

Byzantine Ceremony

Roman¹ life revolves around the concept of order. This order was expressed through the ceremonies that were used to show the Emperor to the people. Indeed, the same word, 'taxi' was used in period to denote both 'ceremony' and 'order'. For the Romans: "terrestrial order was merely the imperfect reflection of celestial order. At its summit was God's lieutenant, the emperor, whose court mirrored that of heaven" (Cavallo 1997: 2). The emperor may not have been born to the purple. He could have started life as a soldier, an artisan or even a peasant (all occurred). He may have come from an ethnic minority. However, once he was elected² to the position he gained all of its prestige. The overwhelming importance of the position can be seen from the common phrase: "The sun acts like the emperor" (McCormick 1997: 230). Like the emperor, the sun oversaw everything, shed its light on all and was far above, and more glorious than, those beneath.

This ceremonial ordering can best be seen in a court procession. This example is from the tenth century, but it stayed similar right up to the end in 1453. If the emperor had to leave the palace, the road he was taking was repaired, cleaned and sprinkled with sawdust scented with rosewater. The streets would be hung with garlands, sweet-smelling plants and such items as rich textiles and silverware. Merchants who thus both showed their loyalty in glorifying the emperor and also advertised their wares often provided the latter.

Along the way staged events would take place. This could include the singing of paeans of praise to the emperor by choruses or individuals. A fountain near where they were located could be filled with wine, almonds and pistachios. Bleachers were built for spectators (including ambassadors) to watch this staged affirmation of power and order. Petitioners would take advantage of this opportunity to circumvent the palace hierarchy by throwing petitions at the emperor's feet (presumably there was someone to pick them up).

The cortege had a set order. First to appear are the banner bearers and the Cross of Constantine. Next were state functionaries, graded by rank. Strict sumptuary laws governed what they wore so that it was of lesser splendour than the items worn by the emperor³. Lastly came the Imperial group of the emperor, bodyguards, family and chief eunuchs.

Upon arrival at the destination (perhaps a church, or even back to the palace) another set of rituals took place. Among other things this usually included gifts to all officials. This could be up to 10lbs of gold coin and was usually at least 2lbs. Favoured foreigners could also receive gifts of silk⁴. Not even the poor were neglected. Money would be set aside to provide food, lodging and even pay taxes for them.

Ambassadors would usually be greeted in the throne room, a marvellous place that inspired that in the Wizard of Oz. The emperor was initially seen behind a series of silken screens, which would be pulled aside if the foreign visitor was sufficiently important. As the throne was approached mechanical animals would make the appropriate sounds and organs would play (remember that this is a time when large pipe organs were rare). On reaching the throne it would rise into the air in front of the astounded supplicant.

All these stage devices were intended to impress the majesty of the emperor on the viewer and to show the order that held the empire together. From the records we have, they worked. Even the Latins and western barbarians, arriving determined to scoff, were invariably impressed. Such groups as the Russ were awed and stunned.

Ceremony and procession are still used today to show the hierarchy of power, even in places like the SCA where we are playacting their appearance. It can easily be shown that, when their use declines, so does respect for the verities that they represent.

- 1 The term 'Byzantine' was made up by modern scholars to give them a shorthand way of talking about the Empire. The actual people of the time talked of the Roman and the Roman Empire and saw its history as contiguous.
- 2 Whilst many emperors inherited the job they were, at least theoretically, elected to it by the acclaim of the army and / or the Senate (such as it was). Usually an Emperor took great care to ensure the person who succeeded him was the one they wanted by proclaiming him junior co-emperor (and getting this confirmed). (Veyne 1992)
- 3 SCA people making Byzantine garb should note this. You should never wear an exact copy of Imperial garb. This is a punishable breach of etiquette.
- 4 Although anyone could buy silk, its export was strictly forbidden without permission. Being given it by the emperor automatically gave a person permission to take it out. This was much appreciated, even by Latin ambassadors.

Bibliography

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