Eyes of the Emperor' and 'Real Spies'. Stories of Espionage in Byzantine Writings

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Ancient Greeks used to say that the investigation of the meaning of words is the beginning of education.[1] In that tradition any study of espionage in Byzantine writings should include the relevant terminology both in military and non-military context. This raises the question of the nature of the sources, be they military manuals, chronicles, letters, hagiographical or other texts, in which espionage-related terms occur, as well as of the sporadic or systematic character of such mentions. The fact that espionage stories in Byzantine sources were often hinted at rather than spelled out should also be taken into account. The relevant terminology leads in turn to questions regarding the organization of Byzantine espionage and its link to strategies, military tactics, foreign relations and politics both in general and in the context of opposition to imperial policies. Examining examples of both subjects provides a general view of spies, espionage and their perception by the people of the time.

A comprehensive picture of Byzantine espionage should take into account the thousand year history of the Empire and its neighbours, while accounting for changing circumstances within that timeframe. Also it should corroborate the findings from Greek Byzantine sources, on which this article is based, with relevant information from Latin, Arabic, Georgian, Slavic and other sources, dealing with espionage from the viewpoint of Byzantium's neighbours. Since such an endeavour lies outside the range of this small contribution, the present article will limit itself to some observations on espionage and its perception as encountered in Byzantine writings.

With the exception of military manuals and historical sources systematically dealing with espionage within the particular context of specific military tactics, references to espionage and spies are random; a handicap in the study of Byzantine espionage. They tend to be found in stories on unrelated subjects, in the context of politics, foreign policy and strategy as well as relevant communications within the Empire and beyond, sometimes appearing only through inference, as a story within a story. In the latter case, we often dispose of some extraordinarily vivid scenes,

[1] Epictet, *Discourses* 1.17.12.

frequently adorned with fictional elements, which stand out as a kind of 'vignette' in the narratives of chronicles and hagiographical texts.

The Terminology of Byzantine Espionage

Coming back to the meaning of words and espionage terminology, Byzantine spies were usually referred to by the common Greek word *kataskopoi*, spies. The word, one already used in ancient Greek, was based on the noun *kataskopè* which denoted 'the action of assessing something in detail and from near distance',[2] hence to 'spy'. The word is found used thus, [3] both by ancient Greek historians such as Thucydides in the *Peloponnesian War* and in Modern Greek. Byzantine military sources use the verbal form of the word *kataskopein* in relation to the duties of the official in the capital that, out of reports from the borders, had to closely observe the situation in neighbouring enemy peoples, keep an eye on them, learn and report.[4] This duty in the tenth century was assigned to a representative of the emperor, often the Eparch of the City, that is, the highest Byzantine official in the capital, second only to the emperor,[5] which underscores the importance of the analysis of information. Similarly, ordinary verbal forms meaning 'to observe' (*diaskopein*)[6] or 'to see' (*theasasthai*)[7] or 'to search and assess'(*diagnonai*)[8] and 'search and find out'(*diereunesai*)[9] were used in order to describe the spies' activities. Sometimes, the terms implied the means, as in

[2] Demetrakos, *Mega lexicon tès Hellenikès Glossès* [Great Dictionary of the Greek Language] (Athens 1953) s.v. 'kataskopè'.
[3] H.S. Jones and J.E. Powel ed., *Thucydides, Historiae* VI (Oxford 1963) 34, 46.
[4] J.F. Haldon, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions*, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae (hereafter CFHB) (Vienna 1990) 86.
[5] A. Kazhdan, 'Eparch of the City' in: A. Kazhdan et al. ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford and New York, NY 1991).
[6] G. Dagron and H. Mihaescu, *Le traité sur la guérilla (de velitatione) de l'empereur Nicéphore Phocas (963-969)* VI (Paris 1986) 13, 39.
[7] Ibidem, 12, 49.
[8] E. McGeer, 'The *Praecepta Militaria* of the Emperor Nikephoros II Phocas' in: E. McGeer ed., *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century* IV Dumbarton Oaks Studies XXXIII (Washington, DC 1995) 40.
[9] 'Leonis Imperatoris Tactica' in: J.P. Migne ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus*, *series graeca* (*PG*) 107 (Paris 1863) 670-1094, Appendix 1095-1120, especially 777A.

the case of the word *diopteusomenon,*[10] which meant 'to find out by observing with one's own eyes'.[11] They alluded to a particular duty in gathering or checking a specific piece of information as in the expression 'to find out in precise detail' (*diereunesai en akribeia*) used by the early ninth century *Chronicle of Theophanes* describing an earlier Byzantine spy mission to Syria which took place under cover of a diplomatic one. The diplomatic mission in question was headed by Daniel Sinopites, Eparch of Constantinople at the time. The emperor, acting on the information received from Daniel about the Arabs preparing for war, made his own preparations assuming the possibility of a three-year siege of his capital. He built up the strength of his navy, repaired the walls and took care of the provisioning of the capital and its population.[12]

Terms as the ones cited above underscore the agent's duty to verify the information personally. Accuracy (*akribeia*) was the operative word in espionage. Procopius, the sixth century historian who described the wars of Justinian I, defined in his *Secret History* the work of spies in the context of the Persian-Byzantine conflict. He pointed out that the spies were in the service of the Empire and were paid by the Empire's treasury in order to go to enemy lands. They went to Persia, gained access (in the guise of merchants or in any other way) to the king's palace and learned accurately (*es to akribes*) the secrets of the enemy,[13] so that, coming back to Byzantium, they reported to their leaders. Their numbers could include naval officers, who, under orders from the admiral of the fleet, used fast ships (*dromones*) to seek information on the enemy's coastal defences or naval war preparations. They also used merchantmen and small fishing vessels of the *myoparon* type (single banked and with a single mast) in order to enter enemy ports.[14] The common name of such ships in Greek and Latin *kataskopos naus/speculatoris*

[10] C. de Boor ed., *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig 1883-1885) 384/1-5.

[11] N. Koutrakou, 'Diplomacy and Espionage: their role in Byzantine Foreign Relations, 8th-10th Centuries', *Graeco-Arabica* 6 (1995) 125-144, especially 144.

[12] *Theophanis Chronographia*, 384/6-14.

[13] K.W. Dindorf ed., *Procopii Caesariensis Historia Arcana* 30 in: Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae (hereafter CSHB) (Bonn 1838) 163/3-8.

[14] A Late Antique mosaic at the Bardo Museum of Tunis represents such a small merchant/fishing ship. It bears the self-explanatory inscription CATASCOPISCUS. See: A. Berkaoui, 'La Tunisie et l'art de la navigation dans l'Antiquité' in: Ministère de la Culture/Agence Nationale du Patrimoine/Institut National du Patrimoine Tunisien ed., *Tunisie. Hommes et Monuments* (Tunis 1996) 54.

navis (scouting or spy ships)[15] clearly refers to their espionage function. The ubiquitous word *kataskopoi*, spies, was also used as a technical term in military manuals,[16] in parallel with terms of Latin origin such as *speculatores, sculcatores,*[17] *exploratores*,[18] *ducatores*, *minsuratores* and *procursatores.*[19] All of them were used indiscriminately for intelligencers, commandos, scouts and guides reconnoitering ahead as well as agents gathering all types of information.

Other similar terms such as the Byzantine Greek term *synodikoi,*[20] denoted information gathering agents operating as a group (from the Greek *synodos*, assembly) in a military context. Military manuals used technical terms such as *trapezitai*, (from *trapeza*, banc, but also fortified borough) *honsiarioi* (from a Bulgarian word for brigands) and *tasinarioi/tasinaria* (from the Armenian *tasn*, ten)[21] which pointed towards small specialist groups of about ten people, often coming from frontier regions. They operated in a local context, harassing the enemy and securing information about his movements.

Another term, the *viglai,* also of Latin origin (from Latin *vigilia*), was likewise widely used in the context of *in situ* information gathering and reporting to the regional commander or to a centralised authority.[22] The

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[15] V. Christides, 'Military Intelligence in Arabo-byzantine Naval Warfare' in: K. Tsiknakis ed., *Byzantium at War 9th-12th* in: The National Hellenic Research Foundation, Institute for Byzantine Research, International Symposia 4 (Athens 1997) 269-281, especially 275-277.

[16] *Leonis Imperatoris Tactica*, 837D, 844B. Another military manual, the eleventh century *Strategikon of Kekaumenos*, used the word *kataskopoi* in parallel with the word *topodetes*, literally 'those who observe the places': W. Wassiliewski and V. Jernstedt, *Cecaumeni Strategicon et incerti scriptoris de officiis regiis libellus* (Amsterdam 1965 [oorspr. 1896]) 26.

[17] The term is made explicit in the popular military manual attributed to emperor Maurice and written around 600AD, which gives the equation *sculcatores=kataskopoi*, thus suggesting that by that time Latin terms needed an explanation in the Greek-speaking Eastern military milieu: G.T. Dennis ed., *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*, CFHB (Vienna 1981) 2, par. 11, 130.

[18] *Leonis Imperatoris Tactica*, 940A. Similarly, this late ninth – early tenth century military manual explains the term *exploratores* by its Greek equivalent *kataskopoi.*

[19] McGeer, 'Praecepta Militaria' 5, par. 2, 52 and McGeer, 'Praecepta Militaria' 4, par. 94, 44.

[20] Wassiliewski and Jenrnstedt, *Cecaumeni Strategicon,* 9/13-15.

[21] Dagron and Mihaescu, *De velitatione*, 252-257.

[22] Haldon, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, Three Treatises*, 84.

term referred mostly to look-outs, guards, watchmen, scouts and any person charged with the duty of watching out against an enemy threat and informing on it. The term *viglai* as well as several related terms such as *viglatores, caminoviglia/caminovigla* and *caminoviglatores* had a strong defensive connotation connected to counter-espionage. The *viglai* secured the roads and forwarded information either by means of the Byzantine semaphore system as seems to be indicated,[23] especially by the term *caminoviglia,*[24] or by courier messengers. The use of signalling fires at specific locations enabled messages originating at the borders (in particular warnings about eminent enemy raids) to reach Constantinople in a matter of hours. It was a kind of Early Warning System that in the Eastern provinces began at the mountains of Cilicia in South Eastern Asia Minor and ended at the Church of the Virgin of the *Pharos* (Lighthouse) in Constantinople. [25] The illustrated manuscript of the *History of Scylitzes*, kept today at the Madrid National Library provides us with an illustration of the system (see fig. 1). In the relevant miniature, Byzantine emperor Michael III (842-867) appears driving his chariot in the Hippodrome while the fires at the Virgin of the *Pharos* (depicted as a church on fire by the miniaturist) signaled an Arab attack. The purpose of the story was, as per later propaganda, to blacken the image of that emperor and present Michael III as an irresponsible ruler who continued to amuse himself instead of dealing with the affairs of the State.[26] However, the incident demonstrates that the semaphore system worked and its signals were clearly visible in Constantinople. Still the information that could be forwarded through this system was rudimentary at best and highly

[23] According to Demetrakos, *Mega Lexikon* s.v. 'kaminoviglia', the word derives from the Latin word *caminus* (fireplace), denoting the watchmen/scouts/agents who used fire signals in order to pass the information along. Another etymology links the words *caminoviglia/caminovigla*, *caminoviglatores* to the late-Latin word *caminus* (road), in which case the agents would be the guardsmen and sentries along the roads, who, however, also signalled information about enemy movements. See the analysis by Dagron and Mihaescu, *De velitatione*, 216, 246-247.

[24] Dagron and Mihaescu, *De velitatione,* 2, 1-3, 39-40.

[25] P. Pattenden, 'The Byzantine Early Warning System', *Byzantion* 53 (1983) 258-299, especially 268-270.

[26] On the deliberate attacks on Michael III's character by later historiography, which have been remarked upon by many scholars, see: R.J. Lilie, 'Reality and Invention, Reflections on Byzantine Historiography', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 68 (2014) 157-210, especially 172-173.

dependent on weather conditions. These inefficiencies meant that in practice a functioning system of human messengers was always necessary.

Fig. 79 (fol. 77v)

Fig. 1: The Byzantine Semaphore system. Source: A. Grabar and M. Manousakas, *L'illustration du Manuscrit de Skylitzes de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Madrid*, fol. 77v. Institut Hellénique d'Études Byzantines et Post-Byzantines de Venise (Venice 1979) fig. 79.

Part of this system was the post service and its agents, *cursores/procursores,* as well as the *agentes in rebus* (active in affairs), *magistrianoi/diatrehontes* that is the imperial agents charged with various duties.[27] They were acting as security agents, ensuring the surveillance of ports and customs, carrying off dispatches, gathering information and carrying out missions, often sensitive, inside the empire and beyond. They reported to the *Magister Officiorum* during the first Christian centuries and to the *Droungarios tès Viglas*,[28] that is

[27] 'Alphabetical Guide', G.W. Bowersock, P. Brown and O. Grabar ed., *Late Antiquity: A guide to the Post-classical World* (Cambridge, MA 1999) 278.
[28] N. Oikonomidès, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IXe et Xes siècles* (Paris 1972) 331-332.

the person responsible for the security of the emperor and the City and/or to the *Logothetes tou Dromos,*[29] that is the high official responsible for the *oxys dromos/cursus publicus* (post service), and for Byzantium's foreign relations from the eighth century onwards. The information they provided was included in the espionage reports that reached the emperor. Not surprisingly, agents of this type, operating both inside the Empire and in foreign lands, were already in Late Antiquity called 'eyes of the emperor'.[30]

This multitude of terms for Byzantine intelligencers explains why the sources use the words 'real spies', *aletheis kataskopoi* for those trained observers sent with the precise duty of verifying information in contrast to watchmen, scouts and commandos, although the latter could also act as 'real spies'. These 'real spies' operated in principle in foreign lands and were charged with finding out accurate information, especially about enemy war preparations,[31] city defences or political developments, using sympathisers' networks. The story of emperor Constantine V (741-775) who was apprised by his *kryptoi filoi* (secret friends, as the *chronicle of Theophanes* called them) of the Bulgarian plans,[32] hints at the existence not only of Byzantine influence in Bulgaria's leading circles but rather of a spy network passing information to Byzantium.[33]

However, operatives inside the Empire were also possible in the context of political struggles. Historian Ammianus Marcellinus relates a relevant incident while describing the revolt of Procopius, cousin and reputed designated successor to the emperor Julian (361-363). Procopius the usurper hid in Constantinople before instigating his revolt against emperor Valens in 365AD. In disguise, he went to Byzantium's marketplace in order to collect rumours and assess the people's feelings in view of a revolt. In this he acted, as Ammianus Marcellinus pointed out, '*ritu itaque sollertisimi cuiusdam speculatoris*': as a most diligent spy.[34]

[29] Ibidem, 312.
[30] Libanius, *Orationes*, in: R. Foerster ed., *Libanii Opera* (Leipzig 1903-1908) 18, 140.
[31] *Leonis Imperatoris Tactica*, 980C-D.
[32] de Boor, *Theophanis Chronographia,* 447/11.
[33] E. Kyriakes, *Byzantio kai Boulgaroi (7os-10s ai). Symbolè stin exoterikè politikè toy Byzantioy* [Byzantium and the Bulgarians 7th-10th Centuries. A Contribution on Byzantine Foreign Policy] (Athens 1993) 90.
[34] *Ammianus Marcellinus*, XXVI/6, 6 in: G. Viansino ed., *Ammiano Marcellino, Storie* III (Milan 2002) 134.

Spy Stories and Espionage Awareness

As far as the perception of espionage was concerned, the Byzantines did not concern themselves with the existence of Byzantine spies and commandos. However, both population and authorities at regional and central level were aware of and worried about the presence of enemy spies and tried to counter their activities. Information concerning popular perception abounds not only in histories and chronicles but also in the arguably most popular and widespread Byzantine literature, namely the hagiographical texts.[35] Hagiography often provides relevant examples. The story of a saint, usually a wandering monk, arrested as a spy came to be almost commonplace in middle-Byzantine hagiography, especially in the context of Arab-Byzantine relations. Michael Psellos the eleventh century Byzantine scholar and Statesman, mentions in his letters a certain Elias monk,[36] a friend and servant of his, who had travelled widely across Byzantine lands as well as to Syria, had firsthand knowledge of the region and could reliably inform

[35] L. Bréhier, 'L'hagiographie byzantine des VIIIe et IXe siècles à Constantinople et dans les provinces', *Journal des Savants* 14 (1916) 358-369. Similarly: H. Delehaye, 'L'ancienne hagiographie byzantine. Les sources, les premiers modèles, la formation des genres. Conférences prononcées au Collège de France en 1935. Textes inédits publiés par B. Joassart et X. Lequeux, préface de G. Dagron', *Subsidia Hagiographica* 73 (Brussels 1991) XXXVII-77; F. Halkin, 'L'hagiographie Byzantine au service de l'histoire' in: J.M. Hussey ed., *Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford, London and New York, NY 1966-1967) 345-354; as well as several authors in S. Efthymiadis ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography* I, *Periods and Places* (Farnham 2011), all stressed the popularity of hagiography while analyzing its importance as a source of historical material. Recent research focused on hagiography's role in reaching its readers: C. Rapp, 'Figures of Female Sanctity: Byzantine Edifying Manuscripts and their Audience', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50 (1996) 313-344, especially 313. On its use as a tool for a message to reach the reader: N. Koutrakou, *La propagande impériale byzantine, persuasion et réaction (VIII^{e}-X^{e} siècles)* (Athens 1994) 152-157; and most recently: A. Timotin, 'Message traditionnel et message immédiat dans l'hagiographie méso-byzantine IX^{e}- XI^{e} siècles' in: P. Odorico ed., *La face cachée de l'hagiographie byzantine. Le texte en tant que message immédiat. Actes du colloque international, Paris 5-7 juin 2008* (Paris 2012) 265-274.

[36] G. Dennis, 'Elias the Monk, friend of Psellos' in: J. Nesvitt ed., *Byzantine Authors, Literary Activities and Preoccupations. Texts and Translations dedicated to the Memory of Nicholas Oikonomides* (Leiden and Boston, MA 2003) 43-62.

Psellos on events in the Eastern provinces of the Empire and beyond. Judging by this, the possibility of monks acting as information gatherers, if not spies, remained very real.

Similarly, the *Life of St. Basil the Younger* describes how the saint was mistaken for a spy at the time of emperor Leon VI (886-912): some *magistianoi* (imperial agents) passing through the saint's region in Asia Minor on an unspecified mission, happened to meet him while taking a shortcut through the mountains. The saint's rather strange appearance (according to the *Acta Sanctorum* version of the *Life* he was wearing a hermit's woollen garments) did not inspire confidence in the imperial agents as to his intentions, so he was arrested and swiftly led in chains - using the imperial post service according to the *Acta Sanctorum* version - directly to the capital.[37] The text does not provide many details about the arrest. However, the terms *magistrianos* and *explorator* used for those making the arrest suggest a reconnaissance mission through a mountain passage, probably in preparation of a Byzantine expedition. Any encounter during such a mission could be suspect. This is further substantiated as the text proceeds with the story of the saint in Constantinople. He was brought to the house of Samonas the patrician, a Byzantine official of Arab origin and one of emperor Leo VI's most trusted collaborators. Consequently the saint was interrogated by Samonas himself. Samonas often acted as a go-between in sensitive negotiations involving Arabs and Byzantine defectors. His activities caused him to be depicted in a less than favourable light in Byzantine chronicles.[38] So, the fact that Samonas is presented in the *Life* as

[37] Greek text in: D.F. Sullivan, A.M. Talbot and S. McGarth, *The Life of St. Basil the Younger. Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the Moscow Version.* Dumbarton Oaks Studies 45 (Washington, DC 2014) 70; Version in Latin: J. Bollandus, G. Henschenius, D. Paperbrochius ed., 'De S. Basilio Iuniore anachoreta Constantinopoli = Vita S. Basilii Iunioris' in: *Acta Sanctorum* Martii III (Antwerpen 1668) 667-681, especially par. 2, 668.

[38] Samonas's feud with powerful Byzantine aristocratic families and factions such as the Argyroi and the Doukai, did not earn him any friends. He is described in Byzantine chronicles as trying to flee to Arab lands, as entering in secret negotiations with the Arabs and engineering the defection and downfall of Andronic Doukas, as involved in the forced retirement of patriarch Nicholas I of Constantinople: in short as a rather 'shady' figure of the early tenth century Byzantine politics. See Theophanes Continuatus in Scriptores post Theophanem in: I. Bekker ed., *Theophanes Continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius*

personally conducting the interrogation and asking the saint questions aiming at identifying him suggests several things.[39] First that Samonas was a known factor in the context of information gathering and processing, possibly acting as the Byzantine 'spymaster' in Arab matters. Second that there was a series of identifying details without which anyone could be suspected of espionage. The identifying elements asked of the saint concerned his name, origins and the purpose of his being where he was apprehended. The ensuing dialog in the hagiographical text is one of a continuous double entente, with Samonas asking realistic questions and even stating that the saint was arrested on a charge of espionage against the land of the Romans (= the Byzantines) and the saint either remaining silent or answering metaphorically that he was a stranger not to a country or town but to mortal life. The *Life* follows in this instance the hagiographical *topos* of confrontation between the saint-hero and the tyrant. Samonas assumes the role of the latter and orders St. Basil to be imprisoned and tortured.[40] Finally, the saint is miraculously saved from death by drowning ordered by Samonas and goes on with his life in Constantinople.

Such identification-aimed questions were often put to lone travellers in Byzantine lands. Several hagiographical texts relating the deeds of Byzantine saints mention their being viewed with suspicion by Byzantine authorities and having to identify themselves, by answering the 'usual questions'. For instance, the *Life of St. Luke the Younger*, a tenth century saint, states that while travelling through mainland Greece the saint was (falsely) accused of being an escaped slave and arrested. He had to answer the 'usual questions' about his birth, parents, family, origin and destination and was freed only after identification by a reliable witness.[41] The accusation might be a pretext but at any rate it gave the road patrol that stopped the saint the opportunity to control a suspected traveller. According to the testimony of another travelling saint, Gregory Decapolites, an identification document, a

Monachus in: CSHB (Bonn 1838) 368-377; R.J.H. Jenkins, 'The "Flight" of Samonas', *Speculum* 23 (1948) 217-235.

[39] Sullivan et al., *The Life of St. Basil the Younger*, 72; *Vita S. Basillii Iunioris*, par. 3, 668.

[40] Sullivan et al., *The Life of St. Basil the Younger*, 74-78; *Vita S. Basillii Iunioris*, par. 4-5, 668-669.

[41] D. Sophianos ed., *The Life of St. Luke the Steiriotes* (Athens 1989) 15/5, 165-166.

kind of 'mission order' was often needed in order to pass such road controls.[42]

It is interesting to note how often in Byzantine writings monks came under suspicion of being spies. After all they comprised one of the most mobile segments of society – the other ones being merchants, military men and army followers. They were able to travel as pilgrims, in search of a suitable place to become anchorites or for visits to other monastic communities or even as paid travelling guides for other travelers,[43] both within and outside the Empire. With them travelled news, rumours and information. They could provide cover for spies or serve as spies themselves, hence the distrust and control of authorities and population. A number of stories, from the tenth century chronicles known as the *Continuators of Theophanes* and from hagiographical texts such as *Life of St. Gregory the Decapolites*, or the Italo-Greek *Life of St. Nilos the Younger*, illustrate this point.

The Chronicles state that emperor Theophilos (829-842) wanted to recall to Byzantium a defector, a general named Manuel who, under suspicion of conspiracy, had sought refuge with the Arabs. At the time of the chronicler, more than a century after the events, there were several stories circulating as to how the emperor succeeded in doing so. According to one version he sent to Baghdad John the Grammarian, a ninth century intellectual monk who later became the last Iconoclast patriarch, [44] ostensibly to negotiate an exchange of prisoners, but with the covert mission of finding Manuel and passing to him the emperor's letter of safe-conduct, so that he could return to Constantinople. Another version had John infiltrating Baghdad amidst visiting Iberian monks. There, disguised as a mendicant, he made contact with Manuel on pretext of asking for alms and passed him the safe-conduct letter which enabled the general to come back to the Byzantine side.[45] These stories have all the trappings of fiction: disguises, subterfuges, undercover intelligencers, even a 'happy end' for the

[42] G. Makris ed., *Ignatios Diakonos und die Vita des Hl. Gregorios Dekapolites*. Byzantinisches Archiv 17 (Stuttgart and Leipzig 1997) par. 49, 110.
[43] H. Delehaye ed., 'Vita S. Pauli Junioris in Monte Latro', *Analecta Bollandiana* 11 (1892) 5-74 and 136-182, especially 22.
[44] P. Lemerle, *Le premier humanisme byzantin* (Paris 1971) 135-137. Also: L. Bréhier, 'Un patriarche sorcier à Constantinople', *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 9 (1904) 261-268.
[45] I. Bekker ed., *Theophanes Continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus*, CSHB (Bonn 1838) 119-120.

Byzantine side. They probably belonged to a collection of such anecdotes circulating about the rather controversial figure of John the Grammarian both by his iconoclast supporters and his iconophile detractors. However, the fact that such stories were in circulation indicates that authorities and population in Byzantium and in Arab lands were aware that visiting monks could be spies in disguise and reacted accordingly.

In the *Life of St. Gregory the Decapolites* the popular reaction took on a rather extreme form. The saint was in the Southern Italian city of Otranto where he became the object of what amounted to a citizens' arrest of the time: he was accused by the mob of being a traitor to the Christian population, suffered the humiliation of being paraded with a *soudarion*, (a kind of oriental head-dress) and threatened with death.[46] He was saved only through the intervention of the iconoclast bishop of Otranto. The particular form of the humiliation suffered by the saint suggests either a will to proclaim him a defender of images, an enemy-traitor to be compared to the external Arab enemy, or a will to demonstrate that the mob had apprehended an Arab spy,[47] – something of particular importance to the city of Otranto at a time when the Arab naval raids in the region were quite common.[48] According to his *Life,* something similar happened to another Byzantine wandering monk, the Sicilian St. Elias the Younger, while travelling with a disciple of his from Sparta to Italy around 880/881 AD. When the travellers reached the city of Buthrinto in the Epirus Vetus region, opposite the island of Corfu, they found themselves under investigation by the local authorities. The local deputy military commander called them 'impious Agarenes' and accused them of being *kataskopoi ton poleon* (spies of

[46] Makris, *Gregorios Dekapolites,* par. 33/5-7, 96-98.

[47] C. Mango, 'On re-reading the Life of St Gregory the Decapolite', *Byzantina* 13 (1985) 633-646, especially 637.

[48] Saracen raids, echoing the dangers of the time, are a recurrent Leitmotiv in Byzantine hagiographical texts from Southern Italy: E. Follieri, 'Il culto dei santi nell'Italia greca' in: *La chiesa greca in Italia dal VIII al XVI secolo: atti del convegno storico interecclesiale, Bari 30.04.–04.05.1969* II. Italia sacra 21 (Padua 1972) 553–577, especially 564–565 and 569–570. Also: S. Efthymiades, 'Les saints d'Italie méridionale (IXe–XIIe s.) et leur rôle dans la société locale' in: D. Sullivan, E. Fisher and S. Papaioannou ed., *Byzantine Religious Culture: Studies in Honor of Alice-Mary Talbot* (Leiden and Boston, MA 2012) 347–372, especially 349, 365. On the narrative motifs of hagiographical texts from Southern Italy see: M. Re, 'Italo-Greek Hagiography' in: S. Efthymiadis ed., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography*, I: *Periods and Places* (Farnham 2011) 227–258, especially 238ff.

towns).[49] The specific accusation indirectly provides us with a glimpse as to the targets of espionage at the time: information on coastal towns and port fortifications were of prime importance in the context of the Arabbyzantine naval conflicts in the region. It also underlines that it was quite easy to accuse someone of espionage, especially a stranger without links to the region.

This awareness of the possibility of foreigners to be spies in disguise was not limited to the Byzantine side. Byzantine texts refer to Christian pilgrims apprehended as spies by Saracens in the Holy Land. A rather curious text, a *Passio of the 63 martyrs of Jerusalem in the year 724AD,* possibly written around the mid-eighth century[50] describes the martyrs' fate. According to this text,[51] they went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre. They also transported a quantity of gold, silver and other offerings for the Christian shrines in Palestine and for the monks residing in the region,[52] a fact that suggests a possible trade mission. There they were arrested by the Arab 'sentries of the roads',[53] (a function similar to the counter-espionage Byzantine one), accused of espionage, tried and put to death.[54]

The above stories denote an awareness and fear of espionage in encounters with foreigners. The fact that spies and scouts dressed in a similar fashion and could often pass for natives of the other side did nothing to alleviate that fear. For instance, the aforementioned St. Gregory the Decapolites, leaving the city of Otranto, happened by pure chance, according to his *Life*, to find himself in the middle of the nearby Arab army. However he was able to go through them without being challenged.[55] This is rather significant – if not suspect. It means that he could pass for Arab – and if the Arab invading army was that close to the city of Otranto, then the inhabitants were rightly suspicious of foreigners.

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[49] G. Rossi-Taibbi ed., *Vita di Sant'Elia il Giovane, Istituto siciliano di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici*, Testi 7 (Palermo 1962) par. 28, 42.

[50] R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others saw It. A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ 1997) 361-362.

[51] A. Papadopoulo-Kerameus, 'Passio of the 63 martyrs under Leo III', *Pravoslavnij Palestinskij Sbornik* 57 (1907) 136-163.

[52] Ibidem, par. 4, 139.

[53] Ibidem, par. 6, 141.

[54] Ibidem, par. 10, 145.

[55] Makris, *Gregorios Dekapolites*, par. 34/1-4, 98.

Another Byzantine hagiographical text, the *Life of St. Nilos the Younger* confirms the importance of disguising a spy's appearance, which caused troubles for Byzantine wandering monks and pilgrims. St. Nilos resided at the forested region of Mercourion, in Southern Italy, when a Saracen raid took place and his companion monks were taken prisoners. The saint decided to partake of their fate in order to offer them consolation. So, he waited on the road for a Saracen raiding party to take him prisoner.[56] Sometime afterwards a company of about ten cavalrymen dressed and armed as Saracens came towards him. The saint expected to be taken prisoner but they asked him to pray for them. They removed their Saracen head-dresses and the saint became aware that they were Byzantine soldiers from a nearby fortress who, as they said, had put on this disguise, in order to '*aposkopisai ton topon*' (spy/scout the region).[57] The story provides an independent witness as to how the *synodikoi/tasinarioi,*[58] the small specialist spying/scout groups described in the military manuals, really operated. At the same time, it corroborates the difficulty for the population to distinguish between friendly and hostile spies, a fact which added to the perception of spies as a military necessity but pushed the public awareness of the danger of espionage almost to the point of paranoia.

The Byzantine 'Spymaster' and the Espionage System

Judging by the above spy stories, the espionage terminology of the military sources is not found in other sources. This is hardly surprising given the technical and practical character of military manuals and the ignorance of such terms by most hagiographers. What the stories, despite their often fictional character underline, is the high awareness of the Byzantine authorities and population as to the existence of enemy spies. Byzantine

[56] P.G. Giovanelli, *Bios kai Politeia toy hosioy patros hemon Neiloy toy Neoy* [Life and acts of our saintly father Nilos the Younger] *Testo originale Greco e Studio introduttivo(cod. Greco criptense B.b II)* (Grottaferrata 1972) par. 30, 77.

[57] Ibidem, 77-78. Also: A. Luzzi, 'La vita di San Nilo da Rossano tra genere letterario e biografia storica' in: P. Odorico and P.A. Agapitos ed., *Les Vies des saints à Byzance. Genre littéraire ou biographie historique? Actes du IIe colloque international philologique ERMENEIA, Paris 6-7-8 juin 2002* in: Dossiers Byzantins 4 (Paris 2004) 175–189, especially 176–177.

[58] See notes 20-21.

spies however were taken for granted and not much spoken about. Also, with the exception of military manuals which were of restricted readership, there was much confusion as to what the various types of spies and commandos were required to do. The hagiographical texts provide useful information as to the perception of spies, but only hint at their organisation. The overall picture points towards a twofold system functioning both at regional and central level. The regional one concentrated on enemy preparations and movements and used mostly small units of army specialists, as the military terms indicate. Possibly the men came from border regions, from the *trapezae,* the fortified boroughs of the borderlands and were bilingual. Their reports were mostly circumstantial and depended on sources ranging from reconnaissance, interrogation of captives and conversion of captives to spies though use of threats and holding family as hostages. Local merchants, pilgrims and non-combatant followers of armies who came into contact with local populations were also sources of information. The spies were accountable to the commanding officer of an expedition or to the general of the Byzantine *theme*, the Byzantine provincial administration unit. It was the duty of the provincial military governor or the commander of an expedition to evaluate the information provided by spies and either act upon it or forward it to the capital to be included into a larger picture. The latter action concerned in particular specific information possibly brought to the regional commander through the 'real spies' operating in foreign lands and had to reach the capital through trusted messengers, probably together with reports on the internal situation.

Once in the capital, such information would be checked against elements provided by other means, including diplomatic reports and special missions. The sources are not exactly clear as to who had the duty to evaluate all the information and provide a comprehensive report which eventually reached the emperor. There was a large body of trusted secretaries. Psellos, who began his career as an *asecretis* (an imperial secretary) has provided us with a vivid picture of their working (and overworking) conditions.[59] Similarly, the *De Administrando imperio*, a Byzantine treatise on kingcraft and foreign policy which was composed specifically for the use of an heir to the empire in the mid-tenth century, indicates by the use of the word *Isteon* (it should be known/noted) at the beginning of several chapters that it was composed using data files from every branch of the imperial

[59] M. Psellos, *Peri Asekreton* [on the Asecretis] in: K.N. Sathas ed., *Biblioteca Graeca Medii Aevi* V (Paris and Venice 1876) 248-253, especially 249.

administration.[60] Such fact sheets could be drawn out from more extensive reports, including espionage ones, although the sources do not mention the person(s) charged with providing the synthesised report that would reach its ultimate destination: the emperor.

However, one or more high officials, acting essentially as Byzantium's 'spymaster(s)', would build a comprehensive picture and provide the emperor with alternatives for him to assess and give the order to act. For Constantinople the official in question was, in all probability, the *droungarios tis viglas*, who, as the term indicates, was charged with countering threats to the capital and to the emperor himself. Another likely candidate was the Eparch of the City, the highest administrative authority in Constantinople after the emperor. Lastly, the *Logothetes tou Dromou*, from the eighth century onwards, as head of the *cursus publicus* (post service) and responsible for the interpreters and the foreign envoys in Byzantine lands also had the possibility to act as 'spymaster'. The historian Procopius' treatment of the *cursus publicus* and spies/*kataskopoi* together in his *Secret History* confirms their interrelationship.[61] Procopius' purpose was to damage Justinian's imperial image by accusing him of reducing the '*oxys dromos*' the velocity and frequency of the post service and thus the passing of information from the frontiers to the capital. He also asserted that Justinian, out of avarice stopped the spies' stipend. Thus Justinian deprived the Empire of information as to the Persian war preparations, indirectly becoming the cause of losing the Lasica region to them.[62] The story, despite Procopius' malign intentions, reflects the perception of spies as a military necessity and of the link between espionage and communications, indirectly confirming the power of the official supervising such services.

[60] G. Moravcsik and R.J.H. Jenkins, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio*. CFHB (Washington, DC 1967) 10, 12-15. For examples of such files see: Ibidem, chapter 37, 166-170.

[61] Dindorf, *Procopii Caesariensis Historia Arcana*, par. 30, 161-162.

[62] Ibidem, par. 30, 163. For a discussion of Procopius' statements see: A.D. Lee, *Information and frontiers. Roman foreign relations in late antiquity* (Cambridge 1993) 173-174. Also: A.D. Lee, 'Procopius, Justinian and the *kataskopoi*', *Classical Quarterly* 39 (1989) 569-572.

An interesting story from the Byzantine Chronicles illustrates the power such an official could yield in the tenth century.[63] It concerns a certain Nicholas, former tax collector, who, accused of peculation, had fled to Syria – presumably with the proceedings from the taxes. During the rebellion or Constantine Doukas in 913 AD,[64] this Nicholas sent to Constantinople, for the attention of Thomas the *Logothetes* a message written in invisible ink on a black cloth. He advised not to fear the rebel, because his rebellion was not thought through and would fail. The message was coded as a kind of prophecy, reducing the danger of its being understood if intercepted. It was written in Arabic and the interpreter of Arabic deciphered and interpreted it. The message essentially apprised the *Logothete*s as to the Arab stance in the case: the Arabs would remain neutral withdrawing their support from Doukas and diminishing his chances of success.

In the above case the *Logothetes* Thomas acted both as responsible for foreign relations and for security matters. Informed of the Arabs' intentions he could avoid international complications and proceed with crushing the rebellion. The story in fact points to him as being the Byzantine spymaster by implication: Nicholas knew the code in which to write the message and addressed it specifically to him. This means that probably Nicholas was himself part of the Byzantine espionage system; a planted spy who had gained his place among the Arabs by simulating a defection.

However, although the *Logothetes tou Dromou*, as per his competences was the best candidate for 'spymaster', it should be clear that this was not a particular office. It was a function and it could be exercised by different officials, depending on personalities and circumstances. One condition, as in the case of Samonas, was absolutely necessary: The official in question had to enjoy the absolute trust of the emperor, the ultimate

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[63] *Theophanes Continuatus*, 383-384; F. Dvornik, *Origins of Intelligence services: The ancient Near East, Persia, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, the Arab Muslim Empires, the Mongol Empire, China, Moscovy* (New Brunswick, NJ 1974) 148-149.

[64] For the revolt of Constantine Doukas see: K. Bourdara, *Kathosiosis kai Tyrannis kata tous mesous byzantinous chronous. Makekonikè Dynasteia (867-1056)* [Conspiracy and Usurpation during the middle-Byzantine period. The Macedonian Dynasty (867-1056)] (Athens-Komotene 1981) 55-59; K. Bourdara, *Kathosiosis kai Tyrannis…To politico adikema sto Byzantio (8os-13os aionas*) [Conspiracy and Usurpation…The political crime in Byzantium (8th-13th century)] (Athens 2015) 195-199.

decision maker in the Byzantine espionage system, who, sometimes acted as 'spymaster' himself. In fact, Procopius credited with this role empress Theodora, who, allegedly, maintained her own spy network and was thus informed not only of what was said in public marketplaces but also of what transpired in everyone's house.[65] Her agents could also perform police and commando operations on her orders. In other words, she operated outside normal channels and as empress, she could afford it.

Also, competition among the various services dealing with Byzantine espionage and counter-espionage cannot be ruled out. Could, for instance, this kind of competition have fueled, among other differences, the enmity between Samonas and general Eustathios Argyros, *Droungarios tès Viglas* at that time? It is possible that Samonas was no stranger to Argyros' downfall upon suspicion of conspiracy, his replacement as *Drougarios tès viglas* and his subsequent exile.[66] Byzantine espionage, as the above story of Nicholas tax collector demonstrates, was interwoven both with interior politics and foreign relations and the function of 'spymaster' was no sinecure.

In conclusion, we should note that although the surviving sources do not allow for a detailed picture of the Byzantine espionage system at regional and central level (and their possible combination), one thing is certain: it existed and it functioned both offensively and defensively. Espionage was perceived as a military necessity and as a tool for political gain. For the Byzantine populations, especially frontier ones, enemy espionage was a phenomenon that was part of life. Byzantines were aware that espionage and counter-espionage could shape politics and wars, in other words could shape history, and in some cases it probably did. The fact that there remains scarce mention of espionage operations is a measure of their success.

[65] Dindorf*, Procopii Caesariensis Historia Arcana*, par. 16, 98/11-13.
[66] *Theophanes Continuatus*, 374. On Eustathios Argyros see: J.C. Cheynet, *La société Byzantine. L'apport des sceaux* (Paris 2008) II 20, 527-528.