



Summary :

The *Book of the Eparch* is one of the most important sources for the economic and administrative history of the Byzantine Empire of the 10th century. It is a unique text, a sort of general manual for the guilds in Constantinople, which provides information on the organization of handicrafts and trade in the Byzantine capital. It is believed to have been written by a very crafty author in 911/912. There have been several prints of this source, and it was also translated in French, English (twice), Bulgarian, Russian, German and Modern Greek language.

Date

10th C.

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. Introduction

Although the cities in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire were spared of the barbaric invasion that the Western part succumbed to, which resulted in not only the decline but also a hazardous ruralization, the big crisis that followed hit these cities as well. In the 7th century, as the result of the [Arab invasion](#), some very prosperous megalopolises were lost, such as Alexandria and [Antioch](#), and, generally speaking, most of the Byzantine cities were undergoing some sort of crisis. This crisis lasted for two centuries (7th – 9th centuries), though opinions among Byzantine scholars vary regarding the depth and the range of this crisis. In the 9th C., towns began to flourish again. What followed were the two centuries (9th – 11th) of great urban economic expansion which resulted to the most fruitful, for the cities, period in Byzantine history. Moreover, at that time the economy of the Byzantine cities was unsurpassed in the whole Europe.¹

2. In Constantinople

Naturally, when speaking of the rise of the Byzantine city in the said period (9th – 11th centuries), the first that should be mentioned is surely the "[Queen of all the cities](#)" – Constantinople. It was the time when the Byzantine production of goods, completely relying on the ancient traditions, was going through great changes. Such handicraft or state-owned workshop production, characteristic primarily of a city, not only did satisfy the great needs of the Empire, but was also an unattainable model for the then western European standards, especially in the case of silk production. To guarantee for the quality of the production and goods, but also to secure further development, the state had an active and encompassing role. The Byzantine statism in this period, visible in various forms, was expressed particularly in the structuring of the city's economy and the physiognomy of the urban society.

The refined and superior civilization, which made a strong impression on the foreigners, was trying hard to keep that supremacy over the rest of the world. That is why trade of the exceptionally precious fabrics and similar luxurious artifacts to the foreigners were in a way undermining the prestige of the Byzantine Empire, and were even viewed as a sort of treason. In regards to this, not only it was forbidden to export the most precious luxurious artifacts, but also the production of the precious and expensive goods was closely monitored. In a word, the trade of the luxurious goods was under a strict control. This lasted until the time when the competition from the Italian republics and other outsider merchants made such prohibitions useless. However, during the reign of [Leo VI the Wise](#) (886-912), when the *Book of the Eparch* -a sort of the constitution of the [guilds](#)' associations in Constantinople- was compiled, these prohibitions still made sense.

The fact that the Arabs were also solid producers and exporters of goods had little effect, if any, on the prestige of the Byzantine Empire. Its geographic position, primarily the positions of [Constantinople](#) and Thessalonica, made for a great advantage over the trading rivals in the Islamic world, primarily due to the fact that the great number of buyers was coming from Eastern and Southeast Europe. Favorable circumstances for trade in the capital also meant that, while the biggest merchants in Constantinople would venture going abroad, merchants from smaller Byzantine towns would find difficulty in doing the same, so they came to purchase their goods



in Constantinople. In any case, great quantities of goods of all kinds and a great number of merchants were ending up in the harbor in the [Golden Horn](#).

The domestic policy of Leo VI, which in essence expressed the interests of the city [aristocracy](#), connected to the development and flourishing of trade and merchant activity, manifested itself particularly during the years of power of Stylianos Zaoutzes (886 – beginning of 899), father of the Emperor's second wife, Zoe Zaoutzaina. It was the time of strengthening of urban entrepreneurship, civic rights, and -in connection to them- the protection of private property as well, while the usury was completely legalized. At the same time, the government did not allow private individuals, who had no governmental function or authority, to use methods of non-economic coercion. Judging on the basis of the *Book of the Eparch*, the administration of Leo VI was trying to attract to their side the local trade and craft guilds leaders. It managed to do so partially by delegating to them part of the functions of the state apparatus, and even some police functions with the ensuing rights and profits. Such functions secured gain possibilities, since they gave them authority, in the struggle against those who destroy the monopoly, to take legal action with regards to the payment and the cost of labor, assessment of goods for customs clearance etc.²

3. The Manuscript

The complete text of the *Book of the Eparch* is preserved in a manuscript from the 14th century, which is kept in Geneva (Bibliothèque de Genève, № 23). Besides the ecclesiastical canons, this manuscript contains legislative texts of the Byzantine emperors, the *Book of the Eparch* and a treatise by Julian of Ascalon. The manuscript was purchased in Ottoman Empire by a priest from the Dutch Embassy in 1636, and then it was given as a present to the well-known jurist Jacques Godefroy, who was not able to study it properly, though. After his death, the manuscript was given to the Geneva library, where it is still kept to this day, registered in the Greek manuscripts collection under the number 23.

The manuscript of the *Book of the Eparch* remained unnoticed for a long time, and finally in 1892 the Swiss scholar, Jules Nicole, studied it and consequently published it in 1893, in a massive volume, with the cooperation of several eminent Western Byzantine scholars. Small parts of the *Book of the Eparch* were found in some other manuscripts as well. Thus, the title and preamble were preserved in a manuscript from Istanbul (Metochion Taphou, No. 25). This manuscript also contains the name of the legislator, Emperor Leo the Wise, as well as the date of its compilation, 911/912. The analysis of the text shows that the *Book of the Eparch* was written by a very crafty author.

The *Book of the Eparch* was produced under Leo VI, but whether it was exactly the same as the edition preserved in the manuscript in Geneva remains unclear. Some researchers thought that this manuscript was written during the reign of the Emperor [Nikephoros II Phokas](#) (963-969), that is, that it was then compiled or interpolated, because the manuscript mentions the *tetarteron*, a coin introduced by this Emperor.³ Others suggested that the manuscript was written under Phokas' heir, [John I Tzimiskes](#) (969-976).⁴ However, this idea has been mostly abandoned in the subsequent literature, which identifies the *tetarteron* cited in the *Book of the Eparch* as the tremissis or semissis known throughout the reign of [Basil I](#) (867-886).⁵ The significance of this very interesting and important source is clear from the fact that thus far it has been translated to French,⁶ English (twice),⁷ Bulgarian,⁸ Russian,⁹ German,¹⁰ and recently in modern Greek.¹¹

4. The *Book of the Eparch*

The *Book of the Eparch* consists of a compilation of regulations regarding the activity of the handicrafts and merchants' guilds in [Constantinople](#), which all fell under the jurisdiction of the [prefect](#) of the Byzantine capital. Its stipulations portray rather clearly the existence of not only a well-developed economy but also the economic policies that the Byzantine Empire had in the 10th century. It is important to note that no contradiction has been attested between the [novels](#) by Leo VI and the *Book of the Eparch*: the provisions in the novels regarding the craft guilds were also formulated in the chapters of the *Book of the Eparch*.¹² To a great extent, the *Book of the Eparch* can be associated to the *Basilica* by Leo VI, although neither the text nor any particular details are in full congruity. Its language is typical of the legislative documents: it contains the legal terms already found in the *Ecloga*, *Procheiron*



and *Basilica*.

The scholars have interpreted the *Book of the Eparch* under different lights. Opinions of the contemporary scholars differ and are often divided. Thus, for example, some think it is a document that “belongs completely to the sphere of the late antique system of guilds,”¹³ while others emphasize “the differences between the commercial organization described in the *Book of the Eparch* and that of late antiquity, since the 10th century treatise reflects neither coercive nor hereditary membership in guilds”;¹⁴ there are also those who view the regulations “as representing the economic ideas of Leo VI” and think that the document can not be viewed separately from the social policies of the Macedonian dynasty.¹⁵

The *Book of the Eparch* contains twenty two chapters, each one dedicated to one of the existing guilds. Among others, there are **notaries**, jewelers, money changers, various dealers in clothing and perfume, candle-makers, soap-makers, purveyors of groceries, meat, bread, fish, and wine. Their rights, obligations and conditions under which they conduct their businesses are discussed in great detail. It remains a puzzle why some of the guilds are recorded, while the others, which most assuredly existed, are not, such as, for example, the guilds of physicians and of coppersmiths, who had the monopoly on the trade with copper; why the construction workers were mentioned and the blacksmiths are not; why the position of the weaver of linen fabrics was discussed but that of the weavers of woolen fabrics is not. The *Book of the Eparch* does not mention the shoemakers or the tailors either. Even if it is assumed that they were still not united in corporations in the 10th century, they were nonetheless placed under the jurisdiction of the prefect of the capital. That is why most researchers believe that in fact we do not have the complete version of the *Book of the Eparch*.

Since the end of the 11th century, and in relation to the fact that the Italian republics, especially **Venice**, but also Piza and **Genoa**, were getting very favorable trading privileges from the Byzantine emperors of the **Komnenian dynasty**, the situation is radically changing. The Byzantine trade was getting more and more suppressed and was not able to compete with the unfair competition from the Apennine Peninsula. With the acquired privileges, the Italian merchants dominated both the trade and handicrafts in Constantinople. In any case, the *Book of the Eparch* finally lost its previous significance by the end of the 13th century.

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Glossary :

	notary (lat. notarius) An official who registered transactions and certified documents.
	novel (novella) Term meaning ad verbum "new decree" and used since around the 4th century in order to denote the provisions of the emperors as separate from the organized codes. They were written mainly in Greek and used extensively in the Middle Byzantine Era. Since the days of Komnenoi and after, they were replaced by other more specialized terms and they are very rare in the Late Byzantine era
	praefectus urbi (prefect of the city) (later referred to as the <i>eparch</i> of the city) Administrator and virtual governor of Constantinople in the Early/Middle Byzantine Era. He was responsible for the surveillance and the harmonious life of the Capital. One of his responsibilities was to control the commercial and manufacturing activities of Constantinople. After 1204, however, the office began to diminish, while from the 14th century, his responsibilities were assumed by two officers, the so-called <i>kephalatikeuontai of the capital</i> .

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