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Republican Remnants in the Medieval Mediterranean

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Introduction

Nobody thinks of medieval Europe as a place to find republics. The region was a patchwork of monarchies, with a complex network of empires and kingdoms, duchies and counties, emirates and papal states. What republics did exist, such as Venice, were generally more of a decentralized power arrangement between noble families than a bottom-up democratic institution, as we would conceptualize a republic in the modern day¹. However, there did exist a few important elements of republican ideology that persisted through the Middle Ages. The legacy of the Roman Republic can be clearly seen in the Byzantine Empire, and in the Commune of Rome.

The Roman Republic was a political entity that began in the ancient city of Rome, continued to conquer Italy, and eventually brought all of the Mediterranean into its sphere of influence. The republic was a complex system of assemblies, elections, and power-transfers, generally giving the richest elites of Rome massive advantages over the enormous population of poor urban workers and farmers, as well as the population of slaves entirely severed from the political process². Internal strains and elite infighting led the Republic to collapse in the middle first century BCE, beginning a period of Roman history usually called the Principate. This period saw a system where one man ruled: the princeps, eventually known as the emperor.

However, the Romans did not see the transition from republic to monarchy as a radical change³. Many did not see it as a change at all, but a simple restructuring of the republic to function better under the benevolent guiding hand of one man. The princeps served as a father and patron to the entire Roman people in the same way a patron serves their clients in the patron-client relationships that so pervaded Roman society. Elements of the republic thus continued to exist under the empire. The first princeps Augustus, who consolidated power in the end of the first century BCE, nominally followed the “rule-book” of the republic, while accumulating true power in his own position⁴.

The Byzantine Empire

This continuity did not stop when the Western Roman Empire fell, but continued institutionally in the Eastern Roman Empire, dubbed the Byzantine Empire by historians. The elements of republican thought in the Eastern Roman Empire are an excellent illustration of how the Roman Republic influenced medieval

1 Stockwell, “Secret History of Democracy,” 116.

2 Lintott, “Constitution of the Roman Republic,” 61.

3 Sumi, “Ceremony and Power,” 264.

4 Crook, “The Augustan Empire,” 118.

politics, even more than a millennia after it collapsed. Anthony Kaldellis' book *The Byzantine Republic* will be the primary source utilized.

The most important element to establish about the Eastern Roman Empire was its Roman identity. Scholars in the past have frequently described the polity as a successor state, or a Greek kingdom pretending to be Roman, or a state more identifying with the Christian faith than a perceived "Romanness," but modern historians tend to recognize the identity of the empire as its citizens and rulers saw themselves; they were Romans⁵. This goes beyond the cultural and nominal, and into the political⁶. The Roman institution of governance that existed in 195 BCE under Cato the Elder was not seen as a fundamentally different institution than the one reigned over by Emperor Alexios I Komnenos in 1095 AD⁷. While the location, religion, culture, language, and even form of the entity changed, it was still the same entity, according to those who lived in it.

The reason for this continuity was the concept of the *politeia*. A Greek term originating in Plato's Republic, the word stands for something that exists beyond superficial structures of government, such as whether a consul or emperor reigns over a bureaucracy of elected or appointed officials governing provinces or themes, and instead exists on the level of the people⁸. The populous of the Eastern Roman Empire was perceived to be the ultimate authority, exercising extralegal action over the state, even over the emperor himself⁹. The *politeia* was the community, the people of Rome, who either choose their governing officials directly via elections, or by allowing a monarchical system to reign if it could bring them peace and prosperity. While the popular assemblies and Senate ceased to exist as anything but vestigial organs by this period¹⁰, democratic or republican elements still persisted in the monarchical regime. This dynamic can be illustrated in a few fascinating examples from the Middle Ages, in how emperors were subject to popular approval and disapproval.

In 1042, an anxious people of Constantinople overthrew the emperor Micheal V. After coming to power and receiving acclamations from crowds, Micheal believed he had the popular mandate to remove the former empress, Zoe. But when Micheal exiled her to a distant island to secure his rule, the people of Constantinople revolted against Micheal, having favored Zoe due to her generous gifts to the public. Flowing into the streets shouting "unworthy," the people, including even women according to Byzantine historian Psellos, besieged the imperial palace itself¹¹. Micheal fled to a monastery, and Zoe was returned to power with the consent of the people. Kaldellis notes how the people of Constantinople both understood their capability to overthrow the monarch, and how their ruling class did not dispute this capability. "The moment the 'entire people' reached a point of consensus against an emperor, he was legitimate no longer. It was they, after all, who had made him legitimate in the first place, by acclamations at his accession," Kaldellis writes¹².

In 1056, Theodosios Monomachos contested Micheal VI's ascension to the throne, and led a procession through Constantinople to demonstrate his popularity. However, none of the public responded positively, and Theodosios' apparent unpopularity led him to abandon his claim and submit to exile¹³. Byzantine historian Zonaras notes that the "popular masses" later made up a song for him: "stupid Monomachos, did

5 Kaldellis, "Byzantine Republic," 8.

6 Kaldellis, "Byzantine Republic," 18.

7 Kaldellis, Byzantine Republic, 29.

8 Kaldellis, "Byzantine Republic," 26.

9 Kaldellis, "Byzantine Republic," 8.

10 Dmitris, "Senate in Constantinople."

11 Psellos, "Chronographia" 5.16– 50, via Kaldellis, Byzantine Republic, 92.

12 Kaldellis, "Byzantine Republic," 9.

13 Kaldellis, "Byzantine Republic," 128.



Mosaic with the Virgin Mary

whatever jumped into his head¹⁴.” However, the same strategy of procession in the streets worked successfully in 1185¹⁵. Isaaiikos Angelos, victim of an assassination attempt by emperor Andronikos I Komnenos, fled through the streets of Constantinople with a sword. Overnight, the thousands of people who turned out to protect Isaaiikos had decided to make him emperor instead of Andronikos, and besieged the emperor’s palace; when they got their hands on the emperor, they tortured him to death, according to Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates¹⁶.

In 1195, Alexios III deposed Isaaiikos II Angelos, and claimed the imperial throne. When he was acclaimed by the magistrates of the politeia and the Senate, the general population of the city “engaged in no seditious behavior,” according to historian Niketas Choniates, continuing “they were calm and applauded the news, neither protesting nor becoming inflamed with righteous anger at the fact that the army had removed from them their customary right to appoint the emperor¹⁷.” Kaldellis argues this absence of popular revolt was instrumental in legitimizing the new emperor’s ascension, while also noting that the author was generally “contemptuous” of Constantinople’s people, and therefore would not have written them as having the ultimate say in approving a new emperor, were it not a generally accepted principle of the time¹⁸.

Kaldellis also acknowledged a problem lying in the empire’s provinces¹⁹. Much focus is placed on the people of the capital, but even if this community has a democratic aspect to it, this does not grant the entire empire a republican status. Kaldellis argues the provinces come into play during rebellions²⁰. Rebellions all begin in the provinces, and since rebellions are a form of chaotic, violent election, the rebellions need provincial approval. The same ceremonies of public approval via acclamation were performed in the provinces before the rebelling emperor could launch his contestation for the throne²¹. These gave the rebelling

14 Zonaras, “Chronicle” 18.1, via Kaldellis, “Byzantine Republic,” 128.

15 Kaldellis, “Byzantine Republic,” 129-130.

16 Choniates, “History” 341– 344, via Kaldellis, “Byzantine Republic,” 129-130.

17 Choniates, “History” 455, via Kaldellis, “Byzantine Republic,” 112.

18 Kaldellis, “Byzantine Republic,” 112.

19 Kaldellis, “Byzantine Republic,” 150.

20 Kaldellis, “Byzantine Republic,” 158.

21 Kaldellis, “Byzantine Republic,” 152.

emperor legitimacy, at least enough to dispute the throne. These frequently-brief civil wars were not ideological or partisan, but about local interests and personnel; finding the best possible man to rule the “republic” in interest of its citizens²². One particular example of this electoral approach to civil wars was how few people were executed for treason after rebellions. The prevailing emperor sought to “diffuse tensions and restore order,” and co-opt the supporters of the failed emperor, while only punishing the ringleaders²³. “The need to retain the perception of public support affected how the history of the rebellions was later told. Later narratives tended to focus on a few leading elements rather than the masses that supported them,” according to Kaldellis²⁴.

Kaldellis argues that these events of popular revolt are not idiosyncratic outliers, but indicative of a larger trend that stretches back to the era of the Roman Republic. As Kaldellis puts it, “popular sovereignty lacked institutions of governance but found expression in the continual referendum to which emperors were subject. Politics was the threat of civil war. Legitimacy was popular. What we call Byzantium was a turbulent, politically dynamic, but ultimately stable monarchical republic in the Roman tradition masquerading, to itself as much as to others, as an imperial theocracy²⁵.”

Commune of Rome

Meanwhile, in what was once the Western Roman Empire, the Eternal City itself underwent a massive upheaval in the mid-twelfth century. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, the city of Rome changed hands several times. Ruled by a succession of Ostrogoths, Lombards, Byzantines, and Popes, the city declined in population. By the 800s, the Pope, under protection from the Carolingian Empire, ruled Rome as a theocratic monarch. Until the late 1100s, the city would be formally part of the Holy Roman Empire, generally viewed at the time as the continuation of the Western Roman Empire. But despite this apparent autocratic rule, the people would still hold sway.

English-language scholarship on the Commune of Rome is relatively limited, so this section will primarily draw from Chris Wickham’s *Medieval Rome: Stability and Crisis of a City, 900-1150*, and Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur’s *The Forgotten Story: Rome in the Communal Period*.

In 1143, the citizens of Rome overthrew the Pope²⁶. Pope Innocent II would not allow the Roman citizens to tear down the walls of neighboring city Tivoli, prompting outrage among the Romans²⁷. In response, the Romans seized the Capitoline hill, and declared the ancient Senate resurrected. This action was called *renovatio Senatus*, and led to the creation of one of Italy’s most efficient and organized communes²⁸. Soon after, in 1145, Pope Lucius II led an assault on the commune to reestablish papal authority, but was repulsed, subsequently dying of a wound sustained in battle²⁹. The Roman forum, Circus Maximus, and the Aventine Hill turned into a battlefield, where the commune defended its independence from the Papacy³⁰. This commune would rule Rome autonomously for over forty years, before the Pope was allowed to return and take over some elements of governance in 1188.

22 Kaldellis, “Byzantine Republic,” 158.

23 Neville, “Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society,” 44– 45, via Kaldellis, *Byzantine Republic*, 158.

24 Kaldellis, “Byzantine Republic,” 159.

25 Kaldellis, “Byzantine Republic,” 200.

26 Wickham, “Medieval Rome,” 434.

27 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 214.

28 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 215.

29 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 216.

30 Mann, “The lives of the popes,” 118.

Otto of Freising records the populous “meeting on the Capitoline and seeking to restore the ancient dignity of the city, they organized the order of senators, which by then had perished many years earlier³¹.” A few years later, the Senate sent a letter to the Holy Roman Emperor Conrad III, reading “to the renowned and most excellent Conrad, lord of the city and the whole earth, by the grace of God ever-venerable king of the Romans, the Roman Senate and people [wish] health as well as prosperous and noble governance of the Roman Empire³².” This letter demonstrates how the Senate took sovereignty of the city into its own hands, while still attempting to recognize and incorporate itself into the existing medieval state structures of the age.

Another Roman communication with their emperor demonstrates this perceived sovereignty even further. Roman envoys to Frederick Barbarossa in 1155 spoke to the emperor as if they were the city itself, saying “you were merely a guest and I have made you a citizen. You were a foreigner from north of the Alps and I have made you a prince. Hence, above all else, you must respect my laws and my privileges, as have all those who preceded you³³.” Romans of the communal period were convinced that they had the right to appoint the Roman Emperor, just as they did in ancient times³⁴. This self-perceived sovereignty which extended over the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire himself shows the heights to which Romans of the time understood their popular mandate to reach.

The commune had a strong attachment to Rome’s imperial past, demonstrated in how it saw itself as superior to the Holy Roman Emperor. This can also be seen in how a certain degree of protection was afforded by the communal government to ancient ruins; the column of Hadrian was granted protection by the commune, via a local nunnery³⁵. This attachment to the past extended to the ancient Republic, which the commune more distinctly saw itself as a continuation of. According to a letter from Pope Eugene III, the “common people” planned to reinvent the dual consulship³⁶. In addition, the use of the terms “Senate” and “consul” at all are allusions to the Republic, which likely would not have been lost amongst the educated elite who reestablished such institutions³⁷.

The commune also used the abbreviation SPQR, a famous formula from the classical city representing the Senate, and thus republican institutions more broadly³⁸. SPQR in the ancient city stood for *senatus populusque Romanus*, meaning “Senate and people of Rome³⁹.” It went without use for centuries between the original Senate’s dissolution in the sixth century and the revolt of 1143, before the new Senate revived the original abbreviation to attach their republican project to memories of the ancient state⁴⁰. Carrie E. Benes writes that this ancient formulation “appealed to the new senators because it stressed the collective roots of Roman political power⁴¹.”

The new senatorial class of Rome justified the new Senate by arguing that they had a popular mandate to power⁴². This negated any imposed lordship over the city, only allowing the emperor or Pope to rule over the city if they had approval of the Roman people. This also granted the Roman people a kind of power beyond the city itself, as both Pope and Holy Roman Emperor derived some of their claims of universal sov-

31 Beneš, “Whose SPQR?” 877.

32 Beneš, “Whose SPQR?” 878.

33 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 336.

34 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 335.

35 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 326.

36 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 342.

37 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 342.

38 Beneš, “Whose SPQR?” 877.

39 Beneš, “Whose SPQR?” 874.

40 Beneš, “Whose SPQR?” 876.

41 Beneš, “Whose SPQR?” 878.

42 Beneš, “Whose SPQR?” 878.

ereignty from their connection to Rome. The Senate referred to itself as *sacer senatus*, or “sacred Senate⁴³.”

But how truthful was this ideological justification? A section of Roman society, called the *populus*, became a political player on the same level of the local aristocracy, and the Papacy⁴⁴. While the communal Senate desired recognition from the Pope as a political and religious authority figure, it clearly delineated its opposition to the local aristocracy⁴⁵. Additionally, no nobles from the city’s most prominent families, save for one Giordani Pierloni, are recorded to have taken part in the overthrow of the pope⁴⁶.

Chris Wickham writes the commune’s goal was “above all to establish an unusually self-aware, and also unusually anti-aristocratic, version of a contemporary north Italian consulate⁴⁷.” This populous mainly consisted of the ‘medium elite’ of richer artisans, legal experts and small-scale rentiers⁴⁸, excluding the urban poor; a similarity the commune shares with the classical Republic⁴⁹. This exclusion is corroborated by Vigueur, who notes how the Roman commune differs from most other Italian communes, where more power was held in the hands of the people. Rome may have avoided the strife these communes saw due to the makeup of its ruling class, consisting of a mix of “military lineages,” “dynamic businessmen,” and up-and-coming large landowners who were especially in-tune with the opinions of Roman artisans⁵⁰.

Wickham’s analysis of the existing voting lists of Senatorial members suggests a regular turnover of members with short terms. Despite this, only around 5% of Roman families had a member serve in the Senate, implying a fairly exclusive political structure⁵¹. Vigueur corroborates this, calling the ruling class of the commune a “new nobility⁵².” Despite this, Wickham’s analysis of contemporary writings also suggests a “faint sign that assembly-based debate was part of the structure of the Senate,” where the people could make their voices heard. This tended to be an avenue for religious radicalism, which “gives further force to the proposal that Rome’s Senate was the focus of a relatively widely based popular political aggregation⁵³.” This points to an early kind of bourgeois revolution of the kind that dominated early modern European history, but taking place more than six centuries before. The mercantile middle class who would eventually go on to overthrow medieval monarchic structures in early modernity is sometimes considered to have begun in the High Middle Ages⁵⁴.

Conclusions

We can see important similarities and differences between the Roman commune and the Eastern Roman Empire. Both harken back to a classical republican past, but in deeply different ways. While the Byzantines represented a continuity from an ancient mode of thinking, the Commune of Rome used classical terminology to couch a system far more individualistic and centered on medieval rank and status. The Byzantines saw their *politeia* as an entity stretching back to the foundation of Rome as an abstract but unified political community, showing a level of ideological continuity between the ancient and medieval world not usually discussed in the historical record. Meanwhile, the revolt of 1143 in Rome resembles a kind of bour-

43 Beneš, “Whose SPQR?” 878.

44 Wickham, “Medieval Rome,” 446.

45 Wickham, “Medieval Rome,” 446.

46 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 133.

47 Wickham, “Medieval Rome,” 446.

48 Wickham, “Medieval Rome,” 411.

49 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 342.

50 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 222.

51 Wickham, “Medieval Rome,” 448.

52 Vigueur, “The Forgotten Story,” 134.

53 Wickham, “Medieval Rome,” 450.

54 Minehan, “Encyclopedia of Political Thought,” 371-373.

geois revolution, with an increasingly wealthy middle class overthrowing an entrenched aristocracy to establish what they saw as a representative republic; though excluding much of the urban poor, as did the Roman Republic before them and the democratic revolutions that would follow them centuries later.

A major difference was that of elite and popular participation. Kaldellis' analysis of the Byzantine political dynamic suggests a mass-populus participation in political life, where the acclamation of crowds—without distinction between middle-elite artisans or urban poor—can make or break an emperor. However, Whickham's chronicle of the early Commune of Rome depicts a state structure dominated by the Roman middle-class, which was, at the time, itself a small segment of elite society.

In conclusion, republicanism did not disappear in medieval times as is commonly conceived, but instead remained as an undercurrent where memory of the Roman Republic still persisted, to eventually resurface in the early modern era. The republican remnants in Rome and Constantinople show that the Middle Ages were not a period of monolithic feudalism, but a complex transitional period from the ancient world to the early modern era. The ancient perception of community continued in Constantinople, while the embryonic bourgeois revolution of Rome foreshadowed the future of democratic revolution by the middle class that would bring aristocratic state structures to their knees.

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