



## Περίληψη :

The Opsikion theme was one of the first four great themes of Asia Minor. Until the middle of the 8th century its role was crucial to the internal life of the Empire, since most times it opposed to central power and to the emperor. After the administrative reforms of Constantine V and its division (ca 742-766), the importance of Opsikion was gradually reduced.

## Άλλες Ονομασίες

Opsikion, Opsikiou

## Γεωγραφική Θέση

Northwest Asia Minor, modern Northwest Turkey

## Ιστορική Περιοχή

Hellespont, Bithynia, Paphlagonia, Lydia, Galatia, Phrygia

### 1. Origination of the term ‘opsikion’

The term ‘opsikion’ derives from the Latin *obsequium*; at first it denoted any kind of ‘escort’, whose mission was to honour or protect officials. Afterwards, it was used to indicate the unit of the imperial guard, whose duty was to secure the safe and smooth transport and stay of the emperor during military expeditions, as Constantine VII Porphyrogennitos (913-920/944-959) clarifies, among other things in the relevant chapter of his work *De Thematibus*.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. History and Geography

The unit deriving from the Opsikion theme was possibly stationed in [Constantinople](#) at first,<sup>2</sup> but during the reign of the [Emperor Herakleios](#) (610-641), ca. 622, it was transferred to Northwest [Asia Minor](#), it was dispersed in many stations and covered an extensive area, from the Dardanelles until the river Ales, as a bridge to the defence of the capital.<sup>3</sup>

Gradually the name Opsikion acquired a wider meaning and signified the whole administrative region, where the opsikia were stationed. Finally it came to define the theme with the same name, also called ‘god-protected imperial opsikion’ or in Latin ‘a Deo conservandum imperiale Obsequium’.<sup>4</sup> The Opsikion theme was one of the first four great themes of Asia Minor. Until the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century it extended to the regions of the [Hellespont](#), [Bithynia](#), [Honorias](#), [Paphlagonia](#), and it also included parts of [Lydia](#), [Galatia](#) and [Phrygia](#).<sup>5</sup>

During the reign of [Constantine V Isauros](#) (740-775), the Opsikion theme was restricted to the area of the Hellespont, the southern part of [Bithynia](#) and the upper part of [Phrygia Salutaris](#).<sup>6</sup> From its remaining former regions, two new themes emerged: the [Boukellarion theme](#), which included the regions of Honorias and [Galatia I](#), with its *strategos* stationed in [Ankyra](#), and the [theme of Optimaton](#), in Northwest Bithynia, with the *strategos*’ seat in [Nicomedia](#).<sup>7</sup> The most important city of this new ‘reduced’ Opsikion and the seat of the *strategos* was [Nicaea](#). Constantine VII Porphyrogennitos (913-920/944-959) mentions nine more cities ([Kotyaion](#), Dorylaion [[Dorylaeum](#)], Medaion, [Apameia](#), Myrliā, [Lampsakos](#), Parion, [Kyzicos](#), Abydos); the most important were Kyzicos, Abydos, Apameia and Lampsakos.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Administration

The military leader of the theme, the ‘*comes* of the imperial opsikion’,<sup>9</sup> was superior to the *stratego*i of the other themes and he was also identified as the *strategos* (or hypostragetos) of Thrace. The defence of both the Asian and European parts of Constantinople fell under his jurisdiction. The first undeniable mention of a *comes* of Opsikion dates back to 680.<sup>10</sup> On the first period of its history, the



Opsikion theme appears to have had a different administrative structure from the other themes; it was divided into **domesticates** and not **tourma**.<sup>11</sup>

Afterwards, the division of the Opsikion from Constantine V (741-775) somewhat marked the beginning of its decline: In the so called **taktikon Uspenskij** (843) the comes of Opsikiou appears only sixth in the hierarchy, as he does in the other **taktika**.<sup>12</sup> Toward the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century the traditional title of the leader of the Opsikion changes from comes to strategos.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. Relations of the Opsikion with the central government

Some of the most significant events of the middle Byzantine period are connected to the Opsikion theme. Towards the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century (685-695), the Opsikion was led by the comes Barasbakourios and consisted of the main military force upon which **Justinian II** (685-695/705-711) depended, in order to enforce his policy.<sup>14</sup> However, after his overthrow in 711 and the execution of Barasbakourios from his successor, the Emperor **Bardanes Philippikos** (711-713), the people of the Opsikion, clearly dissatisfied, led consecutive rebellions, affecting the internal policy of the Empire: the military units of the Opsikion rebelled (they had been transferred in Thrace on the orders of the **patrikios** George Bouraphos in order to repel Bulgarian attacks) and in 713 Philippikos was overthrown; Anastasios II (713-715) was placed on the throne. However, Anastasios blinded George Bouraphos, without any plausible explanation, almost immediately upon his ascent to power. His reign did not last long, since almost two years later, toward the end of 715, Anastasios II was overthrown by the armies of the Opsikion, who declared Theodosios III (715-716) as emperor.<sup>15</sup> Theodosios' successor, **Leo III Isaurian** (716-740) also became emperor with the support of the Opsikion, among others, even though the army of the Opsikion was apparently not actively involved. Nevertheless, three years later, in 718, the patrikios Isoes unsuccessfully attempted to rebel against Leo III. His successor, the patrikios, **kouropalates** and **comes** of the Opsikion **Artabasdos** also rebelled in 741/742 against Constantine V (740-775). After suppressing the rebellion (743), Constantine V bestowed the office of **comes** upon his trusted follower, the **patrikios** Anthes.<sup>16</sup>

The next twenty years were marked with a relative calmness in the area without any significant rebellions. The peace was disrupted in 766 with the conspiracy of the **spatharios** David; the details of this affair are not known. Around the same time (possibly between 742 and 766), Constantine V did some administrative reforms, aiming to put an end to the consecutive rebellions, which were so common in the area, by surrounding the area with forces friendly towards him and his **iconoclastic policy**.<sup>17</sup> The vast area of the old Opsikion was divided in three.<sup>18</sup>

During the time of the rebellion of **Thomas the Slav** (821-823) the Opsikion, sided with the central government.<sup>19</sup> A series of revolts, such as the revolt of the **strategos** of the Opsikion **George Peganes** in 866 and of the strategos of the Thrakesion **Symbatios** against **Basil I the Macedonian** (867-886), the co-emperor of **Michael III** (842-867), but also the revolt of Basil Chalkocheir in 931 against Romanos I Lekapenos (920-944), and the problems they caused,<sup>20</sup> still cannot be compared to the consecutive rebellions of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, when the Opsikion has tried several times to establish its own will to the Empire.<sup>21</sup>

#### 5. The Opsikion in military expeditions

The Opsikion took part in the campaign against the **Arabs** towards the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>22</sup> The military force of the **theme** was ca. 6000 men, according to information of Arab geographers,<sup>23</sup> who present the situation in the area in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The military forces of the Opsikion theme do not appear after the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> The last known reference of the Opsikion theme is that of **George Akropolites**, who writes that the Opsikion theme passed to the hands of the 'Italians'<sup>25</sup> around 1234.



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2. Κυριακίδης, Σ., «Πώς η λέξις θέμα έφθασεν εις την σημασίαν της στρατιωτικής περιοχής;», *Επετηρίς Εταιρείας Βυζαντινών Σπουδών* 23 (1953), pp. 392-394; Haldon, J.F., *Byzantine Praetorians. An Administrative, Institutional and Social Survey of the Opsikion and the Tagmata, c. 580-900* (Ποικίλα Βυζαντινά 3, Bonn 1984), p. 178.
3. Belke, K. – Restle, M., *Galatien und Lykaonien* (Tabula Imperii Byzantini 4, Wien 1984), p. 59; Belke, K., *Paphlagonien und Honorias* (Tabula Imperii Byzantini 9, Wien 1996), p. 69; Belke, K. – Mersich, N., *Phrygien und Pisidien* (Tabula Imperii Byzantini 7, Wien 1990), pp. 84-90.
4. As it is mentioned in a seal of an officer of the Opsikion, Zacos, G. – Vegler, A. (eds), *Byzantine Lead Seals I:II* (Basel 1972), p. 1139, no. 2039, which probably belonged to the *patrikios* Isoes: Lounghis, T., *Researching Seals in a Byzantine Chronography Data Base System, Studies in Byzantine Sigillography*, Oikonomidès, N. (ed.) (Washington 1990), pp. 7-15; Mansi, J. (ed.), *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* 11 (Venice 1798), p. 737.
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6. Pertusi, A. (ed.), *Costantino Porfirogenito De Thematibus* (Studi e Testi 160, Città del Vaticano 1952), p. 128.
7. Haldon, J.F., *Byzantine Praetorians. An Administrative, Institutional and Social Survey of the Opsikion and the Tagmata, c. 580-900* (Ποικίλα Βυζαντινά 3, Bonn 1984), pp. 212-214, 222-227; Lounghis, T., "A Deo conservandum imperiale obsequium. Some notes concerning field troops during the Dark Ages", *Byzantinoslavica* 52 (1991), pp. 54-60.
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9. This title is the evolution of the title *comes domesticorum* of the Early Byzantine period. See Haldon, J.F., *Byzantine Praetorians. An Administrative, Institutional and Social Survey of the Opsikion and the Tagmata, c. 580-900* (Ποικίλα Βυζαντινά 3, Bonn 1984), pp. 143-148, 175-179.
10. There is reference of a strange title of a *comes* of Opsariou in the *Chronikon Paschale*, Dindorf, L. (ed.) (Bonn 1832), p. 715, dated in 626. It is not certain if Diehl was correct in assuming that this should be corrected to *comes of Opsikion*.
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Δικτυογραφία :

**Ring of Leontios, patrikios of Opsikion**  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/07/waa/ho\\_1982.282.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/07/waa/ho_1982.282.htm)

Γλωσσάριο :

**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.

**domesticate**

Equestrian combat unit, it was a subdivision of the thematic army of Opsikion and probably also of the *tagmata* (regiments) until the office of the *domestikos of the scolae* was introduced in the late 8th C.

**kouropalates**

A high-ranking dignity, which from Justinian I was conferred on members of the imperial family and on foreign princes. During the 11th c. it was conferred on several generals, not belonging to the imperial family.

**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.

**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 personages. 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.

**strategos ("general")**

During the Roman period his duties were mainly political. Office of the Byzantine state's provincial administration. At first the title was given to the military and political administrator of the themes, namely of the big geographic and administrative unities of the Byzantine empire. Gradually the title lost its power and, already in the 11th century, strategoi were turned to simple commanders of military units, responsible for the defence of a region.

**taktikon**

**1. Adm.:** A major source for the organization and development of Byzantine administration. In the Middle Byzantine period the *taktika*, as precedence lists ( τακτικά πρωτοκαθεδρίας or τακτικά της καθέδρας or κλητορολόγια or κλητοροθέσια) catalogued the officials who participated to the formal ceremonies of the imperial palace. Four precedence list are still preserved: Uspenskij, Philotheos', Benescevic, de l' Escorial.

**2. Mil.:** A "Taktika" is a famous manual for strategic and tactical military operations by land and by sea. Author in the early 10th century. at Leo F. The text preserved in a compendium and complete the form and influenced the drafting of such handbooks as downstream strategic.

**3. Eccl.:** The "taktiko", known also as "Notitia episcopatum" or *syntagmaton*, in the administration of the Church is a classification list of ecclesiastical authorities according to hierarchy.

**tourma**

(lat. *turma*, meaning squadron) Administrative division of a theme in the Middle Byzantine period. A *tourma* was further subdivided into *droungoi* and *banda*.

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Oikonomidès, N. (ed.), *Les Listes de préséance byzantin* (Paris 1972).

Heisenberg, A. (ed.), *Georgii Acropolitae Opera* (Leipzig 1903).

Al Fakih, "Arabic Lists of the Byzantine Themes", *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 21 (1901), Brooks, E.W. (trans.), pp. 67-77.



## Παραθέματα

### 1. On the name «Opsikion»:

σημαίνει τη ελληνών φωνή τους προπορευομένους έμπροσθεν του βασιλέως επί ευταξία και τιμή ... [και] διά το προπορεύεσθαι έμπροσθεν του βασιλέως και καταρτίζειν και διευθύνειν τας οδούς αυτού και μονάς.

Pertusi, A. (ed.), *Costantino Porfirogenito de Thematibus* (Studi e Testi 160, Città del Vaticano 1952), p. 68, 69.

### 2. On the overthrow of Anastasios II (715):

οι δε παράνομοι λαοί του Οψικίου ... τη νυκτί εις τους οίκους των πολιτών διαδραμόντες μεγίστην ειργάσαντο άλλωσιν μηδενός φεισάμενοι.

De Boor, C. (ed.), *Theophanis Chronographia* (Leipzig 1883), p. 386.

### 3. On the revolt of Artabasdos:

(Αρτάβασδος) δη τυραννίδα ευθύς κατ' αυτού μελετά, τον του πενθερού θάνατον πυθόμενος: και όρκους τον υπό χείρα κατεδέσσει λαόν αυτώ μεν εύνουν έσεσθαι, έτερον δε εις βασιλέα μη δέχεσθαι.

Mango, C. (ed.), *Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople, Short History* (Washington D.C. 1990), p. 132.

## Χρονολόγιο

680: First reference of the *comes* of the Opsikion.

713: Overthrow of the Emperor Philippikos. Anastasios II rises to the throne (with the help of the army of the Opsikion).

715: Overthrow of Anastasios II. Theodosios III rises to the throne (with the help of the army of the Opsikion).

718: Revolt of Isoes, *comes* of Opsikion.

741/742: Revolt of Artabasdos, *comes* of Opsikion

742-766: The old Opsikion is divided in three parts.

866: Revolt of Symvatios and George Peganes, *strategoi* of the themes of Thrakesion and Opsikion respectively.

## Βοηθ. Κατάλογοι

Prosopography: the *comes/strategoi* of the Opsikion

Theodore of Koloneia, *patrikios*, *comes* of the Opsikion (665-681)

Barasbakourios (705-711)

George Bouraphos (713)

Isoes (715-718)



Artabasdos (718-741)

Anthes (750-760)

David *ho kata ton Beser* (765-766)

Gregory of Mousoulakion (778)

Niketas (782/783)

Petronas (787 )

John (795/796)

Paul (798)

Aetios (801-802)

George Peganis (866)

Andrew of the SkythsΑνδρέας ο εκ Σκυθών (874-878)

Philotheos (915-918)

Theodore Dalassenos (1050-1060)