

Ports and landing places at the Balkan coasts of the Byzantine Empire (4th-12th century). Monuments and technology, economy and communication



Fig. 1: The port city of Monembasia (Malvasia) on the Peloponnese (engraving of F. de Witt, Amsterdam 1680)



Fig. 2: Depiction of a Byzantine ship in the illustrated manuscript of the historical work of John Skylitzes (Madrid, Spanish National Library, 12th cent.)

The project in a nutshell

The project focuses on the coastline from Dalmatia via the Aegean Sea to the western Black Sea and the Danube delta. Based on an analysis of all available sources and archaeological evidence, the aim is a complete survey of the coastal towns, bays and estuaries in these regions; this will make possible differentiations with regard to the respective local significance of harbours for regional communication as well as for long-distance trade. Through the cooperation of the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum in Mainz (<http://web.rgzm.de/>) with the University of Vienna (<http://www.byzneo.univie.ac.at/>) and the Austrian Academy of Sciences (<http://www.oeaw.ac.at/imafo/die-abteilungen/byzanzforschung/>), the material of the "Tabula Imperii Byzantini" (cf.

<http://www.oeaw.ac.at/imafo/die-abteilungen/byzanzforschung/communities-landscapes/historische-geographie/>) can be used in order to document for the first time

systematically the medieval port places of the Balkans and to analyse them within the wider European context of the SPP 1630.

Outline of the project

The aim of the project is to document all ports and landing places at the Balkan coasts of the Byzantine Empire from Dalmatia via the Aegean Sea and the western Black Sea to the mouth of the Danube, with regard to their importance, their material structures and their functionality for both the maritime transport network and the communication with the hinterland. For this purpose, a wide range of sources and scientific literature will be critically analysed; also the broader context of economic and social developments will be taken into account.

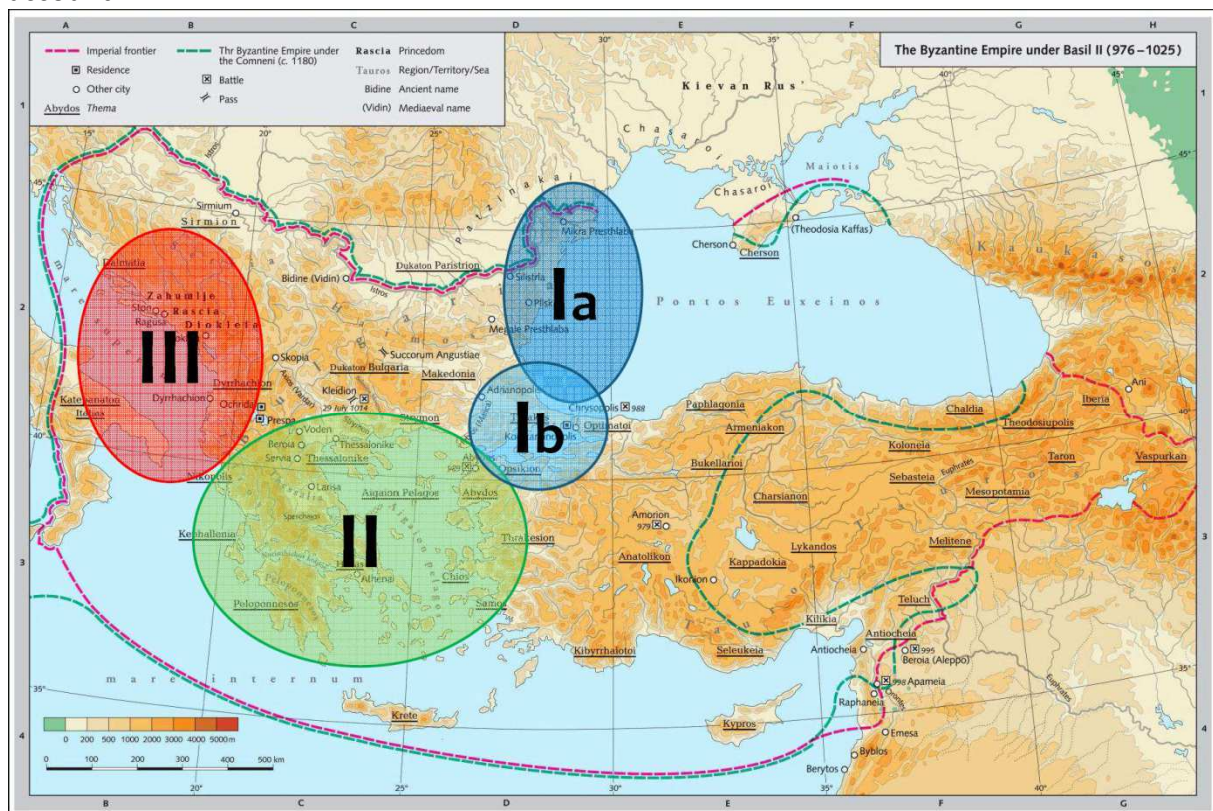


Fig. 3: Map of Byzantine Empire in 1025 with the regions covered by the project at the Balkan coasts (Ia: coastal areas of Romania and Bulgaria; Ib coastal areas of Turkey in Europe (covered in *TIB* 12, 2008); II: coastal areas of Greece; III: coastal areas of Dalmatia and Albania)

The time frame is determined by the emergence of the Byzantine state as successor of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century and by the turn of the 12th to the 13 Century, when the Fourth Crusade in 1204 led to the dismantling of the Empire, after already previously manifested particularistic tendencies since around 1185. After the fall of Constantinople in 1204, the Italian naval powers massively enlarged their commercial presence in the "Romania" and thus modified the framework of ports. The selected endpoint also corresponds with the one of the entire SPP 1630. The Balkan coasts covered in the project were hitherto mainly or even permanently under control of the Byzantine Empire, which sets them apart from other European coastlines which were only temporarily under imperial rule.

In the first phase of the project there will be created a database of coastal towns, bays and estuaries which enabled a landing for small, medium or large vessels as well as of their edificial structure, including all available data, based

- 1) on manuals of sea lanes and coastal traffic lines (Periploi, Portulans) from late antiquity and medieval times,
- 2) other written sources (such as travel reports or hagiography),
- 3) the so far collected archaeological evidence,
- 4) geographical-geological research on the dynamics of the coastlines, and
- 5) research literature on the subject.

Of special significance with regard to the last point is the long-term project "Tabula Imperii Byzantini" of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (cf. <http://www.oeaw.ac.at/imafo/die-abteilungen/byzanzforschung/communities-landscapes/historische-geographie/>) which unites history, economy and trade, transportation and demographics, settlements and other documented or rediscovered monuments and infrastructure for an overall picture of a region - so far in 11 bulky volumes on central regions of the Byzantine Empire (since 1976). This material will be used to establish a documentation of ports, updated, but also reaching far beyond of the objectives of the TIB-project.

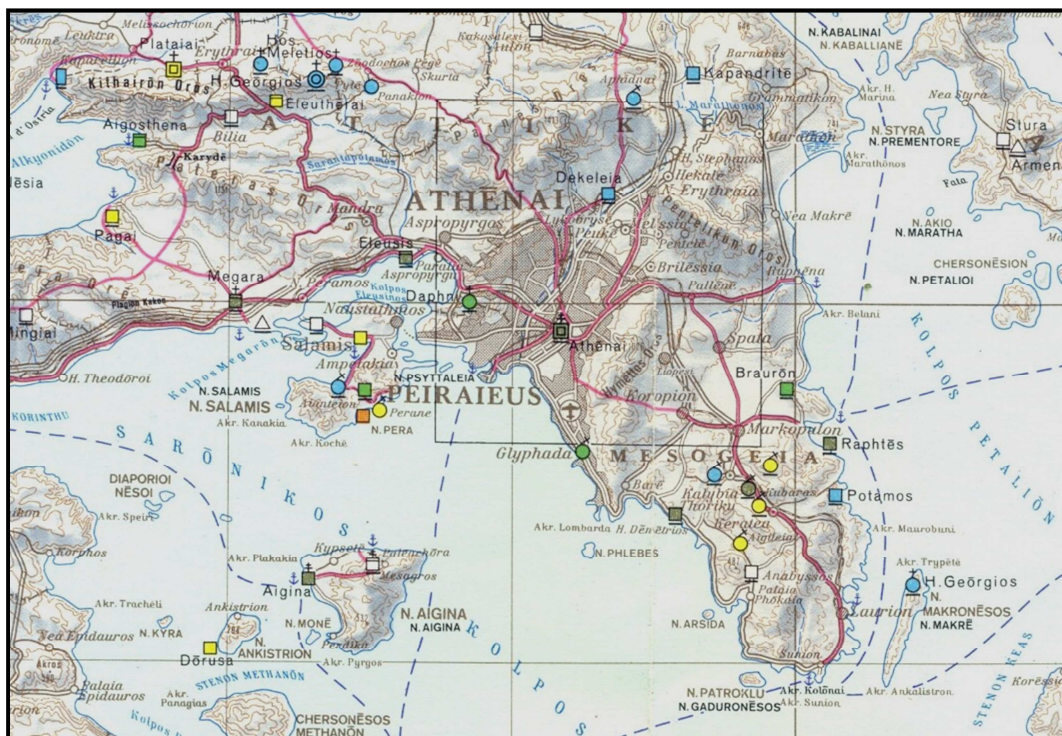


Fig. 4: Extract from the map for TIB 1 (*Hellas und Thessalia*, Vienna 1976) with Athens in the centre

In a cooperation project also a new laser scanning method (airborne laser bathymetry) will be tested, which allows underwater surveys up to 10 meters depth; thus, a coastal zone only fragmentarily documented in written sources (especially in *De administrando imperio* of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, 10th century) in northern Dalmatia (islands of Cres and Losinj with the city of Osor) with further port facilities will be surveyed. An accurate knowledge of the sea surface topography allows us to determine their influence on the shape and size of port structures in greater detail.

Benefiting from the framework of the SPP, the exchange and discussion of results with other projects will be intensified in the second project phase; the SPP-network facilitates this

process of mutual giving and taking. At the same time, field surveys in the regions of the project will be undertaken in order to examine ports and coasts and to check and modify the previously obtained results. Also the written source base will be expanded by enriching the comprehensive database of port terminology created in phase I with the help of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG), an online database of the most important Greek texts also from the Byzantine period. The types of amphora found in the various ports will be analysed with regard to their dissemination also beyond the study area in order to identify the routes of goods and traffic in greater detail; for this purpose, also ship graveyards identified at dangerous points of maritime routes will be included into the data set.

The final "analysis in context" intends to put together the information obtained on the individual elements of ports to a mosaic. Basically the aim is to depict an accurate and realistic image of ports of different dimensions on the background of environmental conditions, edificial structures and the documentation of the trading volume. The weighting of these categories of local and over-regional significance and the distribution of the representatives of different types of ports will allow us to develop further the concept of separate, but overlapping "shipping-zones" and to better understand the interaction of ports with the hinterland. Also the mental attitude towards the selection and use of ports and landing places has to be evaluated. Did the Byzantines merely follow a conservative tradition of the continuation of existing ports (Hohlfelder 1997) or did they pay greater attention to secure locations in the face of often hostile neighbours, for instance? The position on peninsulas, which we observe in Mesembria (Nesebar) and Sozopolis in Bulgaria as well as in Monembasia (Peloponnese) or in Cefalu (Sicily), all of them important hubs, cannot a priori be dismissed as coincidental parallels.



Fig. 5: View of the peninsula of Monembasia (Peloponnese) from the mainland



Fig. 6: View of the peninsula of Sozopolis (Bulgaria)



Fig. 7: View of the peninsula of Ulcinj (Montenegro; map of Simon Pinargenti, 1573)

The surface of a harbour area with wharves and jetties, its storage capacities and its relation to the overall size of the settlement is not solely dependent on morphological conditions, but also reflects the degree of the respective connection to the hinterland. The respective productivity and terrestrial traffic arteries of the hinterland (see the example of cereal cultivation in Thrace and the supply and marketing of grain in Rhaidestos on the Propontis)

have to be taken into consideration as more or less stimulating factors for the overall functionality of a port.

In constant exchange with the other projects in the SPP thus a new analysis of the complex interplays between seaports and hinterland, between sea lanes and land routes, and between natural conditions, physical and institutional infrastructure and human mobility in the pre-modern period will be possible.



Fig. 8: The Byzantine port of Abydos at the Dardanelles (depiction in the illustrated manuscript of the historical work of John Skylitzes; Madrid, Spanish National Library, 12th cent.)

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