Maurice, *Maurice's Strategikon*, 110.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600-1025*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, c1996), 267.

were summoned.”<sup>52</sup> Purely local defense of walls never went away throughout imperial history: in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was not unheard of for fortified centers to be defended by civilians alone.<sup>53</sup>

However, manifestations of self-defense were not necessarily as extreme or obvious as senators and sports fans taking to the battlements. In many cases, cities were indeed garrisoned, but by soldiers with local loyalties, either raised from the local urban or rural population or simply having been emplaced in the same location long enough to “go native” and merge with the locals. The parallel tendencies of troops to put down roots where they were garrisoned unless frequently moved and the convenience to the state of devolving defensive responsibilities on the men locally available made such a union an increasing reality over the sixth and seventh centuries. Indeed, by the course of the sixth century, the *limitanae* dissolved into the outer regions of the empire, becoming little more than local militia.

An anecdote provided by the seventh-century historian Theophylact Simocatta shows just how closely a garrison could identify with the civilian population of a city at the expense of the overall military. Simocatta describes how the citizens of Asemus, a town in the Balkans, refused to surrender their well-disciplined garrison to a passing general who demanded that they join his army.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, according to Simocatta the soldiers of Ansemus’s garrison openly defied the generals by barricading themselves in the city’s church. When the general attempted to retrieve them by force, the entire town, including the

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<sup>52</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy*, 76.

<sup>53</sup> Mark C. Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army: Arms and Society, 1204-1453*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 292.

<sup>54</sup> Theophylactus Simocatta, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta* [Historiae], intro., notes, Michael and Mary Whitby, (Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, c1986), 183.

local bishop, resisted, ultimately expelling the general from their walls and forcing him to move on his campaign empty-handed.<sup>55</sup>

In the seventh and eighth century, the sharp distinction between civil population and soldierly garrison began to break down entirely. The thematic system localized defense, putting the defense of city walls, urban citadels and fortresses in the hands of locally-raised military units, the cheapest expedient to make defense-in-depth of vast swathes of the empire possible.<sup>56 57</sup> In many provinces, particularly in Eastern Anatolia, the state resorted entirely to a defense-in depth-strategy, most famously breaking the empire into multiple themes, or military districts, each of which was granted a military governor with chief political and military authority for his theme.<sup>58</sup> Until the ninth century revival of Byzantine power, in Anatolia in particular, “isolated Byzantine fortress-settlements [depended] for much of the time on their own resources and initiative for their survival.”<sup>59</sup>

From the seventh century on, the defenders of a town, citadel or fortress can generally be assumed to be locals. In “Regional Identities and Military Power,” John Haldon and Hugh Kennedy go so far as to say that the army “replaces the urban populace of the empire as the voice of the provinces.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Haldon and Kennedy believe that while the evidence is sparse, what evidence exists reveals that the view of local provincial units “cannot have been too different from the provincial population, for they were by this time recruited entirely

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<sup>55</sup> Simocatta, *History*, 183.

<sup>56</sup> John F. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 122.

<sup>57</sup> John F. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 62.

<sup>58</sup> John F. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 62.

<sup>59</sup> John F. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 83.

<sup>60</sup> John Haldon and Hugh Kennedy, “Regional Identities and Military Power,” *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: the West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1100*, Walter Pohl, Clemens Gantner and Richard Payne, ed., (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, c2012), 334.



from the districts in which they were based, and probably well integrated into the provincial populations among whom they lived.”<sup>61</sup>

Even by the sixth century, many military manuals abandoned *Maurice's Strategikon's* sharp distinctions between soldier and civilian. An anonymous sixth century treatise on campaigning uses the terms “soldier” and “citizen” virtually interchangeably when describing the preparations defenders ought to take. For example, this treatise hopes against the “negligence” of the “besieged garrison” but a sentence later addresses a question directly to the community, asking in reference to undermining the wall, “How can the citizens deal with siege operations of this sort?”<sup>62</sup> The text also advises the use of bed coverings of the citizens as emergency defensive mats to place on the walltop.<sup>63</sup> Often, such terms are used interchangeably from sentence to sentence throughout the same document. The early tenth century manual *On Resisting Sieges* casually blurs the distinction between the defending soldiers and the able-bodied male population of a city by defining only women, children and the elderly as true non-combatants.<sup>64</sup> Certainly, the potentially antagonistic duality between military-capable civilians and garrison postulated by *Maurice's Strategikon* is difficult to find in later manuals.

This change in the composition of defenders is deeply associated with a fundamental change in the character of fortified settlement. The integration of cities into the military environment was a ruthless battering that only the strongest fortifications could weather. In

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<sup>61</sup> John Haldon and Hugh Kennedy, “Regional Identities and Military Power,” 336.

<sup>62</sup> Anonymous, “Treatise on Strategy,” *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, George T. Dennis, Dumbarton Oaks Text. Vol. 25, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, Research Library and Collection, 1985), 39.

<sup>63</sup> Anonymous, “Treatise on Strategy,” *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 41.

<sup>64</sup> Denis F. Sullivan, introduction, English translation and annotations, “A Byzantine Instructional Manual on Siege Defense” [De Obsidione Toleranda], in *Byzantine Authors: Literary Activities and Preoccupations*, by Nicolas Oikonomidès and John W. Nesbitt, *The Medieval Mediterranean*, Vol. 49, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003), 153.

some cases, cities shrank or relocated to smaller citadels located on the most defensible available terrain, losing their urban character almost entirely. However, even when the fortified perimeter of a settlement was small, under the thematic system the settlement's actual defenders would likely be locals. The militarization of these locals is best understood as a continuation of the process that forced citizens to defend city walls, rather than its antithesis.

Moreover, despite a degree of contraction, a great many Byzantine cities remained commercial and cultural population centers, such as Nicaea, Thessaloniki and Constantinople. In regard to these cities, and to numerous other less-illustrious survivors, we can reliably assume the presence of craftsmen, local aristocrats, the urban poor and other townsmen. Most Byzantine cities fell along the middle of this spectrum, for example boasting both a town wall to repel raiders or bandits and a more powerfully fortified citadel to guard against military threats, or else shrinking drastically but retaining a population of craftsmen and other townsmen. Moreover, as even small fortifications served as refuges for masses of displaced civilians during warfare, civilian populations tended to be inside whatever walls existed and involved in defense when military decisions had to be made.

From the initial fortification of cities in the fourth century on, Byzantine locals were capable of holding out against siege because they were provided with fortifications strong enough to fend off a wide range of attacks even when defended partly or wholly by relatively untrained people. As the author of a tenth-century treatise on skirmishing helpfully reminds “most of our fortified towns are built in strong, rugged locations” and many of these are so strong that they “have no reason to fear a siege” and can be safely neglected by a skirmishing

commander.<sup>65</sup> As the Byzantine military adopted a strategy hinging upon the survival of relatively unaided fortified centers they sought to maximize the defensive capacity of cities in every way possible, ruthlessly sacrificing the grandeur, spaciousness and luxuries of the classical city in the name of maximizing security. A sixth century anonymous Byzantine treatise on strategy sternly recommends prioritizing defense over a “nice appearance,”

I am not unaware that many people look to the present prosperity and believe in increasing it in every way. When they start planning to found large cities, they give no less weight to nice appearance than to security. They have built a number of such cities on level ground and beautified them with gardens, parks and lawns. But the way I look at it is that the outcome of what is happening these days is uncertain. Security, I think, is more important than a nice appearance. I prefer to have my city located and fortified in such a way as to render useless the machines of any besiegers.<sup>66</sup>

The archaeological evidence confirms the judgment of manual authors that Byzantine urban fortifications were generally strong enough to allow a force of locals to mount credible resistance against the attacks of far superior foes.

Byzantine builders, well versed in Hellenistic defensive techniques, made city walls the sites of major defensive innovation and no two walls were alike. Thessaloniki’s fifth century walls featured large triangular projections equal in height with the curtain wall and with a continuous crenellated parapet, an entirely ‘unique’ innovation.<sup>67</sup> Triangular and pentagonal towers were introduced to allow defenders maximum enfilading (flanking) fire while retaining the defensive advantages of angled construction.<sup>68</sup> While not all circuits were as

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<sup>65</sup> Anonymous, “Byzantine Treatise on Skirmishing,” *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, George T. Dennis, Dumbarton Oaks Text. Vol. 25, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, Research Library and Collection, 1985), 223-5.

<sup>66</sup> Anonymous. “Byzantine Treatise on Strategy,” trans. George T. Dennis, in *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 1-136. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985) 33.

<sup>67</sup> Crow and Christie, “Fortifications and Urbanism,” 97.

<sup>68</sup> Crow and Christie, “Fortifications,” 102.

technically advanced as those that ringed the empire's greatest cities, even the smallest towns were walled. Walls were ubiquitous urban structures.

Many city walls had features that maximized the ability of untrained local militia to combat larger, better-equipped forces. These included a massing of towers to lend defending missile troops more enfilading (flanking) fire against the main wall and a *proteichisma*, a sort of secondary wall created by a ditch and a terrace which hindered bringing a ram against the main wall.<sup>69</sup>

Byzantine military manuals record with contempt the ignorance of many of the empire's foes in the highly technical art of siege warfare. Even in the tenth century, the author of a Byzantine manual of siege defense could still declare that "the leaders of the foreign peoples in our time bear no resemblance to those of old in spirit or inventiveness, nor are they comparable in their forces, but fall short of them."<sup>70</sup> There were certainly exceptions: the sophisticated Persian monarchy possessed the resources and institutional muscle to reduce even the strongest fortifications. Moreover, over the centuries the technical gap between the Byzantines and their opponents shrank as technologies spread and dynamic new foes such as the Normans and Muslims appeared. However, even when an enemy boasted the ability to conduct one, the siege of any competently fortified location remained a grueling, risky undertaking for both sides whose outcome was never a certainty.<sup>71</sup>

Even Byzantine armies, who preserved a wide array of complex ancient siege techniques in theory and relied on a handful of simple ones in practice, preferred the far

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<sup>69</sup> A. W. Lawrence, "A Skeletal History of Byzantine Fortification," *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 78, (1983): 171-227, 130.

<sup>70</sup> Anonymous, "Instructional Manual on Siege Defense," 229.

<sup>71</sup> Dey, *The Aurelian Wall*, 134.

cheaper tactics of trickery and betrayal.<sup>72</sup> Overall, there was no revolution in siege warfare from the Roman into the Byzantine era and the defenders of city walls had a tenable, even advantageous position until the advent of gunpowder.<sup>73</sup>

Byzantine cities made use of every geographical advantage to tilt the balance further in favor of defenders. The sixth century treatise on strategy recommends sites on “high ground with steep slopes,” “with rivers flowing around them” or best of all “sites on a promontory in the sea or in very large rivers connected to the mainland only by a very narrow isthmus.”<sup>74</sup>

The historical record shows that most of the cities that survived the waves of invasions and civil wars did so in part because they were sited in excellent locations to resist siege and circumvent embargo. The imperial capital Constantinople occupied a site that fit the sixth century author’s recommendations to the letter, occupying high ground on a triangular promontory surrounded by water on three sides. Thessaloniki, for many centuries the second city of the empire, stood on a coastal hilltop.

However, the most impenetrable walls in the world would be worthless to a city lacked the provisions to outlast the besiegers. Military manuals unequivocally involve civilians in this element of defense as well. The tenth-century manual *On Resisting Sieges* advises a commander to get the population involved in stockpiling resources. The author writes that if it appears that the city is cut off from resupply,

It is necessary to measure out together with the merchants and the wealthy wheat and barley and every type of legume from among the [items] in the warehouses and to store [them] in granaries and to entrust the distribution of these to the bishop of the city and to some other good citizens, in order that each of the people remaining my

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<sup>72</sup>Dey, *The Aurelian Wall*, 133.

<sup>73</sup> Dey, *The Aurelian Wall*, 134.

<sup>74</sup> Anonymous, “Byzantine Treatise on Strategy,” 33.

control provisions for a month according to an edict to be made public and to make an announcement that those inhabitants who do not have more than thirty days of wheat should register with him.<sup>75</sup>

Significantly, the military commander is advised to work *through* the authority of local leaders, such as prominent citizens, local elites and the bishop. This strongly suggests that should no military commander be available, local authorities would be able to organize defense on their own. The author also advises that the populace at large should be consulted in the evacuation process. The commander or the local authorities ought to

...encourage the populace as to what is necessary in the crisis so that one group may readily choose relocation as a salvation and benefit for both groups, others defense of the fatherland, then to lead out of the city and send to another location the noncombatants, namely old men, the ill, children, women, beggars, and those who contribute nothing to those within on account of their own needs, so those within may be secure and those [leaving] not be harmed themselves.<sup>76</sup>

The manual places heavy emphasis on the voluntary and persuasive character of this process. The tone is strikingly different than *Maurice's Strategikon* in that civilian cooperation need not be carefully monitored and encouraged, but rather can be assumed as long as the commander works with local leaders and explains matters clearly to the population. This document reflects a far more militarized society in which siege warfare is a far more regular occurrence. Most strikingly, the manual advocates the enlistment of an extremely wide range of useful civilians:

But as to those who are otherwise needy, but are able to provide common benefit through their own labors, namely arms manufacturers, engineers, siege machine operators, doctors, bronzesmiths, saddle-makers, bridlemakers, shoemakers, tailors, ropemakers, ladder climbers, oarmakers, builders, sailors, caulkers, architects, ladder climbers, oarmakers, builders, sailors, caulkers, architects, mill stone cutters, astronomers who contribute to discerning the movement of waters and winds, both

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<sup>75</sup> Anonymous, "Instructional Manual on Siege Defense," 153.

<sup>76</sup> Anonymous, "Instructional Manual on Siege Defense," 153-5.

take the more accomplished among them to help you moreover organize and support them.<sup>77</sup>

Civilians are important to defense as producers of military equipment, experts, medics and many other functions.

During the aggressive reign of conquering ninth and tenth century emperors such as Basil II, the “Bulgar Slayer,” thematic units shrank to local militias or disappeared. By the time the aggressive policies petered out in the eleventh century and the empire once again found itself on the defensive, urban security was entrusted to static garrisons and militia primarily recruited from the local urban and rural population, often under the formal or informal leadership of local notables or lords.<sup>78</sup> The main field armies of the empire became increasingly composed of foreign mercenaries, who might serve as city garrisons, but usually only in cities located in the area of major imperial campaigns.

In the thirteenth century, when Constantinople was seized and sacked by Latin Crusaders and Venetians, the empire fractured into regional units centered upon the most important cities, such as Nicaea and Trebizond. By this point, the garrison, aristocrats and local populations of cities were so promiscuously interlinked that contemporaries such as Nicetas Choniates simply combine them, referring to the “Nicaeans” or “Prusaeans” and confidently grouping everyone resident in the city and the immediate agricultural area under this umbrella of shared interest.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the evidence for the defense of fortifications by local civilians becomes profuse. For example, paramilitary locals serving as “guards,

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<sup>77</sup> Anonymous, “Instructional Manual on Siege Defense,” 155.

<sup>78</sup> John Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society*, 104.

watchmen and police” increasingly supplemented regular soldierly garrisons.<sup>79</sup> This service might be professionalized to a degree, but was certainly undertaken by men drawn from the local population.<sup>80</sup> While soldiers might be called in when invasion was expected, or be stationed in the largest cities, these local militias were expected to guard the gates, stand sentry on the walls and even man the defenses during ordinary circumstances.<sup>81</sup> During actual sieges, such as the 1422 siege of Constantinople, full mobilization of civilians was common.<sup>82</sup>

In fact, during the Late Byzantine period, many of the illusions of total imperial power disintegrated to the point that civilian participation in urban defense was actually celebrated as a political ideal. In the early fourteenth century, Thomas Magistros included the following endorsement of defensive citizen-militias in his treatise *On the Relations of Citizens to the State*. Magistros entirely rejects the distinction between civilian and soldierly activity, writing that,

In order that those who practice crafts not be held in high repute for this alone and be [only] half as useful to the State, performing for their citizenship only works of peace, they should also have in their minds a spirit and a readiness for combat. Since it is not in the least necessary for us to divide life into peace and war... I urge each of these to possess arms of every sort. While they eagerly devote their time to and carefully do not neglect their usual works, whenever they enjoy leisure they should practice the use of arms and train for battle. Thus when enemies attack and lay siege, with such preparation they can stoutly oppose and completely withstand [them] ... in addition to the armies the State has, these [militiamen] should also be held in high repute and defend [the State] physically.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army*, 306.

<sup>80</sup> Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army*, 306.

<sup>81</sup> Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army*, 307.

<sup>82</sup> Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army*, 308.

<sup>83</sup> Quote reproduced in Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army*, 308.



For Magistros, it is explicitly for the defense of the empire's cities against siege that these militiamen ought to be employed at. In the late Byzantine period at least, civilian participation in warfare had moved from an embarrassment to an ideal.

While such examples are certainly distant from the rest of Byzantine history, given the lack of information about the everyday task of defense in earlier periods, fourteenth and fifteenth century evidence is at the very least a useful hint that civilian participation might have been a factor earlier as well. Two characteristics of these self-defense forces in particular could be considered applicable to earlier periods: first, that these groups were entirely defensive, tied to fortifications and oriented around the mundane but vital everyday tasks such as gatekeeping and sentry duty required to maintain the integrity of defense even in peacetime.<sup>84</sup> Second, that these wall-defense militias were self-generated rather than instituted from above: products of the "independence and isolation" of Late Byzantine towns. The state had no interest in creating competing military units, and they existed where state authority was weakest and because the state was incapable of providing such services itself.<sup>85</sup>

While the evidence is diverse and sparsely divided over a vast spatial and temporal area, it is possible to infer a general movement from the insulation of cities from warfare to their wholesale integration into the military environment. This integration took many forms, most notably the fortification of cities. As cities were integrated, so were their populations. This integration took a variety of forms, but throughout, the state was forced to rely upon locals to defend their walls, whether in the form of local garrisons, thematic troops, civil militias or simply a gang of craftsmen, circus fans and farmers.

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<sup>84</sup> Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army*, 307.

<sup>85</sup> Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army*, 309.

The importance to urban defense of other factors certainly ought to be conceded: state-controlled garrisons were always an element and the power of local commanders, strategoi and governors often prevailed over the popular will. However, the increased participation and oversight of defense by locals, civilians and militias is a demonstrable phenomenon that ought not to be ignored. This phenomenon also should not be separated from the increasing fortification of urban areas and proliferation of other fortification types: the two were symbiotically connected.

The great paradox of Byzantine city walls is that while they were undeniably the product of the state's patronage, they were in practice generally manned by citizens. While the emperor's sacred responsibility to insulate his people from warfare gave him a monopoly over fortifications, the Byzantine state's limited set of goals and resources often left Byzantine cities to their own devices during enemy invasions. During actual warfare, the survival of cities depended upon fortifications manned by the local population and the urban organism was thrust rudely into the military environment with little support.

## 6. Chapter III: The Contractual Nature of Urban Defense

What were the political consequences of the urban community's involvement in urban defense? As we have described, historians have traditionally connected this involvement with a loss of political autonomy. However, fortifications actually forced communities into exercising political agency. As we have shown, the emperor's claim that his walls and armies could shield civilians from warfare without assistance was a highly tenuous one, and citizens had to defend their own walls. But defending a city did not only demand military participation: the everyday reality of security was a *politically* charged task that required citizens to make political choices about their allegiance.

Because when citizens were participants in military activity, rather than passive recipients of it, the military relationship between the emperor and the town acquired a contractual element, in practice if not in theory. As long as the emperor relied upon the local population's performance in a military role, he lost some small but very real portion of the absolute power he claimed over military activity. Emperors counted upon citizens to defend their walls until they could relieve them, while citizens counted upon that relief. Again, in the cases in which defense was conducted with little or no civilian participation, say by the garrison or the governor, the contractual relationship was between those parties and the emperor. But whenever and to whatever degree civilians were involved in city defense, they took held down this role.

For urban defense to be successful it was essential that both parties convinced the other to fulfill their responsibility. Even if a city mounted a fearless defense behind impregnable walls, if the emperor failed to help, the city would likely fall by starvation eventually. Equally, even if an emperor commanded an army capable of annihilating a

besieger, if the citizens had so little faith in him that they yielded without a fight before the first imperial troops began their march, the strongest soldiers and best generals in the world would be incapable of preventing surrender.

That emperors counted upon city defenders to hold out against invaders or rebels is fairly self-explanatory. In its section on military crimes, *Maurice's Strategikon* firmly states that a commander who surrenders a fortress or city to an enemy should suffer capital punishment.<sup>86</sup> Less formally, for the commander, garrison and/or local population to surrender a walled city while able to defend it was considered dishonorable, cowardly and unmanly. When the rebellious Nicaeans decided to surrender their city to the besieging emperor Andronikos, Nicetas Choniates disapprovingly writes that they “succumbed to womanish softness, and none cherished the idea of performing deeds of virtue.”<sup>87</sup>

However, defenders were only obliged to hold out as long as they were able, and were not expected to die in defense if the situation of their fortifications or supplies was hopeless. *Maurice's Strategikon* qualifies its severe proscription of the death penalty by only mandating it in cases in which the defending commander surrendered “while able to defend” the stronghold or else while not “compelled by danger to life.”<sup>88</sup>

In fact, not only were surrenders considered acceptable if the defenders had run out of resources, but they were considered to reflect badly upon the emperor who had failed to relieve his loyal city for such a lengthy period of time. In *The Alexiad*, Anna Komnena transcribes a letter sent to Emperor Alexios by the governor of the city of Larissa, then besieged by Normans. This letter boldly lays out that prompt relief was expected of an

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<sup>86</sup> *Maurice's Strategikon*, 19.

<sup>87</sup> Nicetas Choniates, *Annals*, 158.

<sup>88</sup> *Maurice's Strategikon*, 19.

emperor if he was to live up to his promise to provide military protection, and that in the specific case at hand if Alexios failed to send aid, the allegiance owed to him by Larissa would be forfeit. The governor writes,

I would like you to know, Majesty, that I have through now preserved this fortress from capture through my own great efforts. But we are now deprived of victuals which Christian men may eat; we have even touched what is not lawful. Even that has failed us. If you are willing to hurry to our aid and can drive off the besiegers, thanks be to God. If not, I have already fulfilled my duty. From now on we are the slaves of necessity (for what can man do against nature and tyranny she imposes?). We have a mind to surrender the place to the enemies who press us hard and are clearly strangling us. If this should be our unhappy lot—call down curses on me if you like, but I will speak boldly and frankly to your majesty: unless you hurry with all speed to deliver us from this peril (for we are unable to hold out for much longer), you, our emperor, if you do not bring aid quickly when you have the power to do so, *you will be the first to be charged with treachery.*<sup>89</sup> (emphasis mine)

Whether this extraordinary document was faithfully transcribed or entirely invented by Anna, it admirably exemplifies the relation between city defenders and the emperor's relieving forces. For the governor of Larissa, Alexios Komnenos's legitimacy as emperor is entirely contingent upon his ability to fulfill his military responsibilities to his subjects. In this view, an emperor who failed to relieve a city was just as much a traitor as the defenders who failed to hold one.

Byzantine sources judge emperors who fail to rescue besieged cities quite harshly. Nicetas Choniates condemns Emperor Andronikos I's complacent, incompetent response to the late twelfth century invasion of the empire by Sicilian Normans. According to Nicetas, Andronikos "was not man enough to repel the barbarians."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Anna Komnene, *The Alexiad*, 141.

<sup>90</sup> Nicetas Choniates, *Annals*, 177.

Requests for relief like this one were politically charged documents, and a competent ruler understood that they demanded an immediate response. According to Anna, when her royal father read the above ultimatum, far from being affronted by its “frank” tone, he immediately sprung into action, working feverishly through the night to devise a scheme to relieve the city. Indeed, Alexios considered the rescue of Larissa such a priority that he sought the assistance of a wide array of advisors, including his best generals, an old man from Larissa with local knowledge and even St. Demetrios, who helpfully promised the fretful ruler success in a dream.<sup>91</sup> Even if we put such a dramatic response down to Anna Komnena’s desire to highlight her father’s concern for his subjects’ safety, this episode reveals that to take such a letter seriously and respond to it effectively was considered a trait of a capable ruler.

Because the contractual obligations of both city and ruler hinged upon their ability to respectively resist and relieve, correctly gauging that ability was crucial to both parties. However, determining how effectively and how long a given city could resist was a delicate, complex task. A great many factors had to be taken into account, including the strength of the fortifications and the amount of resources a city possessed. A tenth century manual recommends a city threatened with siege stockpile enough provisions to last “perhaps six months or a year,” and this figure is made assuming that a substantial portion of the population would be evacuated.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, one required familiarity with both the strength of the fortifications under threat and the siege capability of the specific enemy that threatened it. A great many Byzantine treatises and manuals take this necessity into account: for example, *Maurice’s Strategikon* carefully defines the siege capacity of each potential enemy

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<sup>91</sup> Anna Komnene, *The Alexiad*, 141-2.

<sup>92</sup> Anonymous, “Instructional Manual on Siege Defense,” 153.

of the empire (the Persians are experts, the Slavs novices, the Western Europeans are too impatient for lengthy encirclements, and so on) while Constantine Porphyrogenitus's *On Imperial Administration* summarizes the quality of the fortifications for every major city in the imperial frontier areas.<sup>93</sup>

From the perspective of the emperor, providing relief was a delicate matter because rescuing a given city was both time sensitive and potentially only one among many military and non-military commitments he could face at any given moment. From the perspective of the townsfolk, the choice to resist or yield was especially weighty because from the moment citizens committed to defying a siege, they often condemned their community to total ruin if the siege was successful. A city had to balance both their capacity to resist against the likelihood of imperial relief and the results of a failed defense with the consequences of an immediate surrender.

Even if a siege was successfully resisted and relieved, resistance was an expensive and labor-intensive task. Most immediately, walls needed to be repaired and ditches emptied of detritus and eroded earth. But repairing the fortifications only cost time and effort: siege preparations could also damage a city's economy before the enemy even arrived. The tenth-century manual on city defense advises that it is necessary "to reap the fields, even if they are not ready for reaping" before the enemy arrived.<sup>94</sup> This might sound like a minor detail, but in many regions of the empire, agriculture was delicate, producing only a low surplus and heavily reliable on variable conditions of climate, soil fertility and rainfall. If a premature harvest was likely to bring economic ruin and starvation, locals had a powerful incentive to surrender to any invader who demonstrated mild intentions, for example a pretender who

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<sup>93</sup> *Maurice's Strategikon, On Imperial Administration.*

<sup>94</sup> Anonymous, "Instructional Manual on Siege Defense," 179.

sought political control rather than plunder or enslavement. It might also be necessary not only to bring flocks and herd of livestock inside the walls, but also to slaughter them and salt the meat, so as to turn the animals into immediate food resources rather than mouths to feed.<sup>95</sup> Beasts of burden, mules and even horses were to receive the same treatment if supplies were low.<sup>96</sup> Many people also had to be evacuated, both from the countryside to fortified towns and from fortified towns away from the region under threat.<sup>97</sup> Most devastatingly to local agriculture, in the event of siege the state might employ scorched earth policies to leave nothing for besiegers to survive on.

While attackers might spare the fields and villages around a city as bargaining chips to encourage a negotiated surrender, once invaders were rebuffed and committed to a siege everything outside the walls was forfeited to the enemy. Byzantine sources recount the devastating effects repeated sieges could have upon agricultural infrastructure and village society, even if no enemies succeeded in penetrating the fortified nucleus of the local city, fortress or refuge center. In the case of a city divided into a lower and upper city, if the whole or some portion of the inhabitants chose to make a stand in the stronger upper citadel, the lower city would likely suffer heavily.

Of course, surrender could be a dangerous option too. Many of the empire's enemies came to the empire for the specific purpose of extracting wealth, food, slaves and other plunder and returning home. While a city might be able to bargain an enemy down on how much they sought to steal if the city surrendered on terms, many enemies, such as the nomadic Avars and Huns had little respect for treaties with cities and were capable of

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<sup>95</sup> Anonymous, "Instructional Manual on Siege Defense," 175.

<sup>96</sup> Anonymous, "Instructional Manual on Siege Defense," 177.

<sup>97</sup> A.D. Lee, *War in Late Antiquity: A Social History*, (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2007), 134.



continually upping the terms in their favor.<sup>98</sup> Obviously, when negotiations were concluded and the enemy allowed inside, the vulnerability of the inhabitants to deal breaking drastically increased. If an invader sought conquest, surrender could result in the replacement of the dominant elites of a town by an outside group, the seizure by immigrants of the surrounding farmland and dramatic changes in religion and culture. It should be kept in mind however, that given the oppressive weight of the Byzantine state's demands for soldiers and taxes, regime change could also significantly lighten the yoke communities labored under.

Unquestionably, worst possibility facing a city would be the consequences of a successful resistance to siege that was left unrelieved so long that the attackers penetrated the walls by storm or starved the city into submission after a grueling, mutually embittering slugfest. In such cases, a city could reasonably expect to suffer unrestrained massacre, rape and plunder and the wholesale demolition of the city's built environment.<sup>99</sup> Even if they survived, citizens might suffer enslavement and deportation, often on mass scale: the Persians famously enslaved the entire populations of town, as did the Huns and other Northern nomadic groups.<sup>100</sup>

Nicetas Choniates's harrowing contemporary account of the 1204 Sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusaders demonstrates how terrifying the fall of a city to the mercy of invaders could be. Choniates places the following speech at his own departure from the conquered city.

'O imperial City,' I cried out, 'City fortified, city of the great king, tabernacle of the most High, praise and song of his servants and beloved refuge for strangers, queen of the queens of cities, song of songs and splendor of splendors, and the rarest vision of the rare wonders of the world, who is it that has torn us away from thee like darling

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<sup>98</sup> *Maurice's Strategikon*, 117.

<sup>99</sup> Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, 135.

<sup>100</sup> Lee, *War in Late Antiquity*, 135-138.

children from their adoring mother? What shall become of us? Wither shall we go? What consolation shall we find in our nakedness, torn from their bosom as from a mother's womb? When shall we look upon thee, not as thou now art, a plain of desolation and a valley of weeping, trampled by armies and despised and rejected, but exalted and restored, revered by those who humbled thee, and once again sucking the milk of the Gentiles and eating the wealth of kings? When shall we doff these shriveled and tattered rags which, like fig leaves and garments of skins, suffice not to cover the whole body and which the foreigners, as treacherous as the serpent, forced upon us with attendant evils and injuries?"<sup>101</sup>

Nicetas's narrative attempts to convey the violation and destruction of the sack with every rhetorical, religious and cultural tool at his educated disposal. The city is invaded by desolation in the Biblical sense and his family and community's ejection from the city is an expulsion from Eden. The crime is very much a religious one, a violation of sanctuary, of God's chosen space.

Choniates also identifies the sack metaphorically and concretely with rape and violence against women. Choniates compares Constantinople to a beautiful noblewoman in luxurious garments who has been savagely attacked by "implacable and crazed suitors" and now lies beaten and dirty with torn clothes.<sup>102</sup> He also describes her as a mother reduced to a widow, her children scattered and killed.<sup>103</sup> His actual narrative of the sack is also filled with descriptions of rape, centering upon Nicetas's efforts to protect his wife and daughters from the invaders by hiding in the home of a former servant of Venetian ancestry and finally by fleeing the city entirely.<sup>104</sup> For Nicetas, the city is a domestic, feminine space that had been murderously violated.

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<sup>101</sup> Choniates, *Annals*, 325.

<sup>102</sup> Choniates, *Annals*, 317.

<sup>103</sup> Choniates, *Annals*, 318.

<sup>104</sup> Choniates, *Annals*, 323.

Nicetas explicitly locates this violation of his city at the city walls. As he is leaving the city and before his final lament, Nicetas directs a curious speech at the walls themselves.

As we left the City behind... I threw myself, just as I was, on the ground and reproached the walls both because they alone were insensible, neither shedding tears nor lying ruins upon the earth, and because they still stood upright. 'If those things for whose protection you were erected no longer exist, being utterly destroyed by fire and war, for what purpose do you still stand? And what will you protect hereafter unless you strive to bring destruction to the enemy in the day of wrath...?'<sup>105</sup>

For Choniates, the walls exist to protect and enclose urban, sacred, feminine space from monstrous, godless barbarians. Their survival when they have failed at this task is a sick joke to him, a dereliction of duty that could only be atoned for if the walls could somehow help God destroy the wicked in the Last Judgment. One more detail links the violation of the city specifically with the violation of the walls: according to Choniates, some of the crusaders sent Constantinople's city gates home as trophies, along with the chain that had barred the city harbor, a malignant gesture of contempt for the city's sanctity.<sup>106</sup> For Choniates, only the elevated terminology of religion could encompass the horror a city faced if it resisted and was taken by force.

When a failed resistance could have such nightmarish conclusions, a city was certainly capable of surrendering on terms, particularly if they had already put up an honorable fight first. In *The Alexiad*, Anna Komnena describes how the citizens of Dyrrakhion, a Byzantine city on the Adriatic coast besieged by invading Normans under Robert Guiscard, gave up on the prospect of imperial rescue and decided collectively to surrender the city,

When they [the people of the town] learnt of the misfortunes of the emperor, the

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<sup>105</sup> Choniates, *Annals*, 325.

<sup>106</sup> Choniates, *Annals*, 327.

terrible carnage and the deaths of so many remarkable men, not to mention the withdrawal of the fleets and Robert's decision to renew the siege in the coming spring, they thought long and hard about how they could ensure their safety better in the future and about how they could avoid taking such risks again. They gathered therefore, and after each man had expressed his own private opinion and when they failed to agree on a common course, they decided to resolve the impasse by submitting to Robert and surrendering the town. Instigated by one of the colonists from Amalfi and in obedience to their advice, they opened the gates and allowed him to enter.<sup>107</sup>

The surrender of the city is certainly a politically charged action. While we might argue about whether the defenders were garrison troops or civilians, Anna Komnena provides compelling, local details to suggest why the defenders were inclined to surrender: the insurance of future safety and the avoidance of military risks. The surrender of the city is also intimately bound up in the city's walls: the decision to open or close its gates.

Perhaps unsurprisingly under such conditions, emperors were keen to convince citizens of their ability to defend themselves long enough to be relieved. There were several ways an emperor could bolster the confidence and defensive expertise of citizen defenders. The cheapest (and least effective) option was to simply send the citizens of a threatened city a letter of encouragement and advice. While such a letter was hardly equivalent to material aid, it could lend a community some fraction of soldierly expertise on resisting sieges. Most importantly, it was at least evidence that the emperor was aware the city was threatened, and hopefully only the first sign of more substantial assistance to come.

These letters generally contain much the same advice found in Byzantine military manuals, offering optimistic predictions as long as certain key rules and precepts are followed closely. A letter from Alexios Komnenos to the towns located on or off the Adriatic coast threatened with Norman invasion in the late eleventh century, "earnestly exhorted" the

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<sup>107</sup> Anna Komnene, *The Alexiad*, 128.

commanders and the inhabitants themselves “not to lose heart, nor to relax their efforts in any way, but to be watchful and sober, providing all-round protection for themselves and keeping a wary eye open for Robert.”<sup>108</sup> Another such round of letters to coastal cities and their commanders were necessary later in Alexios’s reign when Greece proper was threatened with Western invasion.<sup>109</sup>

Sources from across Byzantine history refer to such letters in tones ranging from approval to mockery. A letter from Synesius, written in 405 when the philosopher and future bishop was resident in his native city of Cyrene, Libya, is rich with sarcastic contempt for the letters of advice sent to Cyrene by Cerialis, the chief commander of the province.

A little ship is carrying us letters from him enjoining us to do exactly such things as we are doing now, namely, to keep within the walls, not to attempt any sortie from the trenches, not to give combat to an enemy who is unconquerable. If we do not obey him, he protests that he will not answer for the consequences. Then again he advises us to establish four watches in the night, as if our hopes lay in matters, like a man who is accustomed to misfortune.<sup>110</sup>

Synesius finds the letters redundant, restrictive and petty; poor substitutes for real assistance.

A number of other sources echo the Libyan philosopher’s low opinion.

A more effective method of lifting the morale of frightened civilians was to send them an experienced military commander, ideally accompanied by at least a handful of loyal, skilled soldiers. Such a figure could convince a city that resisting siege was achievable while providing them the knowledge necessary to do so. In another sense, the provision of a commander or a garrison also took the decision out of the hands of the citizens. However, even when this was true, such an assumption of responsibility for defense from the citizens

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<sup>108</sup> Anna Komnene, *The Alexiad*, 101.

<sup>109</sup> Anna Komnene, *The Alexiad*, 407.

<sup>110</sup> Synesius of Cyrene, “Letter 130: Cyrene Besieged,” Livius, Amsterdam, accessed February 2014, [http://www.livius.org/su-sz/synesius/synesius\\_letter\\_130.html](http://www.livius.org/su-sz/synesius/synesius_letter_130.html).

by a confident representative of the state was essentially a fulfillment of the emperor's contractual obligation and should be seen in that light. For example, Anna Komnena recounts how her father sent George Palaiologos, one of his closest associates, to direct the defense of Dyrrachion. According to Anna, George Palaiologos did an impressive job, raising morale, maintaining vigilance and organizing the technical, disciplined efforts required to counter or destroy siege engines.

Of course, a cowardly or incompetent commander could actually make matters worse. In the early fifth century, Synesius of Cyrene described the provincial general, Cerialis, as "unfit for war and a real nuisance during peace." According to Synesius, Cerialis abandoned the cities under his charge in a merchant ship filled with gold. Synesius's damning verdict of the man was "he took very good care not to share our troubles. Instead of being upon the ramparts, like me, Synesius the philosopher, the general keeps himself close to the oar-blade."<sup>111</sup>

On the other side of Byzantine history, Nicetas Choniates blames the 1185 fall of Thessaloniki to the Latins on the incompetent, even traitorous leadership of David Komnenos. According to Choniates, the Thessalonians were not "helpless and unskilled in warfare" and "forcefully urged" their "governor and commander" to lead them on the walltop and in sallies, but David was "more effeminate than woman and more cowardly than the deer" and "remained a spectator rather than antagonist of the enemy troops," refusing even to wear armor.<sup>112</sup> Nicetas damns David, a "pirate," a "sorcerer" and a "traitor," entirely responsible for Thessaloniki's ultimate surrender.

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<sup>111</sup> Synesius of Cyrene, "Letter 130."

<sup>112</sup> Nicetas Choniates, *Annals*, 165.

A bad commander reflected badly upon the emperor who sent him. For Nicetas, the fearsome, tyrannical policies of Emperor Andronikos had alienated or destroyed all the virtuous, brave men in the Byzantine world, leaving only evasive cowards: “[Andronikos] thus brutally deprived his own reign of those who excelled in bodily strength and military excellence.”<sup>113</sup> Of David, Nicetas writes, “in his constant dread of Andronikos he was most adroit only in seeking ways to escape his irresistible hands by hiding.”<sup>114</sup>

However, the emperor did not only need to convince the defenders of their capacity to defend themselves for a good period of time; he also needed to convince them that he would eventually arrive to rescue them. From the perspective of townsfolk, the emperor could often appear an extremely unreliable ally. Townsfolk faced a variety of threats from bandits and raiders to full-blown invasions, and they generally expected to weather many of these without state assistance. Through Byzantine history, whatever the military system offered by the state, cities were often left to fend for themselves.

The example of the city of Ansemus’s refusal to surrender their garrison to bolster the army of a passing general in the late sixth century shows the gulf that could exist in the perceptions of the military and a town about what security entailed.<sup>115</sup> While the citizens of Ansemus were certainly grateful for the presence of a relieving force, they recognized that its presence was only a temporary relief, and that they would be left to cope with everyday insecurity alone soon enough, and needed to hang onto every defensive asset for dear life.

The independent military-political agency urban populations often held during sieges thoroughly contradicted the imperial claim to a monopoly over military activity. However,

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<sup>113</sup> Nicetas Choniates, *Annals*, 160.

<sup>114</sup> Nicetas Choniates, *Annals*, 164-5.

<sup>115</sup> Simocatta, *History*, 182-3

this contradiction was generally resolved not by dangerous civic declarations of independence, but by the adoption of a more contractual understanding of defense, in which both urban defenders and the emperor are understood to have distinct obligations, which both parties are expected to fulfill out of honor and mutual self-interest.

However, in some cases, Byzantine cities actually held out independently against threats without any imperial assistance, generally during periods of state over-commitment or internal conflict. Interestingly, even when a Byzantine community successfully defended itself with no help from the emperor, the citizens shied away from trumpeting a narrative of urban self-reliance or autonomy. Rather than thus attracting the attention and ire of the paranoid Byzantine state, Byzantine self-defense was credited to timely relief by warrior-saints or other forms of divine intervention. While the governor of Larissa might have been bold enough to call out Alexios as a traitor when his city's survival depended upon a quick rescue, if independent defense went well, once the threat was gone citizens felt little need to rock the boat, however dire their situation had been beforehand. While the Patriarch Photius of Constantinople might have lamented the absence of the emperor and his armies when Scandinavian Vikings suddenly advanced on Constantinople in 860, after the invaders were turned back without a fight by the sight of the walls, Photius was happy to credit the Virgin Mary and her icon for this victory and let the issue of imperial negligence drop.

In fact, in many cases divine intervention was described in exactly the same terms as imperial relief, Constantine Porphyrogenitus describes how when the town of Patras drove off its Slavic and Saracen besiegers with a successful sally, they attributed their success to the appearance of St. Andrew leading their charge.<sup>116</sup> On several occasions, the defenders of

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<sup>116</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio [On Imperial Administration]*, Greek text edited by Gy. Moravesik. English translated by R.J.H. Jenkins, (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks; Chichester: John Wiley, distributor, c2008), 229-30.



Middle Byzantine Thessalonica, even when their enemies quitted the city's walls before imperial assistance arrived or indeed was even sought, did not credit such repulses to their own autonomous action, but rather to the rescue provided by St. Demetrios, who they record rode up to the gates armed and armored leading a large company of saintly soldiers, exactly mimicking the attitude of a relieving emperor.<sup>117</sup> And yet, in reality, in these cases Thessalonica owed their security solely to the strength of their walls and the intrepid efforts of local defenders.

The paradox between the doughty willingness of Byzantine citizens to defend their own walls and their bashful evasion of the credit for such action was the product of the broad but shallow scope of imperial power. In the historian Leonora Neville's apt words, the imperial administration "maintained a monopoly on sovereignty while being apathetic about governing."<sup>118</sup> Thus, while no party dared to actually act as a government or claim political power, people were free to act so long as they characterized their activity as apolitical, in line with the imperial will or otherwise kept below the radar. Indeed, Neville argues that people could actually engage in rebellious acts such as defying tax collectors, but only if they did so without explicitly rejecting the emperor or were quick to accept his offers of forgiveness and ritual punishment.

The risks of actually claiming political power and defying the imperial will were enormous. The censorious late fourth century sermons of Bishop John Chrysostom to the citizens of Antioch, preached in the wake of the city's tax-rebellion and destruction of the statues of Emperor Theodosius II and his wife, transcribes a plea to the emperor for

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<sup>117</sup> Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*, 267.

<sup>118</sup> Neville, *Authority*, 46-7.

clemency. The penitent, pleading, self-punishing letter hammers home the ideological and material impossibility of repelling an emperor's wrath behind walls.

We must confess, O Emperor, this love which you have shewn towards our country! We cannot deny it! On this account, especially, we mourn, that a city thus beloved has been bewitched by demons; and that we should have appeared ungrateful towards her benefactor, and have provoked her ardent lover. And although you were to overthrow; although you were to burn; although you were to put to death; or whatever else you might do, you would never yet have taken on us the revenge we deserve. We ourselves have, by anticipation, inflicted on ourselves what is worse than a thousand deaths! For what can be more bitter, than when we are found to have unjustly provoked our benefactor, and one who loved us so much, and the whole world knows it, and condemns us for the most monstrous ingratitude! If Barbarians had made an incursion on our city, and razed its walls, and burnt its houses, and had taken and carried us away captive, the evil had been less. And why so? but because, whilst you live, and continue such a generous kindness towards us, there might be a hope that we might again be brought back to our former condition, and regain a more illustrious liberty. But now, having been deprived of your favour, and having quenched your love, which was a greater security to us than any wall, whom have we left to fly to? Where else shall we have to look, when we have provoked so benign a lord, so indulgent a father?<sup>119</sup>

For the Antiochene messenger, or at least Chrysostom, open defiance of a sitting emperor is an unthinkable crime bearing incredible risks. In a climate in which any claim to political authority was an act of open rebellion, the decision making process of urban and rural communities was often highly informal and collective. Indeed, elites such as local aristocrats and bishops, while they held significant authority, sought to use their prestige to gather support for their ideas to make them collective rather than pull rank and wield power as a weapon.<sup>120</sup> Nicetas Choniates's account of the role of the local bishop upon the city of

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<sup>119</sup> St. John Chrysostom, edited by Philip Schaff, "St. Chrysostom: On the Priesthood; Ascetic Treatises; Select Homilies and Letters; Homilies on the Statutes," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed February 2014, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf109.xix.xxiii.html>.

<sup>120</sup> Neville, *Authority*, 136.

Nicaea's twelfth century surrender to the Emperor Andronikos establishes this communal dynamic. According to Choniates,

Nicholas, the archbishop of Nicaea, realized the grim realities of the situation and argued for the necessity to be generous. Summoning the people to the church, he proposed that they yield to the times and circumstances. [a description of the archbishops various arguments follows, including the point that] ... the Nicaeans were little by little abandoning the watch and ward of the city and inclining towards the cause of peace. Everyone considered the archbishop's suggestion a good one, and he grasped the ensuing good with both hands.<sup>121</sup>

The archbishop's influence requires persuasion and his solution is a suggestion rather than order that the general body of the people must accept to be undertaken. In Neville's terms,

Because the imperial administration ensured that no rival group would act as a government, the regulation of provincial society was informal and variable. Anyone could try to influence the course of local matters and no one was guaranteed authority. The authority to regulate behavior in Byzantine provincial society was therefore particularly fluid and subject to community consensus.<sup>122</sup>

In this environment, communities had every reason to deny responsibility for their own successful defense and accept the imperial narrative of a rescuing emperor, even if they had to rely on visions of saintly rescuers to do so. Making decisions that would protect themselves without challenging the emperor's claim to power was only one more issue towns had to consider and negotiate.

However, while the Thessalonians were content to hide their independent military agency in humble narratives of religious rescue, some cases reveal the defensive capacities of cities unveiled by religion or politic humility. On the fringes of the empire, a number of cities

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<sup>121</sup> Nicetas Choniates, *Annals*, 158.

<sup>122</sup> Neville, *Authority*, 136.

were so neglected by the empire that they drifted into a state of full political autonomy.<sup>123</sup> At least fourteen ex-Byzantine city-states can be attested, mostly concentrated in Italy, Dalmatia and the Black Sea, famous examples including Venice, Naples, Amalfi, Cherson and Ragusa/Dubrovnik.<sup>124</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenitus explicitly blames the imperial state's inattention for these instances, citing "the sloth and inexperience of those in power."<sup>125</sup>

The case of these cities proves that imperial control of urban communities relied upon the contractual provision of relief, garrisons and commanders. These cities, like the great survivors within the empire's borders, benefitted from a strong geographical location and/or sturdy fortifications. Many of these are still visible today. The powerful walls (heavily modified since the Byzantine era) and Adriatic cliff-side locale of modern Dubrovnik make the city a popular tourist destination, while Venice's semi-artificial occupation of a lagoon famously rendered the city immune to land-based siege. When the state failed to relieve these cities, they were forced to rely on their own defenses, and their success reveals the hardiness and self-reliance of medieval Mediterranean cities that we must delve through layers of imperial propaganda to discover in Byzantine cities such as Thessaloniki. In fact, the commercial success of these cities when relieved from the burden of supporting the Byzantine state suggests that many cities might have been better off independent. Indeed, in a dark twist of fate, the queen of cities herself, Constantinople, would labor under the commercial yoke of Venice for centuries and even suffer its first sack in almost a millennium at the hands of these former colonials.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and His World*, (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 275.

<sup>124</sup> Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus*, 277.

<sup>125</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *On Imperial Administration*, 127.

<sup>126</sup> Arnold, Toynbee, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus*, 276.

However, independence from imperial protection came with dangers, and secure location and disposable wealth might prove insufficient sources of security when these cities found themselves faced with a formidable military foe. At such desperate moments, Byzantine rulers were presented with a golden window of opportunity to re-assert some measure of control by renewing the contractual provision of relief. Constantine Porphyrogenitus recounts how when Ragusa and other Dalmatian cities were attacked by capable Saracen forces, they requested relief from the emperor, who snapped up the opportunity to re-incorporate this slew of towns into the empire as a rescuer rather than a conqueror.<sup>127</sup> Most of these cities drifted in a political purgatory for much of Byzantine history, oscillating from exarchates and themes to autonomous city-states or else vassals of neighboring powers.<sup>128</sup>

In sum, fortifications structured the military-political relationship between citizens and emperors in a very particular way by giving cities the resources to survive independently of state assistance for a period of time but leaving them generally reliant upon eventual imperial relief. Fortifications made urban allegiance (that is their resistance or surrender to external siege) conditional: dependent upon the emperor's willingness and ability to provide rescue and to bolster their defenses. If an emperor failed to provide such resources or convince local defenders of his willingness to do so, he was incapable of maintaining a city's allegiance. To convince them, the performance, persuasion and demonstration of imperial strength was of crucial importance. Byzantine emperors had to prove to cities that they were capable of fulfilling the imperial ideal of guardianship through performance, persuasion and above all prompt, decisive action.

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<sup>127</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *On Imperial Administration*, 127.

<sup>128</sup> Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*, 307-9.

Until this point, we have considered walls only as structures that attempt to exclude warfare from urban space by restricting the movements of armies. Byzantine imperial ideology defined this role explicitly in terms of the restriction of foreign invaders from Christian, Roman space. In this scheme, any movement of a foreign invader into a city, whether peaceful or forceful was fundamentally a failure, the only question being whether the blame for this failure lay with the citizens or the emperor. Moreover, as long as there was a single emperor, the fact that his reception was left in the hands of locals was inconsequential: Byzantine ideology allowed for no rebellion. The power of citizens over their walls was limited by the contractual reliance upon relief, not to mention the general need for garrisons, commanders and of course, the walls themselves.

## **7. Chapter IV: The Negotiation of Imperial Authority: Political Theater at the City Gates**

During civil warfare, imperial claimants competed to appear as legitimate emperors themselves and castigate their rivals as treasonous usurpers. In this world, even the least politically ambitious city was suddenly forced to choose sides. In response, emperors jockeyed to perform as benevolent protectors and avoid playing the role of a bloodthirsty rebel. Because, as we have seen, imperial legitimacy was closely connected to a positive, protective relationship with city walls, a festive welcoming entrance was traditionally a powerful validation of a claimant's authority as a legitimate protective ruler. Rejection and the commencement of siege warfare, on the other hand, placed a claimant in an awkward position: that of a rebel or worse yet, in the position of the very impious, destructive invaders that the emperor was supposed to protect cities from.

Wherever communities controlled their own walls, they were in a position to determine the reception given to an imperial claimant, and in this sense, controlled that claimant's legitimacy. Because the military relationship between cities and the state was partly contractual, ideology and practical reality placed cities in a position from which they could choose which emperor to accept.

In the military narrative, we have seen that the integration of the Byzantine city into the military environment resulted in civilian participation in and sometimes management of the defense of urban fortifications. Urban populations played an important role in determining whether a city resisted or surrendered during a foreign invasion, and in how defense was to be conducted.

If the authority of the Byzantine Emperor had remained unified and stable, the

importance of civilians to control their walls would have likely remained limited. Except on the most distant, neglected peripheries of the empire, few cities were foolish enough to openly defy the fearsome might of the emperor from behind their walls.

However, imperial authority was quite often divided, multiple and at war with itself. Throughout its history, the Byzantine Empire was repeatedly wracked by usurpation. Sometimes, jockeying for the throne was confined to the court, the palace or at least the capital, but on numerous occasions, it took the form of sprawling, ruinous civil wars involving the entire empire. The loose succession laws, the complexities of court and palace life and the close relation between military command and political power offered usurpers multiple paths to the throne. Such civil wars entirely disrupted the military system cities operated within.

In the Byzantine Empire, as has been illustrated at length, authority was officially and publicly unitary and absolute, entirely reserved to and stemming from the imperial office. The consequence of this totalitarian centralization was that any assertion of political power by any subject was an absolute defiance of imperial authority. At the same time, as Leonora Neville ably points out, the empire was no modern, fascist autocracy: it did not seek actual control over social life, but merely aimed to restrict all other parties from political life.

Actual, overt defiance of imperial authority was a dangerous, all-or-nothing business because, in Neville's words, "Byzantine political theory allowed the success of a revolt to be proof that the deposed emperor was a tyrant. The leader of a successful revolt was God's agent in removing a tyrant and would rule as God's regent on earth. The leader of an unsuccessful revolt, however, was a destroyer of the peace who rose against God's regent on earth without justification."<sup>129</sup> Indeed, no Byzantine rebels claimed to be despisers of

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<sup>129</sup> Neville, *Authority*, 44.



imperial authority, but rather upholders of it. Both the rebel and the loyalist were equally loud in their professions of submission to the throne, differing on who the occupant should be.

This put Byzantine cities in a perilous, zero-sum position whenever they were faced with an individual claiming to be the rightful emperor. Either that person was the true emperor, in which case they owed him unquestioned loyalty and a triumphal invitation to enter the city, or else he was not, in which case they owed it to their rightful liege to shut their gates in this usurper's face in the rudest possible manner.

While Byzantine cities rarely sought such choices, the capacity to determine the legitimacy of a ruler is unquestionably a form of political power. When dealing with an outside invader, the choices cities made were simply a matter of military calculation: weighing the best survival choice in light of the available circumstances. But when imperial legitimacy was at stake, the regulation of entrance became a political power that could be wielded against the state. My goal is to examine how citizens navigated this treacherous environment and assert that it was not merely the possession of fortifications, but the choices made with those fortifications, that allowed communities to survive.

The relationship between emperors and cities was, at least at the wall, negotiated and dependent upon the emperor's ability to fulfill his obligations. Cities would much rather serve an emperor who lived up to imperial protective ideals than defy one who failed to conform to them. Regardless, cities sought to avoid imperial retribution, framing their choices in terms of submission to the absolute authority of the rightful emperor: that is, in exact accordance with the emperor's formal authority. Cities exercised power while strenuously denying that they held any.

Cities did not only regulate actual passage of rulers, they also determined the

legitimacy of passage. This was an incredibly potent power: through their reception or rejection of an imperial figure, cities had the power to characterize him as a righteous fulfiller of imperial ideals or a tyrannical usurper bent on violating urban space. An emperor could indeed overcome this power with physical strength, but then he risked transforming himself into the precise opposite of imperial ideals—a tyrannical violator of urban space, a partisan of desolation and destroyer of cities. In civil wars, the position of urban communities was both more perilous and more powerful.

We have already discussed how Byzantine cities relied upon a contractual provision of relief and other support and emperors relied upon cities to defend their own walls whenever necessary. This relationship between cities and emperors was immensely complicated by civil warfare. During a foreign invasion, an emperor played the role of the rescuer, or else the besieger of enemy cities. During a civil war, by contrast, when multiple imperial armies supporting multiple claimants campaigned across the empire, emperors occupied an ambiguous position between two extremes without a middle ground: rebel usurper and rightful emperor. Not only did emperors now appear both as besieger and reliever, but also now occupied an ambiguous position between both roles.

A city's decision to yield or resist suddenly took on an ambiguous appearance. In the case of a civil war, a surrender could now be characterized either as a *desertion of* a lawful liege or as a *submission to* a lawful liege. Similarly, defiance of an imperial claimant could now be cast as either an act of lawful allegiance or a gesture of as open rebellion against lawful imperial authority. An action could be cast in any of these lights, either at the time or in retrospect.

This fundamental ambiguity, founded upon the innate tension between defense, siege and relief found in regular warfare, made the reception a city gave to a would-be-emperor of

enormous importance for both parties. For a city, the grave consequences of open defiance of the true emperor were to be avoided at all cost. For an imperial claimant, the city wall was a stage upon which to demonstrate legitimacy and avoid the appearance of illegitimacy.

During civil warfare, the wall played an ambiguous role: if an imperial candidate was legitimate, his ownership of the wall and mastery of urban space ought to be celebrated and the wall ought to serve as a stage for his triumphal entrance. However, if an imperial candidate was a usurper, the wall was a military barrier to be used to restrict the rebel's attempt to violate urban space. The ambiguity of imperial legitimacy during civil wars made the character of any interaction at a city wall uncertain, determined by the reception of whoever controlled the city wall. This reception, in turn was highly determined by the performance of an imperial claimant before the gates.

Michael Psellus recounts a perfect example of the ambiguity of imperial entrances during civil wars. In 1047, Emperor Constantine IX 'Monomachus' faced an attempt on his throne by his cousin, Leo Tornicius, who marched on Constantinople at the head of a substantial army of professional soldiers. According to Psellus, Constantine had only a handful of honorary mercenary bodyguards available and the armies loyal to him were stationed on the relatively distant eastern frontier of the empire. Worse still, Constantine was then in the throes of debilitating attack of gout and virtually bedridden.<sup>130</sup>

Under these conditions, only one resource was available to Constantine: the city walls. Psellus writes that Constantine immediately recognized that his "safety depended upon one thing only—the circle of walls around him—and it was on the walls that he expended his

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<sup>130</sup> Michael Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers; the Chronographia*, trans. by E. R. A. Sewter, (Baltimore, Penguin Books: 1966), 210.

efforts, building up the parts which had been allowed by negligence to fall into disrepair and planting his stone-throwing machines thick on the ramparts.”<sup>131</sup>

From this point onward, Psellus’s narrative hinges primarily on Tornicius and Constantine’s respective attempts to convince, encourage and intimidate the citizens of Constantinople into opening or barring the gates of the city’s formidable triple walls. From the beginning, Psellus tells us that Tornicius and his allies marched on the capital in the firm belief that “the inhabitants of Constantinople would not remain loyal; they expected no opposition there, because the emperor had made himself unpopular by introducing reforms which curbed the liberty of the citizens.”<sup>132</sup>

Tornicius’s sought to sway the capital’s citizens by presenting himself as a man better capable of fulfilling the ideals of imperial guardianship, “a soldier emperor, a man who would endanger his own life on their behalf and put an end to barbarian incursions.”<sup>133</sup> Tornicius deployed argument and the display of military might to support this claim, all the while holding the threat of an actual siege in earnest over the citizens’ heads.

Byzantine military manuals recommend that a besieger do everything in his power to make his force look as large, fearsome and glorious as possible to intimidate defenders.

*Maurice’s Strategikon* offers the following advice for attackers,

Try to have soldiers who present a handsome physical appearance and whose horses are nicely equipped get as close to the enemy fortifications as they can safely do and let the besieged get a good look at them. Keep the less impressive troops farther off with the supplies, far enough distant that the people within the walls cannot come to any judgment about the men or the animals, but will think they are all men and of the same quality they had seen earlier by the walls. It is also a good idea to get the besieged to believe that we have a large number of armed men; to do this make the

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<sup>131</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 210.

<sup>132</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 209.

<sup>133</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 209-10.

men who do not have coats of mail wear the mail hoods of those who do, so that from a distance it will look as though they too are wearing mail. We should set up our camp far enough away to get them to believe that all the objects they see in it are really soldiers.<sup>134</sup>

In Psellus's narrative, Tornicius employs a number of these manipulative techniques. For one he set up his troops "all in position before the walls, not in a confused mob, nor massed together in one great body, but disposed in a soldier-like manner and giving every sign of readiness for battle."<sup>135</sup> To frighten the civilian defenders who "had no experience of war," and in direct accordance with *Maurice's Strategikon*, "every man wore armor," although Psellus notes that some outfits were noticeably more complete than others.<sup>136</sup> The overall rebel formation also seemed tailored to appear as large as possible: Tornicius spread out his men in small groups to take up as much ground as possible.<sup>137</sup> Psellus also provides us with evidence that Tornicius may have put his best men forward and hidden his least impressive, noting the appearance behind the main body of the besiegers of a "great multitude, which to those on the wall seemed countless, for they too had been divided into small groups." This far group however, at least when it moved, unlike the armored, disciplined soldiers brought near to the wall for close analysis by the defenders, "gave the impression not so much of a strong army as of a disordered mob."<sup>138</sup> In this description Tornicius's military deployment seems to have been as much about performance as tactics. It is a calculated show of might aimed specifically to sway an audience of civilians watching from the city ramparts.

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<sup>134</sup> *Maurice's Strategikon*, 106.

<sup>135</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 210-11.

<sup>136</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 211.

<sup>137</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 210-11.

<sup>138</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 211.

Tornicius's claim to be a competent soldier-emperor was backed up by his own performance as well as the performance of his army as a whole. According to Psellus, Tornicius was highly active before the eyes of the defenders, supervising every action of his men upon horseback, finally riding up to the gates on a white horse, at the exact center of his massive formation flanked by his best knights.<sup>139</sup>

This awesome show of power had an evident effect on the Constantinopolitan citizens: "Amazement and confusion reigned everywhere, and it seemed the entire city would fall an easy prey to the enemy."<sup>140</sup> Psellus refers at length to the visual force of the besiegers: how each element of their deployment was specifically laid out before the defenders' fearful eyes.

Constantine lacked the resources to match this performance of power, but nevertheless made the effort to make public appearances to remind both his own people and the enemy "that he was still alive" by appearing on one of the balconies of the palace overlooking the walls, hiding his crippling illness as best he could.<sup>141</sup> The visibility of both imperial candidates to the viewers on the walltop is a crucial element.

An auditory contest was just as important as the visual. The rebel troops within earshot of the wall began by attempting to persuade the defenders to change their allegiance.

Their first move was to remind the defenders on the wall of the dreadful things they had suffered at the emperor's hands. They brought to their notice the alleviation that would result from his capture, the sufferings that would follow his continued freedom. This information was proffered at different parts of the wall in turn. They begged the defenders to open the gates to them and receive within their city a sovereign who was kindly and merciful, one who would treat them with humanity and bring new glory to the Roman Empire by waging victorious wars against the

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<sup>139</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 211-12.

<sup>140</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 211.

<sup>141</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 211-12.

barbarians.<sup>142</sup>

The defenders, however, rejected these offers. Rather than opening the gates and rejoicing, they “poured forth a torrent of abuse with all manner of disgraceful epithets, both on them and on their pretender.”<sup>143</sup> Psellus provides us with a clue as to why Tornicius’s argument fell flat when he tells us that the old men and veterans in the city were stunned to see a rebel daring enough to lay siege to the capital with artillery and archers.<sup>144</sup> This at least hints that by directing an army against the capital, Tornicius damaged his claim to act as a legitimate emperor, who ought to defend the god-guarded city, not prepare to storm its divinely protected walls.

From the initial jeering refusal of the people, persuasion was abandoned in favor of an escalating duel of words and weapons alike. The rebels responded to the citizens’ insults of Tornicius by attacking Constantine’s character in crude terms. Finally, open conflict broke out when a group of townsmen rode outside the walls and attempted to drive the rebels back with arrows and slings. The disciplined rebels however, feigned retreat and then turned on the townsfolk, driving them back inside the walls in chaos. One rebel horse archer even attempted to win the conflict in one stroke, firing an arrow directly at the imperial booth, which the emperor managed to dodge but which killed a courtier. The emperor was nevertheless forced to watch the battle from a more distant balcony, ceding the ground to Tornicius before everyone’s eyes.

Interestingly, in the narrative that follows, there is a tension between the practical task of winning the engagement and the attempt to fulfill imperial ideals. For example, the gout-

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<sup>142</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 212.

<sup>143</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 212.

<sup>144</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 211.

ridden Constantine made the fanciful decision to abandon the strength of the walls and sally outside the gates with his force of civilians, honor guards and armed convicts to attack Tornicius's disciplined army because it would be "disgraceful" if a true emperor failed to meet a usurper in open battle.<sup>145</sup> According to imperial ideals, after all, an emperor was supposed to ride up and rescue cities by destroying usurpers, not cower inside the walls *with* them. After the unsurprising rout of Constantine's makeshift militia, however, Tornicius too fell prey to quixotic ideals.

After the militia's defeat, they not only fled, but also abandoned the walltop and the gates, fleeing to their homes, thinking defeat inevitable. Tornicius was given the perfect opportunity to enter:

There was nothing to prevent the enemy's getting inside the fortifications: the prize was there to be taken with impunity. The officers in charge at the wall-gates had already abandoned their guard, while they looked for some place to give them shelter. Throughout the city were men on the way back to their homes, or men who contemplated going over to the pretender.<sup>146</sup>

According to Psellus, what happened next demonstrated the power of imperial ideals of legitimacy over utilitarian calculations. Tornicius refused to enter the unguarded gates because he desired to enter not as a besieger, but as a rightful monarch. For him at the very least, the legitimacy of passage was something he could not confer upon himself and usurp, but that had to be conferred upon him by the consent of the people. He might stoop to intimidating the citizenry by force, but he sought a surrender, not a conquest.

Tornicius shirked the final entry. Perhaps it would be truer to say that he was confidently awaiting our invitation to make him emperor; he expected to be led up to the palace preceded by torches, in a procession worthy of a sovereign. So he put off

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<sup>145</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 214-15.

<sup>146</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 215.



his entry to the morrow.<sup>147</sup>

Tornicius was confident, however, that his victory had guaranteed him such an invitation, and was quick to play the part of the magnanimous ruler, sparing all of the townsmen his men had captured and ordering that “the murder of their kinsmen” must end.<sup>148</sup>

This intermission to the conflict gave Constantine the time he needed to shore up his position, repairing his walls and “currying favor with the people.” Pragmatically recognizing that his security lay with their continued loyalty, rather than demonstrations of his honor, he “showed his appreciation of their loyalty in the past, and promised them rewards, as if at the Games, if they continued to be faithful in the future.”<sup>149</sup>

The contest was decided the next day. Tornicius, “under the impression that the Empire was his for the taking,” made his bid for a popular invitation to enter, unveiling a dramatic exhibition of his legitimacy. Advancing in person to the walls on horseback, he brought forward his prisoners from the earlier battle, “loaded with chains,” each placed some distance from each other so a greater portion of the townsfolk on the walls could see them, “stirring pity by their cries as well as by their gestures.” These prisoners, “had been instructed what to say at the appointed moment” and at Tornicius’s signal, made a plea for the wall’s surrender, ignoring the emperor completely and focusing entirely upon the people.

To the emperor they said nothing, but addressed their remarks to the people. They begged them not to treat with contempt men of their own race and their own families, nor bear to watch themselves, a pitiable sight, being hacked into pieces before their very eyes, like victims at a sacrifice. They warned us not to tempt Providence by making light of a sovereign such as the world had never seen before, one whom they themselves knew well by experience. He could have destroyed them even then, they said, and he could have treated them as enemies, but no, -- till that moment he had put

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<sup>147</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 215.

<sup>148</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 215.

<sup>149</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 216.

off the massacre, sparing their lives in order to do us a favor. Thereupon, by way of contrast, they gave a dramatic account of the terrible deeds of our ruler. They described how in the beginning of his reign he had raised very high the hopes of the city, only to bring us down from the clouds to the edge of a precipice. Such were the main points touched on by these prisoners.<sup>150</sup>

This disturbing display of power and mercy is highly reminiscent of the plea made by the repentant Antiochene rebels to Theodosius II hundreds of years before. Both juxtapose the power and just right of the legitimate emperor to destroy his ungrateful subjects if he wished with his merciful restraint from doing so due to his love for those under his custody.

However, this theatrical, emotional performance was unsuccessful, and the “people’s loyalty still did not waver.”<sup>151</sup>

The determinative importance of the personal performance of a would-be-emperor ultimately broke this stalemate. The defenders began to fire upon the rebels (it is unclear whether any time had elapsed between the presentation of the prisoners or whether they had been withdrawn yet) even though the latter were out of range. However, by straining one of the stone-throwing machines too far, a group of defenders managed to send a particularly large stone directly at Tornicius. The stone missed him, “but so frightened him and his staff that they took to their heels.” Furthermore, “the panic and confusion caused among them by this one incident not only broke their ranks but made them retire to their own rampart.”<sup>152</sup>

Stunningly, this “one event marked the change in their fortunes.”<sup>153</sup> The rebels, unlikely to get the chance of another unopposed entrance, having failed to win the loyalty of the citizen defenders and finally having experienced the shameful retreat of their claimant,

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<sup>150</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 216-17.

<sup>151</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 217.

<sup>152</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 217.

<sup>153</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 217.

began to retreat and disperse, conceding the arena of conflict before the wall and ultimately fleeing the city's environs in disorder. Meanwhile, Constantine, remembering his earlier repulse, did not attempt to follow the rebels, but rather awaited the return of the loyal eastern armies. Tornicius attempted to besiege a number of fortresses in the immediate area, but his viability in the eyes of his followers and foes alike had disintegrated and his army melted away "cursing" his name. His failure at the theater of the gate had proved him an illegitimate usurper, not a legitimate emperor, and consequently his following evaporated.

Now, with his position secure, it was Constantine's turn to play the magnanimous emperor by offering clemency to the rebels, except for Tornicius and another rebel leader, who suffered a dismal encore before Constantinople's walls when the emperor, observing the arrival of his foe, determined to violate his clemency in their two cases, condemning both to death. Afterwards, Constantine decided to confirm his mastery of the city and its walls with a lavish triumph.<sup>154</sup>

We must certainly make some allowance for the agenda of Michael Psellus, an experienced, literate courtier. His testimony is vivid, dramatic and full of deliberate oppositions, such as the respective reactions of Constantine and Tornicius to a projectile aimed at their person. However, Psellus is also a historian famous for his balanced, psychologically complex portraits of emperors. His *Chronographia* certainly fails if its a paeon to Constantine IX, who is painted on the one hand as a well-meaning, spirited man who took his responsibilities seriously, but also as a ruler whose inconstant temperament and inability to judge character jeopardized his relationships with his subordinates and impaired his virtues.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, Psellus was an actual eyewitness to the events he describes, making

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<sup>154</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 219-20.

<sup>155</sup> Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine rulers*, 260.

his emphasis on the visual and auditory constraints imposed by the wall especially authoritative.

Psellus's grudge match between imperial candidates demonstrates the determinative role townsfolk could play from a walltop. Just as when a city was threatened with invasion, citizens had to determine whether to open their gates or close them in allegiance to the reigning emperor, but in this case, the besieger also claimed their rightful allegiance. The course of the entire engagement was based heavily upon the loyalty of the townsfolk, and the primary means of influencing this loyalty were the respective performances of both candidates and their ability to fulfill ideals. Indeed, both emperors are so concerned with winning this allegiance that they occasionally miss opportunities to solve their problems by more practical means, most notably when Tornicius forbears forcing entrance through unguarded gates.

Not all would-emperors were as forbearing as Tornicius. Only a matter of decades after his 1040 repulse, the future emperor Alexios Komnenos approached the walls of Constantinople at the head of a rebel army.<sup>156</sup> However, in her *Alexiad*, Anna Komnena portrays her father's entrance into the city as far more cynical. When Alexios approached the city, the sitting emperor had a number of disciplined units of mercenaries available, including the Varangian guard, which was famously composed of globetrotting Scandinavian émigrés and adventurers. In this case, where no local townsfolk manned the wall, they had little influence over events. In light of this fact, Alexios did not undertake to win the loyalty of the entire complement of defenders by a grand public exhibition of his legitimacy and power, but only to quietly suborn a single unit of mercenaries into opening a gate under their jurisdiction at a crucial moment.

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<sup>156</sup> Anna Komnene, *The Alexiad*, 71.

While, as with Tornicius, Alexios's entrance depended upon securing the loyalty of wall defenders, Alexios did not seek or gain the kind of triumphal, legitimate invitation Tornicius held out in the hope of. One of his loyal subordinates, George Palaiologos simply covertly climbed the wall in the middle of the night, waited with the traitorous unit until daylight, and then, when Alexios's army marched on the wall armored for battle, flung open the gates.<sup>157</sup>

However, a forced entrance could bring political consequences, because like any other entry made by violence and not public consent, it was bound to leave troops free to plunder and ravage at will. While Tornicius's forbearance served as a public display of his mercy, Alexios's cold-blooded incursion produced inauspicious results.

Once inside they [the Komnenan troops] scattered in all directions, in the main streets, at crossroads and in alleyways, in their cruelty sparing neither houses nor churches nor even the most sacred sanctuaries; in fact they gathered from them heaps of booty. They did refrain from murder, but all other crimes were committed with complete and reckless disregard for decency. What was worse was the fact that even the native-born soldiers did not abstain from such excesses; they seemed to forget themselves, debasing their normal habits and shamelessly following the example of the barbarians.<sup>158</sup>

As this harsh verdict issued from the pen of Alexios Komnenos's own daughter, whose deep concern with authoring a balanced biography aside, had every reason to downplay the savage commencement of her father's reign, is damning indeed.

An emperor who actively besieged an imperial city jeopardized his performance as a benevolent protector of cities, and indeed risked appearing as the very thing he claimed to oppose: a barbarian violator of urban space and an enemy of Christian Roman civilization.

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<sup>157</sup> Anna Komnene, *The Alexiad*, 72-3.

<sup>158</sup> Anna Komnene, *The Alexiad*, 74.

As strongly as they distinguished urban and outside space, Byzantines distinguished legitimate and illegitimate passage through walls. The distinction was founded upon the welcome of the emperor by the city: the celebratory opening of the gates to him. An illegitimate entrance was one made by force after the closure of the gates: the violation of the wall. The opening or closure of the gates symbolized the will of the city, whoever was responsible for the choice. Emperors sought legitimate entrances and avoided illegitimate ones. Indeed, in the late Antique period, a would-be-emperor actually needed to receive invitations to enter and be proclaimed emperor from the gate of each city he passed to be considered legitimate by all of them.<sup>159</sup> Indeed, even after imperial authority was definitively centered around entrances in Constantinople, the willingness of some other city to open its gates to a usurper built a case for his legitimacy and the refusal of some town to play along and open their gates could stop an attempted coup in its tracks.

Byzantine culture and political theory certainly strongly distinguished between legal and illegal passage into urban space. The only legitimate place to pass through the city wall was at the city gates. *The Digest of Justinian* makes the distinction in unequivocal terms:

.... It is an offense punishable with capital punishment to violate city walls, for example, by moving up ladders and climbing over or by any other means. It is unlawful for Roman citizens to use any other egress than the portals; for to do so is a hostile act and an abomination.<sup>160</sup>

In the *Digest*, violation of the wall transforms the violator into an enemy of society. As described before, despite the occasional classical allusion to some particularly doughty character as a “Breaker of Walls” and the heroic portrayal of Byzantine armies that conquer foreign cities, the violators of good Christian, Roman cities are demonic figures in Byzantine

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<sup>159</sup> Sabine MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, c1981, 46-7.

<sup>160</sup> “Digest of Justinian,” 26.

literature. In his description of the 904 Arab attack on Thessaloniki, John Kaminiates labels the lead Arab besieger an “untamable beast,” a “felon” who “flaunted a style of behavior singularly appropriate to the wild animal after which he was named and for whose ferocious ways and ungovernable temper he was more than a match.”<sup>161</sup> When narrating the 614 Persian Sack of Jerusalem Antiochus Strategos writes of the Persian soldiers that “they entered in a mighty wrath, gnashing their teeth in violent fury; like evil beasts they roared, bellowed like lions, hissed like ferocious serpents, and slew all whom they found. Like mad dogs they tore with their teeth the flesh of the faithful, and respected none at all, neither male nor female, neither young nor old, neither child nor baby, neither priest nor monk, neither virgin nor widow...”<sup>162</sup> In Byzantine terms, to break a wall, to publically violate sacred space and prosecute aggression on those within was an illegitimate, criminal and even inhuman act, at least when suffered by a Byzantine city.

It was very much possible for an emperor who besieged his own cities to end up branding himself as a bestial tyrant. Niketas Choniates’s *Annals*, which cover the century leading up to the traumatic 1204 Sack of Constantinople as well as the event’s immediate aftermath, emphatically labels Andronikos I (reign 1183-85) a tyrant due to his savage sieges of his own cities.

According to Choniates, in 1184 the populations of several cities, including the Nicaeans, Prusaens, Lopadians and later the Thessalonians rose in revolt against Andronikos’ rule. While Choniates already considers Andronikos a tyrant due to his bloody, usurpation of the throne through the murder of the ten-year-old emperor Alexios II, the

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<sup>161</sup> John Kaminiates, *Letters*, 24.

<sup>162</sup> Antiochus Strategos, “The Sack of Jerusalem (614),” Fordham University, New York, Internet Medieval Sourcebook, edited by Paul Halsall, accessed February 2014, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/strategos1.html>.

Dowager Empress Maria and a string of powerful nobles, his description of these sieges is one of his most lengthy exhibit of the emperor's tyrannical behavior.

For Choniates, Andronikos' willingness to violate city walls and subject the civilians of Nicaea, Prusa and Lopadion to massacre, plunder and torture brands him an animalistic, demonic enemy of Christian Roman society. As we have described, in ordinary warfare the fate of a captured city was likely to be worse the longer it had held out. Worst of all, a city taken by force was deprived of all ability to regulate their surrender through negotiation, and indeed, officers and commanders were often entirely incapable of preventing their men from engaging in a violent sack in such a case, even if they wished to do so.

In Choniates's narrative, Andronikos consistently subjects his rebellious cities to a sack. In the case of Prusa which refused to surrender and had its walls broken by siege engines, Andronikos committed a widespread massacre both of the noble leaders and of the general population. Niketas explicitly states that Andornikos's treatment of the Prusaeans, while perhaps in accord with the law of war, invalidated his legitimacy as emperor.

Andronikos entered the city and lodged within, but he did not conduct himself as a meek emperor and savior before the Prusaeans, who were former and future subjects even though they had rebelled for a time, but like a ravenous lion falling on unpenned and shepherdless flocks, he broke the neck of one, devoured, the inward parts of another and did even worse things to a third; the rest he scattered in the direction of cliffs and mountains and chasms. In this fashion did Andronikos behave. Since there had been no preceding formal compact or truce with the citizenry of Prusa, nor had a voluntary surrender been negotiated, and as the city had been taken by force, he utterly ruined and destroyed the vast majority, portioning out his savage anger in manifold and diverse punishments.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Niketas Choniates, *Annals*, 159-60.



In this passage, it is explicitly Andronikos's treatment of Prusa as a hostile foreign city as though he was on campaign against the Arabs that de-legitimizes his authority. The ordinary dynamics of siege warfare are complicated by the additional definitions of civil warfare.

Indeed, the line between a civil war and a foreign invasion was often hazy: foreign armies and pretenders often cooperated, making the distinction between a legitimate ruler with foreign backing and a foreign aggressor manipulating a puppet ruler an ambiguous one.

For example, according to Anna Komnena, the Norman leader Robert Guiscard framed his 1081 Norman invasion of the empire's Balkan territories as a campaign to restore the rightful emperor Michael Doukas to the throne. The politics of the situation are complex: a Michael Doukas had indeed been emperor from 1071 to 1078, at which time he was overthrown by one of his generals, Nikephoros Botaneiates, who was in turn overthrown in 1081 by Alexios Komnenos, Anna's father. The real Michael Doukas had been Robert Guiscard's father in law, giving the Norman a pretext for involvement, but according to Anna, in this tumultuous political climate it was difficult to tell whether the man the Normans presented truly was or was not the former emperor.

Regardless of the truth, the ability of Robert to characterize his invasion as a restoration hinged upon the presentation of "Michael" before the walls of Dyrrakhion, a highly strategic city on the Adriatic coast that the Normans were besieging. In Anna's narrative, the event began when the people of the city started to suspect that the Norman incursion was more than a temporary raid and their commander, George Palaiologos, put the question to the Norman besiegers from the walltop.

Palaiologos ordered the question to be put from top of the walls why he had come. 'To restore Michael, my kinsman, back to the throne from which he was deposed, to his correct office; to punish the outrages inflicted on him; in a word, to avenge him.' Palaiologos' men gave their reply: 'If we see Michael and recognize him, we will without hesitation make obeisance before him and surrender the town.' Hearing this, Robert at once gave orders that "Michael" should be dressed in magnificent robes

and displayed to the citizens. He was led out with an imposing escort, loudly acclaimed with all kinds of musical instruments and cymbals, and shown to them. As soon as they saw him, a thousand insults rained down on him from above; he was a complete stranger, they yelled.<sup>164</sup>

The presentation of “Michael” shows the ambiguity such pieces of political theater often had. On the one hand, it appears to have been unsuccessful in the immediate sense: the defenders reject his authority and respond with jeering and insults. Proper imperial pomp was clearly insufficient to overawe the defenders into surrender.

On the other hand, the defenders do confess that should the actual Michael Doukas be produced, they would have to submit to him over Alexios Komnenos, who was undeniably a usurper. Moreover, while the commander Palaiologos’s men appear to have been able to steer the responses of the defenders on the walltop, the event had a broader audience. Anna relates that many Byzantines from other areas began to go over to ‘Michael’ after his appearance at Dyrrachion. In her words, “countless forces as thick as winter snowflakes were rallying around him [Robert Guiscard] from all directions and the more frivolous folk, believing that the pretender Michael was in truth the emperor, were joining him.”<sup>165</sup> Indeed the pretender gained enough support that Alexios was forced to seek alliances with the Turks and the Venetians to burgeon his depleted forces.<sup>166</sup>

It is easy to see how the possession of a pretender could be useful to a foreign invader. The hope that cities might surrender even to a foreign-backed claimant was often justified. Anna Komnena records how during the reign of her father the Cumans invaded the Balkans armed with a man claiming to be the son of Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes

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<sup>164</sup> Komnene, *The Alexiad*, 110.

<sup>165</sup> Komnene, *ibid.*, 111.

<sup>166</sup> Komnene, *ibid.*, 111.

(reigned 1068-71), having “decided to march in full force against the Roman Empire, on the pretext of re-establishing him on the ancestral throne.”<sup>167</sup>

This strategy quickly achieved success: at the city of Goloe “the inhabitants threw into chains the commander of the garrison and handed him over to the Cumans, whom they welcomed with cries of joy.” This single surrender had a domino effect, and “the people of the neighboring towns, Diampolis and the rest, however, saw the Cumans had gained possession of Goloe; they therefore capitulated, welcomed them with pleasure, surrendered and what is more, acclaimed pseudo-Diogenes.”<sup>168</sup> Even if Anna may have exaggerated the “joy” of these cities, and made no mention of any *fear* that might have motivated their surrenders, her narrative reveals the murkiness that the presence of multiple imperial candidates might lend to the ordinary task of urban defense.

Urban surrenders often followed such a domino pattern: if an imperial candidate or commander proved he could conquer one strongly fortified city by force or that he could convince its population or leaders of his own legitimacy, a whole slew of nearby cities were likely to open their gates without a fight. This pattern is attested to by multiple sources: John of Nikiu describes how when the Byzantine general Nicetas succeeded in forcing one city loyal to a ‘usurper’ to surrender, all the cities of the province followed suit. “And Nicetas directed a combined and powerful attack on the city of Manûf and compelled it to open its gates. Then all the cities of Egypt sent in their submission to him.”<sup>169</sup>

In ordinary warfare a commander who made faithless promises would soon find himself unable to convince other cities to surrender, his unreliability having been

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<sup>167</sup> Komnene, *ibid.*, 263-4.

<sup>168</sup> Komnene, *ibid.*, 266.

<sup>169</sup> John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, 175.

demonstrated. However, in civil warfare he would also certainly forfeit any claim to be a rightful liege. Niketas Choniates describes how during the Latin invasion of the empire after the 1204 Sack of Constantinople, the Venetians and Crusaders attempted to pose Baldwin of Flanders as a legitimate Byzantine Emperor, achieving a good number of surrenders but ultimately facing resistance due to their failure not only to act as a good liege but even to remain faithful to their treaties as would be expected of a foreign invader with the smallest shred of honor.

When the duty of a rightful emperor to defend city walls was elevated to an explicitly religious duty, such ideals could become powerful weapons. For example, one strategy used to placate enemies was the performance of Christian ritual and devotion on the walltop. Byzantine history is rife with anecdotes in which the procession of an icon around the parapet results in the miraculous deliverance of the city. While the prospect of divine intervention was purely wishful thinking, if the attacker claimed imperial legitimacy or even identified as a Christian, it made attacking the walls not only a political faux pas, but a sacrilegious crime against God. According to Niketas Choniates, many cities made declarations of Christian piety when threatened by either Christian invaders such as the Crusaders or by tyrannical emperors such as Andronikos.

Some cities offered surrender without any acceptance of passage or opening of gates, or otherwise qualified the opening, for example by accepting the entrance of the leaders but denying the entrance to the unreliable bulk of the besieging army.

When Henry, the brother of the new Latin “emperor” of Constantinople, warned the “inhabitants” of the Greek city of Orestias that he would never abandon a siege unless they “came to terms” or he defeated them by “the law of warfare,” the inhabitants refused to negotiate. According to Niketas, Henry had recently sacked the city of Apros, which had

surrendered peacefully and “behaved savagely towards its inhabitants, giving them over to slaughter as though the slain were sheep or cattle.”<sup>170</sup> The townsfolk of neighboring Orestias were not quick to forget this.

At the mere mention of treaties, the inhabitants responded in vexation that henceforth Romans would never trust in oaths sworn to by Latins because the Latins were absolutely untrustworthy in the assurances they gave and treated those who went over to them with brutality; the Romans had come to know them to be most merciless to captives of war.<sup>171</sup>

Henry pressed the siege of Orestias, but the citizens, having no other option, put up a vigorous defense, resisting on the battlements and mounting a number of bold sallies, destroying Henry’s siege weapons and killing many of his most important officers. Ultimately, the supplies of the besiegers ran out and their camp was struck with disease, and the siege had to be lifted.

In many of these examples it might appear that when considering whether to open or close their gates that in most cases cities made a single choice and stuck with it. However, there are numerous examples of cities drastically changing their reception of a representative of imperial authority, shifting their stance as the situation changed and based on the actions of a claimant.

An anecdote recounted by the seventh-century historian Theophylact Simocatta establishes the power of citizens to defend their interests with their walls by tailoring the reception to the degree of legitimacy they believed an imperial representative’s actions merited.

Simocatta describes how in 594, the Emperor Maurice’s brother, Peter, campaigned to expel a substantial force of Slavene barbarian from the empire’s Balkan provinces.

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<sup>170</sup> Niketas Choniates, *Annals*, 340.

<sup>171</sup> Niketas Choniates, *Annals*, 340-1.

According to Simocatta, after Peter's initial victories against the Sclavenes, the Byzantine cities along his march competed to receive and entertain their distinguished rescuer. While Simocatta describes Peter as more interested in pressing his military advantage than being the guest of honor at local feast days, Peter accepted several such invitations.

The political ritualization of entrance and exit is illustrated by the reception granted Peter by the city of Asemus. According to Simocatta,

When the inhabitants of the city had learned that the general was expected, they came out of the city to meet Peter, and made his arrival at the city splendid. From bygone times a garrison had been organized in this city for the protection of the citizens, since the barbarians swooped down like lightning around this city quite frequently. Accordingly, when the garrison stationed in this city learned that the general was about to arrive, they took up the standards, which Romans call bands, and went out of the city; then, arrayed in armour, they welcomed the general most gloriously.<sup>172</sup>

This martial welcome of Peter by the citizens of Asemus evokes Roman traditions and is simultaneously a display of civic pride and a declaration of loyalty to the Byzantine state as represented by Peter. So far, the imperial government's authority over urban populations appears to be not only unquestioned but even actively celebrated.

However, Peter's next actions revealed that the citizens of Asemus held a far more nuanced, contractual view of imperial power that belied their declarations of unquestioning submission. According to Simocatta, the city's presentation of their dapper garrison had an unintended consequence: the campaign-preoccupied Peter was so impressed with the "magnificence of the city's soldiers" that he "attempted to remove them from the city and include them amongst his own forces."<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Simocatta, *History*, 182.

<sup>173</sup> Simocatta, *History*, 182.

The citizens and the garrison rejected this demand and in doing so articulated and defended a particular view of the community's military and political position. Since the empire's strategic situation relied upon the capacity of cities to fend for themselves for a substantial stretch of time with minimal state assistance, the possession of a strong garrison (while expensive) might ensure a city's survival. Simocatta corresponds to this view writing that Asemus merited a permanent garrison "since the barbarians swooped down like lightning around this city quite frequently."<sup>174</sup>

To this end, the city rejected Peter's demand by appealing to a higher authority and "the citizens and the city's garrison produced a decree of the emperor Justin which granted the city this successive armed protection."<sup>175</sup> When Peter, then encamped outside the city walls, ignored this defense, things quickly escalated. The garrison took refuge in the city's church. Peter ordered the bishop to expel them but the bishop refused, at which point Peter sent a party of soldiers to drag the garrison out by force, at which point the garrison troops armed themselves and began to fortify the sanctuary against assault. The soldiers were turned back by the garrison's barricades and by their unwillingness to violate sacred ground. Finally, Peter sought to have the recalcitrant bishop dragged outside the city "in dishonor" to the camp, at which point the citizens had had enough and undid their grand welcome with a correspondingly powerful rejection. According to Simocatta,

When the citizens had witnessed this, they all assembled together and forcibly thrust out of the city the man dispatched by the general against the priest; after closing the gates in the wall, they hymned the emperor with acclamations and covered the general with insults. Peter was encamped in a fortified enclosure about a mile from the city. But since his enterprise was disgraceful, he left the city and proceeded to

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<sup>174</sup> Simocatta, *History*, 182.

<sup>175</sup> Simocatta, *History*, 182.

march forwards, escorted by great curses from the city.<sup>176</sup>

The disparity between Peter's welcome and his rejection could hardly be more glaring. He is received with formal celebration and expelled with rude curses.

If Peter's reception was obliquely associated with the city's walls, they were the explicit scene of his rebuff. Indeed, while the welcome might be considered almost an entirely formal ceremony, the rejection has teeth in the form of a forcible expulsion and the barring of the city gates. Indeed, the closing of the gates must be seen as to some degree a military as well as political act.

Of course, the citizens were careful not to formally reject imperial authority: their repulse was justified by an imperial decree and their curses of an actual government representative were mingled with praises to the emperor himself. Their response was sophisticated and prudent, both conservative and subversive.

In Simocatta's narrative, the city walls are stages at which the citizens broadcast their allegiance. In both the positive and the negative, the display is described as collective, involving the body of citizens, and as taking place at the city gate. Even if we grant a leadership role in these events to local aristocrats or the city's bishop, the story of Peter and Asemus visibly contradicts the assertion that walls are instruments used by the state to control civilians. Here a community expressed and asserted its own interests through and by its walls.

In the example of Asemus, the character of the reception Peter receives was intimately related to Peter's ability to fulfill ideals of imperial leadership in the eyes of the townsfolk. When the citizens saw him as an effective protector, the gates were opened in festive welcome. But when he threatened to weaken the city's defenses and furthermore

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<sup>176</sup> Simocatta, *History*, 183.



violated law and religion to do so, he became a tyrant, and the closure of the gates was a just act.

## 8. Conclusion

Byzantine city walls need to be understood as functional political structures. Historians have traditionally viewed Byzantine city walls as means by which the state controlled Byzantine citizens and populations, but the relationship was often quite the opposite. While historians have examined several aspects of walls, such as their role in economic regulation, imperial propaganda and military defense, only recently have scholars have begun to analyze in any depth the most important function of walls: the selective regulation of entrance.

Entering or exiting a city wall was an important event with military and political dimensions. Historians have indeed analyzed this aspect, but focused heavily upon the way walls regulated the daily life and commerce of ordinary people. In this sense, walls are understood to be oppressive, regulatory structures that enforce property divisions, state oversight of markets and generally legitimate the dominant elite.

Byzantine city walls were first and foremost fortifications in a literal sense: structures built by one set of people to protect themselves from another. A city wall, however, performed the task of a fortification in a particular way: like a cell membrane, it entirely enclosed a given space and selectively regulated passage into and out of it. In doing so, a city wall created and maintained a secure space for a given community and its rules, culture and resources. Emperors claimed authority over this passage, but required the acceptance of whoever held the gate to do so. Walls were not static but alive because judgment was required in gatekeeping both individually and collectively. While we generally think of walls as structures states use to control people, walls actually allowed people to control rulers. In Byzantine history, the ability of communities to control the function of their own walls was a

significant issue at the very highest levels of politics.

Walls were political arenas in which civilians negotiated imperial authority by force, performance and persuasion. Since the imperial monarchy zealously maintained a monopoly over all political and military activity, citizens had to operate within the confines of this monopoly. Byzantine citizens were careful to justify their participation in military and political activity on walls. A profession of loyalty to rightful imperial authority invariably accompanied rejection of any actual representative of imperial authority, from a minor official to the emperor himself. Communities also carefully fit acts of collective defense into legitimate narratives, such as saintly intervention or valiant soldierly heroism. Communities presented the most blatantly rebellious acts as the most steadfastly orthodox, hoping that whoever ended up on the throne in Constantinople would accept the story.

While city walls are virtually extinct in the modern world, for almost ten thousand years, from the Neolithic development of agriculture to the beginning of the modern era, they were ubiquitous, encircling cities from West Africa to China. The walled city, with its surrounding constellation of agricultural villages, was the basic unit of human civilization. As historians, it is important for us to understand how city walls informed and affected human activity without being prejudiced by our very limited experience with entirely different contemporary species of barriers.

I could have deployed my thesis that walls could be instruments of communal political decisions in respect to a great many periods and regions more congenial than the Byzantine Empire. For example, if I made this argument for ancient Greek city-states or late medieval Italian towns, my task would have been a far simpler one. In these places, walls were often trumpeted as permanent protectors of communal liberty, or else the power of a fairly broad local elite class. Sources have no qualms about discussing exactly how city walls

could limit central authority. However, by placing my thesis in context of the Byzantine Empire, I believe I have demonstrated that towns could use their walls even when they lived in a political world in which such action could be considered criminal. If communal use of walls can be revealed even beneath the jealous, authoritarian gaze of Byzantine Emperors, the politics of the gate may be a dynamic truly fundamental to the walled city.

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