❖From Late Antiquity to Early ❖Byzantium

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IDEOLOGY AND THE BYZANTINE STATE IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY THE 'TRIAL' OF MAXIMUS CONFESSOR

The society of the East Mediterranean area underwent a process of considerable social and economic re-adjustment during the later sixth and seventh centuries. The East Roman state, which at the beginning of this period included most of the traditional Roman territories in North Africa, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, had by the middle of the second half of the seventh century been reduced territorially to under half of its original extent. The state apparatuses themselves were drastically affected by these changes, whether in civil or military administration and organisation. New supply-lines and new resources — of grain, for example — had to be exploited, and new sources of revenue had to be developed in order to maintain the state and its establishment. But above all, and as has been made clear in a number of analyses, substantial shifts in emphasis within the overall framework of the symbolic universe of East Roman society took place, shifts within the ideology of the East Roman state.[1]

During the last years of the sixth century, particularly from the end of the reign of the emperor Justinian, East Roman society appears to have entered what one might term a period of ideological "introversion", a process which seems to have been a result of the tangible failures of Justinian's policies of reconquest, the impoverishment of the fisc, increased social tension; and which led away from traditional reliance upon the authority of the emperor and the Church, to symbols of a less immediately fallible nature — the cult of saints and divine helpers, their icons, and those who represented a less "official" Christian faith, the hermits and holy men, long a feature of the Syrian and Mesopotamian provinces, now also in other parts of the empire, typified by men such as Theodore of Sykeon.[2] Toleration of "outsiders" decreased, and East Roman society became increasingly inward-looking. Such developments were not, of course, mere haphazard responses, but were determined in their form and in their content by the dynamic of the East Roman social formation in its entirety, both in the degree to which this social formation could respond at various levels to external changes — changes in the political/ideological and the economic context of the surrounding world — and in the degree to which the interplay of its constitutive elements or instances stimulated changes in the social relations of production and the symbolic universe which was both dependent upon, and also structured and reproduced ideologically, these social relations. As members of their society, the emperor and the court establishment, the senatorial aristocracy and the leading officers of government were equally a part of these shifts, and one response to such pressures

and changes, whether perceived or unperceived, seems to have been the promotion of 'a re-integrative' symbolism concentrated around figures such as the Virgin, particularly in Constantinople, and around an emphasis upon the divine support granted to the emperor. A new emphasis upon formal ceremonial was intended to re-inforce the identity of emperor with God's support, as well as re-affirm the identity of the East Romans with the chosen people, and their state with the heavenly kingdom.[3] But while this ideology of unity and re-integration had established itself by the early seventh century — and certainly by the time of the siege of 626 — there were substantial areas where the smallest dislocation could throw the whole strucure into jeopardy, a structure which still depended upon the authoritative and central role of the emperors.

The potential imbalance which might thus be promoted, between two poles of authority, imperial and heavenly, is in fact represented in the actual developments of the mid-seventh century. People looked by tradition to the central authority — from which the whole complex of the public, imperial and Christian ideology depended — as a symbol of security, stability and as a token of heavenly goodwill and support. But the vulnerability of that symbol — the vulnerability of the emperor and the state — could naturally damage the credibility and validity — the e v o c a t i v e power — of the symbols themselves. The dislocation caused by the Arab attacks and their after-effects, and by Roman military disasters, effectively stimulated an already existing potential to transfer spiritual and ideological allegiance and trust from these earthly symbols of authority and power, which seemed to have lost their efficacy, to symbols which were less vulnerable, which had proved their worth in times of danger, but which were already fully integrated into the framework of the imperial state ideology.[4]

In the situation of the middle of the seventh century, the contradictions inherent in this ideological system were brought into the open. The emperor had to maintain and promote a cult in which his dependence upon divine authority was explicit, and yet at the same time promote his own political authority, which was threatened and even by-passed by those very aspects of this cult or symbolic system which stressed divine support, divine mediation. The result was a situation wherein the central secular authority tried to strengthen and to re-inforce its position by discrediting attempts or threats to share or circumvent the authority granted to it by God;[5] while at the same time other sections of Roman society attempted to re-affirm the framework of their own beliefs and symbolic universe by clinging to those symbols which seemed least vulnerable to earthly failure and by opposing changes which may have reduced the efficacy of the traditional legitimating values of their society.[6]

I would like to suggest that the Monothelite controversy reflects the struggle between these two poles of authority at a "public" level, and that the trial of Maximus (as well as the treatment meted out to Pope Martin after his arrest) was designed to illustrate the absolute nature of imperial authority and to challenge and to block any attempt to locate authority through alternative channels.

Monotheletism was originally an imperially-sponsored attempt to reconcile monophysite and dyophisite parties within the state and society. It was based predominantly on the practical need to obtain the support of the eastern, monophysite provinces of the empire for the central government and its Chalcedonian establishment, under the particular conditions of the early

threat from the Arabs.[7] But with the effective loss of those districts its relevance in this respect was lost, yet it continued to be a central policy of the government of Constans II.[8] That it was more than just a personal whim (which must anyway be set in the relevant social context) is clear. It represented the tensions between imperial authority and a public opposition. From the correspondance and from the account of his trial and his exiles, it emerges clearly that what the imperial government — the emperor — wanted, from Maximus, was simply an admission that the emperor was right, that he was effectively the source of all authority, not just within the state, but indeed upon earth, authority vested in him by God and not, therefore, to be challenged by anyone, in any matter. To this end, Maximus' interrogators attempted to cowe him into admitting his mistaken position, by a variety of false accusations, to the effect that he had betrayed the empire in North Africa and Egypt to the Arab invaders by persuading the military commanders not to fight for a monothelite and therefore unorthodox empire.[9] He is accused of having claimed that God was ill-disposed to the family of Heraclius, that Maximus foresaw and foretold the rebellion of Gregory, the exarch of Africa, and that he insulted the emperor when he was in Rome. Note that all of these accusations are strictly "political", and imply primarily a threat to imperial authority. Even the question of the Typos of Constans is couched in political-ideological terms, for Troilus, the interrogating patricius, claims that in rejecting an anathematising the Typos Maximus must necessarily reject and anathematise the emperor — a contingent relationship which Maximus of course denies. It is perhaps interesting to note that Maximus is accused of "loving the Romans and hating the Greeks (Graikous)" — suggestive of a Hellenic/E. Mediterranean awareness of the growing cultural rift between the two halves of the Mediterranean cultural world.

In further interrogations during his first exile, in Bizye, Maximus debates the validity of the imperial assertion that a synod is only legitimate when ratified and recognised by the emperor. Later, after his transfer to Rhegion, a strartlingly clear indication of the importance of the whole affair to the imperial authorities occurs. The patricius Epiphanius brings a message from Constans to the effect that if Maximus will accept the Typos and join the emperor, the latter will meet him at the Chalke gate of the palace and process together with him to the Great Church, so that not only Constantinople but the whole oikoumene might see that they are united. It is important for Maximus to do this, says Epiphanius, for the whole of the West and many in the East have turned their attention to the outcome of the contest. Maximus, of course, refuses. But no clearer sign of the importance attached by the central authorities to Maximus' re-affirmation of imperial authority could be given than this.[10]

Rumours were also put about that Maximus had slandered the Virgin — something in which the ordinary soldiers and people took much more interest than in the question of possible high treason and betrayal. It is perhaps particularly revealing that the state, in its efforts to discredit Maximus, had to resort to suggesting that he had insulted one of the very symbols which represented symptomatically the decline in its own authority.[11] But all these matters were, as it appears in the accounts of the trial or interrogations, mere threats — Maximus was promised a complete pardon if he would but publicly admit that he was wrong, and that the emperor has the sole right and competence to make pronouncements on matters of dogma and state policy.

Maximus was to accept the authority of the emperor and his Typos, and the charges would be dropped. The refusal of both Maximus and Martin to co--operate, however, outraged Constans, and the punishment meted out to both illustrate the extent to which the state was prepared to go in order publicly to humiliate and, more important, to discredit, its opponents. The real issues were not North Africa and slanders against the Virgin, but imperial authority and its denial.

This is not to say, of course, that Constans and his advisers were aware of the structural sources of the threat which they perceived in Maximus' actions (as well as those of Martin and their followers). But they were clearly aware of the denial of imperial authority implicit in Maximus' position, and their powerful reaction to this denial reflects, in my view, the increasing generalisation of a similar, if less well-articulated, attitude throughout the empire; hence the need to demonstrate publicly the wrongness of Maximus' position and his recantation. That such a demonstration, had it been successful, would have materially affected the shifts already in progress is, of course, most unlikely, for these were not dependent upon such surface phenomena but upon more deeply-embedded structural changes in East Roman society in general.

The trial of Maximus Confessor is, I think, one of the most significant single events of the middle of the seventh century, for it highlights a whole series of developments in East Roman or Byzantine ideology and the effects, upon both the attitudes of those in power and those in opposition to their policies, of the shifts described above. It is perhaps also interesting in that a good deal of incidental light is thrown upon the state of the attitudes of ordinary people — soldiers and "civilians" — outside the sphere of the politics of court and Church, which illustrates the shifts which were in the process of taking place within the symbolic and ideological universe of the vast majority of people in the East Roman world.

But the real concerns of the imperial government under Constans II are made abundantly clear by the documents associated with this episode. The interpretation of the traditional state ideology which Constans II promoted is made apparent; and the whole series of events surrounding both the trial of Maximus and the arrest and exile of Martin highlights a struggle which was eventually concluded not by the restoration of Chalcedonian orthodoxy by Constantine IV, but by the effects on both state, society and ideology over a period of some fifty years, of the introduction and pursuit of an iconoclast policy by Leo III; a policy through which the long-term question of the relationship between heavenly and imperial authority was eventually resolved.[12]

[1] See, for the opening comments, Averil CAMERON, *The Theotokos in sixth-century Constantinople: a City finds its Symbol*, Journal of Theological Studies, n. s. 29 (1978) 79—108; eadem, *Images of Authority: Elites nad Icons in late Sixth-Century Byzantium*, Past and Present 84 (Aug. 1979) 3—35; F. WINKELMANN, in: *Byzanz im 7. Jahrhundert: Untersuchungen zur Herausbildung des Feudalismus* (Berliner Byzantinistische Arbeiten, 48) Berlin 1978, 171ff; E. KITZINGER, *The Cult of Images in the Period before Iconoclasm*, Dumbarton Oaks Papers 8 (1954) 85—150.
[2] See P. BROWN, *A Dark-Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy*, English Historical Review 88 (1973) 1—34, especially 10f., 14f; also Averil CAMERON, *Theotokos* (cited above), 79f.
[3] Averil CAMERON, *Elites and Icons* (cited above, note 1), 4ff; and Alan CAMERON, *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Constantinople*, Oxford 1976, 249ff.
[4] Cf. KITZINGER, *The Cult of Images before Iconoclasm*, 226—7; J. F. HALDON, *Some Remarks on the Background to the Iconoclast Controversy*, ByzSlav 38 (1977) 161—184; Averil CAMERON, *Theotokos*, 100.

[5] See the trumped-up charges against Maximus and Martin: *Relatio Motionis* (Migne PG 90, cols. 109—129), cols. 112A—113D; *Martini Papae Epistula ,Quoniam agnovi'*, in: Mansi, X, 849—850.

[6] A point emphasised by the concern shown by soldiers and their chaplains that Maximus may have slandered the Virgin; cf. *Maximi Confessoris Gesta in primo eius exsilio* (Migne PG 90, cols. 136—172), cols. 168C—169B.

[7] See G. OSTROGORSKY, *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates* (= Handbuch d. Altertumswiss., byz. Handbuch, XII, 1.2) München 1963, 80ff. and bibliography; and P. VERGHESE, *The Monothelite Controversy — a Historical Survey*, Greek Orthodox Theological Review 13 (1968) 196—211; J. L. van DIETEN, *Geschichte der Patriarchen von Sergios I bis Johannes VI* (610—715), Amsterdam 1972, 179—218; note also F. WINKELMANN, *Kirche und Gesellschaft vom Ende des 6. bis zum Beginn des 8. Jahrhunderts*, Klio 59 (1977) 477—489.

[8] This is not to deny the fact that many may have taken an eventual re-possession of these territories by Roman forces for granted. The exigencies of actual opposition to the imperial authority seem to have pushed this issue into the background, however.

[9] See note 5 above.

[10] Migne PG 90, 161D—163A; and note the patricius Troilus' response, ibid., 165A.

[11] See note 6 above.

[12] I shall be dealing at much greater length with all of these questions in a forthcoming article: *Ideology and Social Change in the Seventh Century: Military discontent as a Barometer*, Klio 67 (1985) 562—612.