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Social Change in Town and Country in Eleventh-Century Byzantium

Edited by
JAMES HOWARD-JOHNSTON

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3

Social Change in the Countryside of Eleventh-Century Byzantium

Kostis Smyrlis

It was not a revolution—change being neither complete nor sudden—but the countryside of Komnenian Byzantium was profoundly different from that of the tenth-century empire of the Macedonians. One of the most important transformations was the triumph of great landownership. By the end of the eleventh century, a large proportion of the arable land belonged to the estates of more or less powerful landowners who, in a number of ways, dominated the peasants who lived there. At the same time, the state owned more of the empire's land than before, much of which was under the control of prominent members of the ruling Komnenian family. Beside landownership, change is also apparent in the increased prosperity and assertiveness of provincial towns in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Developments within rural society have been under scrutiny since the beginnings of modern scholarship on Byzantium, with the eleventh century being singled out as a turning point. Considerable progress has been made, but many questions remain unanswered. When did the large estate become the dominant form of land exploitation and what proportion of the land was part of large estates at the end of the eleventh century? How powerful were provincial landowners and did their increased wealth translate into greater influence or autonomy? What impact did developments in the countryside have on the evolution of towns and their relations with the centre? What did it mean to be a dependent peasant and what happened to the villages turned into estates? Probably none of these questions will ever receive a definitive answer given the limited amount of available evidence. In what follows, I will review the scholarship regarding these matters and offer some new insights of my own. My focus is on landownership and state finances and on the impact which changes in these domains had on the different layers of rural society.

LANDOWNERSHIP AND THE STATE

As noted, the growth of large-scale landownership was well advanced by the eleventh century. Large agricultural units were already common in the ninth century and their proliferation continued in the next two centuries, probably with little interruption. Growth was achieved through the acquisition of deserted village lands and peasant plots.¹ If the increased importance of large estates is not in doubt, it is not clear when they became dominant. The tenth-century evidence is too scarce to allow for any firm conclusion.² In the eleventh century, we can detect the existence of a dense network of estates in certain parts of Macedonia. In 1047, for example, the estates of the monastery of Iviron in coastal Chalkidike and the Strymon Valley neighboured, for the most part, other, private or imperial, estates and less often the territory of a village or a town (*kastron*).³ A similar picture emerges from the 1073 *praktikon* of Andronikos Doukas concerning the region of Miletus.⁴ However, in the cadaster of Thebes, dating from the second half of the eleventh century, most of the land was apparently divided into small to medium-sized plots which belonged mainly to the local town and village elite.⁵ At least to some extent this may be attributed to the fact that the cadaster offers a more complete picture of landownership than monastic documents, which tend to focus on large landholdings. One should also take into account geographical variation. Large estates are likely to have become dominant earlier and their network denser in those regions which were most fertile and easy to access by boat.

¹ J. Lefort, 'The Rural Economy, Seventh-Twelfth Centuries', in A.E. Laiou, ed., *The Economic History of Byzantium, From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century* (Washington, D.C., 2002), I, 285–90.

² Nicolas Oikonomides has suggested that estates dominated the countryside already in that century: 'The Social Structure of the Byzantine Countryside in the First Half of the Tenth Century', *Symmeikta* 10 (1996), 103–24; reprinted in *idem, Social and Economic Life in Byzantium*, ed. E. Zachariadou (Aldershot, 2004), XVI.

³ J. Lefort, N. Oikonomides, and D. Papachryssanthou, eds, H. Métréveli (collab.), *Actes d'Iviron I, des origines au milieu du XIe siècle* (Paris, 1985; hereafter *Iviron I*), no. 29.

⁴ M. Nystazopoulou-Pelekidou, ed., *Βυζαντινά έγγραφα της μονής Πάτμου. Β', Δημοσιώων Λειτουργιών* (Athens, 1980; hereafter *Patmos II*), no. 50.

⁵ N. Svoronos, 'Recherches sur le cadastre byzantin et la fiscalité aux XI^e et XII^e siècles: le cadastre de Thèbes', *BCH* 83 (1959), 1–166 (text on pp. 11–19); repr. in *idem, Études sur l'organisation intérieure, la société et l'économie de l'empire byzantin* (London, 1973), no. III. See the discussion of this document in P. Lemerle, *The Agrarian History of Byzantium from the Origins to the Twelfth Century* (Galway, 1979), 193–200 and A. Harvey, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire, 900–1200* (Cambridge, 1989), 63–4; Lemerle suggests, on p. 195, n. 1, that the cadaster may not record estates because their owners had obtained the privilege of paying their taxes in Constantinople. The landownership pattern that can be gleaned from the undated property inventory of a—probably monastic—landowner in the region of Athens bears significant similarities to the situation implied by the Theban cadaster: E. Granstrom, I. Medvedev, and D. Papachryssanthou, 'Fragment d'un praktikon de la région d'Athènes (avant 1204)', *REB* 34 (1976), 5–44; text on pp. 30–41.

The fact that scholarship has tended to think in terms of a dichotomy between peasants and large landowners has taken attention away from other types of proprietors. Besides the cadaster of Thebes, monastic archives also reveal the existence of middling landowners, such as those living in the little town of Hierissos, just to the north of Mt Athos.⁶ Although we mostly see this type of property when it is sold or donated to monasteries, it seems that it retained its importance throughout the eleventh century and beyond. Some at least of these lands were situated within the town territory (*ta synora tou kastroi*), the existence of which is revealed by Athonite documents.⁷ Apart from the properties of individual town dwellers, this territory also included communal lands, as in the case of villages.⁸

There is very little evidence of more modest landowners in our sources. To some extent this is to be expected. Monastic archives, our main source on landownership, provide information on other proprietors usually when they alienate their lands to the monasteries. Properties belonging to modest landowners have the least chances of leaving traces in this documentation because few acts concerning acquisitions of limited importance have been preserved.⁹ It is noteworthy, however, that in the cadaster of Thebes there are not many landowners who may be identified as peasants.¹⁰ This does not mean that modest landowners independent of landlords disappeared altogether. We have an example of a village that was apparently composed of independent peasants in early twelfth-century Crete.¹¹ Moreover, although the trend was for large estates to grow over time, this progress could also be reversed. This happened, apparently on a large scale, after the Seljuk conquest of Asia Minor in the late eleventh century which forced many landowners off their properties. Local peasants appropriated these lands and in some cases it took the original owners decades to reclaim them.¹²

⁶ The existence of 'middling landlords' in provincial towns is noted in J. Haldon, 'Social Elites, Wealth, and Power', in J. Haldon, ed., *The Social History of Byzantium* (Chichester, 2009), 190–1. On Hierissos see below.

⁷ *Iviron I*, nos 29 (1047), l. 23; 30 (second half of the eleventh c.), l. 12.

⁸ *Iviron I*, 131. See also the disputes over properties claimed by the town dwellers as a group: J. Lefort, N. Oikonomides, and D. Papachryssanthou, eds, V. Kravari and H. Métrévéli (collab.), *Actes d'Iviron II, du milieu du XIe siècle à 1204* (Paris, 1990; hereafter *Iviron II*), no. 34 (1062); P. Lemerle, A. Guillou, and N. Svoronos, eds, *Actes de Lavra I, des origines à 1204* (Paris, 1970; hereafter *Lavra I*), no. 37 (1076–7). On the communal lands of the village, see Lefort, 'The Rural Economy', 279–80.

⁹ K. Smyrliis, *La fortune des grands monastères byzantins, fin du Xe—milieu du XIVe siècle* (Paris, 2006), 146–50.

¹⁰ Harvey, *Economic Expansion*, 75–6.

¹¹ F. Miklosich and I. Müller, *Acta et diplomata graeca medii aevi, sacra et profana*, 6 vols (Vienna, 1860–90), VI, 95–9 (1118). See also P. Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180* (Cambridge, 1993), 160–1.

¹² Smyrliis, *La fortune*, 169–70; cf. pp. 176–7, on the usurpations that followed the conquest of Constantinople in 1204.

The state and its financial interests played a crucial part in the transformation of the pattern of landownership:¹³ first, during the tenth century, by selling deserted village lands to well-off peasants and to 'powerful' individuals or institutions coming from outside the village commune; next, from around the turn of the eleventh century, by expanding public estates or creating new ones. The state enlarged its properties by absorbing abandoned lands as well as through confiscations and purchases.¹⁴ The state thus became a landowner on a larger scale than before, clearly because it realized that the revenues from land exploitation were greater than those from taxation. Some of these lands the state awarded to state-controlled pious institutions in Constantinople, thereby funding charitable activity in the capital as well as providing income for favoured individuals. The next stage of state intervention took place after Alexios I Komnenos came to power in 1081. In a series of confiscations from the late 1080s, the state expropriated extensive lands in Europe belonging to monasteries, churches, and laymen. The confiscations were done by applying, in an essentially abusive way, the rule according to which a landowner should not possess more land than the amount corresponding to their tax liability. Alexios I apparently raised the tax rate and did not give landowners the option of keeping their properties by paying more. These confiscations were done in response to the loss of state land and revenue in Asia Minor. They also gave the emperor the wherewithal to reward favoured individuals. Grants of public lands and tax concessions were given out on an unprecedented scale, the beneficiaries being close relatives of the emperor and individuals who had rendered important services to the state. They were awarded the taxes and/or ownership of important lands in Europe.¹⁵

LANDOWNERS BASED IN CONSTANTINOPLE

These changes in landownership and state finances had an impact on all layers of society and the relations between them. The state and a number of wealthy aristocratic households (*oikoi*) in Constantinople were the leading

¹³ For what follows, see Lefort, 'The Rural Economy', 273, 288; N. Oikonomides, 'The Role of the Byzantine State in the Economy', in Laiou, *The Economic History of Byzantium*, III, 1006–7.

¹⁴ Confiscations hitting monasteries and laymen were not uncommon: Smyrliis, *La fortune*, 171–5; J.-C. Cheynet, 'Fortune et puissance de l'aristocratie (Xe–XIIIe siècle)', in V. Kravari, J. Lefort, and C. Morrisson, eds, *Hommes et richesses dans l'Empire byzantin II, VIIIe–XVe siècle* (Paris, 1991), 208–10; repr. in *idem*, *The Byzantine Aristocracy and its Military Function* (Aldershot, 2006), no. V. Purchases by the crown or the fisc are attested in 1136: P. Gautier, 'Le typikon du Christ Sauveur Pantocrator', *REB* 32 (1974), 115, 121.

¹⁵ K. Smyrliis, 'The Fiscal Revolution of Alexios I Komnenos: Timing, Scope and Motives', in B. Flusin and J.-C. Cheynet, eds, *Autour du Premier humanisme byzantin et des Cinq études sur le XIe siècle, quarante ans après Paul Lemerle*, *TM* 21.2 (2017), 593–610.

landowners in the provinces.¹⁶ It is impossible to estimate the importance of state-controlled lands but they were extensive and especially prominent in the fertile regions of the empire. The estates of the great *oikoi* of Constantinople, which often originated in imperial donations, were to be found in the same areas. As state property grew in the eleventh century, private individuals and ecclesiastical institutions in the capital also benefited indirectly from the greater availability of fiscal land thanks to imperial donations. There exist a few examples of fully documented fortunes. In 1083, Gregory Pakourianos, commander-in-chief of the army, endowed his newly founded monastery near Philippoupolis with properties located in Bulgaria, Thrace, and Macedonia; they included twenty-three estates or villages and seven dependent monasteries. In 1136, John II Komnenos gave the monastery of the Pantokrator sixty estates or villages and eight dependent monasteries as well as numerous other important properties, all situated in regions neighbouring the Marmara and Aegean Seas.¹⁷ Probably the main significance of the growing presence of Constantinople-controlled estates in the countryside was that it limited the expansion of provincial landowners and drained away much of the local surplus to the capital. The existence of these estates connected the provinces with Constantinople in a number of additional ways, all implying an increased control of the countryside by the centre. Transactions between provincials and landowners in the capital could take place in Constantinople.¹⁸ Disputes over lands would also reach the capital.¹⁹ The estates no doubt provided other less visible channels of communication through the administrators (*episkeptitai*, *kouratores*, *pronoetai*, or *oikonomoi*), both those who travelled out to the provinces and those who lived there and formed part of rural society.²⁰

The large grants Alexios I awarded to his close relatives transformed the way people in many areas of the empire related to central authority.²¹ Although this system was devised as a way of providing financial resources, it had far-reaching consequences. The beneficiaries, in particular Alexios' brothers and brothers-in-law, exercised rights only the state normally possessed. Apart from collecting taxes, the administrators or trusted men of these individuals heard and resolved property disputes, established the limits of estates, and apparently also seized private lands. At the same time, the

¹⁶ Cf. the remarks of Paul Magdalino for the twelfth c.: *Manuel I*, 162–9.

¹⁷ Smyrlis, *La fortune*, 70–1, 83–4.

¹⁸ *Iviron II*, no. 40 (1071). ¹⁹ *Lavra I*, no. 42 (1081).

²⁰ They most often appear in documents concerning the setting of the borders of properties; see for example N. Wilson and J. Darrouzès, 'Restes du cartulaire de Hiéra-Xérochoraphion', *REB* 26 (1968), no. 4. On the administrators of imperial estates, see J.-C. Cheynet, 'Les gestionnaires des biens impériaux: étude sociale (X^e–XII^e siècle)', *TM* 16 (2011) [= *Mélanges Cécile Morisson*], 163–204.

²¹ Cf. the discussion of these grants in Lemerle, *Agrarian history*, 209–14 and Smyrlis, 'The Fiscal Revolution of Alexios I'.

authority of fiscal officials did not extend over their properties. Although the emperor could still intervene, much of this happened without any direct reference to his authority.²² These grants thus introduced a certain ambiguity between what was private and what public. This development, however, did not threaten Constantinople's control over the empire's territories nor did it lead to regional fragmentation. It is preferable to speak rather of a multiple central authority.²³ It is worth repeating here that the revolts of the late twelfth century were not led by members of the Komnenian clan holding properties in the provinces but for the most part by locally based powerful individuals.²⁴

THE PROVINCIAL ELITE

What may be called the provincial elite included town and village notables as well as wealthy monasteries founded in the countryside and in provincial towns.²⁵ The town elite was a diverse group including people in state service or bearing imperial titles, as well as a more or less developed church officialdom headed by the bishop. Villages possessed a much more rudimentary elite, one or two priests, maybe a notary, and a few more notables who represented the village or offered testimony in disputes.

How wealthy were provincial landowners? One of the best-documented cases is that of the imperial dignitary Eustathios Boilas, known from the will he made in 1059.²⁶ Born to an affluent Cappadocian family, he migrated to settle on the empire's eastern frontier. He seems before long to have acquired several pieces of land in a region that was largely deserted; some of these properties he bought, others may have been granted to him by the state. He organized them into distinct estates, building a house and a church on the main one. Boilas' landed fortune was respectable but not great. Having at one point comprised nine estates, by 1059 it had diminished to four such properties worth well over 50 pounds of gold. It is impossible to tell how common this type of landowner was in rural Byzantium. At least in the European provinces of the empire most

²² See in particular *Iviron II*, nos 43 (1085), 45 (1090–1094), 50 (1101), 52 (1104); J. Bompairé, ed., *Actes de Xéropotamou* (Paris, 1964), no. 7 (1085). Caesar Nikephoros Melissenos seems to have donated an imperial estate; but the donation was sanctioned by the emperor: N. Oikonomides, ed., *Actes de Docheiariou* (Paris, 1984; hereafter *Docheiariou*), no. 4.

²³ Cf. E. Patlagean, *Un Moyen Âge grec. Byzance, IX^e–XV^e siècle* (Paris, 2007), 383–4.

²⁴ P. Magdalino, 'Constantinople and the *ἐξω χωραὶ* in the time of Balsamon', in N. Oikonomides, ed., *Byzantium in the 12th Century: Canon Law, State and Society* (Athens, 1991), 180–1; repr. in P. Magdalino, *Studies on the History and Topography of Byzantine Constantinople* (Aldershot, 2007), no. X; and *idem*, *Manuel I*, 155.

²⁵ On the provincial town elite see Magdalino, *Manuel I*, 150–60 and, more recently, Haldon, 'Social Elites'.

²⁶ P. Lemerle, *Cinq études sur le XI^e siècle byzantin* (Paris, 1977), 15–63; text on pp. 20–9.

landowners would have been autochthonous and would have resided in towns within well-populated regions.²⁷ The documentary evidence from the eleventh and twelfth centuries concerning Macedonia and the south-eastern Aegean contains some examples of noteworthy provincial landowners. Judging from the properties they alienated to monasteries none of these individuals or families was very powerful.²⁸ It does not seem to be a coincidence that most major donations to monasteries came either from the emperor or from private landowners in the capital.²⁹

The fortune of wealthy provincials must have often resembled that of the *protopapas* Nikephoros of Hierissos, probably one of the richest men of the town at the end of the tenth century.³⁰ He died before 995, but the family remained influential or wealthy for at least two more generations. Their fortune is reasonably well documented. Before 985, Nikephoros sold to Ivron a courtyard (*aule*) with 'many excellent houses' for seven pounds of gold. In 1001, his son, the *kouboukleisios* Stephanos, sold to the same monastery additional properties for four pounds of gold: his father's house with its six barrels or vats in Hierissos as well as two vineyards, a large field of 100 *modioi*, a prairie, a brick factory, and a mill. In 1017, Stephanos donated to his daughter, who had become a nun, a small monastery with a vineyard and three fields. Although it is not impossible that the family owned a consolidated estate, it seems more likely that their fortune consisted of a number of vineyards and large to medium-sized fields located in the region of Hierissos. Apart from the one measuring 100 *modioi*, other fields of 50, 30, 20, and several of 12 *modioi* are attested in their possession. They also held considerable town properties which served as their residence and maybe also as rental shops.³¹ The brick factory and mill provided additional revenue while the six barrels/vats in Nikephoros' house may point to the sale of wine.

Monastic landowners are much better known than lay ones, the best documented being certain Athonite establishments. A number of these monasteries

possessed important landed fortunes. The prestige of Mt Athos, which enjoyed imperial favour from the tenth century, grew in the eleventh, especially after the monasteries of Asia Minor entered a period of decline following the Turkish conquest. It is doubtful whether any other provincial establishment would have been more prosperous than the leading Athonite monasteries, Lavra and Ivron. Much of their wealth originated in imperial donations of properties that were already monastic. Ivron may have been the richer of the two, possessing towards the end of the eleventh century twenty-three estates in Macedonia; they had a surface area of more than 100,000 *modioi* and included more than 200 dependent peasants (*paroikoi*).³² This was a great fortune that few laymen of the provinces could have matched.

The provincial elite was expanding its landownership from the ninth century and most clearly in the tenth. Indeed, these were the people and institutions primarily targeted by the legislation of the Macedonians trying to curb land acquisitions by the 'powerful'. By the eleventh century, it seems that there were areas where expansion could only proceed at the expense of other more or less affluent landowners, most peasant land having already been absorbed by landowners' estates. We can see this process in the parts of Macedonia documented by the Athonite archives. While disputes with village communes or peasants subside as we move forward in time, fights with other landowners, bishoprics, monasteries, or town dwellers as a group continue unabated.³³ There is little doubt, however, that the greatest competition came from the state itself, which possessed superior financial and legal means. Its increased interest in the land, from around the turn of the eleventh century, must have limited considerably the room for expansion of all other landowners. The confiscations under Alexios I certainly affected rural landowners more than anything had previously. The monastery of Ivron lost almost half its fortune.³⁴

The paucity of information coming from the twelfth century makes it difficult to follow the evolution of the rural elite's landownership. Even the usually well-documented fortune of the Athonites remains in the shadow until the second half of the thirteenth century when the documents show a significant degree of continuity in the property of several monasteries. The limited

²⁷ Cf. M.J. Angold, 'Archons and Dynasts: Local Aristocracies and the Cities in the Later Byzantine Empire', in M. Angold, ed., *The Byzantine Aristocracy, IX to XIII Centuries* (Oxford, 1984), 237; D. Jacoby, 'Les états latins en Romanie: phénomènes sociaux et économiques (1204-1350 environ)', in *XV^e Congrès international d'études byzantines, Rapports et co-rapports* (Athens, 1976), I.3, 7; repr. in *idem, Recherches sur la Méditerranée orientale du XIII^e au XV^e siècle—peuples, sociétés, économies* (London, 1979), no. I.

²⁸ Some examples: *Ivion* II, no. 39 (1071): Psellos; *Docheiariou*, no. 3 (1112): Bourion/Rasopoles; E. Branouse (ed.), *Βυζαντινά έγγραφα τῆς μονῆς Πάτμου. Α', Αυτοκρατορικά* (Athens, 1980), nos 2 and 3 (1079): Kaballoures and Skenoures.

²⁹ The most striking example being that of the village of Radolibos given to Ivron by Kale Pakouriane; in 1103, the village was inhabited by 122 peasant families: *Ivion* II, no. 51.

³⁰ On the family of Nikephoros and their fortune: *Ivion* I, 131-2. In 982, Nikephoros' *signon* was among the first of those placed by 74 inhabitants of Hierissos on an act of guaranty: *Ivion* I, no. 4.

³¹ Cf. M. Kaplan, 'Villes et campagnes à Byzance du VI^e au XII^e siècle: aspects économiques et sociaux', in *Città e campagna nei secoli altomedievali* (Spoleto, 2009), 518.

³² On the properties of Lavra and Ivron, see Smyrlis, *La fortune*, 47-8, 52-4. On the *paroikoi* of Ivron, see *Ivion* II, 33. The monastery of Vatopedi, which during the eleventh c. competed with Ivron for the second rank in Mt Athos after Lavra, seems to have been much less wealthy, owning five estates in 1080: J. Bompaire, J. Lefort, V. Kravari, and C. Giros, eds, *Actes des Vatopédi I, des origines à 1329* (Paris, 2001), 9, 12.

³³ Disputes with peasants or villages: *Ivion* I, no. 9 (995); N. Oikonomidès, ed., *Actes des Dionysiou* (Paris, 1968), no. 1 (1056). Disputes with other great landowners or towns: *Ivion* I, nos 10 (996), 27 (1042); *Ivion* II, nos 31 (1056), 34 (1062), 40 (1071); J. Lefort, ed., *Actes d'Esphigménou* (Paris, 1973), no. 4 (1078).

³⁴ *Ivion* II, 27-31.

evidence we have on laymen indicates that landownership continued to be of importance to town dwellers. Significantly, the imperial privileges awarded to towns in the thirteenth century primarily concern the inhabitants' land and its exemption from taxes; in some cases, commercial privileges are also included.³⁵

Of course, landownership was not the unique source of the provincial elite's wealth. The growth of the Byzantine economy in the eleventh century was based not only on the expansion of agricultural production but also on manufacture and trade, both of which were largely based in provincial towns. The most interesting aspect of this is that significant new production centres emerged in towns such as Thebes and Corinth, bringing into question Constantinople's monopoly. Equally important is the appearance of middle-range finished products of which the consumers would be the growing provincial elite.³⁶ No doubt, wealthy locals were the main force behind, and beneficiaries from, the expansion of manufacture and trade seen in some places.³⁷ Additional income came from the increasingly valuable urban properties they exploited directly or rented. These economic activities offered an alternative to landownership as a means of enrichment, all the more so because territorial expansion was growing harder. Certainly, the increased autonomy of provincial towns noted by scholarship for the eleventh and twelfth centuries is connected with the elite's greater prosperity. Within the limits set by the tight grip of Constantinople over the empire's productive lands, the assertiveness of provincial towns became more pronounced in the twelfth century. It is from this century that we have the first clear evidence of the award of imperial privileges to cities.³⁸ The apparently more extensive thirteenth-century privileges are best understood as a further step in the long process of emancipation of provincial towns from Constantinople.

THE PEASANTRY

By the end of the eleventh century, a large proportion of the peasantry depended on private landowners, either because they were their tenants or because their village or taxes had been conceded to them by the state. All these

³⁵ On these privileges, see E. Patlagean, 'Les immunités des Thessaloniens', in *Εὐψυχία. Mélanges offerts à Hélène Ahrweiler* (Paris, 1998), II, 591–601; D. Kyritses, 'The "Common Chrysobulls" of Cities and the Notion of Property in Late Byzantium', *Symmeikta* 13 (1999), 229–43.

³⁶ On the evolution of the economy in this period, see most recently A.E. Laiou and C. Morrisson, *The Byzantine Economy* (Cambridge, 2007), ch. 4.

³⁷ Cf. Laiou and Morrisson, *The Byzantine Economy*, 129–30; Magdalino, *Manuel I*, 156–9.

³⁸ Magdalino, *Manuel I*, 151; Patlagean, 'Les immunités', 598.

peasants were now called *paroikoi*, a term no longer reserved for the landless tenants.³⁹ Many peasants, perhaps the majority, remained directly subjected to the fisc and thus independent from private lords. Their numbers, however, were constantly diminishing as the concession of peasants to private beneficiaries continued and accelerated with the expansion of the *pronoia* in the twelfth century. The scholarship of the last decades has tried to present a more nuanced image of the condition of the *paroikoi* than the traditional pessimistic one. With regard to tenants, in particular, it has been pointed out that one should distinguish between their juridical and their economic situation. A tenant with a pair of oxen would be better off than a landowning peasant with one or no ox.⁴⁰ It has also been argued that, although a tenant peasant's rent was normally twice as high as a landowning peasant's tax for the same amount of land, tax-exempt landlords may have offered reduced rates in order to attract settlers; at the same time, *paroikoi* would have been protected from the exactions of tax officials.⁴¹ According to a somewhat less optimistic view, although tenants had to part with a greater portion of their surplus than landowning peasants, the expansion of the economy and the increased demand for agricultural produce translated into better living standards for them as well.⁴²

Even if it is no longer possible to equate uncritically the condition of the *paroikos* with impoverishment, it is hard to overlook the fact that landlords tended to exploit their dependent peasants economically. And one should not underestimate the significance of the social and legal inferiority of *paroikoi* vis-à-vis independent peasants. Landlords of the eleventh and twelfth centuries sometimes found *paroikoi* worthy of compassion and care, condemning abusive increases in rent or excessive labour services (*angareiai*), statements which suggest that such behaviour was not uncommon.⁴³ The solicitude of emperor Alexios I for the oppression of the *paroikoi* by their landlords probably reflects the concerns of society at large.⁴⁴ Tax officials could act arbitrarily and exact heavy taxes, but it was landlords or more often their local

³⁹ Lefort, 'The Rural Economy', 238.

⁴⁰ M. Kaplan, *Les hommes et la terre à Byzance du VIe au XIe siècle. Propriété et exploitation du sol* (Paris, 1992), 271–2.

⁴¹ N. Oikonomides, 'Η "Πείρα" περί παροίκων', in *Λιπέρωμα στον Νίκο Σβορώνο* (Rethymno, 1986), I, 232–6; repr. in *idem, Byzantium from the Ninth Century to the Fourth Crusade* (Hampshire, 1992), no. XIII; *idem, Fiscalité et exemption fiscale à Byzance (IXe–XIe s.)* (Athens, 1996), 214–16; Lefort, 'The Rural Economy', 237–8.

⁴² Laiou and Morrisson, *The Byzantine Economy*, 105–8, 111–12.

⁴³ P. Gautier, 'La diataxis de Michel Attaliatè', *REB* 39 (1981), 77, ll. 980–6; L. Petit, 'Typikon du monastère de la Kosmosotira près d'Aenos (1152)', *IRAIK* 13 (1908), 56, ll. 9–19 and 58, l. 34–59, l. 5. Cf. P. Gautier, 'Le typikon du sébaste Grégoire Pakourianos', *REB* 42 (1984), 35, ll. 248–56 and 99, ll. 1331–6.

⁴⁴ A chrysobull of 1086 confirming the donation of a village to Leo Kephala contains a clause asking the landlord to take good care of the *paroikoi* and not to expel them from the village: *Lavra I*, no. 48, ll. 23–4. See also below the case of the *paroikos* Lazaros.

intendants who were constantly present exercising extensive authority over the peasants. The state of being a dependent peasant, the *paroikia*, is described by archbishop Theophylact of Ochrid as a yoke that at least one *paroikos* was keen to throw off.⁴⁵ In principle, *paroikoi* could not leave their landlords' estates. Private landowners would petition the emperor who would order his officials to restore to them the *paroikoi* who had settled elsewhere.⁴⁶ In the case of imperial estates this principle was no doubt scrupulously enforced. Within their estates, landlords seem to have been able to move their tenants around as they pleased, resettling whole villages if this suited their needs.⁴⁷ They could assign them any task they wanted.⁴⁸ *Paroikoi* were expected to fear their lords.⁴⁹ Certain landlords punished or expelled *paroikoi* for crimes or disobedience.⁵⁰ This evidence does not mean that *paroikoi* could not have their cases heard by state or ecclesiastical courts (see below the case of Lazaros). It does indicate, nevertheless, that powerful landlords often exercised informal authority over their dependent peasants. Besides taxation and justice, landlords sometimes replaced the state also with regard to the defence of the country. From the late eleventh century we see landlords constructing or owning castles or towers in their estates where the peasants would take refuge at times of danger.⁵¹ At least in eleventh-century Macedonia private fortifications seem to have been relatively rare becoming more common in the following centuries.⁵²

Given the prevalence of landowners' estates in the countryside, given the economic and legal domination of the lords over their *paroikoi*, and accepting that the rural population was growing, it is at first sight surprising that, instead of declining, the status of *paroikoi* seems to have improved from the eleventh century. According to a judge in Constantinople, tenants who had rented land

⁴⁵ P. Gautier, ed., *Théophylacte d'Achrida, Lettres* (Thessalonike, 1986), 485.

⁴⁶ *Iviron* II, no. 33 (1061); *Lavra* I, no. 64 (1162).

⁴⁷ Petit, 'Kosmosotira', 52, ll. 20-1; 72, ll. 10-13.

⁴⁸ Gautier, 'Pakourianos', 111, l. 1539-113, l. 1543; 113, ll. 1567-9, 1573-5; Petit, 'Kosmosotira', 66, l. 41-67, l. 6; 72, ll. 13-21.

⁴⁹ Wilson and Darrouzès, 'Hiéra-Xérochoraphion', no. 9 (1157; on the date: Magdalino, *Manuel I*, 165).

⁵⁰ The most explicit source on punishment is the *typikon* of the monastery of Kosmosoteira (1152), which explains how the *hegoumenos* ought to administer justice among *paroikoi*, imposing physical or financial penalties in the case of arson: Petit, 'Kosmosotira', 67, ll. 6-20. Physical punishment is also mentioned in *Patmos* II, no. 55 (1097-1109). The expulsion of disobedient *paroikoi* was apparently common; see above n. 44 and Miklosich and Müller, *Acta*, VI, 68 (1091); Petit, 'Kosmosotira', 72, ll. 24-9.

⁵¹ Gautier, 'Pakourianos', 35-9, 113; *Iviron* II, no. 52 (1104), ll. 184, 434-7; *Patmos* II, no. 52 (1089); Miklosich and Müller, *Acta*, VI, 147.

⁵² K. Smyrlis, 'Estate Fortifications in Late Byzantine Macedonia: The Athonite Evidence', in F. Daim and J. Drauschke, eds, *Hinter den Mauern und auf dem offenen Land: Leben im byzantinischen Reich* (Mainz, 2016), 196-7.

for more than thirty years could not be expelled from it.⁵³ We see this principle applied in the late twelfth century on an estate of the monastery of Pantokrator near Smyrna.⁵⁴ Moreover, whereas in the eleventh and twelfth centuries the number of days of *angareiai paroikoi* had to offer seems to have been determined by the landlord, by the thirteenth century state officials recorded the peasants' labour service obligations—something which may have limited arbitrary action on the part of landlords.⁵⁵

One reason why the condition of *paroikoi* did not sink to a low level was economic. To some extent, competition between landlords trying to attract or maintain the workforce on their estates meant that their demands or oppression could not become too heavy. In practice, it would often have been difficult to stop *paroikoi* from fleeing and there must have been significant peasant mobility. The way private landowners tried to counter this mobility, by applying to the emperor for enforcement, shows the limits of their power. The other reason has to do with the persistence of a relatively strong state that set rules and guaranteed the validity of the law. A court decision defined the conditions of tenancy and, later, the fisc started recording the days of *angareiai* owed by *paroikoi*. Certainly a vast distance separated landlords from their *paroikoi* in social terms. *De facto*, lords enjoyed great authority over their peasants, judging and punishing them, or treating them in demeaning ways. But in spite of these serious reductions in status, *paroikoi* were still considered free and legally competent persons. In this sense, the fact that the majority of the rural population became dependent peasants probably contributed to improving the status of the *paroikos*.⁵⁶ In the eleventh century and later, *paroikoi*, indistinguishable from independent peasants, offer testimony in disputes, witness acts, and place their signatures or *signa* at the end of documents, next to those of town notables or members of the high aristocracy.⁵⁷

A remarkable *paroikos* of the late eleventh or early twelfth century apparently understood and made full use of the state's power in order to oppose his landlord and improve his lot. 'Bulgarian' Lazaros was a *paroikos* of the archbishopric of Ochrid who longed for freedom and distinction according to his landlord, Theophylact, our only source on the affair. Although much of it is obscure, it seems that Lazaros assisted fiscal officials by revealing the archbishop's tax evasion in a village he had recently acquired from the fisc by virtue of an exchange. According to Theophylact, Lazaros received clothes

⁵³ I. and P. Zepos, eds, *Jus Graecoromanum* (Athens, 1931), IV, 15.2-3 and discussion in Oikonomides, 'H "Πείρα" περί παροίκων', 238-9.

⁵⁴ Miklosich and Müller, *Acta*, IV, 184-5 (1196).

⁵⁵ Oikonomides, *Fiscalité*, 106, n. 117; Miklosich and Müller, *Acta*, IV, 182.

⁵⁶ Cf. Laiou and Morrisson, *The Byzantine Economy*, 107.

⁵⁷ *Iviron* II, nos 35 (1062); 40 (1071); 43 (1085); Wilson and Darrouzès, 'Hiéra-Xérochoraphion', no. 4; *Patmos* II, no. 53 (1089).

that were 'nobler [*eleutheriotera*] and cleaner than his state' and other gratifications from the fiscal officials; he may have also hoped to acquire the village. The conflict became serious, Lazaros proving a redoubtable opponent of the prelate. No doubt thanks to the backing of the officials, Lazaros was received by Alexios I himself, before whom he accused Theophylact of burning his house in revenge for his supporting the fisc against his landlord. Lazaros' claim is said to have moved Alexios to sympathy for the peasant. The last we hear is that a tax collector was apparently planning to send Lazaros a second time to the emperor with a delegation of 'rebel' villagers to demand the restitution of the village to the fisc.⁵⁸ Although this case may be exceptional, it does reveal the limits of landlord power and shows that *paroikoi*, individually or collectively, could resist their landlord by appealing to the imperial administration and justice.

The fact that the village commune retained some of its competences even after the transformation of villages into private estates helped make *paroikoi* less vulnerable. As has been rightly noted, the loss of the fiscal function of the village caused by this transformation did not destroy the communal organization of the peasants.⁵⁹ In some important ways little was different in villages inhabited by *paroikoi* from communes of independent peasants. Village notables continued to represent the commune as a whole, playing a significant role in dispute settlements.⁶⁰ In documents of the late eleventh and twelfth century, we see *paroikoi* acting in the same way as independent peasants had done earlier: on their own initiative they lay claim to properties belonging to great landowners.⁶¹

CONCLUSION

Estates controlled by the state and private landowners dominated the countryside by the end of the eleventh century, although there must have been

⁵⁸ Most of the information comes from Gautier, *Theophylacte*, nos 96, 98; no. 129 seems to refer to the accusations of tax evasion made against Theophylact. The case of Lazaros is also discussed in A. Harvey, 'The Land and the Taxation in the Reign of Alexios I Komnenos: The Evidence of Theophylakt of Ochrid', *REB* 51 (1993), 145–6.

⁵⁹ N. Oikonomides, 'La fiscalité byzantine et la communauté villageoise au XI^e s.', in *Septième Congrès international d'études du sud-est européen (Thessalonique, 29 août–4 septembre 1994)* (Athens, 1994), I, 101–2; cf. Lefort, 'The Rural Economy', 279–3.

⁶⁰ Apart from the delegation of villagers accompanying Lazaros, see also: *Patmos* II, no. 53 (1089), 200–1 (*ἐννοληπτότεροι*); *Iviron* II, no. 51 (1103), l. 89 (*ἀξιόπιστοι τε καὶ εὐνόληπτοι γέροντες*), l. 92 (*προεστώς*). Cf. J. Lefort, 'Les villages de Macédoine orientale au Moyen Âge (X^e–XIV^e siècle)', in *idem, Société rurale et histoire du paysage à Byzance* (Paris, 2006), 498–9.

⁶¹ *Patmos* II, nos 52 (1089), ll. 107–147; 53 (1089), 55 (1097–1109); *Iviron* II, no. 51 (1103), ll. 85–95; Wilson and Darrouzès, 'Hiéra-Xérochoraphion', no. 9 (1157).

significant geographical variation that cannot be fully understood. There certainly continued to exist plenty of small and medium-sized plots, which were not incorporated into estates. Besides the land belonging to great landowners, land was also owned by less powerful individuals, ranging from well-off town inhabitants to modest peasants. Wealthy town dwellers probably controlled much of the land surrounding their towns. The increased interest of the state in the land during the eleventh century limited the room for expansion of provincial landowners, probably more effectively than the tenth-century legislation had done. With few exceptions, these landowners do not appear to have been able to match the powerful lay and ecclesiastical *oikoi* of the capital in wealth. Towns throughout the empire prospered in the eleventh century thanks to the expansion of the agrarian economy and, in some places, thanks to the growth of manufacture and trade. Nevertheless, the importance of manufacture and trade was nowhere such that it would have permitted the emergence of a truly powerful elite capable of challenging central authority. Wealth in Byzantium still primarily came from the land that was tightly controlled by Constantinople. This did not change under the Komnenoi when large estates were awarded to the emperor's close relatives. In economic as well as legal and social terms, peasants depending on landlords were often worse off than free peasants. Landlords replaced the state to a certain extent within their lands. They collected the taxes, exercised judicial authority, and sometimes they even ensured the defence of a locality. Nevertheless, the fiscal and political interests of the state severely limited the power of landlords. Many landowners were not very wealthy and even those who were powerful did not possess boundless rights over their lands. Tax exemptions were controlled by state officials and were revocable. Confiscation was not rare. The limited power of the landlords, the pervading force of central authority and the persistence of a legal tradition guaranteed by the state restricted the degradation in status of *paroikoi*.⁶²

⁶² The present chapter was submitted for publication in 2012 and last revised in 2015. Two studies dealing with the rural society appeared too late to be taken into consideration here: R. Estangüi Gómez, 'Richesses et propriété paysannes à Byzance (XI^e–XIV^e siècle)', in O. De-R. Estangüi Gómez, S. Métivier, and P. Pagès, eds, *Le saint, le moine et le paysan. Mélanges d'histoire byzantine offerts à Michel Kaplan* (Paris, 2016), 171–212; R. Estangüi Gómez and M. Kaplan, 'La société rurale au XI^e siècle: une réévaluation', in Flusin and Cheynet, *Autour du Premier humanisme byzantin*, 531–60.