



*Court Ceremonies and Rituals of
Power in Byzantium and the Medieval
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Alexander Beihammer, Stavroula
Constantinou, and Maria Parani
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Ritual studies has only comparatively recently emerged as a specific discipline, ambitiously taking “all kinds of symbolic acts” (1) as its object of enquiry. Although a focus on ceremony and ritual has long been a key aspect of various social anthropological, sociological, and psychological approaches to historical research, ritual studies places emphasis on the performative acts themselves, rather than viewing them as the subordinate results of other socio-cultural phenomena. Typically, for the medieval period the major works developing this approach have dealt with the western Roman world and its successors, particularly High Medieval Latin Christendom. However, a number of research projects have sought to move beyond this limitation in recent years, so this volume is timely in shifting focus to the eastern Roman or “Byzantine” world in particular, and the eastern Mediterranean in general. Taking an explicitly comparative perspective, the volume tackles a broad topic through a rich variety of chronological, geographical, methodological, and disciplinary approaches, providing a kaleidoscopic view of the subject’s potential.

The volume consists of an introduction and eighteen essays, divided into four thematic sections and arranged chronologically within each of these. Written by co-editor Alexander Beihammer, the introduction is particularly useful to the uninitiated reader. The author first provides a clear and comprehensive overview of ritual studies’ development as a discipline and its broad thematic trends before the constituent essays are introduced and connected to this discussion. Thus the introduction makes good on the volume’s promise of a “comparative perspective”, and because the chapters are artfully brought into this general thematic overview non-specialists should benefit from the specific points made in each essay.

Part one, “Rituals and the Transformation of the Roman World”, begins with Maria Kantirea on the subject of imperial birthday rituals in Late Antiquity. The author demonstrates clear continuity between classical Roman and medieval eastern Roman *dies natalis*, originating in the Principate and the ancient pagan concept of semi-divine guardian spirits, and ending with a Christianised but secular ritual which retained its public character and continued to underline the emperor’s relationship to the divine. Thus Kantirea demonstrates how rituals can rest on persistent substrata, while continually shifting in their specific significations. In the second essay, Martin Hinterberger provides an immediate point of comparison through a very different

methodology, charting the development of the concept of *phthonos* – broadly translatable as “jealousy”, but often appearing as a distinct force and even the devil himself – as it appears in imperial acclamations from the councils of Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), and the Iconoclastic synod of Hieria (754), as well as the elevation of Emperor Anastasios I (491). Hinterberger has dealt with *phthonos* in a number of publications, including a full monograph, but the real value of this particular essay is the marriage between his subtle semantic analysis and the volume’s comparative approach. Again we find a concept central to classical pagan understandings of imperial rule retaining certain features in the Christian eastern empire, despite radical shifts in the socio-intellectual world which defined the concept’s meaning.

Walter Pohl expands this focus on imperial ritual, analysing diplomacy between Romans and barbarians across Late Antiquity and into the Early Middle Ages. Pohl explicitly frames his analysis in terms of ritual theories, and notes how the majority of sources in fact place little emphasis on the “scripted” or “encoded” aspects of diplomatic encounters. This lack points to a discrepancy between the interests evident in the ritual event itself, and the interests inherent in the event’s presentation by or for an involved party. In the first section’s final paper Andrew Marsham turns to a key ritual moment in the shift between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, the accession of the first Ummayyad caliph Mu‘āwīya ibn ‘Abī Sufyān at Jerusalem in 661. Witnessed by a Syriac Maronite chronicler and later Muslim sources, this event reveals the remarkably syncretistic nature of early Ummayyad ritual, emphasising the caliph not only as leader of the emergent Islamic *umma*, but also as the charismatic sovereign and protector of all Judaeo-Christian monotheisms. Marsham focuses on the significance of Jerusalem itself, demonstrating how important the city was for these rulers in a period where an awareness of bounded community existed among the newcomers, but had not yet crystallised into the labels “Islam” or “Muslim”, and important ties continued to intersect among various loosely distinct groups.

Part two, “Succession Procedures and their Ritual Articulations”, begins with Björn Weiler on descriptions of royal succession and legitimation rituals in the Latin West, c. 1000-1150. The author demonstrates how in this period the narrativisation of royal elevation took place in a common moral framework, as contemporaries increasingly sought to define the nature and responsibilities of kingship. This interplay between the ritual and the reality of royal rule is reflected in the section’s second paper by Eric J. Hanne, focusing on the *bay‘a* or “loyalty oaths” of the eleventh- and twelfth-century Abbasid court. In the context of their political neutering, the Abbasid caliphs exploited their position in legitimation rituals in periods of relative revitalisation after 992 and 1092, at times with great success. Although ultimately the caliphs did not restore their earlier position, Hanne’s essay demonstrates the

potentialities latent in persistent rituals, potentialities which able actors could exploit.

In the third essay Beihammer returns to the issue of narrative presentation, analysing Niketas Choniates' use of imperial succession and accession rituals in the twelfth century. The author illustrates how Choniates, himself a career bureaucrat well-acquainted with the imperial palace's inner workings, creates a three-step development from the ritually well-ordered empire of John II (1118) and Manuel I (1143), through the rise of Andronikos I (1182/1183) and his meticulous but deceitful manipulation of recognised forms, finally to the violent world of Angeloi usurpations, with their use of legitimisation rituals mocked by the sardonic and astute writer. Beihammer reminds us that the moment of the ritual event is only one part of its social valence, and in the hands of accomplished writers the narrative afterlife can be equally important. In the section's final chapter Antonia Giannouli turns to the question of narrative *as* ritual in the form of Palaiologan "coronation speeches". The author asks whether three speeches delivered in 1294, 1341, and 1449 can be appropriately described in these terms, finding that the answer is, of course, nuanced. Unlike in the case of Planoudes' address to the new co-emperor Michael IX, John Kalekas' to Anna of Savoy and John Argypoulos' on the arrival of Constantine XI to Constantinople do not seem to directly interact with the physical rituals of coronation. Through careful philological analysis, Giannouli illustrates that ritualised speech cannot be seen as a straightforward counterpart to physical ceremony, and must be treated on its own terms.

Part three, "Invention, Appropriation and Transformation between East and West", opens with Jo Van Steenbergen on the interplay between ritual, politics, and the urban environment in Mamluk Cairo. Analysing the move from the Fatimid palace city to the Citadel of the Mountain on al-Muqattam Hill, the author convincingly presents Mamluk use of older sites as "*lieux de mémoire*", spatialized rituals which established and emphasised the ruling elite's credentials. This argument finds fascinating comparison in the second paper of the section, in which Stefan Burkhardt analyses court ceremony and rituals of power in the Latin Empire of Constantinople. This peculiarly interesting case, with western rulership models being adapted to Byzantine socio-political substrata and ritual space, reveals the use of the concept of "*Heerkaisertum*", an army-elected emperor, as *primus inter pares*. Nevertheless, despite the august settings and unique sources of Latin imperial ritual, the emperors were never able to establish their independent power, reflected as much in their ritual as their actual political abilities. This failure stands in stark contrast with Venice, which successfully incorporated eastern Roman features into both its ritual and physical space.

Legitimation for a new polity is again a central theme in part three's third paper, as Ioanna Rapti turns to the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia established in 1198. Focusing on two aspects of royal self-representation, coronations and funerals, the author analyses how the Cilician kings exploited their mixed ritual heritage, with a post-Byzantine Armenian ruling elite crowned by Frederick Barbarossa's representative, and maintaining strong links with the Latin West and East as well as the Seljuk sultanate of Konya, all while ruling over a local Byzantine substrate and establishing an ecclesiastical hierarchy both formally subject to the papacy and claiming authority over all Armenian Christians. Ultimately, Rapti demonstrates that, much as the kingdom's establishment, Cilician ceremonial was "a fluid and pragmatic process" (325) that exploited a multiplicity of routes to ritualise authority over social relations. This exploitation of multiple symbolic hegemonies is reflected in the final paper of this section, where Jonathan Shepard explores the relationship between the eastern Roman *adventus* and the western Frankish *arrivistes* in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Originating in the project "Political Culture in Three Spheres: Byzantium, the Latin West and Islamic World", the chapter demonstrates how a shared heritage in ancient Rome gave political and intellectual elites in the Latin West and Greek East a common stock of ritual leadership models. Moreover, intensifying contact in this period introduced certain western aristocrats to the imperial palace's newly re-Romanised ceremonial, adapting it to their particular needs.

In the volume's fourth and final section, "Ritual Performances and their Reflections in Art and Literature", Stavroula Constantinou turns to ritual imperial punishment as represented in Prokopios' *Secret History*. Ritual violence is a well-known phenomenon, emphasised by Michel Foucault among many others, and the author here examines its role in Prokopios' "historical novel". Constantinou convincingly argues that these stylised punishments take on particular roles in the writer's ritualised narrative space, helping to enforce the overall image of Justinian and Theodora's toxic absolutism. Ritualised narrative is the central theme also of Panagiotis Agapitos' essay, focused on reflections of imperial ceremony in the thirteenth-century Medieval Greek Romance *Livistros and Rodamne*. The author demonstrates how the rituals of the "Amorous Dominion" and its ruler, *Eros Basileus* (Emperor Love), are not coincidental literary devices, but purposeful and coherent representations of Komnenian and Laskarid imperial ceremony.

Re-representation of imperial ceremony is also the topic of the section's third essay, with Henry Maguire assessing the evidence for parodies of imperial ceremony in Byzantine art. These acts of mockery were staged by various actors over the empire's history, and the author convincingly argues for the indelible mark they left on central medieval images of the Mocking of Christ.

Ultimately, Maguire contends, these parodies “served to reinforce the official structures that they aped, even while they denigrated the individuals who were the target of their invective” (427). The role of imitation in ritual is a key theme of the section’s fourth essay, with Maria Parani analysing the significance of eunuchs’ attire in the context of middle Byzantine palace ceremonial. These ambiguous and potentially controversial figures, variously praised or denigrated by a number of writers for their perceived qualities, were omnipresent in all forms of imperial ceremony in the ninth and tenth centuries. Particularly analysing the offices and garments unique to eunuchs, Parani finds that in fact only a few were particular associated with this class of dignitary. Nevertheless, their special proximity to the emperor gave their outward appearance a particular valence, as their sexual neutrality helped the ruler to position his palace as mirroring God’s Divine Court and archangelic escort.

Imperial ceremony itself is the key topic of the section and volume’s final two chapters, with Christina Angelidi returning to the issue of imperial diplomacy as revealed by the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies*, and Margaret Mullett analysing Komnenian ephemeral “tented ceremonies”. Angelidi reveals new light from relatively well-studied material, illustrating how much preparation is evident in the receptions, and the attention to detail in the reception halls’ decorations, the dignitaries’ attire, and the handling of procedure. This attention to detail allows us to better imagine the process of ritual transfer which Mullett uncovers in her paper. While the concept of the “itinerant court” is normally thought in terms of kingship in the Latin West, the author convincingly shows that the eastern Roman “mobile court” fits better into the context of eastern and Mediterranean courtly cultures – indeed, there may even have been instances of direct borrowing, hinted at through Arabic sources.

Overall, this volume is a welcome addition to a growing subject area, utilising a comparative approach to the full extent. Although several papers could have been more rigorous in their use of current critical approaches and ritual theory, the strong introduction goes some way to remedying this short-fall, and so scholars of various geographical, chronological, and methodological specialisations should find much of use in these pages.

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