The Imperial Theology of Victory

Paul Stephenson

The last Roman emperor, now remembered as the last emperor of Byzantium, Constantine XI, died fighting to prevent the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks under their 21-year-old leader, Mehmed II. Mehmed’s epithet, Fatih, “the conqueror” preserved the memory of his greatest achievement even as he cast himself in the role of successor to the Roman emperors. His destruction of the tombs of past rulers at the Holy Apostles’ Church, allowed for the placement of his conqueror’s mosque, the Fatih Camii, on that site. At the same time his rival, Constantine, became a symbol for the loss of empire. It was imagined that he could not simply have died fighting, but instead was petrified in his warrior’s pose and preserved outside of time, the “Marble Emperor”, waiting to return as liberator of Christians and restorer of empire. An Ottoman tale reports quite the opposite, that he was beheaded and his head nailed to the base of the column that held the bakır at, the “bronze horse” which was regarded with particular suspicion by the Turks as a talisman of the Christians. The Turks held that the horse’s rider pointed out at them in a mocking fashion, as once it had towards the Persians. Therefore, it is no surprise that Mehmed II wished it to be known that he had melted down the statue, along with Christian bells and crosses, to forge cannons, which would be directed against Christians during the siege of Belgrade in 1456.1

The bronze horse in question was the famous equestrian statue of Justinian (527-65), which in around 533 had been raised high on a column in the Augusteion, looking down upon the hippodrome and pointing to the East. Justinian was depicted holding an orb, a symbol of his ecumenical power, and wearing a peacock-feathered tiara, the toupha, which was adopted from Persian triumphal regalia. According to one account, the statue was cast to celebrate

1 According to Asikpaşazade, cited by Raby J., “Mehmed the Conqueror”, pp. 305-13, at 309. That Mehmed II had been responsible for the statue’s removal, but not its destruction, is clear from Pierre Gilles’ account. Gilles (II. 17), who made a meticulous study of the city during four years in Istanbul, identified in 1544 a colossal bronze statue of a horse rider in pieces, recently removed from the palace “where it had been preserved a long time”, and which was now being melted down for ordnance. He saw a man’s leg and nine-inch nose, and the legs and hooves, also nine inches long, of his horse.
Justinian’s victory over the Persians from captured arms and armour, as an epigram revealed: “The bronze from the Assyrian spoils moulded the horse and the monarch and Babylon perishing. This is Justinian, whom Julian, holding the balance of the East, erected, his own witness to the slaying of the Persians”. The forging of a victory monument from spoils had ancient precedents. Following the Battle of Actium, Octavian’s victory at sea over the forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, Octavian had the bronze prow mounts of his enemies’ ships melted down and formed into four bronze pillars, which he erected in Rome, on the Campus Martius. These were later transferred to the Capitoline by Domitian, and were seen by Servius in around CE 400. Far earlier, the Plataian Tripod was forged from the arms and armour of Xerxes’ fallen Persians into three entwined serpents supporting a golden cauldron. The column, now known as the Serpent Column, was transferred to Constantinople, where it was reinterpreted for and by Christian observers in the hippodrome. Justinian’s statue was different, however, in taking the form of the emperor himself. It made the Christian Roman emperor the very embodiment of victory.

The Christian Roman emperor, or Byzantine emperor, struggled to maintain exclusive possession of victory, and his monopoly was particularly threatened when, like Justinian, he did not lead his own armies. But many Byzantine emperors did lead armies, and those that went to war between c. 300 and 1204 will be the focus of this essay. It is a highly selective essay, focusing on episodes that allow us to identify the vehicles for and symbols of imperial victory, the perceived potency of which changed over time relative to each other and according to the nature and magnitude of the threat that the empire faced. It proceeds from the premise that the Byzantine emperor presided over a branch of the Christian faith that was fundamentally Old Testament in tone, operating according to the model of David, as a priest-king who was the object of divine choice, whose right to rule was established by victory in war. This was emphasized especially after the 7th century, and Middle Byzantine emperors were frequently compared to or portrayed as David, Moses or Joshua, whereas earlier other models prevailed. Classical, especially earlier Roman models remained important, both for emperors and, even more so, for those who wrote about

---

2 Greek Anthology XVI. 62 and 63.

3 This is a fundamental conclusion of Dagron, Emperor and Priest, from which I have drawn inspiration in the past, in Stephenson, “Imperial Christianity and Sacred Warfare in Byzantium”, pp. 81-93. For engagement and criticism of this premise and far more, see now Stouraitis, “Just War’ and ‘Holy War”, pp. 227-64. Also, the collected papers in Koder J./Stouraitis, Byzantine War Ideology.