

3. 'How the east was won' in the reign of Basil II

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Immortalized by his sobriquet 'the Bulgarslayer', the Byzantine emperor Basil II (976–1025) is most famous for his long military campaigns against Bulgaria. In contrast, the emperor's policy towards the empire's eastern neighbours was more usually characterized by peaceful diplomacy than by warfare.¹ Yet, while the eastern frontier remained a low military priority for most of Basil's reign, it was not a region that could be safely neglected. In the decades immediately preceding Basil's reign, Byzantine armies had taken advantage of the waning powers of the Abbasid caliphate and extended Byzantine territorial boundaries into Cilicia, northern Syria and northern Mesopotamia. The result was a radical redefinition of a Byzantine east which for the previous three centuries had been limited to the Anatolian plateau. None-the-less, when Basil II came to the throne in 976, few of the territorial gains of this rapid expansion had been fully consolidated.² In this chapter I want to ask how Byzantine authority in the newly conquered eastern territories was consolidated during Basil's reign. Given the geographical size of the region in question and the chronological length of the reign, I shall discuss only one dimension of the eastern frontier experience. Rather than analysing the empire's dealings with neighbouring states or the military administration of the frontier itself,³ I shall focus on relationships between Constantinople and

¹ A detailed analysis of the empire's dealings with its eastern neighbours, both Muslim and Christian, during Basil's reign is offered by J.H. Forsyth, 'The Chronicle of Yahya ibn Sa'īd al-Antakī' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Ann Arbor, MI, 1977), chaps. 7–9. See J.-Cl. Cheynet's chapter in this volume (Chapter 4) for Basil's greater military attention to the west rather than the east.

² For more background see the chapters by J. Shepard and J.-Cl. Cheynet in this volume, (Chapters 2 and 4).

³ For the military organization of the eastern frontier in this period see N. Oikonomidēs, *Les Listes de préséance byzantines des IX^e et X^e siècles* (Paris, 1972), 344–6, 354–63; N.

the diverse populations who lived on the empire's eastern periphery, above all the inhabitants of the Muslim emirates annexed by Basil's predecessors in the second half of the tenth century. My principal question will be whether Constantinople sought to control the periphery directly or whether it admitted a more flexible and devolved relationship.⁴

Economic background

It is important at the beginning of this discussion to establish the key background context against which political relationships between the Constantinopolitan centre and eastern periphery developed during the later tenth and early eleventh centuries. In the first section of this chapter I shall argue that this context was a cycle of severe economic contraction on the eastern frontier followed by a swift return to prosperity. Moreover, I shall stress the extent to which this recovery was generated by a heterodox frontier population that included large non-Greek-speaking, non-Chalcedonian, and even non-Christian communities.

It is clear that the eastwards advance of Byzantine armies during the tenth century caused significant damage to the economy of the former Muslim emirates. This damage was frequently deliberate, with the intensive raiding of rural hinterlands often forming the prelude to the conquest of important urban centres. During campaigns against the emirate of Melitene in the 920s and 930s, Byzantine forces repeatedly 'destroyed the surrounding hamlets and villages by fire'.⁵ The same strategy was adopted by the emperor Nikephoros Phokas in Cilicia and northern Syria in the 960s.⁶ Contemporary Arab geographers and historians report at length on the incidence of depopulation caused by the Byzantine

Oikonomidès, 'L'organisation de la frontière orientale de Byzance aux X^e-XI^e siècles et le taktikon de l'Escorial', *Actes du XIV^e congrès international des études byzantines* I (Bucharest, 1974), 285-302; in the same volume H. Ahrweiler, 'La frontière et les frontières de Byzance en Orient', 216-19; H.J. Kühn, *Die byzantinische Armee im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert. Studien zur Organisation der Tagmata* (Vienna, 1991), 158-69; W. Treadgold, *Byzantium and its Army 284-1081* (Stanford, CA, 1995), 114-15.

⁴ This chapter owes a large debt both in terms of argument and evidence to G. Dagron, 'Minorités ethniques et religieuses dans l'Orient byzantin à la fin du X^e et au XI^e siècles: l'immigration syrienne', *TM* 6 (1976), 177-216. Although I do not agree with all Dagron's conclusions, I hope that my chapter will draw attention to the immense importance of his article for the history of the medieval Byzantine east. For more on the idea of loose hegemony rather than direct control of the frontier see Shepard's chapter in this volume; see Cheynet's chapter for military administration of the frontier under Basil.

⁵ Theoph. Cont., 415. For more on Byzantium's policy towards Melitene see Shepard's chapter in this volume.

⁶ Yahya ibn Sa'id al-Antaki, *Histoire*, ed. and trans. I. Kratchkovsky and A. Vasiliev, *PO* 18 (1923), 826.

advance, as Muslims who would not convert to Christianity were forced to leave conquered territories. When Tarsos in Cilicia fell in 965, many Muslims left the city for Antioch. When Antioch itself then surrendered in 969, these refugees moved on to the Syrian coastal town of Balanias.⁷

Yet, although widespread devastation and depopulation may have been the immediate consequence of Byzantine conquest, economic contraction appears to have been relatively short-lived. Outgoing populations were often replaced by in-comers, many of whom were non-Chalcedonian Christians. Some years ago Gilbert Dagron used tenth- and eleventh-century chronicle evidence contained within the twelfth-century history of Michael the Syrian to demonstrate that by the later 950s large numbers of monophysite Syrians were beginning to migrate to the former emirate of Melitene.⁸ It is also clear that many Armenians came to live in former Muslim-controlled territories. By the final decade of the tenth century their numbers in Cilicia and Syria were such that Armenian monophysite episcopal sees were established at Tarsos and Antioch.⁹ In northern Syria monks professing various eastern Christian faiths were increasingly to be found in the countryside. Armenian monasteries were recorded in the Amanos mountains during the reign of Basil himself.¹⁰ Evidence from eleventh-century manuscript colophons and the archaeological record indicates that Georgian Chalcedonian monks were active in northern Syria.¹¹ They were certainly present at, and may have controlled, the monastery of St Symeon Stylites the Younger, on the Wondrous Mountain.¹²

However, it was not purely eastern Christian migrants who contributed to the demographic and economic recovery of the Byzantine east. While Arab historians and geographers report that Byzantine conquests often

⁷ Yahya, PO 18, 797; al-Mukaddasi, *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions*, trans. B.A. Collins (Reading, 1994), 147; Dagron, 'Minorités ethniques', 180–81.

⁸ Dagron, 'Minorités ethniques', 189–90; Michael the Syrian: *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1169–99)*, ed. and trans. J.B. Chabot (Paris, 1905–10), 125–7.

⁹ Stephen of Taron: *Des Stephanos von Taron armenische Geschichte*, trans. H. Gelzer and A. Burckhardt (Leipzig, 1909), 196; N.G. Garsoïan, 'Armenian Integration into the Byzantine Empire', in H. Ahrweiler and A.E. Laiou, eds, *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire* (Washington, DC, 1998), 56–7. For the migration of Armenians to Byzantium see Shepard's chapter in this volume.

¹⁰ *Armenia and the Crusades in the Tenth to Twelfth Centuries: the Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa*, trans. A.E. Dostorian (Lanham, NY, 1993), 47–8.

¹¹ W.Z. Djobadze, *Materials for the Study of Georgian Monasteries in the Western Environs of Antioch-on-the-Orontes* (Louvain, 1976); W.Z. Djobadze, *Archaeological Investigations in the Region West of Antioch-on-the-Orontes* (Stuttgart, 1986).

¹² Djobadze, *Archaeological Investigations*, 204–11. By the end of the eleventh century Saint Nikon of the Black Mountain also noted the presence of Chalcedonian Armenian monks at St Symeon's monastery: Garsoïan, 'Armenian Integration', 106–8.

entailed the mass exodus of Muslims from the former emirates, either as fugitives or as enslaved prisoners of war, it is clear that many Muslims remained under Byzantine rule, or returned to their former homes after the conquests were over. In some cases the price of their residence in the empire was conversion to Christianity.¹³ However, while conversion was preferred, it may not have been mandatory. Writing in the final decades of the tenth century, the Arab geographer Ibn Hawqal lamented that many Muslims resided in Byzantine territory happy to pay a head tax.¹⁴ In 1048/9 Ibn Butlan, an Arab Christian doctor from Baghdad travelling in northern Syria, observed a mixed Christian and Muslim population cultivating a flourishing countryside near Antioch. In one village on the road between Aleppo and Antioch he noted the presence of a mosque as well as four churches. When he arrived at the port of Laodikeia he observed that while the town's main mosque had been converted into a church, the local Muslim population were able to worship in another mosque; they also retained their own judge (*qadi*).¹⁵

The prosperity of the Byzantine east in the later tenth and early eleventh centuries was also encouraged by commercial exchange with Muslims outside the empire. The best evidence of the importance of long-distance trade across the eastern frontier comes from the Treaty of Safar drawn up between Byzantium and its northern Syrian client state of Aleppo in 969. According to the commercial clauses of this agreement, goods conveyed by overland caravan included gold, silver, silk, precious stones, linen, Greek brocades and animals.¹⁶ So important was this caravan that when civil war broke out in the later 970s between Basil II and the general Bardas Skleros, imperial and rebel forces fought a battle in the passes of the Taurus mountains to gain control of it.¹⁷ Sea-borne trade between Byzantium and the empire's Muslim neighbours also seems to have been significant. The wreck at Serçe Liman, which sank with a cargo of glass off the coast of Asia Minor, provides archaeological evidence for maritime trade between Byzantium and the Islamic east during Basil's reign itself. Copper coins of Basil II and gold quarter dinars of the contemporary Fatimid caliph al Hakim (996–1021) were found on board.¹⁸

¹³ For example at Melitene: A.A. Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes* II/2 (Brussels, 1950), 154.

¹⁴ Ibn Hawqal, *La Configuration de la terre*, trans. J.H. Kramers and G. Wiet (Beirut and Paris, 1964), 186.

¹⁵ *The Medico-Philosophical Controversy between Ibn Butlan of Baghdad and Ibn Ridwan of Cairo*, ed. and trans. J. Schlacht and M. Meyerhof (Cairo, 1937), 54–7.

¹⁶ W. Farag, 'The Truce of Safar AH 359', offprint from the Eleventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies (University of Birmingham, 1977). I am grateful to John Haldon for providing me with this. See also M. Canard, 'Les relations politiques et sociales entre Byzance et les Arabes', *DOP* 18 (1964), 52.

¹⁷ Skylitzes, 32.

¹⁸ G.F. Bass, 'A Medieval Islamic Merchant Venture', *Archaeological News* 7 (1979), 84–94.

Trade with the eastern world beyond the territorial borders of the empire may also provide the context for the economic recovery of the former emirate of Melitene. The city itself lay at the crossroads of important trading routes. To the east lay Armenia, source of highly prized silks and woollen products;¹⁹ to the south the Djazira, 'the source of all supplies for Iraq'.²⁰ Amida, located on the headwaters of the Tigris, was an established entrepôt for Byzantine linens.²¹ Less than 200 kilometres down river was Djazirat ibn Umar, situated on the junction for routes between Armenia, Byzantium, Mayafaraqin and Arran.²² Several hundred kilometres further downstream lay Mosul and Takrit.²³ The Takritan connection may have been of particular significance for the prosperity of Melitene. In his study of the migration of Syrian monophysites to the Byzantine eastern frontier, Dagron calculated that by the early eleventh century there were fifty-six Syrian churches in and around Melitene.²⁴ Many of their patrons came from Takrit. Of these, the most famous were the Banu Abu Imran. Their wealth was such that they lent Basil II enough money to support an entire Byzantine field army when he stayed in Melitene during the winter of 1022.²⁵ Their prosperity almost certainly derived from their position as merchants on the Tigris trading route. Not only did members of Banu Abu Imran live in Melitene and Takrit; others were to be found in Mosul.²⁶

Tenth-century imperial pragmatism

Thus far this chapter has argued that the agricultural and commercial activity of a variety of eastern Christian and Muslim settlers was fundamental to the recovery of the eastern periphery of the Byzantine empire in the later tenth and eleventh centuries. But the more important question for our purposes is how did the imperial authorities in Constantinople deal with this heterodox frontier population? In this section I shall argue that successive tenth-century emperors, above all Basil II, usually adopted a pragmatic approach to local governance, choosing to work with rather than against the ethnic and religious plurality of the Byzantine east.

¹⁹ Al-Mukaddasi, 329-31; Ibn Hawkal, 338; Al-Tanukhi, *Table Talk of a Mesopotamian Judge*, trans. D. Margoliouth (London, 1922), 137.

²⁰ Al-Muqaddasi, 124.

²¹ Ibid., 133.

²² Ibn Hawkal, 219.

²³ Ibid., 209, 223; al-Muqaddasi, 111.

²⁴ Dagron, 'Minorités ethniques', 194.

²⁵ Michael the Syrian, 144-5; Bar Hebraeus: *The Chronography of Gregory Abu'l Faraj, the Son of Aaron, the Hebrew Physician, Commonly Known as Bar Hebraeus*, ed. and trans. E.A. Wallis Budge (London, 1932), 178.

²⁶ Ibn Hawkal, 209.

One of the most visible manifestations of this imperial pragmatism is the extent to which emperors themselves often took practical steps to encourage the settlement and commercial enterprises of the heterodox frontier populations. In the mid-960s Nikephoros Phokas (963–69) encouraged the Syrian Jacobite patriarch to move to northern Mesopotamia from Antioch in order to escape persecution from Melkite (Chalcedonian Arab) Christians in northern Syria. The patriarch's migration then inspired a more general movement of Syrian Christians to Melitene and its hinterland.²⁷ Syrian migrants, especially merchants from Takrit, were also drawn to Melitene by more prosaic imperial inducements: the availability of tax breaks.²⁸ Imperial authorities were even anxious to retain Muslim populations within the conquered territories. Nikephoros Ouranos, Basil II's supreme commander in the east during the first decade of the eleventh century, recommended that if enemy cities surrendered voluntarily, the local inhabitants should be allowed to keep their possessions, while the leaders of the urban élite should receive presents.²⁹ Nor was this ethnic inclusiveness necessarily mere official propaganda. An eleventh-century Iraqi chronicler explicitly praised Basil II for his justice and affection for Muslims, his willingness to keep out of Muslim territory and his kindness to Muslims who entered his.³⁰

Pragmatism also seems to have been the hallmark of the way in which imperial authorities chose to administer the former emirates. Although the evidence is patchy and comes mainly from lead seals, emperors such as Basil appear to have been willing to acknowledge the logic that in regions where the everyday language of economic and fiscal exchange was not Greek, maximum benefit was likely to accrue from minimal administrative change. Of course, most modern discussions of administration in the Byzantine east usually focus on the military organization of the frontier, tracing the development of large regional duchies manned by professional troops from the centre under the hegemony of a *doux* or *katepan*, and the significance of small border themes staffed by Armenian infantry and light cavalry-men.³¹ However, underneath this military

²⁷ Dagron, 'Minorités ethniques', 186–204; Michael the Syrian, 130–32.

²⁸ Bar Hebraeus, 178. For imperial interest in the commercial potential of the east see Shepard's chapter in this volume.

²⁹ E. McGee, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the 10th Century* (Washington DC, 1995), 158.

³⁰ *Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate*, ed. and trans. H. Amedroz and D. Margoliouth (Oxford, 1920–1), VI, 119. For the pragmatic and rational governance of the frontier in accordance with the manpower and financial resources available to Byzantium see in this volume Cheynet and Shepard.

³¹ See, for example, Oikonomides, *Les Listes*, 344–6, 354–63; Kühn, *Die byzantinische Armee*, 158–69; Treadgold, *Byzantium and its Army*, 114–15; see also Cheynet in this volume.

administrative tier, which may itself have been much more flexible and *ad hoc* in its arrangements than contemporary Byzantine bureaucratic *taktika* imply, I would suggest that there persisted a civil administration very similar to that which had existed under the previous Muslim regimes³².

One strong sign that pre-existing administrative structures were left intact by tenth-century emperors comes from the fact that the seals of judicial and fiscal officials ubiquitous elsewhere in the Byzantine empire are rarely to be found on the eastern frontier. For example, there are hardly any extant seals from the east of *kommerkiarioi* (customs officials), despite the clear importance of trade in these regions and the explicit imperial desire to promote commerce visible in areas such as Melitene.³³ Moreover, even in those instances where seals of bureaucrats familiar elsewhere in the empire are found in an eastern context, it seems possible that the primary function of their owners was to act as the overseers of indigenous tax collectors and judicial officers. This hypothesis certainly seems to be the best explanation for the survival from the eastern frontier of a large number of seals belonging to *kouratores* or *episkeptitai*, officials closely associated in the rest of the Byzantine empire with imperial estate management. Hitherto it has usually been argued that the appearance of such seals in an eastern context indicates that large areas of the Muslim emirates were turned into crown estates managed directly by imperial officials.³⁴ Yet I would argue that in the east *kouratores* were not estate officials at all, but instead plenipotentiary figures placed at the head of an infrastructure of indigenous administrators. In this role they acted more as the guarantors of tribute than as the managers of imperial immovable property.

The viability of this association between *kourator* and tribute is most strongly supported by the historical account of the creation of the *kouratoreia* at Melitene, established when that city was conquered in 934: 'they

³² See Shepard's chapter in this volume for the incidence of local dignitaries left in charge at Melitene from the 920s to 961.

³³ Thus far I have managed to find only one example from an eastern context: G. Schlumberger, *Sigillographie de l'empire byzantin* (Paris, 1884), 312, no. 157.

³⁴ N. Oikonomidès, 'L'évolution de l'organisation administrative de l'empire byzantin au XI^e siècle', *TM* 6 (1976), 138; Kaplan, *Les Hommes et la terre à Byzance du VI^e au XI^e siècle* (Paris, 1992), 316–17; J.D. Howard-Johnston, 'Crown Lands and the Defence of Imperial Authority in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries', *ByzF* 21 (1995), 88–94. Howard-Johnston provides a detailed list of such officials from the eastern frontier, to which should be added: John, *spatharokandidatos* and *kourator* of Antioch (J.C. Cheynet, 'Sceaux byzantins des musées d'Antioche et de Tarse', *TM* 12 (1994), no. 47); Euthymios Karabitziotēs, *exaktōr*, *krites* of Hippodrome, Seleukeia and *kourator* and *anagrapheus* of Tarsos (N. Oikonomidès, *Studies in Byzantine Sigillography* III (Washington, DC, 1993), 192); John Hexamilites, *krites* of Seleukeia and *kourator* of Tarsos (J. Nesbitt and M. Braundlin, 'Selections from a Private Collection of Byzantine Bullae', *Byz* 68 (1998), no. 13).

[the Byzantines] captured and razed it to the ground not only Melitene but also its neighbouring cities and districts which were highly productive and very fertile and yielded many other revenues. Having then turned Melitene into a *kouratoreia*, the emperor had many thousands of [pounds] of gold and silver raised annually in revenues from there'.³⁵

The term used by Theophanes Continuator to convey the sense of the revenues raised on an annual basis at Melitene is *δασμοφορεῖσθαι*. The principal meaning of *δασμός* in Greek is 'tribute'.³⁶ Although no other source comments explicitly on the imperial *kouratoriai* in the Byzantine east, there is literary evidence which indicates that the payment of tribute was how the imperial authorities most readily conceived of the reward they could expect from the conquest of Muslim emirates. This expectation is most clearly stated in the case of the campaign to annex Antioch. The city itself was conquered in the autumn of 969. However, in the summer of the previous year, Byzantine armies had softened up the city's hinterland with a large punitive raid. As the main army withdrew north for the winter, small Byzantine garrisons were left behind, occupying a ring of fortifications in the mountains and roads that surrounded the city.³⁷ From these bases Byzantine commanders were under instructions to lead daily raids on the countryside around Antioch in order to force the inhabitants within the city to surrender. In a tribute-related context, it is striking that the later tenth-century historian, Leo the Deacon, argued that the objective of this strategy was to compel Antioch to become *tributary* (*hypospondos*) to the Byzantines.³⁸

The principle that Constantinople may have chosen to control the eastern frontier through tribute-raising arrangements with local populations may also help to explain the important but rather ambiguous position in the historical record of *basilikoi*. Whenever *basilikoi* are discussed by modern historians they are uneasily compared to *kouratores*, that is to say as officials with a role in estate or fiscal administration.³⁹ However, the

³⁵ Theoph. Cont., 417. For more on *kouratoriai* see Cheynet's chapter in this volume.

³⁶ H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1968), 370. Theoph. Cont., 417; see Shephard's chapter in this volume.

³⁷ These fortresses included Baghras, at the centre of a new theme in the Amanos mountains called Mauron Oros, and Qalat Siman, the fifth-century monastery of St Symeon Stylites: Yahya, PO 18, 816; Skylitzes, 271-2; J.C. Cheynet, C. Morrisson and W. Seibt, *Sceaux byzantins de la collection Henri Seyrig* (Paris, 1991), no. 183; W.B.R. Saunders, 'Qalat Siman: a Frontier Fort of the Tenth and Eleventh centuries', in S. Freeman and H. Kennedy, eds, *Defence of the Roman and Byzantine Frontiers*, BAR International Series (Oxford, 1986), 291-305.

³⁸ Leo the Deacon: *Leonis Diaconi Caloënsis Historiae Libri Decem*, ed. C.B. Hase, CSHB (Bonn, 1828), 73-4: ὥστε καθ'ἐκάστην ἐπεξελάσει καὶ καταδρομαῖς καὶ ἐπιτιτῆδεων διαρπαγαῖς τὴν Ἀντίοχου ταπεινώσῃσι, καὶ εἰς ἀμυχανίαν δεινὴν κατακλείσαντες καὶ ἀκούσαν ἀναγκάσῃσι Ῥωμαίοις γενέσθαι ὑπόσπονδον.

³⁹ Ahrweiler, 'Recherches', 73-4; J.C. Cheynet, 'L'apport arabe à l'aristocratie byzantine des X^e-XI^e siècles', *ByzSlav* 61 (1995), 141-2.

careers of the two *basilikoi* in the later tenth century indicate that such officials could be key intermediaries upon whom the Byzantine authorities in Constantinople depended in order to mobilize the resources of the great former emirates. One of these *basilikoi* was Kulayb, whose career is predominantly known from the chronicle of the Arab Christian historian Yahya ibn Sa'id al-Antaki. Kulayb was a Christian Arab, possibly a Syrian monophysite, who entered Byzantine service in 975 when he surrendered two fortresses in northern Syria to the emperor John Tzimiskes; in return he was given the high-ranking title of *patrikios* and appointed the *basilikos* of Antioch. During the revolt of Bardas Skleros, at the beginning of Basil's reign, Kulayb surrendered Antioch to the rebels, and was transferred to the position of *basilikos* in Melitene instead. When Skleros returned to Melitene from exile in Baghdad a decade later in 987, Kulayb was still *basilikos* of the city.⁴⁰ If other evidence is aggregated with Yahya's testimony, then Kulayb is transformed from a fairly anonymous frontier character into a linchpin of local politics and diplomacy during the first decade of Basil's reign. When a diplomatic envoy, Ibn Shahram, was sent in 981 by the Buyid emir of Baghdad to Byzantium to discuss Skleros's exile in Iraq, he met Kulayb. In his report of his meeting Ibn Shahram indicated that Kulayb alone of the rebel Skleros party had received a pardon from the emperor. It is clear from this report that it was Kulayb's ability to ensure the annual delivery of the tribute from the client state of Aleppo in northern Syria that had guaranteed his personal status on the frontier.⁴¹ Further signs that Kulayb was a high-profile figure on the frontier, well rewarded by authorities at the centre, comes from the fact that he was able to sponsor the high-profile Syrian monastery of Bar Gagai near Melitene in 987/8.⁴²

A second *basilikos* of critical political importance at the start of Basil's reign was Ubayd Allah, another Christian Arab. In 976 he used his position as *basilikos* of Melitene to surrender the city to the rebel army of Bardas Skleros. This action enabled Skleros himself to sequester the fiscal revenues of the former emirate, and to declare revolt openly against the emperor. Taken into the service of Skleros, Ubayd Allah became Kulayb's successor as *basilikos* at Antioch.⁴³ Basil II was only able to regain Antioch for the imperial 'side' in 977/8 when he promised to make Ubayd Allah governor (*wilaya*) of the city for life.⁴⁴ Yahya ibn Sa'id's account of Ubayd

⁴⁰ Yahya, *PO* 23 (1932), 369, 373, 420.

⁴¹ *Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate* VI, 23–4.

⁴² Michael the Syrian, 125–6; Dagron, 'Minorités ethniques', 192, 197. Sigillographical evidence indicates that Kulayb also had a son called Bardas: G. Zacos, *Byzantine Lead Seals II*, compiled J. Nesbitt (Bern, 1985), no. 371. See also Cheynet, 'L'apport arabe', 141–2.

⁴³ Yahya, *PO* 23, 373.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 375–7; V. Laurent, 'La chronologie des gouverneurs d'Antioche sous la seconde domination byzantine', *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth* 38 (1962), 231–2.

Allah's actions during the civil war at Antioch indicates the breadth of his powers. As *basilikos* he was clearly not simply a functionary with responsibility for fiscal and judicial matters, but was also in charge of an armed garrison. Once he had defected to the emperor, he defended Antioch against attack by a Skleros army. Furthermore, he suppressed a revolt by local Armenians.⁴⁵

Limited transformations during the reign of Basil

Taken together Kulayb and Ubayd Allah's careers demonstrate the degree to which Basil II was dependent during the early years of his reign on local figures from former Muslim regimes to mobilize the resources of the frontier emirates, and to facilitate diplomatic relations with the empire's eastern neighbours. In some senses, however, once the civil wars which plagued the first thirteen years of Basil's reign came to an end in 989, the nature of the emperor's dependence on intermediaries began to change. From this point on key functionaries on the frontier seem to have been drawn from the ranks of Constantinopolitan administrators rather than from the representatives of previous Muslim regimes.

The trajectory of this change is most easily traced in the ecclesiastical and secular history of northern Syria and Cilicia as it is reported by the historians Yahya ibn Sa'id and Michael the Syrian. In Yahya's account of the civil wars of the early years of Basil's reign, it becomes clear that another key intermediary figure on the eastern frontier was Agapios, patriarch of Antioch. Agapios's rise to power began during the first Skleros revolt. When Theodore, the incumbent patriarch of Antioch, died in May 976, Agapios, the bishop of the neighbouring Byzantine client city of Aleppo, travelled to Constantinople to persuade the emperor to appoint him as Theodore's replacement. In return he promised to compel Ubayd Allah, the rebel *basilikos* of Antioch, to declare for the emperor.⁴⁶ Despite Agapios's relatively junior status, Basil and his advisers were so desperate to regain control of Antioch from the Skleros party that they agreed to this plan. In the first instance it was a deal that worked to Agapios's advantage. On his return to the east he persuaded Ubayd Allah to defect. In January 978 he himself was then installed as patriarch.⁴⁷ During the next decade he used the authority he had been granted by Constantinople to secure his own position in the locality. At the heart of his policy was the promotion of the Antiochene Melkite church at the expense of local Syrian monophysites. According to later Syrian historians, Agapios burnt the books of Syrian churches, forced local notables to

⁴⁵ Yahya, PO 23, 378.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 375–6.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 377.

have their children re-baptized as Chalcedonians, and then deployed these converts as local clergy in the countryside.⁴⁸ However, Agapios' power as a mediator between locality and centre proved to be short-lived. Twelve years later Basil II decided to extricate himself from dependence on local figures such as Agapios. In 989 Agapios was accused of colluding with another rebel family, the Phokades, summoned to Constantinople and secluded in a suburban monastery. During the 990s, the emperor began to extend his authority even more energetically into the localities. In 996 Agapios was officially deposed.⁴⁹ His replacement was a Constantinopolitan, John the *chartophylax* of Hagia Sophia.⁵⁰ Soon John was joined in the east by another Constantinopolitan functionary Nikephoros Ouranos, who, as *kraton* of the east, exercised supreme military command over the whole frontier.⁵¹

Yet, while the appointment of Constantinopolitan figures to positions of senior command on the frontier represented a change in the balance of power between centre and periphery in favour of the former, there is little sign that the basic structure of governance in the Byzantine east was revolutionized during the second half of the reign of Basil. Instead there is persuasive evidence that, underneath a thin tier of centrally appointed officials, the quotidian management of the eastern frontier remained in the hands of indigenous functionaries. As a result there was little change in the basic tribute relationship between locality and centre that had characterized Byzantine administration in the east since the middle of the tenth century. Evidence for only limited changes to frontier administration during the second half of the reign of Basil II, and indeed during the rest of the eleventh century, comes both from the careers of those senior officials who were dispatched to the east from Constantinople, and from our knowledge of the minor officials on the periphery itself.

Turning first to the careers of Constantinopolitan officials dispatched to the east, it is striking how many continued to fulfil the intermediary and plenipotentiary role previously undertaken by local notables such as Kulayb and Ubayd Allah. One such official was Nikephoros Ouranos, *kraton* of the East. Now at one level, Ouranos's duties were primarily military in nature. Shortly after his arrival in Antioch he accompanied Basil II on a campaign to annex the princedom of Tao in western Georgia in

⁴⁸ Michael the Syrian, 131–2.

⁴⁹ Yahya, *PO* 23, 428.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 445–6.

⁵¹ Skylitzes, 345; Yahya, *PO* 23, 400, 460, 466–7 J. Nesbitt and N. Oikonomidès, *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art* III (Washington, DC, 1991–96), no. 99.11; E. McGeer, 'Tradition and Reality in the *Taktika* of Nikephoros Ouranos', *DOP* 45 (1991), 139–40.

1000.⁵² The following year he returned to Tao to repel an incursion led by Gurgen, prince of Inner Iberia.⁵³ Several years later he won a victory over an Arab dervish insurrectionist called al-Acfar.⁵⁴ Yet Ouranos also had the expertise to take on much wider frontier duties than those of a mere military commander. He was able to call upon extensive experience in administrative and diplomatic affairs. Ouranos' early professional life had been spent in Constantinople within the imperial palace and the upper echelons of central administration. By 982 he was keeper of the imperial inkstand, a position requiring competence in the handling of sophisticated documents including imperial chrysobulls.⁵⁵ His knowledge of the administrative practices and court politics of Constantinople was so well regarded that during the mid- to later 980s he was appointed *epitropos*, or lay guardian, of the Athonite monastery of the Lavra, a position which must have brought him experience in acting as an intermediary between the interests of a locality and central government.⁵⁶ He was also a skilled diplomat. In 982 he was sent to Buyid Baghdad to negotiate the release into Byzantine hands of the rebel general Bardas Skleros.⁵⁷

Furthermore, Ouranos was not the only official from the capital during the second half of the reign of Basil who was drafted into a frontier plenipotentiary role that demanded a full portfolio of competences. After Ouranos was posted to Antioch, he summoned his friend and correspondent Philetos Synadenos to Tarsos.⁵⁸ Although the later eleventh- or early twelfth-century manuscript in which the Synadenos–Ouranos correspondence appears tells us that Philetos was *krites* of Tarsos, the responsibilities which he undertook when he arrived in the east may have extended more widely than those of a judge.⁵⁹ If, for example, Synadenos was vested with the same offices held by other senior officials at Tarsos in the tenth and eleventh centuries, then it is likely that his real responsibilities were as *krites* of the neighbouring theme of Seleukeia and *kourator* of the

⁵² Yahya, *PO* 23, 460.

⁵³ Stephen of Taron, 212.

⁵⁴ Yahya, *PO* 23, 466–7.

⁵⁵ Several of Nikephoros's own letters seem to date from the period when he was still keeper of the imperial inkstand: V. Laurent, *Le Corpus des sceaux de l'empire byzantin II, L'Administration centrale* (Paris, 1981), 102.

⁵⁶ Ouranos' appointment post-dates 984 and pre-dates 999: P. Lemerle, A. Guillou, N. Svoronos and D. Papachrysanthou, eds, *Actes de Lavra I: Des origines à 1204*, Archives de l'Athos V (Paris, 1970), 19–20, 45–6, 52; McGeer, 'Tradition and Reality', 130–31.

⁵⁷ *Eclipse of the Abbasid Caliphate VI*, 25–34; Skylitzes, 327; Yahya, *PO* 23, 400–402.

⁵⁸ 'The very famous *magistros*, Ouranios [the heavenly one], made me come': Darrouzès, *Épistoliers byzantins*, 257.

⁵⁹ Synadenos' letters appear in MS 706 from the monastery of St John on Patmos: Darrouzès, *Épistoliers byzantins*, 9–12.

former emirate of Tarsos.⁶⁰ Furthermore, while it is dangerous to read substantive meanings into the elusive literary artefacts which passed between senior officials such as Synadenos and Ouranos, it is possible that an elliptical allusion to the incompatibility of learning and the bearing of arms contained in one of Philetos's letters to Nikephoros may reflect the wide range of duties, including military service, that officials on the frontier were expected to undertake in imperial service. If this is so, Philetos implies that Ouranos was better equipped than himself:

On the one hand I have lost the capacity to be wise and to be called wise, and on the other, I am completely inexperienced in the bearing of arms, the rattling of a spear, the moving and shooting of an arrow, and the shaking of a spear against the enemy, and as much as is required to make war against the foe – for I am not hardhearted or very daring, but someone undaring and feeble – I have failed at both: for I am now neither wise, nor daring, in the face of the enemy. And so tell me who I am, wise *Strategos*. As for me, what I had I have thrown away, what I had not, I am unable to take hold of, and that which I am, as you see, I have lost'.⁶¹

Moving beyond the careers of individuals such as Ouranos and Synadenos, there is further evidence that the appointment of Constantinopolitan officials to senior positions on the frontier in the second half of Basil's reign did little to change the basic tribute relationship underpinning Byzantium's governance of its eastern provinces. Although this evidence comes from a region outside the former Muslim emirates, and from a slightly later period than Basil's reign, it demonstrates that Byzantine administration continued to depend on indigenous officials deep into the eleventh century. The evidence in question is to be found in the Caucasian katapanate of Iberia, created from the princedom of Tao in western Georgia annexed during the second half of the reign of Basil II. Some decades later, during the reign of Constantine Doukas (1059–67), the senior Byzantine commander on this stretch of the frontier, the *katapan* Bagrat Vxkac'i, introduced a series of tax concessions for the northern Armenian city of Ani. Notice of these arrangements is inscribed on the west wall of the city's cathedral. The inscription itself was written in contemporary vernacular Armenian, and could thus be read by the local inhabitants. More important, it lists the officials who were expected

⁶⁰ The evidence here comes from the tenth- and eleventh-century sigillographical record: Eustathios Romaïos, *krites* of Seleukeia and *megas kourator* of Tarsos: K.M. Konstantopoulos, *Βυζαντινὰ μολυβδόβουλλα τοῦ ἐν Ἀθῆναις Ἐθνικοῦ Νομισματικοῦ Μουσείου* (Athens, 1917), no. 147a; Euthymios Karabitziotēs *exaktor*, *krites* of the Hippodrome and Seleukeia and *kourator* and *anagrapheus* of Tarsos and John Hexamilites, *krites* of Seleukeia and *kourator* of Tarsos (see above note 34).

⁶¹ Darrouzès, *Épistoliers byzantins*, 255.

to execute the *katepan's* decree. These functionaries are called *tanuters*. All are identified as local Armenians who held modest Byzantine titles: Mxit'ar *hypatos*, Grigor *spatharokandidatos*, and Sargis *spatharokandidatos*. One modern Armenian historian has suggested that these *tanuters* were the managers of local economic and fiscal affairs, whose duties resembled those performed by functionaries known as *ra'is* within towns with large Muslim populations. That is to say, they acted as the spokesmen for their own communities within different quarters of the city, and were responsible for managing the fiscal relationship between those communities and the local representative of centralized authority.⁶² As such they were the key intermediaries around whom a tribute-based system of taxation could operate.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that imperial realism and pragmatism won the Byzantine east for Constantinople in the later tenth and eleventh centuries. Successive emperors encouraged the settlement and commercial activities of the diverse populations of the frontier, and were willing to administer these regions through indirect means, which left indigenous bureaucratic structures largely intact. There are signs that these principles continued to underpin centre-periphery relations throughout the reign of Basil II and deep into the eleventh century. Taken as a whole, this is a picture of close co-operation between Constantinople and the populations of the eastern periphery. Yet this is a model that also contradicts the widely held belief that during the eleventh century an orthodox Chalcedonian centre became increasingly unable and unwilling to assimilate a heterodox frontier. According to this view, it was the centre's failure to assimilate the periphery that persuaded many frontier populations to support Turkish and Crusading armies rather than Byzantine forces during the later eleventh and early twelfth centuries.⁶³ This chapter is not the place to undertake an entirely fresh analysis of the role of ethnic and religious division in the political turmoil that surrounded the collapse of the eastern half of the Byzantine empire in the years after the battle of Manzikert. However, I would like to conclude with one brief thought about the relationship between administrative accommodation and ethnic conflict.

⁶² K.N. Yuzbashian, 'L'administration byzantine en Arménie aux X^e et XI^e siècles', *REArm* 10 (1973-74), 179-81.

⁶³ S. Vryonis, 'Byzantium: the Social Basis of Decline in the Eleventh Century', *GRBS* 2 (1959), 169-72; Dagron, 'Minorités ethniques', *passim*. A corrective to a model of irreconcilable conflict between centre and periphery has recently been offered by P. Magdalino, *The Byzantine Background to the First Crusade* (Toronto, 1996), 18-33.

One of the cases most frequently cited to support the argument that the eleventh century witnessed the irretrievable breakdown between an Orthodox centre and heterodox frontier is the story of the arrest, imprisonment and death of the Syrian patriarch John Bar Abdoun during the short reign of Romanos III (1028–34). The fundamentals of the case can be established from the chronicle of Michael the Syrian. In 1029, less than five years after the death of Basil II, the hierarchy of the Syrian Church was denounced in Constantinople by the Chalcedonian metropolitan of Melitene. Imperial messengers were then sent to Chrysoberg, the *krites* of Melitene, ordering him to detain the Syrian patriarch and his senior bishops. The Syrian clergy were arrested, conveyed to Constantinople and interrogated. As a result of their ordeal some of the bishops adopted a Chalcedonian position; those that did not remained in prison. The patriarch himself died in captivity.⁶⁴

Yet we must ask to what extent this story necessarily demonstrates the increasing oppression of the periphery by an intolerant, Orthodox centre. Other details from the events surrounding the detention of the Syrian church hierarchy indicate that local secular officials of Constantinopolitan origin could still be enthusiastic promoters of the well-being of the populations under their tutelage. Chrysoberg, the *krites*, is almost certainly the owner of an unpublished seal in the Dumbarton Oaks collection belonging to John Chrysoberges. The information contained in the legend on this seal indicates that Chrysoberges was not only *krites* of the city, but also held the offices of *kourator* and the *kankellarios* of the *genikon*.⁶⁵ Thus, he emerges from the sigillographical evidence as a single official vested with a full portfolio of judicial and fiscal duties. Moreover, like other frontier functionaries such as Philetos Synadenos and Nikephoros Ouranos, he clearly exercised military duties: when he arrested the patriarch he dispatched nine soldiers to undertake the task.⁶⁶ Like Ouranos and Synadenos, his pedigree was that of a Constantinopolitan administrator.⁶⁷ Yet, despite his Constantinopolitan roots, the *krites* could still act as the representative of the best interests of those he administered. According to Michael the Syrian, Chrysoberg arrested the Syrian patriarch with considerable reluctance, and only after trying to persuade local

⁶⁴ Michael the Syrian, 140–45.

⁶⁵ John Chrysoberges, *spatharokandidatos*, *kankellarios* of the *Genikon*, *krites*, *anagrapheus* and *kourator* of Melitene (Howard-Johnston, 'Crown', 89, n. 41).

⁶⁶ Michael the Syrian, 140–41.

⁶⁷ For seals of various tenth- and eleventh-century members of the Chrysoberges family active in civil and ecclesiastical administration see Schlumberger, *Sigillographie*, 285, 313 and Nesbitt, *Oikonomidēs*, *Catalogue of Byzantine seals I*, nos 1.30, 71.13; Laurent, *Le Corpus des sceaux*, no. 335; Zacos, *Byzantine Lead Seals II*, no. 57; J.C. Cheynet, 'Sceaux byzantins', nos 63–4.

Syrian dignitaries that the patriarch should leave the city for his own safety.⁶⁸

Various synodal decrees issued by the church authorities in Constantinople in the decade following the arrest and interrogation of the Syrian churchmen corroborate the notion that many local secular officials were reluctant to disturb the heterodox populations of the locality. As Dagron noted, these decrees deplore the willingness of such officials to contemplate marriages between members of different Christian denominations and their acceptance of the testimony of Syrian Christians in legal cases.⁶⁹ This evidence indicates that the pragmatism of secular officials rather than episodes of persecution may have been more typical of the exercise of Constantinopolitan authority in the Byzantine east in the decades which followed Basil's death. Although vacuums of imperial legitimacy in Constantinople, such as the short and unpopular reign of Romanos III, could occasionally be manipulated by local agitators such as the Chalcedonian metropolitan of Melitene, officials like Chrysoberg were usually able to use their access to power in the centre to arbitrate successfully between and on behalf of the frontier populations. Certainly the persecution of Romanos III's reign seems to have had little effect on the long-term prosperity of the Syrian community in Mesopotamia during the eleventh century. As Dagron has stressed, Syrian monasteries continued to be founded in the Melitene region until the arrival of the Turks.⁷⁰

How then can we explain the loss in the later eleventh century to the Turks of the heterodox east that Basil himself had won, if not in terms of irretrievable breakdown between a Chalcedonian Constantinople and a heterodox frontier? Without too much flippancy, perhaps I can suggest that the answer may lie partly in the *success* of the devolved relationships that had been fostered so enthusiastically by emperors such as Basil II. In the predominantly peaceful relationships which typified Byzantine dealings with its eastern Muslim neighbours during the reign of Basil and his immediate successors, the frontier was able to flourish with a minimal Constantinopolitan presence in the locality. However when the more belligerent Turks arrived, this slim-line presence simply proved to be inadequate.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Michael the Syrian, 141

⁶⁹ Dagron, 'Minorités ethniques', 204.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁷¹ See Cheynet's chapter in this volume for the extent to which the arrival of Turkish nomads in the mid- to late eleventh century shattered the pre-existing frontier equilibrium, and for the importance of civil war within Byzantium during the 1070s for the eventual collapse of the position of the empire in the east.