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0521770173 - Byzantium's Balkan Frontier: A Political Study of the Northern Balkans,  
900-1204

Paul Stephenson

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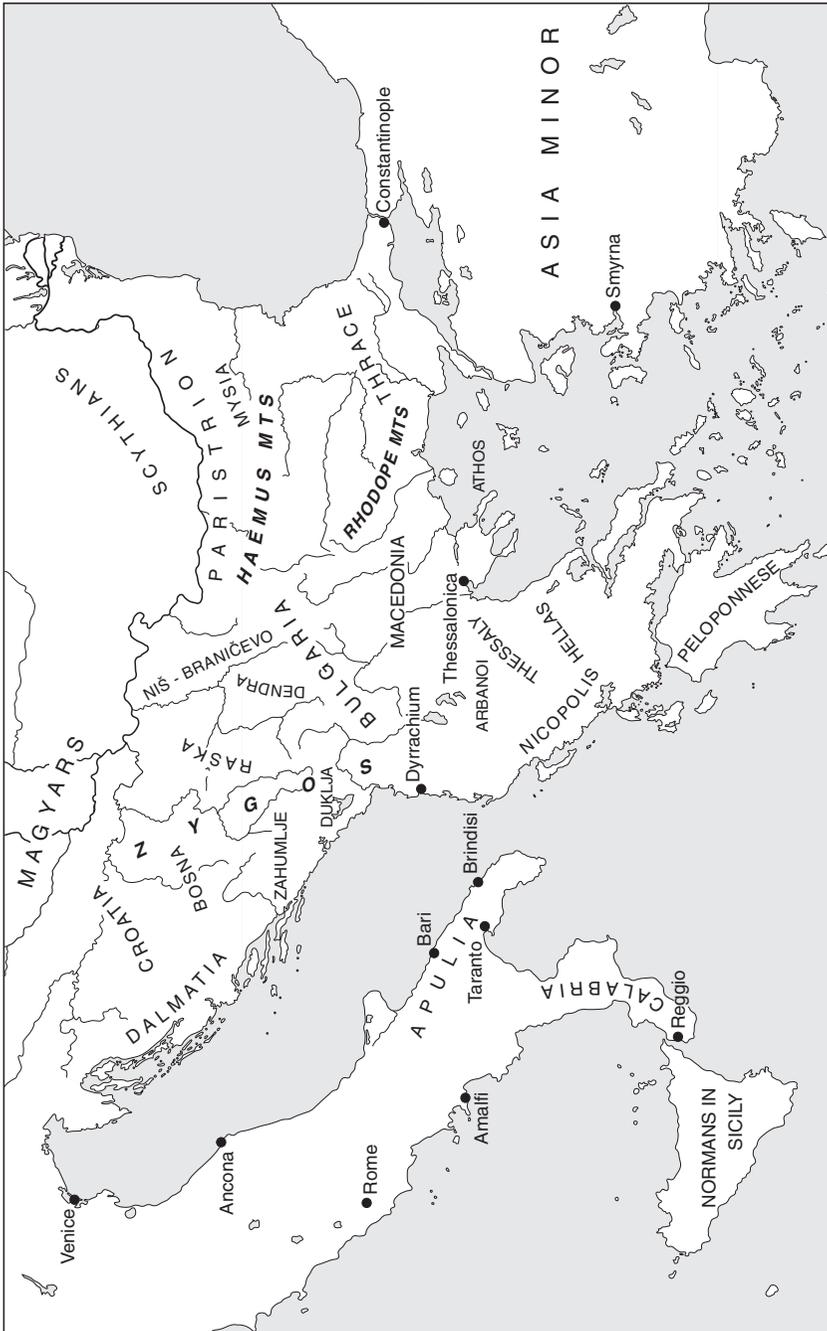
## *Introduction*

*Byzantium's Balkan Frontier* seems a straightforward title, but it is ambiguous: the meanings conveyed by the three words to a modern reader would not have been recognized in medieval south-eastern Europe. The Byzantines called themselves *Rhomaioi*, Romans, and their capital 'New Rome'. Byzantium – from Byzantion, the site on the Bosphorus refounded as Constantinople – was a neologism of the sixteenth century, and its use was essentially pejorative, intended to distinguish the decadent Christian successor from its predecessor, the Enlightenment ideal of Rome. Balkan is a Turkish word for mountain, first applied by the Ottomans to the range known to classical and Byzantine authors as Haemus, and today as the Stara Planina. Balkan was first applied to the whole mountainous peninsula in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> There was no Byzantine collective word for all the lands between the Danube and the Mediterranean, except as part of a greater whole: Europe, as defined by Herodotus, or – in contexts we will explore further – *oikoumene*, 'the civilized world'. The word 'frontière', from the Latin 'frons', emerged in French to signify the facade of a church, or the front line of troops disposed in battle formation. It came to be used as an alternative to 'limite', from the Latin 'limes', and by the sixteenth century had absorbed the meaning of the latter; that is, it contained the notion of limitation. However, 'frontière' also retained its own connotations of facing and moving forward.<sup>2</sup> The English derivation is still used in such contexts as 'advancing (or pushing back) the frontiers of knowledge', which while positing outward expansion at the same time implies a delimited, finite body.

<sup>1</sup> Obolensky 1971: 20. See now more expansively Todorova 1997: 21–37.

<sup>2</sup> Febvre 1973: 208–11.

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o.1 The Balkans, 900-1204

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## MAPS AND FRONTIERS

A full historical articulation of the concept of the frontier was integral to the creation of nation states with their profoundly politicized borders. The geopolitical developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries heralded, indeed required, the rise of cartography as a method for representing graphically the extent and limits of nations. It remains to be seen whether there existed an equivalent Byzantine conception of the frontier, but we can be fairly certain that they did not articulate the notion cartographically. Byzantium, an empire which endured for over a millennium, has left us no maps.<sup>3</sup> Three Byzantine portolans have survived which list ports and the distances between them, but these were not accompanied by maps.<sup>4</sup> Maritime charts of the twelfth century and later show the Dalmatian coast, but nothing of the peninsula's interior. The earliest known map of the whole of the northern Balkans was produced in Bulgaria between 1430 and 1453, probably in 1444.<sup>5</sup> This was a military map, and might lead us to suppose that Byzantine emperors and generals who fought so often in the northern Balkans between 900 and 1204 would have benefited from the production of similar charts. But there is no indication that they ever did, and accounts of campaigns and journeys through the highlands and passes refer most often to local guides, for example the Vlachs, whose geographical knowledge gave them a remarkable advantage in dealings with the empire. Nevertheless, historians of Byzantium frequently produce maps which show the extent of the empire at a stated point in time. Their maps will generally include clear indications of where they believe the empire's borders, the political limits of imperial authority, should be located. Sequential maps might illustrate clearly, indeed far more clearly than text alone, how the empire's limits, and by implication political fortunes, fluctuated through time. For example, the second edition of Michael Angold's excellent political history of the empire between 1025 and 1204, has maps with the straightforward titles 'The Byzantine Empire c. 1025', and 'The Empire

<sup>3</sup> *ODB*: ii, 385–6. Of course, the Byzantines preserved ancient cartographic wonders, such as Ptolemy's world map, which are on a quite different scale to the charts with which we are concerned. It is to these that Eustathius of Thessalonica was referring when he wrote of 'the image of the earthly chart drawn by the hand of the craftsman', cited at Zafropoulou 1997: 41. See also Dilke 1985: 72–86, 154–82.

<sup>4</sup> Zafropoulou 1997: 42–3. The relationship between portolans and navigational charts is analogous to that between itineraries and terrestrial maps. Itineraries were used effectively without the need for graphical representation of the locations, distances and key sights *en route*, throughout the medieval period. <sup>5</sup> Nikolić 1982–3: 63–75.

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under the Comneni'.<sup>6</sup> Such illustrations do not reveal that Byzantine authors rarely provide details to help a reader locate a place, and it has taken considerable effort on the part of modern scholars to locate some of the more familiar sites or regions in space and time. Examples which we will encounter in the following chapters are Presthlavitzza, 'Little Preslav' (a fortified town), Dendra (a region), and Paradounavon (a Byzantine administrative district).

The maps which accompany this text, like all maps of the Byzantine Balkans, are the creation of a modern author which do not, since they cannot, illustrate medieval perceptions of the empire or of its frontiers. And to that extent they are little different from the text itself, which is a work of synthesis and interpretation with a particular perspective. Many historians now believe it is impossible to produce an objective historical narrative from the often highly subjective data with which they must work. Historians of medieval Byzantium have better reason than many to despair of ever divining 'truths', for the limited written sources on which all interpretations rely are remarkably difficult to handle, still less decipher. The most eminent commentators have written of 'distortion' and condemned Byzantine literature as derivative. Prejudice in the selection and arrangement of information is ubiquitous, and the usual 'solution' – employing Rankean rules to compare contemporary sources – is frequently impossible: there are simply too few texts. Nevertheless, there are pertinent questions that we can ask of our texts and expect answers, starting with 'How did Byzantines in the tenth to twelfth centuries conceive of the empire's frontiers?'

The medieval Byzantine dictionary, the *Souda*, states that 'the zones near the edges (*termasi*) of the lands are called *eschatia*', which might be translated as 'the extremities', 'the periphery' or 'the borders'.<sup>7</sup> The *Souda* is a compilation of excerpts from earlier sources, and this definition appears to date from the third century.<sup>8</sup> Further specific terms appear to have been formulated on the empire's eastern front in the seventh and eighth centuries, a period of significant retrenchment.<sup>9</sup> By the mid-tenth century, the *De Administrando Imperio* – a source to which I will devote considerable attention in chapter one – uses three terms. The first, *sunoros*, means 'bordering on'.<sup>10</sup> The second, *akra*, is most simply translated as 'the extremity', although it can also mean the top of a hill,

<sup>6</sup> Angold 1997: 352–3 (map 1), 356–7 (map 3). An alternative to Angold's map of the Comnenian empire may be found at Magdalino 1993: xxi, where borders are not indicated. See also *ODB*: i, 354–5.

<sup>7</sup> *Suidae Lexicon*: i, 432.

<sup>8</sup> Isaac 1988: 125–47.

<sup>9</sup> Haldon and Kennedy 1980: 79–116; Kaegi 1986: 279–305.

<sup>10</sup> *DAI*: 140, 144, 154, 212, 214.

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and hence came to mean 'citadel'.<sup>11</sup> The third term, *horos* (alternatively *horion* or *horismos*) is a fixed linear border, often defined by the setting up of boundary stones: a process known as *horothesia*.<sup>12</sup> Documents preserved in the archives of monasteries on Mount Athos refer frequently to the *horion* or *horismos* of monastic lands, since it was imperative to establish the exact extent and limits of lands granted to or possessed by foundations which were subject to or exempt from taxation.<sup>13</sup> The same principles and terms applied to the empire as a whole. In the twelfth century Anna Comnena uses *horos*, *horion* and *horismos* to refer to linear borders, for example to refer to a river established as the border in a peace treaty.<sup>14</sup>

Such fixed linear borders are often regarded as the empire's natural frontiers, and for both medieval and modern authors the Danube is the empire's natural frontier in the northern Balkans.<sup>15</sup> But as with all natural frontiers, 'nature only serves as a mask; it is the mask worn by long-standing historical and political facts, the memories of which men retained over centuries' (Febvre 1973: 215). The notion of the natural frontier is profoundly politicized, and culturally proscriptive: it marks the barrier and point of transition between 'self' and 'other' in many historical contexts. In medieval Byzantium the frontier delimited the *oikoumene*, and marked the point of transition from the civilized world to the barbarian. The notion of the barbarian was an invention of fifth-century Athens. The barbarian was the universal anti-Greek defined in opposition to Hellenic culture. The two identities were polarities and together were universal: all that was Greek was civilized; all that was barbarian was uncivilized. Byzantine authors, through their classical education, inherited this way of seeing other peoples.

Barbarism did not only threaten the political borders, it constantly circled the conceptual limits of the Christian Roman empire, and threatened to fall suddenly and swiftly upon those not standing vigilant guard. Thus, in the early 1080s in his capacity of Master of Rhetors, Theophylact Hephaistus delivered an oration in which he praised the weather in Constantinople where 'winter does not rebel, nor does he rush the frontiers and fall upon us in Scythian fashion, freezing the blood of living creatures and laying crystalline fetters upon the rivers' (Theophylact, *Discours*, ed. Gautier: 181.5–8). His chosen subject is

<sup>11</sup> *DAI*: 228, 236, 238.      <sup>12</sup> *DAI*: 266, 270.

<sup>13</sup> For example, *Actes de Lavra*: 263–9, especially 268.69 (*horion*), 269.87 (*horismos*).

<sup>14</sup> *Alexiad*: i, 138; ii, 43 (trans.: 130, 182).

<sup>15</sup> One medieval scholar is Michael Psellus, *Scripta Minora*: ii, 239, which is translated below at p. 112; a modern scholar is Alexander Kazhdan, *ODB*: ii, 1797.

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prophetic, for he would later write often and at length of his exile from Constantinople, and his choice of imagery is fascinating. The winter outside the most civilized of cities is personified as the archetypal barbarian, the Scythian, launching sudden raids across the limits of the *oikoumene*. As we will see below (at pp. 107–14, 153) Byzantine authors refer to numerous northern peoples as Scythians, alluding both to their origins (as far as the Byzantines were concerned) in ancient Scythia, and to their way of life, which resembled that of Herodotus' Scythians.

The barbarian beyond the frontier has been a constant feature of attempts by various peoples to define their own brand of 'civilization'. The seminal frontier thesis in modern historiography, expounded in 1893 by Frederick Jackson Turner, historian of the American west, considers the frontier as 'the meeting point between savagery and civilization'.<sup>16</sup> Turner saw the frontier as crucial to the creation of a distinctly American identity, where the American was self-reliant, innovative and ruggedly individualistic. This 'pioneer spirit' facilitated the westward expansion of a peculiar form of 'civilization' across lands previously occupied by native American 'savages'. Turner's thoughts on the significance of the frontier were a statement of a prevailing ideology which we can now contextualize and criticize. Similarly, we can contextualize and criticize Byzantine perceptions of frontiers and barbarians. There can be no barbarian except in the mind of the self-consciously civilized person, and just as Turner's Indians were savages in the minds of his European-American frontiersmen, so northern peoples were considered by Byzantine authors to be Scythians.

Already it will be clear that few frontiers are purely political or military, and to place such emphasis on the linear border side-steps many concerns addressed in recent frontier studies.<sup>17</sup> Wherever sufficient data allows, I will be concerned with the place of the frontier in Byzantine thought, rhetoric and ideology. However, and in spite of my earlier statements, the main body of my text will comprise a narrative of Byzantine activity in the northern Balkans through three centuries with emphasis on political and military matters. I believe this is still a valuable exercise, and one which will hopefully facilitate further discussion of the significance of the frontier in Byzantine history. Moreover, even a political approach raises interesting conceptual questions. First, for example, what did the political border signify for the peoples living on either side of it? Can we even know that they were aware of the border, or exactly

<sup>16</sup> Turner 1920: 3.<sup>17</sup> Mathisen and Sivan 1996: 1–7.

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where it ran? Occasionally these questions can be answered, for example by the discovery of boundary stones. More frequently they cannot. Second, by drawing a simple line on a map we are obliged to consider the nature of political authority within and beyond that line. If we accept that Basil II extended the political borders of the empire as far as the Danube (see below at pp. 62–77), we cannot assume that political authority in every region south of the Danube was exercised in the same way. Nor can we assume that this way was (or these ways were) different to those beyond the frontier. If, as I argue, Byzantine authority was almost always exercised through existing local power structures, how does Byzantine government in Raška (in Serbia, within the frontier) differ from Byzantine influence in southern Hungary (beyond the frontier)? Or how do both differ from government in the highly developed *thema* (administrative district) of Thrace, or the new *thema* of Bulgaria established by Basil II? Can we identify both an internal and external frontier? And where then do we cross from domestic policy into foreign policy, or from provincial administration into frontier policy?

## CONTENTS AND CONTEXTS

In the following chapters we will explore the nature of Byzantine influence and authority in each of the frontier regions in the northern Balkans: Paristrion, the lands beside the Ister (Danube) in modern Romania and Bulgaria; Sirmium, from the Danube-Sava to Niš (in Serbia); Dalmatia and Croatia; Dyrrachium and Duklja, Zahumlje and Travunija which comprise most of modern Albania, Montenegro and Hercegovina. We will also consider regions of the interior highlands: Bosna and Raška, which stretched across the regions known today in English as Bosnia, Kosovo and the Sandžak; the *thema* of Bulgaria, with its centre in the modern Republic of Macedonia; and lands beyond the frontier, principally medieval Hungary (including modern Vojvodina), but also Italy. Each region was of interest to various Byzantine emperors between 900 and 1204, but certain areas were of greater interest at certain times.

The chronological limits of this study were chosen with maps in mind. It begins when Bulgaria dominated the northern Balkans, and her political borders ran along the Danube to the north, in the south-west within miles of the great Byzantine cities of Thessalonica and Dyrrachium, and in the south stopped at the Great Fence of Thrace. A suitable modern illustration of this can be found in *The Cambridge Medieval History*

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(*CMH*), or alternatively Dimitri Obolensky's *Byzantine Commonwealth*, which is still the best analysis of Byzantine concerns in the northern Balkans and beyond.<sup>18</sup> My text becomes fuller when the empire's border is restored to the lower Danube by John I Tzimisces (969–76), and again by Basil II (976–1025). However, the period 900–1025 is treated as an introduction to lands, peoples, and *themata* which will be developed in considering the subsequent period. Thus the text becomes fuller still in the later eleventh century, and is at its fullest in the reign of Manuel I Comnenus (1143–80) when the imperial frontier was advanced, for the first time in centuries, beyond the rivers Danube and Sava following the annexation of Sirmium and Dalmatia.

The eleventh and twelfth centuries have received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years, particularly in Britain and France, which has done much to revise the dominant interpretation established by George Ostrogorsky. Ostrogorsky's political *History of the Byzantine State* posits the thesis that the empire achieved its medieval apogee under Basil II. One of the few maps in the second English edition of his book illustrates the extent of the First Bulgarian Empire, inviting the reader to consider the scale of the reconquest masterminded by the 'military' emperors of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, and to contrast this with the ineffectual 'civilian' emperors of the mid-eleventh century.<sup>19</sup> He states unambiguously: 'The death of Basil II marked a turning point in Byzantine history. It was followed by a period of decline in which in its foreign policy Byzantium lived on the prestige won in the previous age and at home gave play to all the forces making for disintegration' (Ostrogorsky 1968: 320). In the first chapter of this work I present my own interpretation of imperial foreign policy in 'the previous age', the tenth century. In chapter two I offer my assessment of John I's and Basil II's campaigns in the Balkans. It will be clear that my judgement of their achievements differs considerably from Ostrogorsky's, and sets the scene for a fuller analysis of imperial foreign and frontier policy in the western half of the empire in the period after Basil II's death.

Paul Lemerle mounted the first powerful defence of imperial policy in the period of 'civilian' government. He called for Byzantine policy to be considered in relation to the wider historical picture, for attention to be paid to the forces and changes affecting northern and western Europe at this time, and for credit to be given for the enlightened and sensitive

<sup>18</sup> *CMH*: iv.1, 512; Obolensky 1971: 100. Alternatively, see Runciman 1963 [1929]: 80.

<sup>19</sup> Ostrogorsky 1968: 289. The maps in the third German edition are better. See Ostrogorsky 1963: 256–7 (Karte IV: 'Das Reich Basileios II. um 1025'), 320–1 (Karte V: 'Das Reich der Komnenen').

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manner with which successive emperors responded. Lemerle also demanded that less attention be paid to individual agency, and maintained that emphasis placed on the emperors and their personal roles obscured appreciation of processes. It led, he stressed, to the inevitable and obfuscatory juxtaposition of strong and weak, 'civilian' and 'military', good and bad. Nevertheless, Lemerle had his own champions. He praised Constantine IX Monomachus (1042–55) for widening access to the senate, promoting education, and instituting a more meritocratic system of government. Another of his heroes was Nicephoritzes, chief minister in the reign of Michael VII Ducas (1071–8), who attempted to restore central control over the empire's economy and rebuild her armies, albeit with a great reliance on mercenaries.<sup>20</sup> In effect Lemerle credited a 'civilian' emperor and chief minister with creating a 'New Society'.

Lemerle, with his French disciples and colleagues, took discussion of the eleventh century onto a different level, and his ideas have been embraced in Britain and the USA. As Angold (1997: 16–17) put it: 'The old notion . . . that the eleventh-century crisis received political expression in the shape of a struggle between the civil and military aristocracy . . . has been quietly shelved.' However, Angold questioned Lemerle's upbeat interpretation of the eleventh century, and his shifting all the blame onto Alexius I. He stressed the poisoned legacy of Basil II, which his successors struggled to master, but ultimately failed to control. For this reason, like Lemerle, he dealt more sympathetically with Constantine IX, who attempted to 'face up to the state's predicament', 'to put the empire on a peacetime footing', and 'to ease the state's financial difficulties by cutting military expenditure'. Such an analysis has been made possible by the great advances in our understanding of the medieval Byzantine economy. Much of the seminal work was undertaken by Alexander Kazhdan, whose studies in Russian have gradually been made more widely accessible through his collaborative projects with English-speaking colleagues. Others have made substantial contributions, and there is now no doubt that the Byzantine economy was growing rapidly throughout the eleventh century and into the twelfth. An issue with which scholars now must grapple is how the imperial government managed the wealth, how it controlled and distributed resources. In chapters three and four I offer a particular perspective on the empire's predicament as it was bequeathed by Basil II, on the methods employed to deal with subject

<sup>20</sup> Lemerle 1977: *passim*, especially 249–312.

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peoples and neighbours on a peacetime footing, and on the relations between centre and periphery and the flow of resources. I do not intend for these chapters to constitute a full political history of the northern Balkans in the eleventh century, still less solve the problems of the relationship between Byzantine orthodox culture and the nascent Slavic orthodox culture, or cultures, in the peninsula; so much will be apparent from the lack of attention I have devoted to the emergence of Slavic literary culture in exactly this period. However, I hope that my contribution adds something to a continuing discussion, and provides an impetus to further explorations of processes of cultural transmission and change in the medieval Balkans.

The twelfth century, the age of the Comneni, has followed the eleventh into vogue, with corresponding criticism of Ostrogorsky's approval for the revival of triumphal militarism. Once again Lemerle was in the vanguard of those who valued John Zonaras' highly critical account of the reign of Alexius I Comnenus (1081–1118) more highly than the *Alexiad*, the biography produced by Alexius' daughter Anna. A recent collection of essays restores the balance between the two accounts, and advances our knowledge of diverse aspects of Alexius' reign, and of the government and society at the beginning of the twelfth century. The most valuable contribution for this work is Jonathan Shepard's study of Alexius' diplomacy, which, when placed alongside his many other detailed papers, establishes a new context for any analysis of relations between east and west.<sup>21</sup> The rise of the Latin Christendom, and its most obvious confrontation with the eastern empire in the form of the First Crusade have deservedly received significant attention from Byzantine scholars, following the eloquent lead of Steven Runciman.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the Norman achievement has generated interest, but too few useful studies by Byzantinists. My brief contribution, in chapter five, must be read in this context. However, my emphasis, naturally, is on the frontier lands where Normans and Crusaders first entered the empire. The Norman invasion of Dyrrachium in 1081 gives the first, and best documented opportunity to study how the frontier system in the western Balkans functioned. The advent of the First Crusade, and its successes in the east, presages a new era when Byzantine eastern and western policy, always related, can no longer be regarded as wholly distinct.

Venice played a central role in the Latin expansion into Outremer, and her merchant fleet was essential for supplying Frankish colonists trapped

<sup>21</sup> Shepard 1996: 68–132.

<sup>22</sup> Runciman 1951: *passim*; Shepard 1988b: 185–277; Shepard 1997: 107–29.