The Byzantine Empire as Segmentary Polity

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This article argues that the Middle Byzantine imperial court's relationship with outlying parts of the empire and neighboring polities can be understood more effectively through a comparison with the "segmentary polity." The segmentary polity, originally developed by the British anthropologist Aidan Southall, is a model used in African, South Asian, and Southeast Asian studies to explain a model of fluid, distributed, and plural sovereignty with strong ritual elements.[1] This article will explain this model, its applicability to the Byzantine Empire in the period approximately 900–1100, its utility, and some notes of caution in its use.

The Problem of Territoriality in Byzantine Studies

"The Byzantine Empire," Jonathan Shepard has commented, "is difficult to pin down in territorial terms, and modern historical geographies wisely tend to leave its borders indistinct."[2] While the theoretical limits of imperial functionaries' authority were defined with some precision, and these limits at times followed natural obstacles and fortification lines, the actual reach of these functionaries' authority could vary according to season, elevation, or local political circumstances.[3] Moreover, the theoretical extension of the Byzantine imperial hierarchy to include rulers of surrounding polities—Rus', Bulgaria, Serbia, and Georgia, for example—has led to considerable definitional ambiguity, being a subject of intense discussion since well before Dmitry Obolensky's seminal 1971 work, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*.[4] On the one hand, the Byzantine

1 A. Southall, "The Segmentary State in Africa and Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30.1 (1988): 52–82.

2 J. Shepard, "Bunkers, Open Cities and Boats in Byzantine Diplomacy," in *Byzantium, Its Neighbours and Its Cultures*, ed. D. Dzino and K. Parry (Brisbane, 2014), 11. To aid comprehensibility by non-specialist readers, I use the most conventional English-language terminology for polities mentioned in this paper: thus "Byzantine Empire" rather than *Romanía*; "Georgia" for the unified post-1008 Bagratid polity of Kartli and Apkhazeti, which was later termed *sakartvelo*; and Sukhothai and Ayutthaya rather than Sukhodaya and Ayodhya.

3 For the delimitation of precise areas of official authority, see, for example, Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De thematibus* (ed. A. Pertusi [Vatican City, 1953]; trans. J. Haldon, *The De thematibus ('On the Themes') of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus* [Liverpool, 2021]); for examples of the delineation of fixed borders, see *De Administrando Imperio* 53 (ed. G. Moravcsik and R. J. H. Jenkins, 2nd rev. ed. [Washington, DC, 2008], 265–66); Anna Komnēnē, *Alexiad* 3.11 (D. R. Reinsch and A. Kambylis, eds., *Alexias* [Berlin, 2001], 116; E. R. A. Sewter and P. Frankopan, trans., *The Alexiad* [Harmondsworth, 2009], 105); in general, see E. Honigmann, *Die Ostgrenze des byzantinischen Reiches* (Brussels, 1935); P. Stephenson, "The Byzantine Frontier at the Lower Danube in the Late Tenth and Eleventh Centuries," in *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700*, ed. D. Power and N. Standen (Houndsmills, 1999); although cf. the papers in F. Curta, ed., *Borders, Barriers, and Ethnogenesis: Frontiers in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2005).

4 To name but a few examples, A. A. Vasiliev, "Was Old Russia a Vassal State of Byzantium?," *Speculum* 7.3 (1932): 350–60; F. Dvornik, *Les Slaves, Byzance et Rome au IX^e siècle*, 2nd ed. (Hattiesburg, MS,

Empire of the ninth to eleventh centuries maintained a complex imperial bureaucracy and legal system of a much more far-reaching nature than most of its immediate neighbors.[5] On the other hand, recognition of its emperors' primacy was often loose and expressed in ritualistic forms, with imperial suzerainty over Bulgaria, Serbia, Georgia, Rus', and so on being strictly nominal in terms of direct ability to influence political appointments, but nonetheless dramatic in terms of imperial ceremonial and the aesthetics of power.[6]

This apparent contrast is at the root of numerous controversies within Byzantine Studies and related disciplines. In the last few years alone, Christian Raffensperger has sparked debate with his argument that the Byzantine Empire had relatively little impact on the Rus' kingdoms, while Anthony Kaldellis has forcefully argued that the pre-eleventh-century Byzantine imperial core should be characterized more as a proto-nation state than as an empire in the classically understood sense.[7] This article aims to shed light on the relationships between the Byzantine imperial core and subordinated power centers. It will primarily focus on the city and theme of Cherson in Crimea; the Anatolian frontiers of the Empire; and the North Caucasian Kingdom of Alania. The rulers of this kingdom, the North Caucasus's most powerful polity in the ninth to eleventh centuries, utilized much of the Byzantine vocabulary of rulership, carrying the title of *exousiokratōr* and being depicted in Byzantine regalia.[8]

One method of conceptualizing these practices, in Alania as elsewhere, is to regard them as Byzantine cultural influence on distinct political entities outside of the empire's borders. However, this model was criticized by Peter Brown as far back as 1976 for its mechanistic assumption that culture would flow "through an obscure law of cultural hydraulics" from areas of "high culture" to "low culture."[9] This model implies an even, consistent diffusion of culture from a center to the surrounding regions, like an oil spot spreading; however, this image does not match our evidence. For example, in the case of Alania, while there is copious evidence of the adoption of Byzantinizing royal imagery, dress styles, and architecture, there is no evidence of any adoption of writing for legal or administrative purposes (much to the frustration of modern historians).[10] In this context, a more appropriate model is that promoted by Alicia Walker, who has argued that cultural forms are actively adopted rather than passively spread, this process involving a careful appropriation of cultural elements for strategic purposes.[11]

In this situation, it is tempting to reach for Dimitri Obolensky's venerable conception of the

1970); F. Dölger, *Byzanz und die europäische Staatenwelt* (Ettal, 1953); A. Grabar, "God and the 'Family of Princes' Presided over by the Byzantine Emperor," *HSlSt* 2 (1954): 117–23; G. Ostrogorsky, "The Byzantine Emperor and the Hierarchical World Order," *SEER* 35.84 (1956): 1–14; D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe 500–1453* (New York, 1971).

5 For a comparative view, see C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800* (Oxford, 2005), 124–30; see also N. Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IX^e et X^e siècles* (Paris, 1972); N. Oikonomides, "L'évolution de l'organisation administrative de l'empire byzantin au XI^e siècle (1025–1118)," *TM* 6 (1976), 125–52.

6 For royal imagery and ceremonial, see Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, 98–105, 117–28; J. Shepard, "Orthodoxy and Northern Peoples: Goods, Gods and Guidelines," in *A Companion to Byzantium*, ed. L. James (Chichester, 2010); S. Pirivatrić, "The Serbs and the Overlapping Authorities of Rome and Constantinople (7th to 16th Century)," in *Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Belgrade, 22–27 August 2016: Plenary Papers*, ed. S. Marjanović-Dušanić (Belgrade, 2016); A. Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia* (University Park, PA, 1998). For architecture, see J. Bogdanović, "The Relational Spiritual Geopolitics of Constantinople, the Capital of the Byzantine Empire," in *Political Landscapes of Capital Cities*, ed. J. J. Christie, J. Bogdanović, and E. Guzmán (Boulder, CO, 2019); N. N. Nikitenko, *Rus' i Vizantiia v monumental'nom komplekse Sofii Kievskoi* (Kyiv, 2004).

7 C. Raffensperger, *Reimagining Europe: Kievan Rus' in the Medieval World* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); R. K. Kovalev, "Reimagining Kievan Rus' in Unimagined Europe," *Russian History* 42 (2015): 158–87. For empire, see A. Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA, 2019), 196–232.

8 See J. Latham-Sprinkle, *The North Caucasian Kingdom of Alania, 850–1240* (Cambridge, 2025); W. Seibt, "Metropoliten und Herrscher der Alanen auf byzantinischen Siegeln des 10.–12. Jahrhunderts," in *Sfragistika i istoriia kul'tury*, ed. E. V. Stepanova (St. Petersburg, 2004); N. Iamanidzé, *Les installations liturgiques sculptées des églises de Géorgie (VII^e–XIII^e siècles)* (Turnhout, 2010), 163–69.

9 P. Brown, "Eastern and Western Christendom in Late Antiquity: A Parting of the Ways," *Studies in Church History* 13 (1976): 1–24, at 5.

10 For royal imagery, see below. For dress styles, see I. A. Arzhantseva and O. V Orfinskaia, "The Cut of the Clothes of the North Caucasian Alans," *Archaeological Textiles Review* 55 (2013): 86–96, at 92–94; for architecture, see D. V. Beletskii and A. I. Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty- drevneishie khramy Rossii: Problemy khristianskogo iskusstva Alanii i Kavkaza* (Moscow, 2011).

11 A. Walker, *The Emperor and the World: Exotic Elements and the Imaging of Middle Byzantine Imperial Power, Ninth to Thirteenth Centuries CE* (Cambridge, 2012), xx–xxi.

Byzantine Commonwealth. This invokes a fuzzily defined Byzantine primacy rooted in the aesthetic and ceremonial aspects of power across Eastern Europe (and, as Stephen H. Rapp has more recently argued, the Caucasus).[12] While this model has drawn criticism, for example from Kaldellis and Raffensperger, for not corresponding to the Byzantine view of their neighbors, when one looks conversely from the point of view of those neighbors, their recognition of a loose, ritually defined Byzantine suzerainty seems to support Obolensky's model.[13]

However, I would argue that all of these models—whether of influence, or appropriation, or of a Commonwealth—all miss one aspect of the construction of this ritual suzerainty, and of political power in general: its relational aspect, as theorized in contemporary relational sociology.[14] In essence, models of cultural influence and appropriation both posit a set of monads: a set of self-contained "boxes," marked "Byzantium," "Alania," "Rus'" and so on, able to exist on their own without necessarily referring to other political-cultural entities. In practical terms, these models posit that the Byzantine Empire was fundamentally distinct from regions it influenced, it appropriated from, or that formed part of its Commonwealth. Of course, these models recognize the fact that these political entities are interconnected, and explicitly attempt to theorize that interconnection. But one gets the impression that even when one uses a model of selective appropriation, the indigenous, the familiar, and the self are independently existing entities and categories, which could survive the removal of the foreign, the exotic, and the other, even if the latter are constructed in contradistinction to the former.[15] In more practical terms, these models all imply that we can identify a certain "Alan-ness," "Rus'-ness," and so on, existing separately from these transregional connections—a model compatible with, if not explicitly reinforcing, modern ethno-nationalist conceptions of historical identity.[16]

This article, by contrast, argues that, at least at the elite level, rulers of polities around the Black Sea to a certain extent depended on their relations with each other for their potency as political actors. As such, the regions over which they held sovereignty or suzerainty cannot be sharply separated from each other. Even when members of the Constantinopolitan court and patriarchate defined themselves as separate from and superior to other courts of the Eastern Mediterranean, this contradistinction necessarily relied on a consciousness of these courts' existence and the potential for interconnections between them. After all, it is impossible to present oneself as superior if there is no-one else to feel superior to. For example, Constantine Porphyrogennētos's construction of the supremacy of the Constantinopolitan imperial center over all other regional polities can be read as a direct reaction to the closer marital links forged between it and the Bulgarian court by Rōmanos I.[17] Another good example is the complex Constantinopolitan attitude to missionary work during the late ninth and early tenth centuries, in which an imperial rhetoric of superiority and aloofness ran into the need to assert imperial and patriarchal control over disparate Christianization processes that were largely initiated at a local level.[18] While one particular

12 Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, 1–3; S. H. Rapp, *Caucasia and the Second Byzantine Commonwealth: Christianization in the Context of Regional Coherence* (Seattle, 2012), https://www.academia.edu/15250940/Caucasia_and_the_Second_Byzantine_Commonwealth_Byzantinization_in_the_Context_of_Regional_Coherence_Working_paper_2012_, 6–7. For the continued vitality of this concept, albeit with criticism, see G. G. Litvarin, *Vizantiia, Bolgaria, drevniaia Rus' (IX–nachalo XII v.)* (St. Petersburg, 2000), 338–58; J. Shepard, P. Frankopan, and A. Cameron, eds., *Byzantine Spheres: The Byzantine Commonwealth Re-Evaluated* (Oxford, 2025).

13 A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 2011), 108–11; see also Raffensperger, *Reimagining Europe*, 10–14.

14 For the relational construction of political identities, see H. White, *Identity and Control: How Social Formations Emerge*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ, 2008); T. D. Kemper, *Status, Power and Ritual Interaction: A Relational Reading of Durkheim, Goffman and Collins* (London, 2011). White and sociologists influenced by him argue that the basic unit of social interaction is not an individual self, but rather a relationally constructed "identity" that a given person takes on in a certain situation. From this, White argues that politics, in the sense of control of narrative, necessarily is also constructed relationally.

15 For a critique of a model of selective appropriation, see F. B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and the Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton, 2009), 1–5; for the application of this critique to the South Caucasus, see I. Foletti and E. Thunø, "Introduction: The Artistic Cultures of the Medieval South Caucasus: Historiography, Myths and Objects," in *The Medieval South Caucasus: Artistic Cultures of Albania, Armenia and Georgia* (Brno, 2016).

16 For this critique, see N. Evans, "The Uses of Rupture in Medieval Northern Eurasian History," *Russian Review* 83.1 (2024): 8–16.

17 *De Administrando Imperio* 13 (Moravcsik and Jenkins, 65–77).

18 See S. A. Ivanov, *Pearls Before Swine: Missionary Work in Byzantium* (Paris, 2015), 218–21; J. Shepard, "Spreading the Word:

court, for example Alania, could be presented as insignificant, the aggregate effect of connections with many supposedly inferior courts was to present the image of a mighty suzerain who could pick and choose between them, magnify some and diminish others.[19]

I therefore argue that this view of political cultures as distinct monads has difficulty in dealing with the political interrelatedness of the Middle Byzantine period. This, in turn, is the result of deeper problems in the study of empires. First, there is the structuralist orientation of much of the comparative literature on empires, which leads to an emphasis on stability as a baseline from which changes deviated.[20] Second, there is the disjuncture between the contemporary imagination of political power as territorial and singular, in contrast to its multiple reality in the past.[21] Third, there is the conflation of different forms of imperial power, with classic definitions of statehood and empire privileging bureaucratic control over knowledge as a means of exerting suzerainty, as opposed to methods of claiming suzerainty based on a claim to special access to or control of esoteric knowledge.[22] As a consequence of these tendencies, situations where sovereignty is fluid, multiple, or expressed in ritual terms—as in polities along the Byzantine periphery—can be hard to grasp when one starts from a point of view that assumes political sovereignty as stable, singular, and bureaucratic.

Given the significance of this baseline understanding of sovereignty, suzerainty, and ritual suzerainty to this paper, it is thus necessary to take a brief digression into the theory surrounding these terms. Considerable confusion often surrounds the concepts of sovereignty and suzerainty, due in large parts to disciplinary divisions. In contemporary Political Science and International Relations, sovereignty is generally defined in Westphalian terms, implying singular, centralized, bureaucratic, and violent domination over the political sphere within clearly defined territorial boundaries.[23] However, this definition has been widely criticized as unsuitable for pre-seventeenth-century (or even pre-nineteenth-century) history, most notably for its explicit Eurocentrism and reification of contemporary colonial approaches to state sovereignty.[24] An alternative approach to sovereignty foregrounds its boundary-setting function: the definition of a given political community, and the (potential or actual) direction of violence against designated outsiders. Deriving ultimately from the work of Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault, and Giorgio Agamben, this conception has gained much greater acceptance in anthropological and archaeological circles.[25] While Schmitt and Foucault sought primarily to understand (and in Schmitt's case, justify) twentieth-century authoritarianism, the concept of sovereignty as boundary-setting is sufficiently flexible as to lend itself to a wide variety of social formations across history.[26] In the case of the

Byzantine Missions," in *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, ed. C. A. Mango (Oxford, 2002).

19 For example, Michael Psellos criticized Constantine IX for paying too much attention to Alania due to his affair with the daughter of its king, depicting Alania as a previously insignificant kingdom that was elevated due to the honors Constantine granted to its royal family. However, given that this story is intended to reflect on the character of Constantine IX, his poor judgment and overly indulgent nature, it implicitly demonstrates that his imperial majesty is maintained by his ability to pick between subordinated political leaders, which his favoritism toward one of them undermined. See Michael Psellos, *Chronographia* 6.151 and 153–54 (D. R. Reinsch, ed., 2 vols. [Berlin, 2014], 1:176–77; E. R. A. Sewter, trans., *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers: The "Chronographia"*, revised ed. [Harmondsworth, 1979], 235, 236–37); F. Lauritzen, *The Depiction of Character in the Chronographia of Michael Psellos* (Turnhout, 2013), 128–29.

20 See A. J. Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires* (New York, 2001), 22–35.

21 Contrast, for example, G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA, 1998), 15–47, and J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Empires in World History* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), 11–18, with D. Graeber and D. Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London, 2022), 359–440.

22 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 386–91. Graeber and Wengrow contrast the sovereignty of bureaucratic empires such as the Roman Principate with the apparent suzerainty of the eleventh- to third-century BCE oracular center of Chavín de Huántar over much of the central Andes, resting on its ability to provide pilgrims access to special knowledge of the supernatural.

23 J. Costa Lopez et al., "Forum: In the Beginning There Was No Word (for It); Terms, Concepts, and Early Sovereignty," *International Studies Review* 20 (2018): 489–519.

24 Lopez et al., "Forum", 507–13; T. Kayaoglu, "Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations Theory," *International Studies Review* 12.2 (2010): 193–217; A. Mbembé, "Necropolitics," trans. L. Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11–40.

25 C. Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. G. Schwab (Chicago, 2005); C. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. G. Schwab, expanded ed. (Chicago, 2007); M. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, trans. D. Macey (New York, 2003); Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

26 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8–11; A. T. Smith, "Archaeologies of Sovereignty," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011): 415–32; A. T.

Middle Byzantine Empire, a multitude of exercises of sovereignty-as-boundary-setting immediately spring to mind, not least the delimitation of foreign peoples, friends, and enemies in the works of Constantine VII.[27]

Yet the authoritarian origins of contemporary Western discourses on sovereignty, whether lying in debates over princely power or assaults on liberal democracy, can lead us to conflate sovereignty and rulership or, more broadly, to take at face value the claims to singular power put forward by rulers.[28] This is a temptation we must particularly resist in the case of the Middle Byzantine Empire, given that alternative conceptualizations of sovereignty that emphasized popular republicanism co-existed with more overtly theocratic ones; and even these latter claims to rulership were not an inherent quality of the ruler, but rather relied on a close relationship to a divine being with whom sovereignty ultimately resided, and who was approachable, if not fully comprehensible, through scriptures unalterable by secular powers.[29] Given this indirect relationship with sovereignty, it is no coincidence that imperial ritual sought to play with and blur the line between the deity and the emperor through mimesis.[30] In a similar manner, the law blurred the boundary between the law itself and its personification (νόμος ἔμψυχος) as the emperor, just as encomia of Constantinople blurred the line between the sovereign city and the sovereign himself.[31] Just as ritual reconfirmed the emperor's sovereignty, it also mystified where, exactly, sovereignty lay.

The mystification of the precise origin of sovereignty through ritual mimesis should alert us to the fact that a singular approach to sovereignty, even one that rejects the territoriality of Westphalian theories, can conceal as much as it reveals. This insight can also be applied to the spatial contexts of empires. There are few better examples of this than the distinction between "sovereignty" and "suzerainty." While in principle these two concepts are distinct, with the latter implying a superior relationship between an overlord and vassal who remains semi-sovereign, in practice the sovereignty-suzerainty distinction is almost entirely disciplinary in nature rather than theoretical.[32] The term "suzerainty" appears almost entirely in Ancient Near Eastern, East Asian, and Southeast Asian Studies, serving as an awkward and inexact gloss in European languages (the term derives from fifteenth-century French law) for a wide variety of imperial practices, notably the Imperial Chinese tributary system and Ancient Near Eastern system of subordinate countries, as in the Hittite Empire.[33] The English term "suzerainty" essentially acts in historiography as a catch-all term to denote non-Western, pre-modern forms of imperial primacy that do not possess the territorial and singular attributes usually assigned to sovereignty.

This article, therefore, will take a different path. While retaining the fundamental definition of sovereignty as boundary-setting, it will discard Westphalian sovereignty's territorial and singular implications. When we do this, the distinction between sovereignty and suzerainty becomes essentially analogous to the distinction between dominance and hegemony; that

Smith, *The Political Machine: Assembling Sovereignty in the Bronze Age Caucasus* (Princeton, NJ, 2015), 4–7; D. Graeber, "Notes on the Politics of Divine Kingship: Or, Elements for an Archaeology of Sovereignty," in *On Kings*, ed. D. Graeber and M. Sahlins (Chicago, 2017).

27 See in particular *De Administrando Imperio* 13 (Moravcsik and Jenkins, 74–75); also A. M. Feldman, "Reconceptualizing Northern Peoples in the De Administrando Imperio," in *Πρακτικά 9ου Συνεδρίου Εταπτυχιακών Φοιτητών Και Υποψηφίων Διδακτόρων Του Τμήματος Φιλολογίας*, ed. A. Theodorake (Athens, 2018); cf. Mbembé, "Necropolitics," 17–19.

28 For this point, see Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 25–28; A. Azfar Moin and A. Strathern, "Sacred Kingship in World History: Between Immanence and Transcendence," in *Sacred Kingship in World History* (New York, 2022), 18.

29 In general, on sovereignty in the Byzantine Empire, see A. Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome* (Cambridge, MA, 2015).

30 A. al-Azmeh, "Caliphal Sovereignty or the Immanence of Transcendence," in *Sacred Kingship in World History*, ed. A. Azfar Moin and A. Strathern (New York, 2022), 165, 177–79.

31 I. Ševčenko, "Constantinople Viewed from the Eastern Provinces in the Middle Byzantine Period," *HUkSt* 3–4.2 (1979): 712–47, at 713; P. Odorico, "La périphérie dans le temps et l'espace," in *Byzantina–Metabyzantina: La périphérie dans le temps et l'espace* (Paris, 2003), 14–15; al-Azmeh, "Caliphal Sovereignty or the Immanence of Transcendence," 180.

32 Y. Y. Zhu, "Suzerainty, Semi-Sovereignty, and International Legal Hierarchies on China's Borderlands," *Asian Journal of International Law* 10 (2020): 293–320, at 298–99.

33 Zhu, "Suzerainty, Semi-Sovereignty, and International Legal Hierarchies," 302–3; A. Altman, "Rethinking the Hittite System of Subordinate Countries from the Legal Point of View," *JAOS* 123.4 (2003): 741–56. The term "ritual suzerainty" appears almost exclusively in works by, quoting, or inspired by Aidan Southall, falling largely in the fields of African and South Asian Studies.

is to say, "sovereignty" implies the ability of someone or something to designate others as being part of an in-group, *and* to directly, and if necessary violently, regulate the ability of these others to exercise political choices, in the sense of themselves assigning values to people and concepts.[34] Suzerainty, meanwhile, is essentially a non-exclusive extension of sovereignty; while the ability of an imperial center to place a given subordinated political actor into an epistemic framework is openly recognized by that subordinated actor, this does not imply a recognition of the right to forcefully restrain that subordinate's ability to construct their own epistemic and political frameworks, up to in some cases simultaneously recognizing multiple suzerains. Ritual plays a critical role in the claiming and acceptance of sovereignty and suzerainty, for this both reconfirms the imperial center's primacy and mystifies the reason for this pre-eminence.[35] To give a practical example of the distinction, the core provinces of the Byzantine Empire, in the sense of regions more than a few days' travel from Constantinople but within which aristocrats' ability to take up official posts and to define significant military points was subject to imperial (dis)approval, can be considered to be subject to Constantinople's sovereignty; Alania, where the kings recognized the Byzantine emperor's right to place them within the imperial hierarchy but the emperor held no coercive power was under imperial suzerainty.[36] Of course, these are static ideal types with a wide range of intermediate situations between them, but this should serve to illustrate my overall point. While these definitions might seem at first glance commonsensical, this precision is necessary, given the major problems that plural, overlapping, fluid, uncertain, or seasonal sovereignty and suzerainty have caused in the conceptual frameworks of Byzantine Studies and related fields. One great advantage of the theory of the segmentary polity is that it takes these ambiguous situations as a starting point, rather than an exception—a feature, not a bug.

Situations of plural suzerainty are important subjects of study due to their sometimes-significant consequences. To give one particularly consequential example, the Georgian Kingdom of Tao-Klarjeti in the ninth century recognized the suzerainty of both the Byzantine emperor and the ʿAbbāsid caliph, with this suzerainty being displayed through the grant of titles (*kouropalatēs*, and Presiding Prince [*mtavari* or *didi eristavi*] of Kartli respectively) and regalia.[37] At the same time as recognizing Byzantine and ʿAbbāsid suzerainty, Tao-Klarjeti's Bagratid rulers forcefully exerted their own sovereignty over the western South Caucasus in a series of military conflicts and political maneuvers, which ultimately culminated with their formation of the united Kingdom of Georgia in 1008.[38] Similarly, another branch of the Bagratid family was able to consolidate its rule over Armenia through recognition as Kings of Armenia and as *archontes tōn archontōn* by the ʿAbbāsid Caliph al-Muʿtamid and Emperor Basil I respectively.[39] In both Georgia and Armenia, recognition by the Byzantine and ʿAbbāsid imperial centers thus provided a critical spur to the Bagratids' fortunes. Rather than writing this process off as the internecine complexities of frontier polities, I will put plural, shifting, and relational sovereignty at the center of our analysis of the Caucasus and wider Byzantinate world.

This kind of overlapping and plural suzerainty has, however, long presented a conceptual problem in Byzantine Studies. One potential approach is to

34 For hegemony and domination, see A. Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith (London, 1971), 12; G. Cospito, "Dizionario Gramsciano / Gramsci Dictionary: Hegemony," *International Gramsci Journal* 3.1 (2018): 18–25. For the definition of political contestation as a struggle over the definition of value, see D. Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (Basingstoke, 2001), 87–88.

35 For the critical function of ritual order being the reconfirmation of imperial sovereignty rather than enabling the functioning of bureaucracy, see L. A. Neville, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society, 950–1100* (Cambridge, 2004), 14–31. On mystification, see al-Azmeh, "Caliphal Sovereignty or the Immanence of Transcendence," 177–80.

36 For this definition of the imperial core, see Neville, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society*, 2, 34–47.

37 C. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, DC, 1963), 416; S. H. Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography: Early Texts and Eurasian Contexts* (Leuven, 2003), 145–46, 312, 380, 384. The office of "Presiding Prince" was not strictly speaking an ʿAbbāsid title, but was rather a designation made by the *ostikan*, or governor, of the province of Armīniya. The fact that this position was expressed in local languages does not take away from the fact that ʿAbbāsid recognition was critical to establishing this prince's legitimacy.

38 For a good summary, see Toumanoff, *Christian Caucasian History*, 485–98.

39 A. Eastmond and L. Jones, "Robing, Power and Legitimacy in Armenia and Georgia," in *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. S. Gordon (London, 2001).

view this kind of border polity as being essentially a post-classical continuation of the client states found along Roman frontiers during the Late Republic and Principate.[40] Given this model's extensive use for Rome's eastern frontiers and for the Bosporan Kingdom of the Crimea, the forerunner of the Middle Byzantine Theme of Cherson, which this article will analyze below, this might seem an attractive option. However, this model is bedeviled by a certain difficulty in theoretically conceptualizing the frontier states that are central to it; David Braund, for example, noted that these states lie both within and outside the Roman Empire, problematizing the entire notion of the latter having a fixed boundary.[41] Indeed, Braund even suggests that something about the dynamics of the frontier could autonomously generate these kinds of polities, although he does not specify what this causative factor might be.[42] This same difficulty in categorization has also been noted in the specific case of the Bosporan Kingdom, with its precise relationship to Roman sovereignty fluctuating.[43] While these authors are undoubtedly correct to note the difficulty of defining these polities' place in systems of sovereignty and suzerainty, noting a difficulty is not the same as resolving it. This is not to say that a detailed genealogical study of the links between client kingship under the principate and the imagination of sovereignty under the Middle Byzantine emperors would not be valuable; it certainly would be. Indeed, the model of the segmentary polity could in all probability be productively applied to the Roman Principate and Dominate.[44] However, in unmodified form, the comparison between the Middle Byzantine imperial periphery and classical client kingdoms does not get us much closer to a unified theoretical approach that can allow us to consider these polities on their own terms rather than the half-in-half-out approach implied by extant studies of client kingship.

40 See in particular D. Braund, *Rome and the Friendly King: The Character of the Client Kingship* (London, 1984).

41 Braund, *Rome and the Friendly King*, 182.

42 Braund, *Rome and the Friendly King*, 181–90.

43 V. M. Zubar' and A. S. Rusiaeva, *Na beregakh Bospora Kimmeriiskogo* (Kyiv, 2004), 158–61.

44 For suggestions in this direction, see A. Zuiderhoek, "Politics and Participation: Cities and Empires," in *The Cambridge Urban History of Europe*, vol. 1, *Ancient Europe*, ed. P. J. E. Davies and C. G. Williamson (Cambridge, forthcoming).

The problematic nature of a singular and territorial approach to sovereignty has been recognized as a broader issue in Byzantine Studies beyond the specific case of frontier polities. John Haldon, for example, argues explicitly for a territorialized and exclusive approach to state sovereignty in the Byzantine Empire, but is immediately forced to caveat this definition by noting the existence of nomadic and pastoralist communities that were difficult to reconcile with this form of sovereignty, as well as those living along frontiers and in difficult terrain such as mountains.[45] Judith Herrin refers to these kind of communities and regions as "gray areas and local elements that escaped . . . rigorous control."[46] Once again, we see that regions that do not fit the pattern of exclusive, territorial sovereignty must be theorized as an exception rather than being integrated fully into a theoretical model.

Of course, in certain senses, an approach that foregrounds the territorial and singular aspects of sovereignty can be useful. The Middle Byzantine period, particularly in Western Anatolia, was indeed marked by a relatively comprehensive system of imperial administration, while Middle Byzantine sources do sometimes identify frontiers in terms of sharp geographical delimitations.[47] If a given researcher's purpose is to study, for example, a source that defines borders in linear terms,

45 J. Haldon, "Provincial Elites, Central Authorities: Problems in Fiscal and Military Management in the Byzantine State," in *The Province Strikes Back: Imperial Dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. B. Forsén and G. Salmeri (Helsinki, 2008), 158–59.

46 J. Herrin, "A Christian Millennium: Greece in Byzantium—How the Empire Worked at Its Edge," in *Margins and Metropolis: Authority across the Byzantine Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 2013), 12.

47 There exists a huge bibliography on imperial administration in the Middle Byzantine period. While I will be no means attempt to be comprehensive, particularly significant overviews include H. Ahrweiler, "Recherches sur l'administration de l'empire byzantin aux IX^{e}–XI^{e} siècles," *BCH* 84 (1960): 1–109; Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IX^{e} et X^{e} siècles*; A. P. Kazhdan, *Sotsial'nyi sostav gospodstvuiushchego klassa Vizantii XI–XII vv.* (Moscow, 1974); Oikonomides, "L'évolution de l'organisation administrative de l'empire byzantin au XI^{e} siècle"; P. Lemerle, *The Agrarian History of Byzantium: From the Origins to the Twelfth Century* (Galway, 1979); J.-C. Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance (963–1210)* (Paris, 1990); J. Haldon, "Military Service, Military Lands, and the Status of Soldiers: Current Problems and Interpretations," *DOP* 47 (1993): 1–67; C. Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976–1025)* (Oxford, 2005). For Western Asia Minor, see J.-C. Cheynet, "Basil II and Asia Minor," in *Byzantium in the Year 1000*, ed. P. Magdalino (Leiden, 2003), 81–83. For attempts to delimit fixed borders, see n. 4, above.

then a territorial approach to sovereignty that treats mountain or frontier communities as an exception is perfectly reasonable. The purpose of this article is not to supplant a territorial approach to sovereignty, or one that centers regions of stronger imperial control, but rather to complement it—to offer an alternative methodological approach that centers marginal, fluid, ambiguous, and plural sovereignty, which may be useful to researchers who wish to study these kinds of communities, their worldviews, and structural relationships to imperial centers.

In order to do so, one productive approach is to look beyond the Byzantine world for well-established theoretical models in other world regions. Instead of a global or comparative methodology strictu sensu, this may be seen as applying a cosmological "lens" from one historical society to another in order to enable a conceptual reimagining of the latter.[48] This method is intended to avoid some of the problems with global and comparative methodologies, such as their implicit Eurocentrism and teleology, as well as the temptation to overemphasize tenuous interregional connections.[49] Rather, this method is intended to open up our analyses to phenomena that we might not otherwise consider to be connected or germane to the argument: to, in the words of A. Azfar Moin and Alan Strathern, "wash away some of the sedimented habits of thought that collect in pools of specialism unperturbed by other streams of scholarship."[50] Conversely, engaging with theoretical approaches from outside the Eastern Mediterranean can also help to include the Byzantine Empire in broader conversations in global history.[51]

In keeping with its theoretical approach of segmentary polity-as-lens, this article will argue that rather than seeking a certain essence of the Byzantine Empire, to distinguish whether it *was* this or *was* that we should instead seek to determine broader patterns of action within the wider political network of the Byzantine imperial center. I will argue that one non-exclusive way in which we can see the Byzantine Empire is as a West Eurasian counterpart to the segmentary polities of Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. This move away from seeing the Byzantine Empire and its neighboring polities as distinct can help us better understand their elites' interrelationships. This article will apply this idea to the tenth and eleventh centuries, demonstrating that this can be usefully applied to the Middle Byzantine imperial "apogee" as well as the more decentralized period after 1204.[52] The relationship of the Byzantine

48 This approach draws particularly from C. D. Pennock and A. Power, "Globalizing Cosmologies," *Past and Present* 238 (2018): 88–115, but applied to the concept of sovereignty and the political, rather than "the global" itself.

49 M. Puett and K. Davis, "Periodization and 'The Medieval Globe': A Conversation," *The Medieval Globe* 2.1 (2016): 1–14; C. Holmes and N. Standen, "Introduction: Towards a Global Middle Ages," *Past and Present* 238 (2018): 1–44, at 16–17; N. Berend, "Interconnection and Separation: Medieval Perspectives on the Modern Problem of the 'Global Middle Ages,'" *Medieval Encounters* 29 (2023): 285–314.

50 Moin and Strathern, "Sacred Kingship in World History," 4. See also H. De Weerdt, C. Holmes, and J. Watts, "Politics, c. 1000–1500: Mediation and Communication," *Past and Present* 238 (2018): 261–96; C. Holmes, "The Making and Breaking of Kinetic Empire: Mobility, Communication and Political Change in the Eastern Mediterranean, c. 900–1100 CE," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 32 (2022): 25–45.

51 An absence lamented in J. Haldon, "Towards a Social History of Byzantium," in *A Social History of Byzantium*, ed. J. Haldon (Chichester, 2009), 16–17.

52 The comparison of the post-1204 Byzantine Empire to a "galactic polity" has briefly been made in De Weerdt, Holmes, and Watts, "Politics, c. 1000–1500," 263–64. Several other related comparisons have previously appeared, although no others directly make the comparison of Byzantium to a segmentary polity. Catherine Holmes has argued that Byzantinists can gain from comparative studies of migratory specialists in East African history. John Haldon has compared Middle Byzantine and Song Dynasty strategies of integrating potentially fissiparous provincial elites into the state structure using grants of titles, although this study extends our viewpoint of this strategy beyond what is usually considered the boundary of the empire. Peter Parkes has suggested that patterns of fosterage in the North Caucasus in the nineteenth century are indicators of a segmentary polity structure. From the Southeast Asian point of view, Victor Lieberman has compared the Christianization of Rus' to the transplantation of Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka to Burma, albeit without following through the implications for political organization, while Geok Yian Goh has taken the comparison the other way, comparing the structure of *chakravartin* kingship in the "Buddhist *ecumene*" to the Byzantine ideology of universal kingship. Finally, David B. Miller has suggested that we can understand Rus' political structure as a series of "transparencies" overlaying each other, with one representing a common culture of Christianity (and, by implication, ritual hegemony); however, this model does not include Byzantium. See C. Holmes, "Global Byzantium: Whirlwind Romance or Fundamental Paradigm Shift?," in *Global Byzantium: Proceedings of the 50th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, ed. L. Brubaker, R. Darley, and D. Reynolds (London, 2022), 108–22, at 115; Haldon, "Provincial Elites, Central Authorities," 177–79; P. Parkes, "Fostering Fealty: A Comparative Analysis of Tributary Allegiances of Adoptive Kinship," *Comparative*

imperial core to regional elites of the Western Caucasus and northern Black Sea resembles that between royal centers of segmentary polities of Southeast Asia, for example the thirteenth- to fifteenth-century CE empire of Sukhothai, the fourteenth- to eighteenth-century CE Ayutthaya empire, and the satellite kingdoms that surrounded them. The segmentary polity model imagines a ring of satellite, subordinated courts surrounding an imperial center and imitating it in miniature, with varying levels of direct control of personnel and action exerted from the center. While this model can sometimes cohere into a moment of apparent clarity, it is important to emphasize that this landscape is constantly shifting, with subordinated courts acting independently from the center and, at times, even seeking to surpass it. Moreover, this model explicitly emphasizes the ritual and esoteric aspects of imperial control over knowledge, taking these seriously as components that can help structure patterns of action.

In order to demonstrate this point, this article will compare elite legitimation in Alania—a region conventionally considered to lie outside the Byzantine Empire's borders—with that in a region conventionally placed within them: the Theme of Cherson, in southwestern Crimea. In making its argument, the article will also make reference to other regions, notably the Bagratid Kingdom of Georgia, and the Byzantine Empire's Anatolian frontier. It will start by introducing the concept of the segmentary polity and its historiography. It will then examine elite legitimation and the limits of imperial power in Cherson, before comparing these practices to elite legitimation in Alania.

The Segmentary Polity

The term "segmentary state"—or to use more capacious terminology, "segmentary polity"[53]—was coined by Aidan Southall to describe the political structure of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Alurland, in what is now north-western Uganda and the north-eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.[54] Southall defines the segmentary polity as "one in which the spheres of ritual suzerainty and political sovereignty do not coincide. The former extends widely toward a flexible, changing periphery. The latter is confined to the central, core domain."[55] Critical to this definition is the lack of a coercive, institutional, investigative apparatus outside the core domain. Instead, the superiority of the center is maintained through ritual means—that is to say, a reciprocal recognition of the superior access of the center of the segmentary polity to the supernatural. The ritual subordination of outlying elite centers is demonstrated through the use of kinship terminology, with the center's ruler being called the "father" or "mother" of the family, and through occasional tribute of a fluctuating and usually tokenistic kind, in strictly quantitative terms. Conversely, the positions of these subordinated centers are reconfirmed through grants of regalia, titles, or other ritual privileges.[56] We may term these ritually subordinated centers "subordinated courts," although these may be led by subordinate kings or royal appointees. The critical factor is the relational construction of political order. For the core polity, its relations with ritually subordinated courts allow it to claim a regional or even universal hegemony; for its subordinated courts, the power of local elites is reconfirmed by their recognition by the center.[57]

Southall's model has subsequently been applied to a wide variety of societies across the world, to the point that Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber have argued that the segmentary polity is one of the more common forms of historical political organization.[58] Richard Fox, Burton Stein, and Hermann Kulke have applied this concept to several polities in the Indian subcontinent, notably several Rajput and Orissan polities,

Studies in Society and History 45.4 (2003): 741–82; V. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2003), 2:132; G. Y. Goh, "Beyond the World-System: A Buddhist Ecumene," *Journal of World History* 25.4 (2014): 493–513; D. B. Miller, "The Many Frontiers of Pre-Mongol Rus'," *Russian History* 19.1/4 (1992): 231–60.

53 I prefer the term "segmentary polity" to "segmentary state" due to the latter's implication of a core administration manned by officials whose position is separate from their personality, which not all such polities possess. For a critique of the concept of "state" in the context of segmentary polities, see D. Graeber and M. Sahlins, "Introduction: Theses on Kingship," in *On Kings* (Chicago, 2017), 21–22.

54 See A. Southall, *Alur Society: A Study in Processes and Types of Domination* (Nairobi, 1970), 229–63.

55 Southall, "The Segmentary State in Africa and Asia," 52.

56 Southall, "The Segmentary State in Africa and Asia," 57–64.

57 M. Sahlins, "The Stranger-Kings of the Mexica," in *On Kings*, ed. D. Graeber and M. Sahlins (Chicago, 2017).

58 Graeber and Sahlins, "Theses on Kingship," 14. Graeber and Sahlins use the term "galactic polity," which I discuss below.

and the South Indian Pallava and Chola dynasties.[59] However, it has had its greatest impact in Southeast Asian history, where it has inspired a political model that bears a variety of evocative names: the "galactic polity" (Stanley Tambiah), the "mandala polity" (O. W. Wolters), and the "solar polity" (Victor Lieberman).[60] All these models share a conception, derived ultimately from the *Arthaśāstra* (a second- to third-century CE Indian manual of statecraft) and the cosmological models of Theravada Buddhism, of intra-polity relations comprising a series of spheres operating around a central node.[61] From the point of view of a ruler, one's own polity is the core of this system, its central capital, palace or central temple evoking the cosmological axis of Mount Meru.[62] These South and South-East Asian variations on the concept of the segmentary polity introduce a critical innovation: an "intermediate" level of subordinated courts that are to a certain extent incorporated into the central administration of the core zone, but whose rulers also have considerable autonomy.

The core of the South and Southeast Asian solar polity is surrounded by a multi-layered empire.[63] Outside the core zone, under the direct rule of the capital, there are satellite provinces ruled by royally appointed governors, each centered on and named after a regional capital. Beyond this region of closer control lie tributary kingdoms, which the king subordinates to his will through the movements of his army. From the time of Aśoka onward, this last process was compared to the Buddhist idea of the chakravartin, a universal ruler who upholds righteousness, "rolling the wheel" around Mount Meru. These tributary kingdoms, linked to the imperial center through marital and figurative kin-relations and the recognition of its ritual supremacy, likewise have their own royal courts, and exert influence on subordinate communities in a manner directly comparable to their relationship to the imperial center, forming essentially miniature versions of it.[64] As Tambiah put it, "we have before us a galactic picture of a central planet surrounded by differentiated satellites, which are more or less 'autonomous' entities held in orbit and within the sphere of influence of the center."[65] In a process that Marshall Sahlins terms "galactic mimesis," the ruling elites of these subordinated royal courts imitate the styles of their overlords, who, in turn, can imitate the styles of larger, more distant imperial courts. For example, Kachin chieftains in upland Burma imitated the lifestyle of lowland Shan princes, who in turn appropriated the royal styles of Burmese monarchs and Chinese emperors.[66] This appropriation can go so far that the ruling elites of subordinated kingdoms sometimes claim to be "stranger-kings," whose lineages originate from the suzerain polity, drawing their power not from their representativeness of the indigenous aristocracy but their difference and distinction from it.[67]

It is critical that this system is focused on central points and the relations between them rather than being boundary focused. For example, the terms for subordinated polities or provinces in Mon and Thai, *dun* and *moan*, can be glossed as "kingdom, country, region, province, town," but the best translation is "center-oriented space."[68] Moreover, there is not just one imperial center, but multiple imperial centers, each exerting a "gravitational" influence over satellite polities in the space between them: for example, Majapahit and Angkor at various times both exerting influence on satellite polities between them, such as Ayutthaya. Thus, shifts in power

59 See R. G. Fox, ed., *Realm and Region in Traditional India* (Durham, NC, 1977); H. Kulke, "Royal Temple Policy and the Structure of Medieval Hindu Kingdoms," in *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia* (New Delhi, 2001), 125–38.

60 I henceforth utilize Lieberman's terminology of "solar polity" as I accept his critique of Tambiah's term "galactic polity," that the "gravitational" effects of its sub-components on each other more closely resemble a solar system with planets and moons than a galaxy with multiple solar systems.

61 Kauṭilya, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra*, trans. P. Olivelle (Oxford, 2013), 271–76.

62 S. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge, 1976), 37–40, 45–47.

63 The distinction between "kingdom" and "empire" here being that empires are usually larger and maintain an ideology of difference in their peripheries that is negotiated through their imperial center. For this definition of empire, see Motyl, *Imperial Ends*, 4; Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 2–8; K. Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, 2008), 1–10.

64 Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 102–11; O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY, 1999), 27–31; Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 1:33–40.

65 Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 113.

66 Graeber and Sahlins, "Theses on Kingship," 13–14; Sahlins, "The Stranger-Kings of the Mexica," 235.

67 Graeber and Sahlins, "Theses on Kingship," 5–7.

68 Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 112.

are conceptualized not as changes in boundaries, but rather in the power of these imperial centers. Benedict Anderson likened the effect to a lightbulb flickering, its light spreading out without any definable edge, its light constantly waxing and waning: or rather, we should say, several different-colored lightbulbs, each representing a competing imperial center, their influence imperceptibly merging into that of their neighbors.[69]

This was, therefore, a highly unstable system; indeed, it was entirely possible for a subordinated court to grow stronger than a weakening overlord and overtake it as the regional hegemon, as happened with Ayutthaya overtaking their former overlords in Sukhothai. This changeable aspect is the final aspect of the segmentary polity that it is important to highlight. This basic model could encompass a wide variety of forms, from loose tributary relationships to centralized imperial administrations.[70] Victor Liebermann distinguishes four basic types of mainland Southeast Asian administrative systems within segmentary polities, designated Patterns A, B, C, and D.[71] These developed from the tenth- and eleventh-century "Pattern A" polities, characterized by the central role of temples and ritualized links between central courts, through decentralized "Pattern B" administrations, where the functions of temples were taken over by secular elites, which recognized the suzerainty of imperial centers but retained considerable independence. These gave way to the more centralized "Pattern C," where autonomous viceroys were supplanted by replaceable administrators sent out from imperial centers, with the greater presence of imperial administration allowing an increase in taxation and manpower demands. In fifteenth-century Đại Việt (northern Vietnam), this in turn was replaced by "Pattern D," an attempt to implement a fully-fledged Neo-Confucian bureaucracy recruited via examination. The core zone of a solar polity could thus be as small as the immediate hinterland of a particularly large village whose suzerainty was loosely recognized by surrounding temples and monasteries, or as large as the area controlled by centrally-appointed administrators in Burma and Siam in the period immediately before the encroachment of European colonialists.

69 B. Anderson, "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture," in *Language and Power: Culture and Politics in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY, 1990).

70 Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region*, 111–18.

71 Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 1:31–7.

The segmentary polity is therefore characterized by the following features:

1. An orientation toward central points, rather than boundaries or territories;
2. The existence of subordinated courts, which resemble miniature versions of the imperial or royal center that they are subordinated to;
3. A differentiation in the level of subordination to an imperial center, which varies between subordinated courts, over time, and even seasonally;
4. The significance of ritual in tying subordinated courts to the imperial center, with some subordinated courts recognizing only the ritual suzerainty of the imperial center; and
5. The constant fluidity of the system, to the point that subordinated courts can sometimes overtake the imperial center and take over its dominant role.

What, then, of Byzantium? I argue that its relations during the tenth and eleventh centuries CE with outlying polities in the Black Sea region show many similarities with Southeast Asian segmentary polities, and, in particular, the centralized "Pattern C" polities of the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries. These comprised a core region; outlying governorships incorporated to a certain extent in the central administration, but also displaying considerable autonomy; and satellite kingdoms that recognized the suzerainty, but not sovereignty, of the imperial center. To illustrate this point, I will examine some aspects of the Constantinopolitan court's relationships with two subordinated courts in this region in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE: the thematic commandery of Cherson in the Crimea and the court of the North Caucasian kingdom of Alania. While showing some major differences, this article seeks to demonstrate that both of these subordinated courts had major similarities to each other in terms of elite legitimation and showed features strongly reminiscent of Southeast Asian segmentary polities, including:

1. An orientation toward the Byzantine imperial center of Constantinople, and a recognition of its primacy;
2. The legitimation of local elites through reference to their relationships with the Byzantine imperial center;
3. Differentiated levels of recognition of this supremacy, as most notably demonstrated by the direct

appointment of Cherson's *stratēgoi* by the Constantinopolitan court, in contrast to Alania;
4. Use of ritual means to reconfirm the subordination of Cherson and Alania to Constantinople, most notably through the use of the Greek liturgy; and
5. An instability within this system, as demonstrated for example by negotiations between Cherson and Constantinople, and Chersonite revolts against the imperial center.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, it will explore patterns of legitimation in Cherson and their orientation toward Constantinople. Second, it will compare these with legitimizing practices in Alania, and elsewhere in the Caucasus. Third, the article will discuss the broader applicability of the theory of the segmentary polity, making reference to frontier regions of Byzantine Anatolia in order to demonstrate that Alania and Cherson are not isolated cases. Fourth, this article will briefly discuss the character of the Byzantine imperial core. Finally, the article will discuss points of caution regarding the use of the theory of the segmentary polity and further implications of this comparison.

Legitimation and Its Limits in the Theme of Cherson

Connection with the Middle Byzantine imperial court was incredibly important for the legitimation of local elites in the northern Black Sea. A few examples will suffice. Southern Crimea was officially part of the empire's administrative system, with the Theme of Klimata being established in 841, transforming into the Theme of Cherson in the late 840s or early 850s, and being united with the Theme of Khazaria (eastern Crimea) in the 1060s.[72] Its stratēgoi and a number of subordinate officials, such as *kommerkiarioi* and the *ek prospōu* (responsible for customs and finance respectively) were directly appointed by the imperial court. Moreover, Cherson's indigenous aristocracy also had their positions reconfirmed through grants of imperial titles, such as *prōteuon*, and court ranks up to the level of *patrikios*.[73] These court titles and the links to the emperor they signified were clearly an important element in elite self-presentation, being mentioned both on seals and public inscriptions. For example, a now-lost inscription of 1059 recording the reconstruction of the praetorium's gates explicitly locates this event in an imperial context, stating that it took place in the reign of Isaac I Komnēnos (ἐπὶ Ἰσακίου μεγάλου βασιλέ[ως] καὶ αὐτοκράτορ[ος] Ῥωμαί[ων]). This imperial connection magnifies the authority of the *stratēgos* and patrikios Leo Aliatos, who commissioned the gates.[74] The power of the stratēgos is linked directly to his closeness to the emperor, as depicted graphically in this inscription.

Links to Constantinople were also highly significant in the ritual sphere. The *Lives of the Bishops of Cherson*, initially a text from the late eighth or early ninth centuries that emphasized the links of the Chersonite Church with Jerusalem, was re-edited in the late ninth century to emphasize links with the Byzantine imperial center. This was done by rewriting the text to claim that the ultimate evangelist of Cherson was a bishop sent by the emperor in Constantinople.[75] This demonstrates the significance of links with Constantinople in constructing the legitimacy of ritual specialists within the church.

72 N. A. Alekseenko, "Imperskaia administratsiia Khersona: ot arkhontii do katepanata (po dannym sfragistiki)," in *Drevneishie gosudarstva Vostochnoi Evropy*, ed. T. N. Jackson (Moscow, 2016), 435–50, 460–64.

73 Alekseenko, "Imperskaia administratsiia Khersona," 453–56; N. A. Alekseenko, "Imperskaia administratsiia v Krymu i Kherson v X–pervoi polovine XI v. (po dannym vizantiiskikh molivdovulov)," in *Russkii istoricheskii sbornik: Srednevekovyi Kherson X–XI vv.*, ed. A. V. Sazanov (Moscow, 2015), 398–416.

74 The full inscription reads: Ἐγένοντο αἱ πόρται τοῦ πραιτωρίου / σιδηραῖ, ἐνεκαινίσθησαν καὶ / αἱ λοιπαὶ τοῦ κάστρου ἐπὶ Ἰσακίου / μεγάλου βασιλέ(ως) καὶ αὐτοκράτορ(ος) Ῥωμαί(ων) / τοῦ Κομνηνοῦ κ(αὶ) Αἰκατερίνης τῆς εὐσεβεστάτης / Αὐγούστης διὰ Λέοντ(ος) π(ατ)ρικίου κ(αὶ) στρατηγοῦ Χερ- / σῶνο(ς) κ(αὶ) Σουγδ(αίας) / τοῦ Ἀλιάτ(ου), μη(νὸς) Ἀπρι(λίου), / ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) ιβ′, ἔτ(ους) ,ϛϕξ̄ϛ̄ (The iron gates of the praetorium were constructed, and the remaining [gates] of the fortress renovated, in the reign of Isaac the great emperor and autocrat of the Romans, the Komnēnid, and of Catherine, the most highly revered empress, by Leo, patrician and *stratēgos* of Cherson and Soldaia, of the Aliatoi, in the month of April, twelfth indiction, 6567 AM). See V. V. Latyshev, ed., *Sbornik grecheskikh nadpisei khristianskikh vremen iz iuzhnoi Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1896), 16–17; see also the discussion in A. V. Sazanov, "Kherson v XI veke," in *Russkii istoricheskii sbornik: Srednevekovyi Kherson X–XI vv.*, ed. A. V. Sazanov (Moscow, 2015), 323–27.

75 Iu. M. Mogarichev et al., eds., *Zhitiia episkopov chersonskikh v kontekste istorii Chersonesa Tavricheskogo* (Kharkiv, 2012), 24 (text), 27 (trans.), 344–61 (commentary).

This ritual suzerainty was also perpetuated and recreated on a daily basis through the Greek liturgy.[76] The naming of the Byzantine emperor in the diptychs (prayers for the living and the dead) during the Divine Liturgy was seen as an indicator of ritual suzerainty. For example, the tenth-century Armenian *History of the Caucasian Albanians* of Movsēs Daskhurants'i, speaking about events of the early eighth century, explicitly identifies the mentions of the Byzantine emperor in the prayers introduced by the Caucasian Albanian Catholicos Nersēs as a sign of the region's political alignment with the empire and against the Umayyad Caliphate.[77] The political importance of the diptych prayers is clear in a later Constantinopolitan text, the famous 1393 letter of Patriarch Anthony IV to Grand Prince Vasilii I of Moscow, rebuking the latter for removing the name of the Emperor from the diptychs. The Patriarch comments that "even if God has permitted the Nations to encircle the seat of imperial authority, the emperor . . . is consecrated as *basileus* of the Romans, that is, of all Christians, and his name is commemorated everywhere by all the patriarchs, metropolitans and bishops, wherever people call themselves Christians, which is the privilege of no other local prince (*archōn*) or sovereign (*toparchos*)."[78] While Anthony Kaldellis is undoubtedly correct that we should understand this passage as a piece of rhetoric, not an objective assessment of the relationship between Constantinople and other Christian nations, its very existence demonstrates that, as late as the 1390s, the patriarch of Constantinople considered the ritual hegemony of the Byzantine emperor over Moscow to be worth defending and that imperial suzerainty was threatened by the removal of the emperor's name from the diptychs.[79]

In the case of Cherson, therefore, we see the legitimation of local political leaders through reference to their connection to the Byzantine imperial center and administrative system, as demonstrated most potently through titles and the epigraphic recording of these connections. We also see recognition of Constantinopolitan primacy in the ritual sphere, most notably through the form of the liturgy. On this basis, Cherson is generally included within the Byzantine Empire's borders.[80]

However, it has long been recognized that the sovereignty of the imperial court over Cherson was subject to processes of negotiation and sometimes outright challenge. The indigenous Chersonite aristocracy was known for its restlessness against imperial rule, with rebellions being recorded in 892 and 1016, the latter led by the city's former stratēgos, George Tzul, a member of one of the most important Chersonite families.[81] In a further rebellion in about 1066, one *katepanō* of Cherson was stoned to death in the street.[82] Such was this propensity to revolt that Constantine VII famously warned about it in the *De Administrando Imperio*—a work that concludes with bluntly worded instructions to cut off Cherson's food supplies in case of a rebellion.[83] In order to prevent such rebellions, the imperial administration was forced to concede a measure of civic independence to Cherson. The city was not only exempted from imperial taxes, but actually received an imperial financial subsidy, kept under the wary eye of the stratēgos.[84] Municipal positions such as the *pater polis*, *ekdikos* (defensor civitatis), and

76 For the significance of the liturgy as a source of political thought, see S. Griffin, *The Liturgical Past in Byzantium and Early Rus* (Cambridge, 2019), 3–14.

77 Movsēs Daskhurants'i, *The History of the Caucasian Albanians* III.3–7, trans. C. J. F. Dowsett, (Oxford, 1961), 189–93.

78 . . . εἰ γὰρ καὶ, συγχωρήσει θεοῦ, τὰ ἔθνη περιεκύκλωσαν τὴν ἀρχὴν τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ τὸν τόπον . . . ὁ βασιλεὺς . . . χειροτονεῖται βασιλεὺς καὶ αὐτοκράτωρ τῶν Ῥωμαίων, πάντων δηλαδὴ τῶν χριστιανῶν, καὶ ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ καὶ παρὰ πάντων πατριαρχῶν καὶ μητροπολιτῶν καὶ ἐπισκόπων μνημονεύεται τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ βασιλέως, ἔνθα ὀνομάζονται χριστιανοὶ, ὅπερ οὐδεὶς τῶν ἄλλων ἀρχόντων ἢ τοπαρχῶν ἔχει ποτὲ . . . : F. Miklosich and J. Müller, eds., *Acta et diplomata graeca medii aevi: sacra et profana, collecta et edita*, 6 vols. (Aalen, 1860), 2:190; translation in G. Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, trans. J. Birrell (Cambridge, 2003), 311–12.

79 For this critique, see Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*, 100–111.

80 For example, see A. Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2024), 540–41, 612.

81 M. Nystazopolou-Pelekidou, "L'administration locale de Cherson à l'époque byzantine," in *Εὐψυχία: Mélanges offerts à Hélène Ahrweiler*, ed. M. Balard and H. Ahrweiler (Paris, 1998), https://books.openedition.org/psorbonne/4300; on George Tzul's position as a former stratēgos of Cherson, see Sazanov, "Kherson v XI veke," 232–43.

82 PSRL, vyp. 1, *Povest' vremennykh let*, ed. Postoiannaia istoriko-arkheograficheskaia kommissiia Akademii Nauk SSSR (Leningrad, 1926), 166; S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, trans., *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text* (Cambridge, MA, 1953), 145.

83 *De Administrando Imperio* 53 (Moravcsik and Jenkins, 284–87).

84 *De Administrando Imperio* 53 (Moravcsik and Jenkins, 286–87); Alekseenko, "Imperskaia administratsiia Khersona," 458.

the prōteuon (first citizen) survived Leo VI's abolition of municipal authorities.[85] Such concessions seem to have only increased during the latter half of the tenth and early eleventh centuries. Despite Constantine VII's warnings not to do so, in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries at least two members of local aristocratic families were made stratēgoi, most likely due to the need to placate this aristocracy in the face of the threat from the Rus'.[86] With the establishment of Riurikid rule over Tmutarakan by Mstislav Vladimirovich in the early 1020s, there existed a rival royal center to the Constantinopolitan court to which the cities of the northern Pontos could potentially transfer their allegiance. Constantin Zuckerman has recently argued that this led to Byzantine suzerainty over the cities of the northern Black Sea becoming nominal (or, we might suggest if we stick to the theory of the segmentary polity, solely ritual) by the 1070s–1080s.[87]

It is thus clear that political power in Cherson relied on a delicate balancing act between imperially appointed administrators and the indigenous aristocracy, including the straightforward co-option of the latter by appointing them to court positions and offices. Conversely, the acceptance of these conditions and positions by the indigenous aristocracy both legitimated their rule and limited their freedom of action, as demonstrated by the fact that they were still subordinated to externally appointed stratēgoi and that the revolt of 1016 against these power structures ended in failure.[88] As we will see, patterns of legitimation used in Alania and elsewhere in the Caucasus were remarkably similar to those used in Cherson, as was the fact that indigenous aristocrats' freedom of action was constrained by these patterns of legitimation. While the level of imperial sovereignty and suzerainty over Cherson and Alania differed, and the restrictions on their aristocracies' freedom of action likewise differed, the basic pattern was a variation on a theme, not an entirely distinct system. It is this fact that underlies the theory of the segmentary polity, and its applicability to the medieval Black Sea region.

Political Legitimation in the Caucasus: The Importance of Connections with Constantinople

The Kingdom of Alania emerged in the mid-ninth century in the Upper Kuban region of modern Karachay-Cherkessia and Krasnodar Krai, Russian Federation.[89] While its rulers never developed a bureaucratic state structure, they nonetheless enjoyed suzerainty over a large part of the Northwest and Central North Caucasus, extending by the early eleventh century from modern Chechnya to Krasnodar Krai. Their realm was composed of a number of autonomous sub-polities, known as *as*, which had their own princes but recognized the supremacy of the Alan rulers. While this political structure relied on the prosperity of the North Caucasian pastoralist economy, which allowed for a dense population, the Alan kings' supreme position was not predicated on direct control over this economy. Rather, this rested on their unmatched ability to obtain the symbols of imperial recognition from their neighbors: titles, regalia, and marriage alliances. While in the late ninth century the Alan rulers sought these symbols of "the power of the foreign" from the Khazar Khaqanate, in the late tenth and eleventh centuries Alan rulers adopted many of the symbolic trappings of Byzantine power.

In the 950s, the Constantinopolitan court granted the King of Alania the title of exousiokratōr in order to win his support against the Khazar Khaqanate; indeed, it may even have been created specifically for him.[90] This title was used on seals of Alan rulers until the 1150s, as well as those of children of the exousiokratōr—an indication of the title's

85 It is also possible that these positions were re-established, possibly as a concession to Chersonite municipal independence: see Alekseenko, "Imperskaia administratsiia v Krymu i Kherson," 398–416.

86 Alekseenko, "Imperskaia administratsiia v Krymu i Kherson," 352–55.

87 C. Zuckerman, "The End of Byzantine Rule in North-Eastern Pontus," *Materialy po istorii, arheologii i etnografii Tavrii* 22 (2017): 311–36.

88 Sazanov, "Kherson v XI veke," 232–47.

89 In general, see Latham-Sprinkle, *Kingdom of Alania*; V. A. Kuznetsov, *Ocherki istorii Alan* (Vladikavkaz, 1992); Beletskii and Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty*, 15–66.

90 B. Martin-Hisard, "Constantinople et les archontes du monde caucasien dans le Livre des Cérémonies II, 48," *TM* 13 (2000): 361–475, at 366; *De Administrando Imperio* 13 (Moravcsik and Jenkins, 64–65). This title differs from any used by Georgian kings and is attested only in Greek-language sources, and thus cannot be considered an indirect borrowing from Georgian royal practice.

perceived significance.[91] Alan royal seals, notably that of exousiokratōr Gabriel (r. ca. 1040–1050), closely followed Constantinopolitan models, and may even have been produced in Constantinople itself.[92] While these seals likely reflect a Constantinopolitan view of Alania and its rulers, we can say confidently that symbols of authority issuing from the Byzantine imperial center were highly prized in the North Caucasus. Indeed, we even know of a tenth-century imitation molybdobull (lead seal) that was produced locally, which allowed its possessor to claim a (non-existent) imperial connection.[93] In a similar vein, an early eleventh-century donor plaque at Zedazeni Monastery, near Mtskheta in Georgia, became associated with the Alan King Urdure (fl. 1039).[94] This plaque depicts its subject not just in Byzantine style, but actually wearing imperial robes, including a *lōros*—the oldest known such depiction in Georgian art.[95] We once again see the appropriation of the styles of the Byzantine imperial center in order to legitimate North Caucasian elites.

This emphasis on connection to the empire in constructing royal authority can also be found in the core territory of the Alan kings, the Upper Kuban. Notably, an inscription from 965 at the Byzantine-style Senty Church in modern Karachay-Cherkessia, as well as mentioning the exousiokratōr David and the *exousiokratōrissa* Maria, states that the church was restored "during the reign of Nikēphoros [II Phokas], Emperor and Augustus" (ἐπὶ βασηλ[είας] Νηκηφώρου βασηλ[(έως)] καὶ αὐγ[ούστου]).[96] This concession of suzerainty to the Byzantine emperor—which we know that at least some North Caucasians could read—is even more surprising, given that in the *De ceremoniis* of Constantine VII, written less than a decade prior to the Senty Inscription, the Byzantine emperor does not issue "orders" to the Alan king in his greeting, and thus does not make a direct claim of sovereignty over him.[97] One gets the distinct impression that Alan rulers were nonetheless willing to recognize the suzerainty of the Byzantine emperors, since the epigraphic formulae that did so also allowed them to use Byzantine titles, court ranks, and architecture to proclaim their links to the imperial center. For our subject, it is highly significant that both the overall form and even the specific language of these proclamations—for example, the naming of the reigning Byzantine Emperor alongside a local powerbroker—are strikingly reminiscent of those used in the Theme of Cherson.

91 For an overview of known seals of Alan exousiokratōrs, see S. M. Perevalov, "Alanskaia epigrafika: 1. Katalog grecheskikh nadpisei," *Vestnik Vladikavkazskogo Nauchnogo Tsentra* 11.1 (2011): 2–10. Irene and Constantine, two children of an exousiokratōr (almost certainly the Alan king Dorgholel), mentioned their family relation to him on their own seals, this relationship apparently being considered important in the establishment of their own authority in the Byzantine sphere. See V. N. Chkhaidze and A. I. Vinogradov, "The Seal of Konstantinos, the Son of the Protoproedros and Exousiokrator of All Alania (About 1065–1075)," in *Anticharismatos Episphragisis: Iubileen sbornik v chest na 70-godishninata na Prof. d.i.n. Ivan Iordanov*, ed. T. Todorov (Shumen, 2019); J.-C. Cheynet and D. Theodoridis, *Sceaux byzantins de la collection D. Theodoridis: Les sceaux patronymiques* (Paris, 2010), 210–11; Dumbarton Oaks Online Catalogue of Byzantine Seals, "Irene, *Protoproedrissa*, Daughter of the *Exousiokratōr* (of Alania?) (1072–1078)," http://doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1951.31.5.1007.

92 Seibt, "Metropoliten und Herrscher," 54–55.

93 A. A. Ierusalimskaia, "Alanskaia replika na vizantiiskii molivdobul," in *Sfragistika i istoriia kul'tury*, ed. E. V. Stepanova (St. Petersburg, 2004).

94 Iamanidzé, *Installations liturgiques*, 163–69. This plaque probably was not originally intended to depict Urdure, but an explanatory label added shortly after its creation made this association.

95 Eastmond, *Royal Imagery*, 39.

96 The full inscription reads as follows: Ἐνεκεν[ίσ]θ(η), ἐνεώσ[θ(η)] ὁ να[ὸς] τ(ῆς) / ὑπεραγίας θ(εοτόκ)ου ἐπὶ βασηλ[είας] / Νηκηφώρου βασηλ[(έως)] καὶ αὐγ(ούστου) (?) ΑΣ[. . .] / κὲ Δα(υὶ)δ ἐξουσηωκράτορ(ος) [Ἀλανίας] / κ(αὶ) Μαρίας ἐξουσ[η]ωκράτ[ορίσσης] / [μ]ην(ὶ) Ἀπρη(λίου) β′, ἡμέρᾳ ἁγ[ί]ου Α[ντιπάσχα] (?) / δηὰ χηρὸς Θεοδώρου, μητ[ροπο-] / λ(ίτου) καθηγη(ασμένου) Ἀλανί(ας), ἀπ[ὸ] κ[τί-] / σε(ως) κό(σμου) ἔτ(ους) ϛυογ′. Ἀν[ε-] / γράφε[το] δηὰ χειρὸς [τοῦ δεῖνος] / ἀποκρησ(ιαρίου) πατρ(ικίου) (The church of the most holy Mother of God was dedicated and restored in the reign of the Emperor Nikēphoros and the Empress AS (?) . . . and David, *exousiokratōr* [of Alania], and Maria, the *exousiokratōrissa,* on 2 April, on the Day of Holy Antipaschus (?), by the hand of Theodore, established as Metropolitan over Alania, in the year 6473 AM. Written by the hand of . . ., *apikrisarios* and patrician). See Beletskii and Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty*, 241–42. On spelling conventions in this text, see Latham-Sprinkle, *Kingdom of Alania*, 177.

97 For a culture of Greek literacy in Alania, see S. N. Malakhov, "O grecheskoi pis'mennoi traditsii u narodov Severnogo Kavkaza v X–XVII vv.," in *Mir pravoslaviia*, ed. Arkhiepiskop German (Volgograd, 1997); A. Lubotsky, *Alanic Marginal Notes in a Greek Liturgical Manuscript* (Vienna, 2015), 48–50. For the specific presence of Greek graffiti at Senty, demonstrating that some North Caucasians present at this site had knowledge of Greek, see Beletskii and Vinogradov, *Nizhnii Arkhyz i Senty*, 245–54. For the diplomatic formula for addressing Alania, see *De ceremoniis* 2.48 (G. Dagron and B. Flusin, eds., *Le Livre des cérémonies*, 5 vols. [Paris, 2020], 2:48, 3:364–65); see also 4.2:902–5 for the implications of this formula.

This importance of links to the Byzantine court for royal legitimation can also be found elsewhere in the Caucasus, notably in Georgia. One may point, for example, to the persistent importance of the title kouropalatēs in the royal styles of the Bagratid dynasty of Tao-Klarjeti. Originally acquired by Presiding Prince Guaram of Kartli (eastern Georgia) in ca. 588, this title signified not only connection with Byzantium, but also provided a legitimatizing link to the past in the aftermath of the flight of the Bagratids from Kartli to Tao-Klarjeti. Moreover, it demonstrated the preeminence of Bagratids over other Kartlian aristocrats.[98] As Stephen H. Rapp has argued, the ability to acquire this title formed one aspect of the "three-pronged legitimacy of the early Kartvelian Bagratids," as presented in the *Life and Tale of the Bagratids* of Sumbat' Davitis Dze.[99] The title of kouropalatēs is so important that this work culminates with Bagrat' IV of Georgia's successful negotiations to acquire this title from Emperor Rōmanos III, despite the recent war between the Georgian kingdom and the empire.[100]

In the South Caucasus, legitimation through connection with the Byzantine imperial center was sufficiently persuasive that would-be rulers continued to use this strategy long after Constantinople had lost its ability to use coercive force in the region. As such, this strategy cannot be seen as an indirect reflection of Byzantine military power or enforced domination. This can be clearly seen in the *Dzegli eristavta*, a Georgian chronicle written in approximately 1405 at the monastery of Largvisi in Ksani, now in South Ossetia.[101] The first part of this chronicle gives the mythic origin of the *eristavis* (dukes) of Ksani, who are claimed to be the descendants of three brothers from the Alan royal family who fled over the mountains.[102] While this story cannot be considered reliable by virtue of its chronological inconsistencies, what concerns us here is the literary construction of the eristavis' legitimacy.[103] Having established themselves as the most prominent local family through their leadership in war and their tomb's place of honor in the monastery of Largvisi, their role as eristavis is confirmed through a chronologically implausible visit by the "god-crowned king Justinian the rebuilder" (ღმერთივ გვრგვნოსნისა ისტჯნიანე აღმაშენებელ[ი]), none other than the emperor Justinian I.[104] The emperor recognizes Rostom, the most senior of the three brothers, as *eristavi*, his investiture signified by imperial gifts of a seal, belt, and arms. We thus see that even within this fifteenth-century normative text, a claim of imperial investiture remained vital in constructing the authority of a Caucasian ruler.

We thus see that across the Caucasus and northern Black Sea, the grant of titles and regalia from the imperial court was extremely important to the reproduction of local elites' authority. This reception of titles and regalia necessarily involved a recognition of the right of the emperor to distribute them, and to place the most powerful Caucasian aristocrats within a hierarchy that the emperor headed. This subordination was primarily expressed in personalistic and ritual terms. In the 1070s, Michael Psellos would depict imperial

98 For the origins of this title, see S. H. Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature* (London, 2014), 336–42.

99 Rapp, *Medieval Georgian Historiography*, 373–74.

100 *Kartlis tskhovreba*, ed. R. Met'reveli (Tbilisi, 2008), 375; R. Met'reveli and S. Jones, trans., *Kartlis Tskhovreba: A History of Georgia* (Tbilisi, 2014), 219–20.

101 I. S. Dolidze, ed., *Kartuli samartlis dzeglebi*, 8 vols. (Tbilisi, 1965), 2:102–4; S. S. Kakabadze, trans., *Pamiatnik eristavov* (Tbilisi, 1979), 21–24.

102 Saurmag Kakabadze argued that this section of the chronicle was originally written in the ninth century and was later combined with a fifteenth-century production. This is highly unlikely, since Kakabadze drew this conclusion from the presence of a "King Adarnase," whom he identified as one of the early Bagratid kings of that name. However, Adarnase is mentioned after the unnamed twenty-six kings and twenty-four eristavis that separate the initial, foundational section of the *Dzegli eristavta* from the rest of the chronicle. Thus, even if this Adarnase can be identified with a historical figure (which is unlikely), he should be placed much closer to the chronicle's fifteenth-century date of composition. See Dolidze, *Kartuli samartlis dzeglebi*, 2:105; Kakabadze, *Pamiatnik eristavov*, 15, 24, 53–54.

103 For example, King Davit of Georgia, most likely identifiable with David IV (r. 1089–1125), is claimed to be a near-contemporary of the Emperor Justinian (for whom, see below).

104 It is also possible that this figure may represent Justinian II, as was suggested by Th. D. Jordania. This is unlikely since the epithet *aghnashenebeli*, denoting both building in a physical sense and figurative reconstruction, seems more apt for Justinian I. Kakabadze rejected the identification of this figure with a Byzantine emperor on the grounds of this story's chronological and geographical implausibility, suggesting instead that this represented an unknown Georgian king, perhaps Ashot I (r. 813–826/30). However, this explanation overlooks the clearly delineated mythic and foundational function of this passage and does not explain why the name of Justinian came to be attached to this king. See Kakabadze, *Pamiatnik eristavov*, 14–15.

suzerainty over Alania as being reconfirmed by regular pledges of loyalty to the imperial center and the delivery of hostages.[105] From the point of view of the imperial center, this subordination could also be demonstrated using kinship terminology. The acceptance of the title "spiritual son" and of imperial suzerainty were seen as essentially coterminous, in a remarkably close parallel to the Alur segmentary polity.[106]

Constantinople's ritual supremacy over the northern Black Sea is most clearly visible in its ecclesiastical organization. The bishopric of Cherson and metropolitanate of Alania were both directly subordinate to the patriarchate of Constantinople, and it is certain in the case of Cherson and likely in the case of Alania that the Greek liturgy was used. While only two North Caucasian liturgical manuscripts still survive, both follow the standard Constantinopolitan rite.[107] Moreover, they display evidence of that their authors had a good understanding of the Greek text and its liturgical implications (for example, translating "Chrysostom" using the Alanic calque *zirēn kam*, "golden mouth.")[108] This familiarity with the Greek liturgy is also suggested by the fact that a now-lost Greek synaxarion, seen in 1807 by the German traveler Julius von Klaproth in a church near the village of Verkhnii Chegem in modern Kabardino-Balkaria, contained a calendar of saints very similar to that of the Middle Byzantine Constantinopolitan liturgy.[109] Moreover, while the initial adoption of Christianity in Alania likely predated the arrival of missionaries sent by Patriarch Nicholas Mystikos in the early tenth-century, the archbishopric and later metropolitanate of Alania were established by Greek-speaking clergy from Constantinople; indeed, all metropolitans of Alania known from seals and council acts have Greek names.[110] Inscriptions from the period of the Alan metropolitanate's operation in the North Caucasus (ca. 930–ca. 1105) almost exclusively use Greek. One of these, an inscription dated 1067 from the North Church at Nizhnii Arkhyz, the likely center of the Alan metropolitanate, carries the correctly calculated date of the Easter cycle. This is evidence of the performance of the *computus* of the date of Easter, which necessarily implies liturgical activity.[111] It thus seems most likely that in

105 There are important reasons for doubting the veracity of Psellos's account of Constantine IX's affair with the daughter of the Alan king, who remains unnamed in his account and is known only by her title *sebastē*. Notably, this was the only period in Psellos's career when his close relationship with the women of the imperial palace was interrupted, leading to his forced retirement to a monastery. As such, his account of Alania's low status, designed to emphasize Constantine's poor judgement in honoring its royal family, should be treated with considerable skepticism. However, it is notable that Psellos imagined Byzantine suzerainty over Alania being demonstrated by the presence of high-ranking hostages and regular diplomatic visits to pledge loyalty to the empire; thus, even if these events did not actually occur as Psellos describes them, we can reasonably assume that this is how such suzerain-subordinate relationships were imagined from the point of view of the Byzantine center. This in turn most likely influenced Constantinopolitan court officials' behavior toward subordinated courts. This relationship was undoubtedly seen differently in Alania, even if the wife-giving party appears to have been considered the inferior one in North Caucasian culture at the time. See Michael Psellos, *Chronographia* 6.151–55 (Reinsch, 1:175–77; Sewter, 235–39); F. Lauritzen, "A Courtier in the Women's Quarters: The Rise and Fall of Psellos," *Byzantion* 77 (2007): 251–66. For wife-giving as a sign of inferiority, see in general C. Lindholm, "Kinship Structure and Political Authority: The Middle East and Central Asia," in *Frontier Perspectives: Essays in Comparative Anthropology* (Oxford, 1996), 147–71, at 150–54; for specific examples from the tenth- to fourteenth-century North Caucasus, see Aḥmad Ibn Faḍlān, *Risāla Ibn Faḍlān*, ed. S. Dahhān (Damascus, 1959), 171; trans. P. Lunde and C. Stone, *Ibn Fādlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North* (London, 2012), 63; *Tā'rīkh Dāghistān*, in A. R. Shikhsaidov, T. M. Aitberov, and G. M.-R. Orazaev, trans., *Dagestanskie istoricheskie sochineniia* (Moscow, 1993), 104–5.

106 A. Carile, "Byzantine Political Ideology and the Rus' in the Tenth–Twelfth Centuries," *HUkSt* 12/13 (1988–1989): 400–413, at 405–6. For example, the Alan king gained the title of "spiritual son" at the time of his baptism in the 950s, a title used in official correspondence to him. See *De ceremoniis* 2.48 (Dagron and Flusin, 3:364–65); cf. Southall, "The Segmentary State in Africa and Asia," 69.

107 These lectionaries both date to the post-Alanic period, one being produced in 1275 in a Greek-speaking region of the Byzantine world and then being used in the North Caucasus and the other dating to the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. See Lubotsky, *Alanic Marginal Notes*; A. I. Vinogradov, D. V. Kashtanov, and V. V. Ponariadov, "Rukopis' Shogenova- unikal'nyi pamiatnik pis'mennosti Severnogo Kavkaza," in *Kavkaz v sisteme kul'turnykh sviazei Evrazii v drevnosti i srednevekov'e: XXX "Krupnovskie Chteniia"*, ed. U. Iu. Kochkarov (Karachaevsk, 2018).

108 Lubotsky, *Alanic Marginal Notes*, 33–34.

109 J. Potocki, *Voyage dans les steppes d'Astrakhan et du Caucase*, ed. Julius von Klaproth (Paris, 1829), 152; for an example of the Middle Byzantine liturgical calendar of saints, see the *Menologion* of Basil II (PG 117:143–57).

110 While these individuals may well have been Caucasians known by Greek names, this nonetheless demonstrates that their status was imagined in terms of connection with the Greek-speaking Byzantine imperial center. See Seibt, "Metropoliten und Herrscher"; V. Grumel and J. Darrouzès, eds., *Les regestes des actes du Patriarchat de Constantinople* (Paris, 1971), 186, 197, 345–46, 472, 545–46.

111 E. C. Skrzhinskaia, "Grecheskaia nadpis' iz srednevekovoi Alanii," *VizVrem* 21 (1962): 118–26.

the period of the Alan kingdom, its metropolitanate also used a Greek liturgy, most likely that of St. John Chrysostom. All of this evidence points to a recognition of the ritual supremacy of Constantinople, and an acceptance of patriarchal suzerainty that paralleled and supported the suzerainty of the Byzantine Emperors.

In this schema of ritual subordination, it appears that Georgia occupied a marginal position. While the Catholicate of Mtskheta was initially subordinated to Antioch and became an autocephalous patriarchy in 1010, it nonetheless came under increasing Byzantine influence during the tenth to eleventh centuries, adopting a translated version of the Constantinopolitan Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom in place of the Jerusalemite Liturgy of St. James.[112] However, both Georgian liturgies were much more ambiguous than the Greek liturgy, with the diptych prayers using the word *mepe* (king), which could refer either to a local Georgian ruler or to the Byzantine emperor. While the Liturgy of St. James contained prayers for a number of deceased Byzantine emperors, the living individuals referred to in the diptychs could vary widely in both Georgian liturgical traditions, only sometimes referring to the Byzantine Emperor.[113] By comparison with the unambiguous prayers for the Byzantine Emperor in the Greek liturgy used in Alania and Cherson, the Georgian liturgy therefore represents a ritual practice at the margins of Byzantine suzerainty. We therefore see varying levels of Byzantine suzerainty expressed in the ritual sphere in different parts of the Black Sea region, as with elite symbolism and titulature.

A further similarity between Cherson, Alania, and Georgia is the fact that the actions of the supposedly "independent" rulers of Caucasian polities had their freedom of action limited by the need to maintain connections with the Constantinopolitan imperial center. We have already mentioned the anxiety caused to the Bagratid court of Georgia by their legitimacy resting, in part, on their recognition by the Byzantine emperor. This threat to their legitimacy was not an idle one, as demonstrated by imperial backing for attempts in 1028–1036 and 1043–1046 to place an alternative ruler, Demetre "of Anakopia," the half-Alan son of Giorgi I, on the Bagratid throne.[114] It seems that this caused considerable anxiety for the Georgian Bagratids and their supporters, given the importance placed on the acquisition of the title of kouropalatēs for Bagrat' IV in the pro-Bagratid history of Sumbat' Davitis Dze.[115] If we define power not only as the ability to dominate, to enforce one's will in the face of resistance, but also as the ability to subvert and frustrate such attempts, then we can only conclude that the reliance of the Georgian Bagratids' legitimacy on the Byzantine court gave the latter a certain kind of power over them.[116]

The same might be said for the Alan kings of the North Caucasus, whose own power rested on the status that access to the Constantinopolitan court gave them. Indeed, we have hints that when more members of the Alan nobility started to gain access to the imperial court during the mid-eleventh century by serving as imperial functionaries, this triggered a competitive cycle of elite ostentation in the North Caucasus, which we see reflected in a number of extremely rich burials in this period.[117] This may also have led to a reaction from the Alan kings, with the Alan king Dorgholel's adoption in

112 For this liturgy, see M. Tarchnishvili, *Liturgiae ibericae antiquiores*, 2 vols. (Leuven, 1950); A. Jacob, "Une version géorgienne inédite de la liturgie de saint Jean Chrysostome," *Le Muséon* 77 (1964): 65–119. My thanks go to Bernard Coulie for help with these sources.

113 For example, the ninth-century manuscript Gi of the Liturgy of St. James mentions only the scribe, Zosimus, by name in its diptychs for the living, whereas the eleventh-century Codex Georg. 89 from Mt. Sinai, a manuscript of the Liturgy of St. John, names a number of both living and dead individuals. By contrast, no such lists of specific individuals exist in other manuscripts, notably the thirteenth- to fourteenth-century manuscript Vi of the Liturgy of St. James and the twelfth-century manuscript Go of the Liturgy of St. John. See Tarchnishvili, *Liturgiae ibericae antiquiores*, 1:18, 2:14; Jacob, "Une version géorgienne," 109–10.

114 *Kartlis tskhovreba*, ed. Met'reveli, 282–84, trans. Met'reveli and Jones, 154–57. For dates, see Bernadette Martin-Hisard, "Regards croisés du XI^{e} siècle, byzantin et georgién, sur Lip'arit' et sa famille," *TM* 21/1 (2017): 399–450 at 425–29.

115 *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, ed. Met'reveli, 375, trans. Met'reveli and Jones, 219–20. On the importance of this title in cementing the legitimacy of the Georgian kings versus usurpers, see M. D. Lordkipanidze, *Georgia in the XI–XII Centuries*, trans. G. B. Hewitt (Tbilisi, 1987), 57.

116 This definition takes the concept of "left-handed power"—the power to frustrate and indirectly resist, as opposed to the "right-handed" power to directly and forcefully impose one's will—and applies it to the elite level of politics. On "right-handed" and "left-handed" power, see E. E. Baptist, "Toward a Political Economy of Slave Labor: Hands, Whipping-Machines, and Modern Power," in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, ed. S. Rockman and S. Beckert (Philadelphia, 2018), 37–38.

117 In general, for rich burials in the late eleventh century, see S. N. Savenko, *Kharateristika sotsial'nogo razvitiia alanskogo obshchestva Severnogo Kavkaza po materialam katakombnykh mogil'nikov X–XII vv. n.e.* (Piatigorsk, 2017), 190–94; for these burials as a demonstration of social position, see M. E. Mamiev, *Alanskoe pravoslavie: Istoriia*

the 1060s-70s of the title of "exousiokratōr of *all* Alania" (ἐξουσ[ιο]κράτωρ[ος] πάσης Αλανί[ας]) possibly being an attempt to emphasize his access to the Byzantine imperial center in the face of irredentist aristocrats.[118]

One could even go as far as to suggest that the ritual suzerainty of Constantinople over Alania, with the liturgical language remaining Greek, indirectly impeded the development of vernacular literature in the North Caucasus, contributing to this region's distinctiveness in comparison to the South Caucasus. No Alan king would, as far as we know, ever be able to commission a work comparable to the Georgian *Kartlis tskhovreba*, nor would any great aristocratic family ever commission a family history comparable to the great works of Armenian history; no Alanic equivalent of the *Life of Saint Nino* would ever cement the position of a monastery or archbishopric.[119] Of course, there is no suggestion that the Constantinopolitan court or patriarchate intended these consequences; nonetheless, their ritual suzerainty limited the options for political actors in the North Caucasus, with dramatic consequences for the region's history.

These extended examples suggest that we cannot draw a sharp dividing line between outlying themes of the Byzantine Empire and the ritually subordinated kingdoms that surrounded it. Without denying the substantial differences between these regions, what we see are variations on a basic pattern, where local elites draw their legitimacy from the Constantinopolitan imperial center, but in return have their own freedom of action limited by this strategy.

The Byzantine Empire as Segmentary Polity: The Anatolian Borderlands

In broad terms, then, we can see that Cherson, Alania, and Georgia resemble different parts of the Southeast Asian solar polity. Cherson corresponds to outlying regions of Southeast Asian polities ruled by relatively autonomous governors, but still somewhat incorporated into the imperial core's administration. The Alan court, by contrast, lies outside the direct coercive power of the imperial center, but is still ritually subordinated to it, as demonstrated by its use of the Greek liturgy and the direct evidence of the Senty Inscription. The court of the Georgian Bagratids, by contrast, lies right on the periphery of Byzantine suzerainty: while its ritual practices display some recognition of Constantinople's importance, any hint of suzerainty is so faint as to be outright deniable. Indeed, this suzerainty was sufficiently weak that, with the dimming of the Constantinopolitan "lightbulb" in the late eleventh century, the Georgian court would make strenuous efforts to outdo it and to become the new regional suzerain.[120]

One might object that Cherson is unrepresentative of outlying themes of the empire, given Cherson's unique history of autonomy stretching back to the classical Bosporan Kingdom.[121] Yet we can find comparable examples of regional elites legitimizing themselves through access to the imperial center in a region much more critical to imperial ambitions in the Middle Byzantine period: the empire's Anatolian borderlands. Practices of administration in this region have been a subject of intense debate, given their significance for central themes of tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantine history such as legislation against the *dynatoi*, the political and social background of the Sklēroi and Phōkades rebellions of the 980s, and the collapse of imperial authority in Anatolia in the years surrounding the Battle of Manzikert.[122] Given these disputes over the interpretation of the primarily legislative source

i traditsiia (Moscow, 2014), 138; Latham-Sprinkle, *Kingdom of Alania*, 233–35.

118 Chkhaidze and Vinogradov, "Seal of Konstantinos," 188–90.

119 On the legitimizing aspects of Georgian and Armenian historiography and hagiography, see Eastmond, *Royal Imagery*, 7; B. Martin-Hisard, "Jalons pour une histoire du culte de Sainte Nino (fin IV^{e}–XIII^{e} s.)," in *From Byzantium to Iran: Armenian Studies in Honour of Nina G. Garsoïan*, ed. J.-P. Mahé and R. W. Thomson (Atlanta, 1997), 70–74.

120 Rapp, *Caucasia and the Second Byzantine Commonwealth*, 25–27.

121 See A. V. Podossinov, "Am Rande der griechischen Oikumene: Geschichte des bosporanischen Reiches," in *Das bosporanische Reich: der Nordosten des Schwarzen Meeres in der Antike*, ed. J. Fornasier and B. Böttger (Mainz, 2002); Zubar' and Rusiaeva, *Na beregakh Bospora Kimmeriiskogo*, 152–232. For the Middle Byzantine linkage of Cherson's Bosporan past and its current autonomy, see A. G. Papadopoulos, "Rereading the Story of the City of Cherson and the Maiden Gykia in *De administrando imperio* as Arts of Rule Narrative," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 31 (2016): 143–63.

122 Key literature includes G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. J. Hussey (Oxford, 1968), 303–7; Lemerle, *The Agrarian History of Byzantium*, 105–56; M. Kaplan, *Les hommes et la terre à Byzance du VI^{e} au XI^{e} siècle* (Paris, 1992), 414–43; Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance*; Cheynet, "Basil II and Asia Minor"; C. Holmes, "Political Elites in the Reign of Basil II," in *Byzantium in*

material, it is difficult to generalize regarding administrative practices in Eastern Anatolia. Furthermore, given that this source base is heavily slanted toward legal documents that implicitly assume a normative baseline of stative and territorially uniform imperial power, teasing out the more fluid dynamics of the frontier can be difficult. Given these difficulties, this section will not attempt a general overview of the situation in Eastern Anatolia, which would expand this article far beyond its already-lengthy dimensions. Rather, it has the more limited objective of demonstrating that dynamics of power in some outlying regions that were incorporated into the official administrative system, namely the Theme of Chaldia and the city of Melitēnē, resembled those in Cherson and in the outlying parts of Southeast Asian solar polities, where centrally appointed viceroys nonetheless enjoyed considerable autonomy.

It has been widely argued that in some regions of Eastern Anatolia, particularly those more distant from Constantinople and major arteries of communication such as highways, imperial authority was conveyed primarily by a process of brokerage, being either negotiated between imperial officials sent out from Constantinople and local aristocrats, or directly relayed through relatively autonomous aristocrats who were assigned official positions.[123] In a similar vein, while the exact interpretation of the shift toward centrally organized, if sometimes regionally based, *tagmata* regiments during the eleventh century is disputed, the fact that regional thematic commanders could have considerable autonomy and duplicate the central state's institutions has long been established.[124] As far back as 1960, Hélène Ahrweiler could write that during the ninth and early tenth centuries,

> The theme system had transformed the Byzantine province into a sort of a miniature "State" within the framework of the empire, controlled by the capital through an ingenious system summarized as follows: I. Dependence of provincial civil functionaries on the relevant central government bureaus. II. Economic subordination of the provinces . . . III. Nomination of the theme's high (civil and military) functionaries by Constantinople. . . .[125]

This sounds awfully like the "middle zone" of more centralized varieties of Southeast Asian segmentary polities, where autonomous viceroys headed relatively autonomous satellite administrations that resembled the central government in miniature.

Let us focus on two particularly clear parallels to these Southeast Asian viceroyalties, and to the Theme of Cherson. The first can be found in the Pontic Alps, where the Gabras family formed a hereditary dynasty of local powerbrokers.[126] The Gabrades' powerbase was originally rooted in the decentralization of imperial military forces, with Theodore Gabras originally holding the title of *topotērētēs*, or deputy commander of a tagma regiment. Like many such topotērētai, Gabras was apparently able to use his local command function to be able to put down roots and create a

the Year 1000, ed. P. Magdalino (Leiden, 2003); Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire*.

123 Kazhdan, *Sotsial'nyi sostav gospodstvuiushchego klassa Vizantii*, 221–65; Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestations à Byzance*, 475; L. Andriollo, *Constantinople et les provinces d'Asie Mineure, IX^e–XI^e siècle: Administration impériale, sociétés locales et rôle de l'aristocratie* (Leuven, 2017), 413–15. For the significance of communication routes, see Ševčenko, "Constantinople Viewed from the Eastern Provinces in the Middle Byzantine Period," 719–22.

124 For views of "tagmatization" as representing a centralizing process, see Ahrweiler, "Recherches sur l'administration de l'Empire Byzantin," 89–90; N. Svoronos, "Société et organisation intérieure dans l'Empire Byzantin au XI^e siècle: Les principaux problèmes," in *Etudes sur l'organisation intérieure, la société et l'économie de l'Empire Byzantin* (London, 1973), IX: 1–17; for views seeing this process as decentralization, see Oikonomides, "L'évolution de l'organisation administrative de l'Empire Byzantin au XI^e siècle," 143–51; Haldon, "Military Service, Military Lands, and the Status of Soldiers," 48–49.

125 "Le régime des thèmes avait transformé la province byzantine en une sorte de petit 'État' dans les cadres de l'empire, contrôlé par la capitale grâce à une systême ingénieux se résumant ainsi: I. Dépendance des fonctionnaires civils des provinces vis-à-vis des bureaux centraux compétents. II. Subordination économique des provinces . . . III. Nomination des hauts fonctionnaires du thème (civils et militaires) par Constantinople" : Ahrweiler, "Recherches sur l'administration de l'Empire Byzantin," 89. While Ahrweiler sees administrative practices as becoming more centralized in the later tenth and eleventh centuries, this is disputed by Oikonomides and Haldon (see n. 125).

126 A. Bryer, "A Byzantine Family: The Gabrades, c. 979–c. 1653," *University of Birmingham Historical Journal* 12.1 (1969): 164–87; A. Bryer, S. Fassoulakis, and D. M. Nichol, "A Byzantine Family: The Gabrades (An Additional Note)," *BSl* 36 (1975): 38–45; R. M. Bartikian, "O vizantiiskoi aristokraticheskoi sem'e Gavras, I," *IFŽ* 3 (1987): 190–200; R. M. Bartikian, "O vizantiiskoi aristokraticheskoi sem'e Gavras, II," *IFŽ* 4 (1987): 181–93; R. M. Bartikian, "O vizantiiskoi aristokraticheskoi sem'e Gavras, III," *IFŽ* 1 (1988): 163–78.

regional powerbase.[127] Not only did Theodore Gabras monopolize the position of *doux* of the Theme of Chaldia from approximately 1067 onward, he also conducted a semi-independent policy of alliance, marrying into the Armenian Taronite family and the Alanic Dorgholelid royal family.[128] By the 1120s, his successor Constantine Gabras was conducting his own negotiations with neighboring Turkoman dynasties, a process that quickly proceeded to the adoption of Turkoman symbols and positions of authority; indeed, by 1146, John Kinnamos could describe another member of this family as a Seljuk "satrap," "related to the Romans by birth, but . . . nurtured and reared among the Turks."[129] Ultimately, this autonomy would allow them to break away from exclusive imperial suzerainty; indeed, as early as 1106, Gregory Gabras, son of Theodore, also recognized Danishmendid suzerainty.[130] Nonetheless, even after 1106, the Gabras family continued to seek out reconfirmation of their social position from the imperial center through their appointment as doukes of Chaldia. Thus, despite their relative autonomy, their freedom of action remained constrained by this legitimatory dependence on the imperial center. As in Cherson and Alania, the Greek liturgy remained in use, demonstrating the ritual subordination of the Pontic region to Constantinople. The episcopal organization of the Pontos remained a potent symbol of Constantinople's ritual suzerainty even after the emergence of the Empire of Trebizond, leading to repeated clashes over the precise structure of the region's bishoprics and their relationship to the wider Black Sea region.[131]

This acceptance of Constantinopolitan sovereignty and (later) suzerainty was, however, at odds with the social base of the Pontic aristocracy, and with local political practices. Anthony Bryer concluded that "although rivals, the Gabrades and Danishmendids probably had more in common than they did with the Komnēnoi of Constantinople or the Seljuks of Konya."[132] He makes the interesting suggestion that this similarity was driven, at least in part, by traditions of autonomy among the highland communities that recognized the sovereignty of the Gabras family and Danishmendids.[133] As John Haldon has suggested and archaeological work along the Anatolian *thughūr* (border marches) has confirmed, the social and economic base of communities in this frontier zone was very similar, regardless of whether they recognized a Christian or Muslim sovereign or the suzerainty of emperor or sultan.[134] Taken together, this raises the possibility of practices of distributed sovereignty along the frontier emerging from bottom-up communal social practices, as much as being a result of aristocratic ambitions. Regardless of its ultimate origins, this process of brokerage, delegated sovereignty, and ultimately the supplanting of Byzantine suzerainty strongly resembles practices of elite legitimation in Cherson and Alania—specifically, practices of appealing to the imperial capital for titles and offices, the acceptance of ritual suzerainty, and limitations placed on the local aristocracy's freedom of action by these practices.

Nor was this situation confined to the difficult terrain of the Pontic Alps. In tenth- and eleventh-century Melitēnē, imperial officials appointed by Constantinople (*kouratōrēs*, *episkeptitai*, and *basilikoi*) acted essentially as intermediaries between the Byzantine central government and the existing local administrative apparatus, with the manifestation of imperial sovereignty

127 J.-C. Cheynet, "Toparque et topotèrètès à la fin du 11^{e} siècle," *REB* 42 (1984): 215–24, at 221–23.

128 For Theodore Gabras's autonomy and alliance policy, see Anna Komnēnē, *Alexiad* 8.9 (Reinsch, 255–57, Frankopan and Sewter, 232–36); see also Bryer, "A Byzantine Family: The Gabrades, c. 979–c. 1653," 167–76; Bartikian, "O vizantiiskoi aristokraticheskoi sem'e Gavras, II," 181. For the Dorgholelids, see Latham-Sprinkle, *Kingdom of Alania*, 280–86.

129 . . . εἰς Ῥωμαίους μὲν ἀναφέρων τὸ γένος, ἐν δέ Πέρσαις καὶ τραφεὶς καὶ αὐξηθεὶς . . . : John Kinnamos, *Epitome* 2.8 (A. Meineke, ed., *Rerum ab Ioannes et Alexio Comnenis gestarum* [Bonn, 1836], 56; C. M. Brand, trans., *Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenos* [New York, 1976], 51). See also Bryer, "A Byzantine Family: The Gabrades, c. 979–c. 1653," 177–80.

130 Bryer, "A Byzantine Family: The Gabrades, c. 979–c. 1653," 176.

131 For example, see Theodore of Alania, *Alanikos* 15 (PG 140 :401–2), and commentary in S. N. Malakhov, "K voprosu o lokalizatsii eparkhial'nogo tsentra Alanii v XII–XVI vv.," in *Alany: Zapadnaia Evropa i Vizantiia*, ed. A. G. Kuchiev, V. K. Tmenov, and V. A. Kuznetsov (Vladikavkaz, 1992), 153–57; for disputes in the fourteenth century, see A. Bryer and D. Winfield, *The Byzantine Monuments and Topography of the Pontos* (Washington, DC, 1985), 347–50.

132 Bryer, "A Byzantine Family: The Gabrades, c. 979–c. 1653," 169.

133 Bryer, "A Byzantine Family: The Gabrades, c. 979–c. 1653," 167–70.

134 Haldon, "Towards a Social History of Byzantium," 12, 25–7; A. A. Eger, *The Islamic–Byzantine Frontier: Interaction and Exchange among Muslim and Christian Communities* (London, 2015).

being largely limited to extracting tribute.[135] This intermediary role, and the widespread recruitment of local powerbrokers into the imperial administration, lent itself to imperial officials swiftly becoming autonomous following the Battle of Manzikert. In Melitēnē, a Byzantine military commander of Chalcedonian Armenian background, Philaretos Brachamios, began to take over neighboring cities such as Edessa and Antioch, deposing imperial appointees and refusing to recognize the suzerainty of Emperor Michael VII. He was thus able to negotiate with the subsequent emperor, Nikēphoros III, to extract the title of kouropalatēs in return for recognizing the emperor's rule, putting him on the same level as the Bagratid kings of Georgia—i.e., right on the periphery of Byzantine suzerainty.[136] Brachamios was then able to recognize multiple suzerains, also submitting to the Seljuk Sultan Malikshah in 1085.[137] C. J. Yarnley argues that Philaretos's success was fundamentally due to his ability to mediate between wealthy aristocrats in the cities of Melitēnē, Edessa, and Antioch, and more distant imperial centers.[138] While this mediatory role provided greater potential for autonomy in the polycentric political context following the Battle of Manzikert, it is notable that this was an outgrowth of practices of local mediation stretching back to the tenth-century "high point" of Byzantine military power. This process not only closely resembles practices of political legitimation in Cherson and the Theme of Chaldia, but also in Southeast Asian solar polities, such as in the considerable autonomy of northern regional governors during the eighteenth-century Ayutthaya-Burmese wars. While these individuals theoretically owed their positions to an acceptance of the suzerainty of Ayutthaya, they were nonetheless sufficiently autonomous as to be able to switch allegiance between the imperial centers according to the dictates of the strategic situation.[139]

We thus can see that Cherson was not an exceptional case, but rather that many regions on the Byzantine periphery showed similar power dynamics, whereby officials who were in principle appointed by Constantinople had considerable autonomy in practice, but still legitimated themselves through reference to their imperial connections and recognized the suzerainty of the imperial center. While we cannot by any means claim that this situation applied always and everywhere along the imperial frontier, the fact that it can be observed in multiple time periods, including the supposed apogee of Middle Byzantine power in the second half of Basil II's reign, suggests that this was a persistent power dynamic rather than an exceptional case.

Conversely, there are plenty of further examples of political elites traditionally placed outside the borders of the Byzantine Empire who drew legitimacy from their connections to it, even to the point of recognizing its suzerainty. Jonathan Shepard's work on the Byzantinization of Bulgar and Rus' elite authority provides particularly close analogies to Alania's relationship with Constantinople. In the former case, access to Byzantine imperial regalia explicitly underpinned a divinely appointed hierarchy with the Khan at its pinnacle.[140] In Kievan Rus', Grand Prince Vladimir's decision to adopt a Byzantine style of rulership was marked by the construction of magnificent, Byzantine-style churches.[141] The recognition of multiple suzerains, as in the Bagratid Kingdom of Georgia, has parallels elsewhere. The eleventh-century Principality of Zeta (in modern Montenegro) provides an interesting comparandum; specifically, Prince Mihailo

135 Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire*, 368–89; D. Gyllenhaal, "Byzantine Melitene and the Social Milieu of the Syriac Renaissance," *DOP* 75 (2021): 205–36. This interpretation has largely superseded that of J. Howard-Johnston, "Crown Lands and the Defence of Imperial Authority in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries," in *Bosphorus: Essays in Honour of Cyril Mango*, ed. S. Efthymiadis, C. Rapp, and D. Tsougarakis (Amsterdam, 1995). For taxation as a sign of sovereignty over outlying subordinated centers, see A. Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces under Early Islam: Islamic Rule and Iranian Legitimacy in Armenia and Caucasian Albania* (Cambridge, 2017), 180–208.

136 Attaleiates, *History* 35.10 (A. Kaldellis and D. Krallis, eds. [Cambridge, MA, 2012], 548–51); Michael the Syrian 15.4, *Texts and Translations of the Chronicle of Michael the Great*, ed. G. A. Kiraz and J.-B. Chabot, 11 vols. (Piscataway, NJ, 2009), 4:173; C. J. Yarnley, "Philaretos: Armenian Bandit or Byzantine General?," *REArm*, nouvelle série, 9 (1972): 331–54.

137 Matthew of Edessa, *Chronicle*, trans. R. Bedrosian (Long Branch, NJ, 2017), 82–83. For the background to this event, see Yarnley, "Philaretos: Armenian Bandit or Byzantine General?," 345–52.

138 Yarnley, "Philaretos: Armenian Bandit or Byzantine General?," 351–52.

139 See S. Chutintaranond, "Mandala, 'Segmentary State' and Politics of Centralisation in Medieval Ayudhya," *Journal of the Siam Society* 78.1 (1990): 88–100, at 94.

140 Shepard, "Orthodoxy and Northern Peoples," 176–78.

141 Shepard, "Orthodoxy and Northern Peoples," 182–84.

obtaining papal reconfirmation of his Byzantine court title of *prōtospatharios* in 1077 is highly reminiscent of the Bagratid practice of recognizing multiple suzerains in order to legitimize the power of a local aristocrat.[142] Other elites on the periphery of the Byzantine segmentary polity that drew legitimacy from their connections to Constantinople include Berber groups in North Africa of the fifth and sixth centuries and, in the same period, the Ghassānids of North Arabia and the early Slavs of the Danube frontier.[143] These examples likewise resemble the process of "galactic mimesis" found in Southeast Asian solar polities.[144]

The fact that attempts to seek legitimation from the Byzantine imperial center are so widely spread in time and space and can be linked in multiple regions and areas to practices of plural suzerainty implies that we cannot see these as aberrations in periods of imperial weakness. Power centers distant from Constantinople might recognize other suzerains more frequently when the central government was weak, and might indeed challenge its exclusive sovereignty, for example through the construction of fortifications, dispossession of imperial appointees, or withholding of tax revenue; but this should be seen as an intensification of a pre-existing pattern rather than a deviation from a norm of imperial central control.

The fact that distant power centers' acceptance of imperial suzerainty fell on a continuum, rather than being sharply distinct, is reflected in the terminology used for them in contemporary sources. For example, it is notable that in the ninth and tenth centuries, the term archōn could be used both for centrally appointed governors of regions distant from Constantinople, such as Crete, Dalmatia or Cyprus, and for princes in the Caucasus and Balkans who recognized imperial suzerainty.[145] It is similarly notable that upon the emergence of self-reproducing provincial elites in the eleventh century, the term used for them was, likewise, archontes.[146]

This linguistic similarity is particularly clear in the case of the term toparchos. This term was used both for autonomous aristocratic powerbrokers distant from Constantinople who were considered to be under imperial suzerainty, including the Amir of Crete, the Bulgarian Tsar Samuel, and the Danishmendid Amir Yağıbasan of Cappadocia, as well as for autonomous provincial governors who received their positions—on paper at least—from Constantinople.[147] Examples of the latter include several unnamed provincial governors removed by John I Tzimiskēs, autonomous governors of eastern provinces in the early years of Alexios I's reign, and governors who appropriated wealth confiscated from the Venetians in 1171.[148] While most common after 1071, this term was used from the beginning of the eleventh century and thus represents a feature of Byzantine elite terminology even during the apparent apogee of Middle Byzantine imperial power.

This term's apparent conflation of foreign princes and peripheral imperial appointees has caused no little confusion in previous historiography. Paul Lemerle described toparchs as being "in some sort of zone of influence of the empire."[149] Meanwhile, Jean-Claude Cheynet stated that governors who were called toparchs, "while recognizing imperial authority,

142 L. Maksimović and G. Subotić, "La Serbie entre Byzance et l'Occident," in *Byzantina–Metabyzantina: La périphérie dans le temps et l'espace*, ed. P. Odorico (Paris, 2003), 170.

143 See Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 334–35; L. I. Conrad, "The Arabs," in *CAH*, vol. 14, *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425–600*, ed. A. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins, and M. Whitby, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 2001), 692–94; F. Curta, "Frontier Ethnogenesis in Late Antiquity: The Danube, the Tervingi, and the Slavs," in *Borders, Barriers, and Ethnogenesis: Frontiers in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2005), 200–203.

144 See n. 64.

145 See for example *Taktikon Uspenskii*, in Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance byzantines*, 52–53, 56–57; *De ceremoniis* 2.48 (Dagron and Flusin, 3:364–66).

146 Haldon, "Provincial Elites, Central Authorities," 175.

147 See Theodosios the Deacon, *The Capture of Crete* 2.367 and 4.784 (R.-C. Bondoux and J.-P. Grélois, eds., *La prise de la Crète [960–1]* [Paris, 2017], 88–89, 138–39); John Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historiarum*, Basileios kai Kōnstantinos 20 (H. Thurn, ed. [Berlin, 1973], 339; J. Wortley, trans., *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057* [Cambridge, 2010], 321); Niketas Choniates, *History*, Man. Com. 3 (J. A. Van Dieten, ed. [Berlin, 1975], 116–17; H. J. Magoulias, trans., *O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniatēs* [Detroit, 1984], 66–67). In general, see M. Nystazopolou-Pelekidou, "Note sur l'anonyme de Hase improprement appelé Toparque de Gothie," *BCH* 86.1 (1962): 319–26; Cheynet, "Toparque et topotèrètès à la fin du 11e siècle."

148 Leo the Deacon, *History* 6.2 (C. B. Hase, ed., *Historia* [Bonn, 1828], 196; A.-M. Talbot and D. F. Sullivan, trans., *The History of Leo the Deacon: Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century* [Washington, DC, 2005], 145); Anna Komnēnē, *Alexiad* 3, 9 (Reinsch, 110–11; Frankopan and Sewter, 100); Nikētas Choniatēs, *History*, Man. Com. 5 (Van Dieten, 172; Magoulias, 97).

149 "... en quelque sorte dans la zone d'influence de l'empire": P. Lemerle, *Prolégomènes à une edition critique et commentée des "Conseils et Récits" de Kékauménos* (Brussels, 1960), 81.

formed a screen between the emperor and the [local] inhabitants he ruled. . . . We are therefore dealing with a personality who is neither totally independent, nor completely subject to imperial authority, and which was thus considered to be a comparable situation to that of foreign toparchs vis-a-vis the empire; this allows us to explain the use of the term 'toparch' when applied to Byzantines."[150] While recognizing and seeking to explain the fact that the same term was used for both Byzantine governors and foreign princes, these explanations are hamstrung by the binary distinction between indigenous and foreign that this article seeks to challenge; the theory of the segmentary polity, seeing various toparchs as being gradations of the same kind of subordinated ruler outside the "core zone" of the Byzantine Empire, helps to resolve this apparent contradiction.

This similarity is reflected in the most famous Middle Byzantine source that describes the normative behavior of a toparch, the *Stratēgikon* of Kekaumenos.[151] This text, written in ca. 1075–1078 based on the author's experiences as stratēgos of Hellas in the 1040s, advises a toparch on how to balance relationships with the imperial center and other local power-brokers.[152] In keeping with his own imagining of the toparch's role as a kind of bridge or broker between the imperial court and provincial elite society, Kekaumenos cautions that a toparch should not accept too many gifts from the Emperor, since this can allow subordinates to bypass the toparch's intermediary role and bring accusations against him.[153] He in turn should send gifts to other border lords (*akritēs*), but should be aware that they seek to lull him into a false sense of security by accepting them.[154] In this environment where the reach of the central government is fairly limited, being mainly manifested through centrally appointed generals (stratēgoi) and judges (*kritai*), the toparch's power depends on his intermediary role between the central imperial court and other lower powerbrokers.[155] One could not think of a better example of the kind of subordinated regional court envisaged by the theory of the segmentary polity.

It is thus clear that far from being an exception, Cherson represents a particularly clear example of a subordinated peripheral court corresponding to the "middle zone" of the segmentary polity. Numerous other examples of subordinated courts can be found in the Middle Byzantine period, along with a developed technical vocabulary and political imagination for describing them. Even the specific offices found in Cherson were not unique, but were sometimes shared by frontier toparchs—for example, the position of prōteuon was also held by John Chrysēlios, toparch of Dyrrachion in the early eleventh century.[156] While there was the significant difference of the presence or absence of centrally appointed imperial officials, the basic dynamic of recognition of imperial suzerainty by subordinated courts was present both in the Black Sea region and the Balkans.

In this context, rather than seeing the aristocracies and governors of the Themes of Cherson and Chaldia as fundamentally different kinds of political actors to the rulers of Alania and Georgia, I propose that we collapse the distinction between them and see the differences between them as ones of degree, not kind. From the point of view of the imperial center, any control or suzerainty had to be mediated through the indigenous aristocracy, whose positions were in turn legitimated through their connections to Constantinople. On the

150 ". . . tout en reconnaissant l'autorité impériale, forme un écran entre l'empereur et les habitants qu'il domine. . . . On a donc affaire à un personnage qui n'est ni totalement indépendant, ni soumis complètement à l'autorité impériale, et qui se trouve donc dans une situation semblable à celle du toparque étranger vis-à-vis de l'empire; cela permet d'expliquer l'emploi du terme toparque appliqué à des Byzantins": Cheynet, "Toparque et topotèrètès à la fin du 11[e] siècle," 220.

151 M. D. Spadaro, ed., *Raccomandazioni e consigli di un galantuomo* (Alessandria, 1998); P. Odorico, trans. *Conseils et récits d'un gentilhomme byzantin* (Toulouse, 2015). A parallel Greek–English edition by Charlotte Roueché is available at https://ancientwisdoms.ac.uk/library/kekaumenos-consilia-et-narrationes/index.html.

152 For the author's background, see Odorico, *Conseils et récits d'un gentilhomme byzantin*, 13–17. It is worth underlining the text and author's strong Pontic connections, with the sole manuscript being preserved in Trabzon, for example (Ševčenko, "Constantinople Viewed from the Eastern Provinces in the Middle Byzantine Period," 727).

153 Kekaumenos, *Stratēgikon* 5, 218 (Spadaro, 232; trans. Odorico, 175); see also Lemerle, *Prolégomènes à une edition critique*, 15.

154 Kekaumenos, *Stratēgikon* 5, 226 (Spadaro, 242; trans. Odorico, 180).

155 Lemerle, *Prolégomènes à une edition critique*, 82–85; Andriollo, *Constantinople et les provinces d'Asie Mineure*, 400–402.

156 For John Chryselios as toparch, see *Gesta regum sclavorum* 38, ed. Tibor Živkovič, 2 vols. (Belgrade, 2009), 1:144); for his title of prōteuon, see B. Prokić, *Die Zusätze in der Handschrift des Johannes Skylitzes Codex Vindobonensis Hist. Graec. LXXIV* (Munich, 1906), 31. In general, see A. Ducellier, *La façade maritime de l'Albanie au Moyen Âge: Durazzo et Valone du XI[e] au XV[e] siècle* (Thessalonika, 1981), 105–7.

one hand, stratēgoi and other imperial officials in Cherson and along the Anatolian frontier had to rely heavily on the indigenous aristocracy to render their rule effective; indeed, appointment to official positions often served to legitimize the already-existing power-base of local aristocrats. On the other hand, the reliance of subordinated kings, such as the exousiokratōr of Alania, on Byzantine recognition limited their freedom of action. In both cases, the imperial center and the indigenous aristocracy limited the actions the other could take, which brings into question the idea that either were fully sovereign, in the sense of being able to unilaterally set group boundaries.

The Byzantine Empire as Segmentary Polity: The Imperial Core

The reader may have noted a particular absence in this article so far. While we have spent much time with subordinated courts, where is the imperial core? After all, practices of brokerage were key to Byzantine imperial rule even in the immediate surroundings of Constantinople; thus, can we delineate a specific zone in which the dynamics of power were fundamentally different to these subordinated courts?[157]

To resolve this apparent conundrum, it is worth repeating a core feature of the segmentary polity: its orientation toward central places, rather than zones. As such, trying to delineate a particular region of the empire as being fundamentally different from others would be to try to turn the model to a purpose to which it is not ideally suited. The purpose of this section is therefore, first, to demonstrate that this orientation toward central places (specifically, Constantinople, as conflated with the person of the emperor) was present in Middle Byzantine elite culture; and second, to analyze the dynamics of the provinces under firm imperial sovereignty in terms of this orientation toward a central point.

The first point is not hard to demonstrate. While alternative conceptions of Byzantine—or rather, Roman—identity and polity were very significant, there is no denying the centrality of Constantinople even to republican conceptions of Roman-ness.[158] The importance of Constantinople to its elites is famous: one might witness the city's centrality to most forms of Byzantine geography, forming a "sort of Byzantine Greenwich," in Dimiter Angelov's words; or it being seen, from Gregory of Nazianzos onward, as the "eye of the *oikoumenē*," its information processing center; or John Zōnaras's complaints that he had been exiled from Constantinople to the wilderness when he was living on the Princes' Islands, only a dozen miles or so away; or Theodore Balsamōn's famous division of Christian sacred space into Constantinople and "the outlying regions" (αἱ ἔξω χῶραι) (one is tempted to gloss this as "all that other stuff"), the former being orthodox, the latter lax in their ritual practices.[159] The fact that this was not the only way that Byzantines could think about geography does not take away from the fact that at least some members of imperial and patriarchal court circles had adopted a center-oriented conception of space with marked similarities to those current in segmentary polities in Central Africa and Southeast Asia. Indeed, these conceptions both were specifically oriented around the palace as a center of spiritual power. In the solar polities of Southeast Asia, for example Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, the ultimate central place of the "mandala" was the Buddhist relics held in the royal palace, while in this center-oriented conception of the Byzantine Empire, the central place was arguably the body of the emperor himself, conflated with his place of residence in the vast majority of encomia of Constantinople.[160] While the precise reasoning behind this orientation toward the imperial residence was different, the

157 For brokerage at the imperial center, see De Weerdt, Holmes, and Watts, "Politics, c. 1000–1500," 267–68.

158 In general, see Kaldellis, *Romanland*; Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic*. One may note that every instance Kaldellis notes of popular uprisings against emperors occurred in Constantinople itself, or aimed at its capture (*The Byzantine Republic*, 89–137, 150–58).

159 Gregory of Nazianzos, *Or.* 42 (PG 36:469); John Zonaras, *Epitomē Historiarum* 9, 16, ed. L. Dindorf, 6 vols. (Leipzig, 1868), 2:297; Theodore Balsamon, *Scholia* In Can. XLI Conc. in Trullo, In Can. LXII Conc. in Trullo, PG 137:728–29; P. Magdalino, "Byzantium and the ἔξω χῶραι in the Time of Balsamon," in *Byzantium in the 12th Century: Canon Law, State and Society*, ed. N. Oikonomides (Athens, 1991); D. Angelov, "'Asia and Europe Commonly Called East and West': Constantinople and Geographical Imagination in Byzantium," in *Imperial Geographies in Byzantine and Ottoman Space*, ed. S. Bazzaz, Y. Batsaki, and D. Angelov (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

160 For Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, see Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 87, 97; for the centrality of the emperor and his conflation with the city of Constantinople, see Odorico, "La périphérie dans le temps et l'espace," 14–15; Ševčenko, "Constantinople Viewed from the Eastern Provinces in the Middle Byzantine Period," 713.

ultimate result of an orientation toward the central capital city and palace is remarkably similar.

The second point is somewhat harder to delineate. In order to understand the differences (and similarities) between outlying subordinated courts and the "core zone" of the Byzantine Empire, we need to return to the definition of sovereignty adopted in this paper: its function as boundary-setting, in combination with the ability to coercively limit the ability of other actors to construct their own systems of values and enforce boundaries accordingly. In practical terms, the core territories of the Byzantine Empire might be considered those regions within which the Emperor's sovereignty was not openly challenged or limited, and he and his administration could replace officials, change local powerholders' places within the imperial court hierarchy, limit their ability to construct fortifications, and order the collection of taxes without open resistance or overt negotiation.[161] As Leonora Neville has noted, this form of sovereignty more closely resembles control over who was legitimately allowed to use violence and against whom than a monopoly on its use, let alone a Foucauldian attempt at social regulation.[162] While imperial authorities could, in theory, issue laws claiming a wide-ranging sovereignty over social relations within households, even between slaveowners and the enslaved, in practice the ability to enforce these claims was limited by the reactive, overburdened, and personalistic character of the imperial legal administration, as explicitly recognized through the principle of *oikonomia*.[163] This is to say nothing of environmental limitations on the exercise of sovereignty, such as distance, ease of access, geographic elevation, or weather.[164]

As such, while there is a very real difference between the "core zone" of the empire and outlying centers, this is once again a matter of degree, not kind. The distinction between a senior imperial servant in the core zone and the relatively autonomous leader of a subordinated court could be as simple as whether the emperor happened to be traveling in that particular region at that time or campaigning on the opposite frontier of the empire; or even dependent on the time of year or level of snowfall along a particularly critical communication route.[165] There is, however, a major difference between an army commander who feels that he must outwardly obey imperial commands once they are issued, even if he attempts to influence their content beforehand, and one with whom the imperial central authority must negotiate (even covertly) in order to exercise its wishes. It is this difference, in practical terms, that defines the difference between the Byzantine imperial core and a subordinated court. The basic patterns of legitimation through reference to the imperial center and of distributed sovereignty nonetheless remain similar within both the imperial core and in regions under the sovereignty of subordinated courts.

Some Notes of Caution

So what does this similarity in patterns of legitimizing action mean, then? Should we take the universalist claims of Byzantine emperors seriously, and extend the borders of their empire to the Terek (or, for that matter, the Tisza or Volga)? Conversely, should we consider the imperial core to only comprise the immediate imperial presence? On both counts, no. To do the first would be to take a tendentious and propagandistic form of imperial rhetoric at face value, while the latter approach would ignore the major differences that still existed between regions where provincial elites were incorporated into the thematic administration and were subject, at least in theory, to civil laws promulgated in Constantinople, and those where they were not.[166] But nonetheless, these similarities in patterns of action

161 For these characteristics, see Neville, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society*, 2.

162 Neville, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society*, 5–65 and passim; see also J.-C. Cheynet, "Point de vue sur l'efficacité administrative entre les X^{e} e XI^{e} siècles," *ByzF* 19 (1993): 7–16; R.-J. Lilie, "Die Zentralbürokratie und die Provinzen zwischen dem 10. und dem 12. Jahrhundert: Anspruch und Realität," *ByzF* 19 (1993): 65–75.

163 See Y. Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 171–72; Neville, *Authority in Byzantine Provincial Society*, 100–104.

164 Ševčenko, "Constantinople Viewed from the Eastern Provinces in the Middle Byzantine Period," 719–22; Haldon, "Towards a Social History of Byzantium," 8.

165 For the significance of the emperor's location, see G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge, 2007), 110–11; Holmes, "Political Elites in the Reign of Basil II," 50–56.

166 The survival of ecclesiastical manuscripts from the late medieval Central North Caucasus and legal manuscripts from the Northeast Caucasus strongly suggests that no Byzantine-influenced legal manuscripts were ever produced in the North Caucasus. There is also no evidence of Byzantine influence on *adat* customary law. See Malakhov, "O grecheskoi pis'mennoi traditsii," 34–37; for Dagestani legal

should make us think seriously about the lines on the maps that we use to illustrate our lectures, no matter how much we might hedge them about with caveats.

To be absolutely clear, I am *not* arguing that the Byzantine Empire was solely a solar polity (or galactic polity, or mandala polity, or whatever terminology one chooses to use). Quite aside from chronological differences, the solar polity was a political formation rooted in the cosmologies and material realities of Southeast Asian polities, neither of which the Byzantine Empire shared. Aside from the obvious differences between Theravada Buddhism and Orthodox Christianity, such as the lack of a patriarch-like figure in the former, the solar polity emerged in a very different natural and social environment.[167] Rather, drawing a comparison between the Byzantine Empire and Southeast Asian or Central African segmentary polities, in a broader sense, is productive because we can identify consistently similar patterns of action present in both, not as part of a taxonomic quest to reclassify the Byzantine Empire as "actually" being something different from the conventional understanding of it.

Just because the Byzantine court and its ritualized subordinates could act in a way similar to segmentary polities in other parts of the world, this did not mean that they always did. I make no claim to have suddenly discovered the "true form," in a Platonic sense, of the Byzantine Empire. Indeed, even within a circumscribed time frame such as the Middle Byzantine period, I doubt that one could convincingly claim that the Byzantine Empire *was* any one given thing or can be fit into any neat category. I rather argue that we should take a leaf out of the book of the Theravada canonists. The latter, in a manner broadly reminiscent of the Heraclitean position in the Western philosophical tradition, emphasized that what we experience as forms and selves are in fact only momentary flashes of coherence in a process of constant change.[168] As such, we should not try to minimize the contradictions inherent within these systems of power, nor the fact that different philosophical conceptions of them could cohere within remarkably short periods of time. In the Byzantine case, Anthony Kaldellis has highlighted the ability of Middle Byzantine rhetoricians to utilize different and even contradictory modes of thinking about imperial power, depending on the exigencies of the situation—for example, Patriarch Photios justifying the Byzantine imperial order as divinely instituted in some situations, but outright denying its divine origin in others.[169] Subordinated courts, such as Alania, undoubtedly also utilized divergent and even contradictory methods of legitimation.[170] However, the fact that multiple methods of legitimation were used does not take away from the significance of visual and epigraphic references to the Constantinopolitan imperial center, as demonstrated by the persistence of this strategy across different regions, time periods, and cultures.

An approach to the segmentary polity that draws on Theravada theology therefore has the significant advantage that it does not attempt to replace other conceptions of the Byzantine Empire; from a certain point of view, these other "flashes of coherency" can be equally illuminating. To give but one example, the fact that we take seriously the ritual aspects of Byzantine suzerainty over peripheral elites, and the transregional character of political power in the wider reaches of the Byzantine segmentary polity, does not invalidate characterizations of the Byzantine imperial core as relatively homogeneous in terms of its political ideology. It is perfectly possible to argue that the Byzantine imperial core was not only distinguished by differences in patterns of administrative power, but also by shared

manuscripts, see V. O. Bobrovnikov, ed., *Obichai i zakon v pis'mennykh pamiatnikakh Dagestana V–nachala XX v.*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 2009).

167 For example, whereas the Byzantine court spent much of its history trying to exert control over inflows of people into the empire, even when this was actively desired, in Southeast Asia the forcible transfer of population into manpower-poor solar polities was a principal objective of warfare. See Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 123–54; P. Charanis, "The Transfer of Population as a Policy in the Byzantine Empire," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3.2 (1961): 140–54; cf. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 119–20.

168 For early Pali canonists' views of *dhamma*, see Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 32–38; for the comparison between this point of view and the Heraclitean tradition, see K. K. Inada, "The Range of Buddhist Ontology," *Philosophy East and West* 38.3 (1988): 261–80.

169 Cf. Photios, *Ep.* 1 and *Ep.* 187 (B. Laourdas and L. G. Westerink, eds., *Epistulae et Amphilochia*, 6 vols. [Leipzig, 1983], 1:21–22, 2:82); see also Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic*, 182–84.

170 North Caucasian elite iconography, for example, does not exclusively imitate Byzantine models, as in the case of the so-called Tomb of Dorgholel from Kiafar, a reused Bronze Age dolmen with mythological figures carved in a North Caucasian style. See N. A. Okhonko and Z. Dode, *Alanskaia grobnitsa XI veka* (Stavropol', 1994).

political ideologies of ethnic homogeneity *and* that the outer reaches of the Byzantine segmentary polity were marked by a transregional elite, fluid in their ethnic identity, which drew its coherence from their interrelationship with an imperial core.[171]

A final point of caution relates to the point of view from which these momentary coherences become visible: that of courts and ecclesiastical elite centers. Tambiah's original conception of the galactic polity has been criticized for being overly court-centric and for downplaying the fact that the galactic polities he described were largely confined to the lowlands of Southeast Asia, the uplands being inhabited by hill peoples outside the direct, coercive control of lowland courts.[172] Similarly, as Dimitri Obolensky long ago pointed out, the degree of Byzantinization visible in a culture could rely more on topographic elevation than distance from Constantinople, with the peoples of the Pindus and Rhodope mountains showing less obvious affinity for Constantinopolitan high culture than princely and episcopal elites in Novgorod.[173] The patterns of action in the Byzantine world that this article identifies were overwhelmingly the concern of courts and of related ecclesiastical elites. I am sure that the precise wording of the liturgy was not exactly a high priority for the average transhumant herdsman, whether in the Rhodopes or the Great Caucasus (or, for that matter, for an enslaved woman in a household, whether she lived in Constantinople or Kutaisi). For the majority of people, local area- and kin-based identities, such as the *as* in the North Caucasus and the *qevi* in Georgia, indeed did not rely on transregional contacts for their coherence, but rather seem to have been defined by geographical distance, local alliances, and an ideology of shared kinship.[174]

Nonetheless, as Johannes Preiser-Kapeller has pointed out, elite ideology is significant to the study of these non-elite communities since it shaped the environment in which they acted.[175] For example, in the case of Alania, it seems that the ideology that valued transregional connection was widely shared across social classes. This is demonstrated by the widespread use of Byzantine prestige goods, notably glass bracelets and beads, even in poorer graves, which served as a public demonstration of social position.[176] This interpretation is supported by the fact that the first signs of Christianization in the North Caucasus are not the products of royal conversion, but rather much more humble uses of Christian ritual objects and symbols in graves, with this iconography only later being adopted by elites.[177] As such, while transregional connection might not necessarily have been the binding principle that held together local communities in the North Caucasus, it seems that this was the ideology that bound them to the transregional elite that directly recognized Byzantine suzerainty.

Implications

The segmentary polity is a modern invention of English-language scholarship. It does not directly translate any term from the societies it claims to describe, whether Alur, Thai or Byzantine. It is, in short, a heuristic tool, to be taken up or discarded as necessary. It is also a partial model, which cannot—or should not—be taken as an accurate or total representation of Byzantine society, or even of the elite political systems on which it focuses. But, as George Box famously remarked, "all

171 For the former point of view, see Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic*; Kaldellis, *Romanland*. For the concentration of Kaldellis's analysis on the Byzantine imperial core, see Y. Stouraitis, rev. of A. Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome*, *JHS* 136 (2016): 296–97.

172 See M. E. Spiro, "The Buddhist Conception of Kingship and Its Historical Manifestations: A Reply to Professor Tambiah," *Journal of Asian Studies* 37.4 (1978): 809–12; J. C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT, 2009), 56–58 and passim.

173 Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*, 280–81.

174 For the *as*, see J. Latham-Sprinkle, "One Alania or Two? The Question of a 'Dual State' in the Seventh to Thirteenth Century North Caucasus," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 24 (2018): 185–208; for the qevi, see I. Javakhishvili, *Gosudarstvennyi stroi drevnei Gruzii i Armenii*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1905), 1:33–35.

175 J. Preiser-Kapeller, *Jenseits von Rom und Karl dem Grossen: Aspekte der globalen Verflechtung in der langen Spätantike, 300–800 n. Chr.* (Vienna, 2018), 11–12.

176 V. A. Kuznetsov, *Alanskie Plemena Severnogo Kavkaza* (Moscow, 1962), 50. This use of imported goods seems to have been intended as a demonstration of social position, since Ibn Faḍlan reported that glass beads were highly prestigious goods in tenth-century West Eurasia. See Ibn Faḍlān, ed. Dahhān, 150; trans. Lunde and Stone, 64; on burial practices, see Savenko, *Kharateristika sotsial'nogo razvitiia*, 93–96.

177 See Latham-Sprinkle, *Kingdom of Alania*, 98–101; V. A. Kuznetsov, *Khristianstvo na Severnom Kavkaze do XV v.* (Vladikavkaz, 2002), 33–36.

models are wrong, but some are useful."[178] I argue that the segmentary polity is a useful model of tenth- and eleventh-century Eastern Mediterranean elite politics, which may also be useful in other times and regions. In combination with other models—even seemingly incompatible ones, such as territorial approaches to sovereignty—it may open up some new insights for Byzantinists and specialists in related fields.[179] In this spirit, I offer some potentially useful implications of this model.

The most obvious conclusion is that we cannot follow the Constantinopolitan self-perception and consider the Byzantine Empire to have been a polity apart from all others. As Preiser-Kapeller has noted, its rulers' very claims of exceptionalism demonstrate that it was no exception.[180] It might have had an unusually large and homogeneous core area, with an unusually developed system of court-centered administration and highly developed material, rhetorical and ideological tools to bind regional elites into the center, even if this sometimes manifested as a desire to replace the personnel of that center. But its relationships with the outlying regions of its suzerainty, whether those were border themes or ritually subordinated kingdoms, followed similar patterns to numerous other times and places in human history.

Speaking practically, we should take seriously the continual reconstitution of power in relational terms, whether that means Alanic elites justifying their rule in terms of their relationship to the Byzantine emperor, or Burmese elites justifying their rule through their connection to the Buddhist relics of Sri Lanka.[181] As David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins comment, "the kingdom is neither an endogenous formation nor does it develop in isolation: it is a function of the relationships of a hierarchically ordered, intersocietal historical field."[182] Rather than seeking the origins of a given political order in endogenous developments within a bounded social unit of analysis, we should instead see it within the network of social possibilities afforded by connections with neighboring elites. In the case of the Byzantine segmentary polity—or at least its outer reaches—we should perhaps even talk about branches of a transregional elite with its own ideology, delineated by its closeness to imperial centers and able to transfer its allegiance between them. Rather than being mostly unrelated elites of ethnic-based polities or the subordinated members of a strict imperial hierarchy, we can view the participation of elites in this system as what Lotte Pelckmans has called the "elite stereo-style": a shifting pattern of socially enforced behaviors that are internalized into an elite identity but which can only be produced relationally, both through recognition of other elites and the performance of loyalty toward the elites who act out this "stereo-style."[183] For example, one might point to the katepanō of Cherson who was stoned to death in the street by his subjects in the 1060s. In all likelihood, he was not a Byzantine by birth, but a North Caucasian: his seals call him "Nikēphoros, the vestarch and katepanō of Cherson and Khazaria, the Alan."[184] How much he had in common with his subjects in Cherson is debatable; indeed, his lack of connections to them probably explains his appointment.[185] However, he was nonetheless able to perform this "elite stereo-style" sufficiently well that the Rus' chronicler who recorded his death identifies him solely as a stereotypically treacherous servant of the "Greeks."[186] His identity as a member of elite society was at no point fixed, but was rather dependent on the relational context in which he found himself, and which those who observed him inhabited.

A great advantage of the theory of the segmentary polity, as particularly developed in the context of Southeast Asian history, is its explicit recognition of

178 G. E. P. Box, "Robustness in the Strategy of Scientific Model Building," in *Robustness in Statistics*, ed. R. L. Launer and G. N. Wilkinson (New York, 1979), 209.

179 On the utility of seemingly incompatible models, see P. Truran, *Practical Applications of the Philosophy of Science* (Cham, 2013), 61–67.

180 See Preiser-Kapeller, *Jenseits von Rom und Karl dem Grossen*, 73–76.

181 For the latter, see Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, 79–81.

182 Graeber and Sahlins, "Theses on Kingship," 5.

183 L. Pelckmans, "Stereotypes of Past-Slavery and 'Stereo-Styles' in Post-Slavery: A Multidimensional, Interactionist Perspective on Contemporary Hierarchies," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48.2 (2015): 281–301, at 289–93.

184 The full seal reads: Κ(ύρι)ε β(οή)θ(ει) / Νικηφόρω / βεστάρχῃ / (καὶ) κατεπαν(ῳ) / Χερσωῶνος / (καὶ) Χαζαρ(ίας) τῷ / Αλανῷ. See N. A. Alekseenko and I. A. Tsepkov, "Katepanat v Tavrike: legendarnye svidetel'stva ili istoricheskie realii," *Khersonesskii sbornik* 17 (2012): 7–17 at 8.

185 For the appointment of foreigners to imperial positions who emphasized their difference from subject populations, see Kaldellis, *Romanland*, 147.

186 PSRL, vyp. 1, 166; trans. Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor, 145.

this mutability and of the shifting patterns of political power. When viewed from this point of view, many of the apparent contradictions of the edges of the Byzantine segmentary polity fall away. For example, cases of plural sovereignties found in the Caucasus, such as in the critical case of ninth-century Tao-Klarjeti, become not aberrations, but a standard part of an explanatory schema in which transfers of allegiance between imperial centers are the norm.[187]

In his attempt to rehabilitate Heraclitean, action-oriented approaches to politics, which resemble those of the Theravada canonists that inspired the theory of the solar polity, David Graeber notes that this method of thinking runs counter to much of the Western European and North American academic tradition.[188] Yet if we utilize Graeber's conclusion that it is productive to see society not as a coherent "thing" that can be bounded, that *is* or *is not*, but rather as a continual evolution of multiple competing political projects, we open up new and promising terrain for research.[189] In our particular case, the question becomes, for example, not "was the North Caucasus (or Cherson, or even Chaldia) part of the Byzantine Empire," but "who was saying that it was, and why?" Ritualized invocations of the faraway core of the Byzantine segmentary polity, such as liturgy, architecture, and royal imagery, become arguments in the ongoing struggle to define societal value, rather than reflections of an underlying reality, such as a stable, underlying, and non-discursive ethnic basis to political loyalty or the relative lack of sophistication (however defined) of a society that makes it prone to imperial influence. The coexistence of these invocations with other, less obviously Christianized forms of ritual or iconography, as in the North Caucasus, becomes not a signifier of imperfectly understood Christianization, but ghostly echoes of a long-gone struggle over what a society should be, played out through the politics of inclusion in competing segmentary polities.

In sum, the segmentary polity as a theory foregrounds marginal, mutable, and plural forms of political sovereignty. Researchers interested in these themes and in regions where these forms of sovereignty were common, such as the Caucasus, Anatolian frontier, or the Balkans, may thus find this a useful model to conceptualize the relationship between local powerbrokers and more distant imperial powers. What use may be made of this model, I leave to the academic community and public to decide.

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187 On plural sovereignty in the tenth- to eleventh-century South Caucasus, see J. Latham-Sprinkle, "Treason and Sovereignty in the Medieval Caucasus," *Chronos* 3 (2022): 50–63.

188 Graeber, *Anthropological Theory of Value*, 49–66.

189 Graeber, *Anthropological Theory of Value*, 230, 254–59.

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