ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΕΙΖΟΝΟΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΥ

Authoring : *Dale de Lee Benjamin* *(23/4/2008)*

For citation : *Dale de Lee Benjamin , "Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period", 2008, Encyclopaedia of the Hellenic World, Constantinople*
URL: <http://www.ehw.gr/l.aspx?id=10840>

Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period

Summary :

The administrative system in the Early Byzantine period was a continuation of the reforms begun by Diocletian (284-305) and continued by Constantine (324-337). These reforms significantly expanded the imperial bureaucracy while significantly reducing the size of the provinces. The main point of the administration was to provide the necessary security and financial needs of the empire. The Roman Empire, since the end of the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180) had faced nearly a century of crises, both economic and security. Diocletian's reforms were meant to address these matters, and most of his reforms were kept in place throughout the early Byzantine period until the Arab conquests of the seventh century lead to major reforms once again.

Date

4th-7th century

---

1. Reforms of Diocletian and Constantine

Early Byzantine Imperial administration is the Late Antique Roman Imperial administration as reformed by Diocletian (284-305) and Constantine (324-37). Diocletian understood that a well integrated administration that could address issues of governance, security, and finance would be more responsive to the crises that the empire had faced for sometime. From fewer than fifty provinces, Diocletian created about one-hundred uniform provinces. These provinces were grouped into twelve dioceses administered by a vicar whose superior was the praetorian prefect of one of the tetrarchy, Diocletian's system of four emperors. This system of dioceses and prefectures, as set up by Diocletian, had a lasting impact. Prefectures were subdivided into dioceses, which were divided into provinces. The number of major officials was tripled, and the number of low-ranking bureaucrats increased correspondingly. There were also four imperial courts with bodyguards, messengers, and departments to keep government records, all under a master of offices (*magister officiorum*). The army and navy were also increased in size, and each province was assigned a duke (*dux*) to command the forces in the province, although a duke's command sometimes covered two or three of the new small provinces. Dicoletian made a principle of separating civil and military authority, a principle that survived until the development of the thematic system at the end of the seventh century. While the bureaucracy was large, it was meant to be efficient, and promotion was open to any ambitious, able, and loyal Roman. Diocletian also tried to stabilize the currency and improve taxation. One of the main purposes of civil administration was taxation (the poll tax), and taxation remained an important function throughout the early Byzantine period. Taxation was based on indictions (assessments). The indiction was fixed to September the 1st and occurred on a five-year cycle.

Many of Diocletian's reforms did not survive, although he stabilized the Empire.[1] The tetrarchy, a power sharing executive meant to prevent civil war and ensure a smooth succession, quickly collapsed after Diocletian's retirement. Yet, his bureaucratic reforms survived and were completed and modified by Constantine. Certain aspects of the administration of this period survive into the late Byzantine period. For example, Constantine converted the five-year tax indiction to a fifteen year cycle. As Constantine took over more of the empire, he appointed new prefects to administer regional groups of dioceses. Constantine created the *scholae*, an exclusive group of guards and agents who served him in various capacities, and who remained an important unit through much of the Middle Byzantine period. Constantine's reforms had the effect of further centralizing the administration around one emperor. Constantine also tried to increase revenues and to streamline imperial finances. He created two new ministers responsible to him, the count of the sacred largesses (*comes sacrarum largitionum*) to manage public expenditures and the count of the private estate (*comes rei privatae*) to administer imperial properties.[2]

From the fourth century, the palace at Constantinople became the center of the imperial court, even though Constantine himself, who began construction of the palace, moved around a great deal. The palace was still the political center of the empire, and provincials from all over the empire flocked to the court in search of rank and office. Titles could be honorific or connected to an office. In the early period, titles still carried considerable weight; in the middle and later Byzantine periods, a kind of honor inflation set in, and emperors invented new titles of more weight. *Magistros* and *patrikios* were both senior titles, but not necessarily offices. In the time of Justinian *spatharios*meant just a sword bearer, but by the end of the seventh century, it was a high-ranking honorific title. Honorific

Authoring : *Dale de Lee Benjamin* *(23/4/2008)*
For citation : *Dale de Lee Benjamin , "Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period", 2008, Encyclopaedia of the Hellenic World, Constantinople*
URL: <http://www.ehw.gr/l.aspx?id=10840>

Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period

titles did not guarantee that one had a significant role in the imperial administration, but officials who had a significant role in the administration usually had one or more honorific titles.

2. The Age of Justinian

Justinian (r. 527-65) furthered modified the imperial administration by his legal and administrative reforms that were intended to shape a new era. Early Byzantine imperial administration as shaped by Justinian remained intact until the thematic reforms of the seventh and eighth centuries. Justinian quite self-consciously attempted dramatic reforms of the imperial administration, although he maintained the late antique system as shaped by Diocletian and Constantine.First, Justinian codified the law in his *Codex Justinianus*. Then he issued a new handbook for law students in his *Institutes*, and finally, he began a series of administrative reforms, even on the provincial level. He attempted to emasculate the senatorial class, which had been implicated in the Nika riots. Justinian made the senatorial class more reliant on the emperor by the granting of titles, which he preferred to grant to those who had served loyally in the provincial administration.

On of the most important and powerful offices of the empire after the emperor himself, was the *magister officiorum*, the master of offices. First attested in 320 but probably dating back to the reforms of Diocletian, this office was head of the empire's central administration. He directed most of the non-fiscal departments, including imperial guard regiments (*scholae palatinae*) and the network of imperial spies, who kept a close watch over provincial officials. The master of offices also directed the palace administration, the arms factories, and indirectly, the diocesan and provincial governors and military officers. The provincial inspectors (*curiosi*) and public post (*cursus publicus*) were also ultimately responsible to him through imperial agents (*agentes in rebus*). Other officials, *comes*, directed clerical and administrative staff, and the praetorian prefects still had supervision over the diocesan governors (*vicarii*). On the local level, administration could be felt through the maintenance of public safety by controlling brigands, and the management of imperial estates upon which much of the population worked. Justinian's rule saw an expansion of the imperial bureaucracy and an effort to expand it into the reconquered territories of Italy, North Africa, and Spain.[3] At the same time, Justinian attempted to streamline the bureaucracy in an effort to save money. John of Cappadocia, Justinian's praetorian prefect, curtailed the imperial post. In 536, he suppressed most of the dioceses. His streamlining of the bureaucracy and emphasis on efficiency earned him the dislike of the senatorial class. The historical sources do not treat him well, although he was an a gifted administrator with an eye to reform, and was attempting to continue the reforms begun under the emperor Anastasius' (491-518) praetorian prefect, Marinus the Syrian.[4] It was Marinus the Syrian who had first put tax collection under the supervision of imperial administrators, the *vindices*, rather than city councils.[5]

Justinian's attempts at reform, however, probably had limited effect. The separation of civil and military authority and increasingly fiscal administration as well, began under Diocletian, continued. However, as Justinian's reign continued, inefficiency and corruption grew only worse, exacerbated by financial and social crises.[6] Justinian himself became completely preoccupied with ecclesiastical unity and began to leave the imperial administration to itself.[7] While he never achieved his goal of church unity, he did leave the imperial administration somewhat streamlined with Greek as its new official language. However, the administration would contract just as the empire itself.

3. Post-Justinian

Justinian's successors largely continued his administrative policies but adapted them to new circumstances. Tiberios Constantine (578-582) established exarchates in North Africa (591) and Italy (584), a sign of the importance of the regions. Even during Justinian's time, however, there was always a gap between vision and reality of administration. The emperor may envision an efficient, effective, and even benevolent imperial administration, but the constraints of communication and transportation in a pre-modern society hampered many efforts at reform. Locals on every level had a surprising amount of freedom and could cooperate as they saw fit. Corruption was endemic, and difficult to combat. Many reforms by Justinian and his successors were responses to new crises and problems, or attempts to amend ill-conceived reforms.

Just how long the late Roman, early Byzantine administrative system began by Diocletian has been a matter of some controversy.

Authoring : *Dale de Lee Benjamin* *(23/4/2008)*

For citation : *Dale de Lee Benjamin , "Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period", 2008, Encyclopaedia of the Hellenic World, Constantinople*
URL: <http://www.ehw.gr/l.aspx?id=10840>

Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period

Evidence from various sources, including coins and hagiography, suggests that at the opening of the seventh century, the administration was largely intact.[8] By the end of the seventh century the Justinianic system of small provinces had begun to be replaced by the thematic system, the administrative system of the middle Byzantine period. Ostrogorsky gave credit to Heraclius (610-41) for implementing the thematic system, but this view has been largely rejected.[9] This system was further developed by Leo III (717-41) and Constantine V (741-775). While the administrative units of the empire may have changed, and the civil and administrative offices became combined, the bureaucracy remained a fixture of the government from the Late Antique period on.

---

1. Williams, S., *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery* (New York 1985), pp. 61-70 for the tetrarchy; pp. 89ff. for an overview of administrative reforms; and pp. 201ff. for Diocletian's legacy.

2. For a detailed overview of the imperial administration under Constantine, cf., Kelly, Christopher, "Bureaucracy and Government," in N. Lenski (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge University Press 2006), pp. 183-204.

3. For an overview of the Justinianic administrative system, cf. Haldon, J. F., "Economy and Administration: How did the Empire Work?," in Michael Mass (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge University Press 2005), pp. 28-59, cf. especially the helpful chart, pp. 42-43.

4. Evans, J. A. S., *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances to Imperial Power* (London 1996), pp. 195-7.

5. Jones, A. H. M., *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: a social, economic, and administrative survey* 2 vols. (Oxford 1986), vol. 1, p. 236.

6. Haldon, J. F., "Economy and Administration: How did the Empire Work?," in Michael Mass (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge University Press 2005), pp.48-49.

7. Evans, J. A. S., *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances to Imperial Power* (London 1996), pp. 192ff.

8. Kaegi, W., "Notes on Hagiographic Sources for some Institutional Changes and Continuities in the Early Seventh Century," *Byzantina* 7 (1975), pp. 61-70, Kaegi also discusses and refers to other sources for this period.

9. For Ostrogorsky's view that the themes were developed by Heraclius, cf. his *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick 1952; repr. 2005), pp. 96-101, for a survey of scholarship rejecting this view, cf. Kaegi, W., "Some Reconsiderations on the Themes (seventh-ninth centuries)" *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft* 16 (1967), pp. 39-53.

Bibliography :

- **Barnes T.D.**, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*, Harvard 1982
- **Ostrogorsky G.**, *History of the Byzantine State*, New Brunswick – New Jersey 1957
- **Jones A.H.M.**, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602. A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey, 1-2*, Oxford 1964
- **Kaegi W.E.**, "Some reconsiderations on the themes (7th-9th centuries)", *Jahrbuch der österreichischen byzantinischen Gesellschaft*, 16, 1967, 39-53
- **Williams S.**, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery*, New York – London 1996

Authoring : *Dale de Lee Benjamin* *(23/4/2008)*

For citation : *Dale de Lee Benjamin , "Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period", 2008, Encyclopaedia of the Hellenic World, Constantinople*
URL: <http://www.ehw.gr/l.aspx?id=10840>

Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period

Evans J.A.S., *The Age of Justinian. The Circumstances to Imperial Power*, London 1996

Frank R. I., *Scholae Palatinae*, Rome 1969

Kaegi W.E., "Notes on Hagiographic Sources for some Institutional Changes and Continuities in the Early Seventh Century", *Byzantina*, 7 , 1975, 61-70

Lenski, N. (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, Cambridge 2006

Maas, M. (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, Cambridge 2005

Webliography :

Le Synekdèmos d'Hiéroclès et l'opuscule géographique de Georges de Chypre, Bruxelles 1939: charted are the lands of: Europe, Asia Minor, Near East

http://soltdm.com/sources/mss/hierocl/harta1.htm

Provincial Reorganisation

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/BURLAT/21*.html#2

The Roman Empire. Diocese of Asiana

http://www.roman-empire.net/maps/empire/dioceses/diocl-asiana.html

Glossary :

comes

1. A title in the Roman and the Byzantine Empires, designating an official with political but mostly military jurisdiction. Especially the *comes Orientis* held the position corresponding to that of a vicar in Early Byzantine period. In the years of Justinian I, the comes in head of wider provinces assumed political and military powers, while in the Middle Byzantine period the Opsikion theme was one of the few themes which was the jurisdiction of a comes instead of a strategos.
2. A nobility title in medieval Europe.

comes sacrarum largitionum

The count of the sacred, that is imperial, treasures was a high ranking political official with economical functions, the administrator of the imperial treasury.

cursus publicus

Byzantine empire: the service of the public post (office), "δρόμος", dispached into carrying the official correspondence as well as articles concerning the administering of the empire, but also applied to the military and the provincial administration. Two departments, manned with slaves, performed the duty: the cursus velox, that used horses, and the cursus clabularis, that used ox carts. Ocasionaly the cooperation of individual entrepreneur was in effect. Under Justinian I (527-565) the department of the cursus clabularis was abolished. The department of the cursus velox was abolished in the 12th c. in Asia Minor and soon after in the Balcans as well. The office was administered by the Curiosus Cursus Publici Praesentalis under the Magister Officiorum, the logothetes tou dromou (λογοθέτης του δρόμου) and in the end by an interpeteur (ερμηνευτής).

doukas (lat. dux)

Antiquity: Roman military commander who, in some provinces, combined military and civil functions.
Buzantium: a higher military officer. From the second half of the 10th c. the title indicates the military comander of a larger district. After the 12th c., doukes were called the governors of small themes.

exarchate

Byzantine administrative term, designating a territorial and and administrative unit. It was formed in late 6th C. in Carthago and Ravenna, both regions of high political and military importance. The exarch (the govrnor of an exarchate) accordingly combined both political and military power. The exarchate of Carthago is attested until the late 7th C., while that of Ravenna until the mid-8th C.

indiction

A 15-year cycle according to which a year was assigned in the Middle Ages. Initially it denoted an extraordinary agricultural tax; later on (under Constantine I) it was a tax of which the amount remained unchanged during a 15-year cycle. It gradually acquired a chronological meaning, which it kept even after the tax ceased to exist. The chronological system based on indictions became

Authoring : *Dale de Lee Benjamin* *(23/4/2008)*

For citation : *Dale de Lee Benjamin , "Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period", 2008, Encyclopaedia of the Hellenic World, Constantinople*
URL: <http://www.ehw.gr/l.aspx?id=10840>

Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period

mandatory under Justinian I. The system was not absolutely precise, since it was the years of the indiction that were reckoned (first indiction, second indiction and so on, until the fifteenth), while the cycles themselves were not numbered.

magister officiorum

The head of the central political administration of the empire, his functions were predominantly judiciary, although he did have some military ones too: he was the head of the scholai, i.e. the emperor's personal army. He had no economic functions; he administered three services and was responsible for the court's internal affairs.

magistros

Higher office that Philotheos in his Kletorologion places above the anthypatos. This title lost its importance from the 10th century and gradually disappeared - most probably in the middle of the 12th century.

patrikios

(from lat. *patricius*) Higher title of honour, placed, according to the "*Tactika*" of the 9th and the 10th centuries, between *anthypatos* and *protospatharios*. It was given to the most important governors and generals. Gradually, however, it fell into disuse and from the 12th century did not exist any more.

praetorian prefect (praefectus praetorio)

Commander of the emperor's bodyguard under the principate. During the regne of Constantine I the praetorian prefect becomes a dignitary responsible for the administrative unit called the prefecture, which was subdivided into dioceses. In 400 A.D. there were four such praetorian prefectures, of Oriens, of Illyricum, of Illyricum, Italia and Africa and of Gallia. The praetorian prefects were second only to the emperor. The praetorian prefect of Oriens was the mightiest among prefects. His office is for the last time mentioned in 680.

scholae palatinae

Scholae palatinae were created by Diocletian (284-305). They were corps of the imperial guard, and to be more precise they formed the personal army of the emperor. They served under the magistri officiorum and later on under the Domesticos ton Scholon. Seven regiments were stationed in the East and five in the West. Justinian I (527-565) introduced four more short-lived regiments.

spatharios

Early Byzantine period: Office as well as honorary title. In Early Byzantine period *spatharioi* were called the guards of the Emperor or other high functionaries. From the years of Theodosios II onwards, the imperial *spatharioi* belonged to the corps of cubicularii and they were eunuchs.
Middle Byzantine period: A honorary title, probably from early 8th c. In the 9th c. it gradually lost its status; in the 11th c., it is rarely to be found in the sources, while in the 12th it is used to denote lesser personnages. As an actual functionary, spatharios had an active role in administration as well as in the affairs of the court. As an honorary title, it was conferred to courtiers, members of the administration and military dignitaries, members of notable lineages and even clerics.

vicarius

The term refers to the substitute of various officials. Since the 3rd century, the vicarius replaced mostly procuratores from the equestrian class. The most important vicarii were those who replaced the Praetorian eparchs in the dioceses set up by Diocletian. In addition, the vicarii could have military (like the command of the garrison in Egypt) or even judicial responsibilities.

Chronological Table

285-305: Diocletian

293: Diocletian institutes tetrarchy

305-311: Galerius

311-324 : Licinius

324-337 : Constantine

337-361: Constantius II

361-363: Julian

363-364: Jovian

Authoring : *Dale de Lee Benjamin* *(23/4/2008)*

For citation : *Dale de Lee Benjamin , "Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period", 2008, Encyclopaedia of the Hellenic World, Constantinople*
URL: <http://www.ehw.gr/l.aspx?id=10840>

Administrative system in the Early Byzantine period

364-378: Valens

379-395: Theodosius I

395-408: Arcadius

408-450: Theodosius II

438: *Codex Theodosianus* promulgated

450-457: Marcian

457-474: Leo I

474: Leo II

474-491: Zeno

491-518: Anastasius I

518-527: Justin I

527-565: Justinian I

529: *Codex Justinianus*

534: Second edition of Codex

565-578 : Justin II

578-582 : Tiberius II Constantine

582-602: Maurice

602-510: Phocas

610-641: Heraclius

636: Battle of Yarmuk