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CASTRATION AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE STRENGTHENING OF THE DYNASTIC PRINCIPLE*

The paper discusses examples of corporal mutilation that accompanied intra-dynastic conflicts or clashes with real or potential pretenders to the imperial throne. Castration was a known but rarely applied measure in the political conflicts of the 7th and 8th century. Hence the two consecutive cases of castration of all sons of the deposed emperor Michael I Rhangabe (813) and the assassinated emperor Leo V the Armenian (820) deviated from the previous Byzantine practice. The paper establishes that in these cases the choice of castration as the most effective means of ensuring the future political disqualification of the princes and their families was a result of the strengthening dynastic principle, which was particularly noticeable in the cases of the descendents of Constantine V from his third marriage. It also highlights that castration was never used on the deposed emperor *autokratōr*, but only on the bearers of imperial dignities (co-emperors) or simply princes with no imperial title. In examples where castration was used to ensure political disqualification, it was not a sanction for an individual wrongdoing (in other words, castration was not a penalty prescribed for a specific transgression); if these cases were a matter of punishment at all, the penalty was meant to sanction the entire bloodline (γένος) rather than the (innocent) individual.

Castration was a milder form of punishment compared to other forms of physical mutilation (severing of the nose, tongue or ears; blinding). Due to the ambivalent attitude of the Byzantine society towards eunuchs, castration did not necessarily lead to social marginalization. Hence, it was applied more frequently during the reign of the Macedonian dynasty, but prominent castrates were incorporated into the official hierarchy as members of an order of eunuchs (τάξεις τῶν εὐνούχων).

Keywords: corporal punishment, castration, legislation, eunuch, dynasty

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Legal irregularity in the succession of the imperial title in Byzantium, and hence the line of succession within the ruling family, forced emperors to ensure their potential successor by conferring the title of caesar and later co-emperor on the heir apparent. Vacillation between the principles of seniority and primogeniture – particularly marked in the 7th century as well as later – led to conflicts between the members of the emperor's immediate family. In addition, the lack of laws on succession made establishing a dynasty more difficult, despite the growing awareness of and need for strengthening and adhering to the dynastic principle in the Byzantine society.

One of the facets of the struggle for the preservation of supreme power in the hands of a single family or one of its branches was the mutilation of its members – potential or real pretenders to the imperial throne. Physical maiming also had a symbolic character and the severing of a certain body part corresponded to the transgression of the victim. This is indicated in Byzantine criminal legislation, first of all in the *Ecloga* issued by Leo III in 726.¹ This new code of law presented the elaborate system of physical punishment for the perpetrators of certain crimes, which had been in use in Byzantium throughout the 7th century. In many cases mutilation was substituted for the capital punishment prescribed in Roman legislation for certain crimes. The introduction of various forms of corporal punishment was not merely a consequence of Eastern (Persian) influences; it was also a reflection of the evolution of the legislation inherited by Christian Byzantium from classical Rome and of the changing social understanding of corporal symbolism.²

In addition to the severing of the nose and tongue, amputating limbs, and blinding, the Byzantine penal practice also used castration. In Byzantine criminal legislation the penalty of castration was intended for those that violated the ban on implementing it in the territory of the Empire, as prescribed by Justinian's novel (JN 142), which was later included into the *Basilica* (Vas. LX, 51, 64). The *Ecloga*, however, prescribed genital mutilation in only one case: the crime of bestiality (sodomy) was punishable by severing of the penis (καυλοκοπεῖν), which has sometimes been translated incorrectly and interpreted as the penalty of castration.³ In view of the risks involved in the removal of the penis, the end result of this brutal punishment was probably death.⁴

In political conflicts within the same ruling family or in the process of purging its opponents – real or potential pretenders to the imperial throne – castration was

¹ *Ecloga* (L. Burgmann) c. XVII.

² *Patlagean*, Le blason pénal 405–427; cf. *Maleon*, Impossible return 32.

³ *Ecloga* XVII.39. See for example: *Ecloga* (L. Burgmann) p. 239: *Sodomiten... sollen entmannt werden*. Cf. the Russian translation, Эклога. Византийский законодательный свод VIII века, ed. Е. Э. Луишиц, Moscow 1965, 72: *Скотоложество карается оскотлением*. In contrast, *Patlagean*, Le blason pénal 406, provides the correct translation: *couper la verge*.

⁴ The legislator's intention was to punish the perpetrator of a criminal offense rather than to make him a castrate. To ensure the survival of the punished individual, the penis removal surgery needed to be performed by a trained person; in addition, the victim needed to receive adequate medical care after his operation, as well as a medical device that would allow unimpeded urination (an artificial urethra).

not used nearly as frequently as other ways of mutilation. Hence two consecutive cases of castration of Byzantine princes in the first half of the 9th century are particularly interesting: in 813 the sons of Michael I Rhangabe were castrated on the orders of Leo V the Armenian; in 820, Michael II the Amorian used the same method to mutilate the sons of Leo V the Armenian. This raises the questions of the reasons behind this act and of the meaning of castration in these cases.

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Generally, there were three main reasons for castration in the Byzantine Empire: punishment (of both the individual and his bloodline); political and/or hereditary removal of an individual from the line of succession (in intra-dynastic conflicts or in the case of illegitimate offspring); and finally lucrative reasons.⁵ The last case could be said to have been a kind of *voluntary* castration, where parents or other relatives had male children undergo castration to improve their chances of upward social mobility, as the Byzantine court and church hierarchy was open to eunuchs.⁶

The reason for the less frequent use of castration compared to other forms of mutilation should be sought in Byzantine ecclesiastical and secular legislation, which generally condemned neutering, especially voluntary castration of an adult male.⁷ The terminological definition of a eunuch – with sterility (inability to procreate)⁸ as his fundamental distinction – as well as his legal status depended on the reason behind his

⁵ Cf. *Patlagean*, *Le blason pénal* 421 sq.

⁶ So-called voluntary castration is discussed by Theophylact of Ohrid in: *Defense of eunuchs*, *Gautier I*, 303.22–26; cf. *Krsmanović – Todorović*, *O Teofilaktovoj Odbrani I*, 96–97, 118–119. It should be noted that so-called voluntary castration did not always involve the complete surgical removal of the testicles (which is the literal meaning of the term castration); very often it was the result of the protracted crushing of the testicles in warm baths before puberty (in boys aged 5–7), *Krsmanović – Todorović*, *O Teofilaktovoj Odbrani I*, 99.

The Byzantine church was particularly open to eunuchs (*Messis*, *Les eunuques*), as well as the imperial court and state administration, primarily offices associated with the ruler's person; for a general overview, see *Guiland*, *Les eunuques* 165–380.

⁷ This is explicitly stated in the Apostolic Canon no. 22: Ὁ ἀκρωτηριάσας ἑαυτὸν μὴ γινέσθω κληρικός· αὐτοφονευτὴς γάρ ἐστιν ἑαυτοῦ, καὶ τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ δημιουργίας ἐχθρός. The church did not denounce individuals who had become eunuchs as the result of an illness, a medical intervention or a third-party violent act (Canon I of the First Ecumenical Council; Apostolic Canon no. 21). Secular legislation generally condemned castration, particularly if the procedure had been performed on Roman citizens or in the territory of the Roman Empire. Constantine I made the act punishable by death (CJ IV, 42,1). Castration was forbidden in the novel of Leo I (CJ IV, 42,2) as well as the famous novel of Justinian I (JN 142). Leo VI improved the legal status of castrates and generally condemned castration (NL LX). Ecclesiastical and secular legislation concerning castration were the subject of Theophylact's treatise *Defense of eunuchs*; cf. *D.Simon*, *Lobpreis des Eunuchen*, *Schriften des Historischen Kollegs*, *Vorträge* 24, München 1994, 5–27; *Krsmanović – Todorović*, *O Teofilaktovoj Odbrani I*, 104–118.

⁸ *Ringrose*, *Perfect Servant* 13–14; *Krsmanović – Todorović*, *O Teofilaktovoj Odbrani I*, 98–99, 104–105. When discussing eunuchs in the Byzantine Empire, it should always be borne in mind that the term does not only include castrates but also persons whose sterility might have been the result of less drastic sterilization methods. In these cases the victims did not necessarily suffer impotence or display features characteristic of eunuchs such as loss of body hair.

infertility.⁹ The Code of Justinian provides the terminological definitions formulated by classical Roman jurists, which classify eunuchs (*spadones* as the generic term) into three main categories: *spadones* (as a sub-type) – men whose infertility was caused by a genital birth defect; *thlibiae/thlasiae* – eunuchs who had suffered testicular disfigurement (such as application of pressure), usually in early childhood; the last group were the *castrati* (Gr. ἐκτομῖαι), whose sterility was the result of a surgical intervention (as in the cases of the sons of Michael I Rhangabe and Leo V the Armenian). Legislation was more benevolent towards the first two categories and allowed them adoption, with the right to appoint an heir to their property.¹⁰ While it is easy to understand the more liberal treatment of the sub-type of *spadones*,¹¹ the ambivalence of the Byzantine society towards eunuchs is clearly reflected in the legal treatment of *thlibiae/thlasiae* (those who had been ‘pressed’ or ‘crushed’). Although their sterility was the result of violent actions – usually the parent’s or other relative’s decision to make a male child sterile by the protracted crushing of his testicles in warm baths – *thlibiae/thlasiae* were de facto treated the same as men with a genital defect acquired at birth or late in life, so the perpetrators of this act did not suffer any penal sanctions.¹² In contrast, Roman and secular Byzantine legislation generally forbade surgical castration (except for medical reasons), with the intervention being punishable for both those who performed the operation and those who voluntarily subjected themselves to it. Of course, Byzantine emperors who had their subjects castrated suffered no sanctions except perhaps moral censure, as evidenced in the *Vita Ignatii*, whose author describes the castration of the sons of Michael I Rhangabe by Leo V the Armenian as ‘inhumane’ (ἀμειλικτος).¹³ On the other hand, the Christian church was very tolerant of those who had become eunuchs as the result of an illness, birth defect or a third-party violent act.

The castration of members of the imperial family or real/potential pretenders to the throne was a known but infrequently practiced measure in Byzantium. It is important to note that in these cases castration was performed as a method of permanent

⁹ On the terminology for the typology of eunuchs and castration techniques, see *Ringrose*, *Perfect Servant* 51–66, 219 n. 33; *Tougher*, *Eunuch* 26–35; *Messis*, *Les eunuques* 31–45.

¹⁰ Dig. XXIII, 3.39, 1; XXVIII, 2, 6.

¹¹ *Institutiones* I, 11,9 = *Basilicorum libri XXXIII*, 1.59. The 13th-century compilation of laws *Synopsis minor* (*Jus Graeco-Romanum VI*), E, ογ, p. 399 (which included older legal regulations from the 10th and 11th century, *N. van der Wal, J. H. A. Lokin*, *Historiae Iuris Graeco-Romani Delineatio*, Groningen 1985, 114), states that out of the three eunuch groups (σπάδωνες – those who were temporarily unable to father children due to an illness, but could hope to have offspring once this defect was cured; καστράτοι – those who had their genitals surgically removed; θλιβῖαι – those who had their testicles crushed by their mothers or wet nurses), only σπάδωνες were allowed to adopt children, as only they had any hope of fathering offspring.

¹² Cf. nn. 7; 11. Although Justinian forbade castration for commercial reasons/greed, this was nonetheless a very widespread phenomenon in Byzantium, *S. Papaioannou*, Sicily, Constantinople, *Miletos: The Life of a Eunuch and the History of Byzantine Humanism*, in: *Myriobiblos. Essays on Byzantine Literature and Culture*, edd. *Th. Antonopoulou–S. Kotzabassi–M. Loukaki*, Boston–Berlin–Munich 2015, 261–284, 262. Cf. *Patlagean*, *Le blason pénal* 421–422; *Scyl.* 244.91–92: ὑπὸ τῶν γονέων μὲν εὐνουχισθεῖς

¹³ *Vita Ignatii* 8.9–10.

political disqualification and not as a penal sanction (although it was perceived as such by the victim). Until the reign of Leo V the Armenian, castration was not seen as a more effective means of political disqualification than other forms of physical mutilation. A survey of physical mutilation of members of the ruling family or opponents to the throne from the Heraclian dynasty on indicates the evolution of the symbolism of corporal maiming in Byzantium. This process altered the classification of penal sanctions in terms of both their gravity and the effects entailed by them.¹⁴ Notably, the ruling sovereign – emperor *autokratōr* – was never subjected to castration. Examples contained in historical sources show that the ruler who wielded real power in the state was spared castration, but not the bearers of the imperial title (his co-rulers) or princes. Sources also reveal that in the best-case scenario a deposed *autokratōr* was forced to take monastic vows and exiled (usually to a monastery removed from the capital);¹⁵ the worst-case scenario was execution, which could be accompanied by mutilating, burning or throwing his corpse into the sea.¹⁶ Between these two possible endings of a deposed emperor's reign, there was a range of physical disfigurements intended to prevent his return to the throne. However, although politically motivated, in these cases corporal stigmatization often had a strong penal component – the intention of punishing a dethroned political opponent.

MUTILATIONS OF MEMBERS OF THE HERACLIAN DYNASTY

During the reign of the Heraclian dynasty (641–711), the severing of the nose was the usual corporal punishment for deposed emperors along with the death penalty. Castration was performed in no more than two or three cases.

Conflicts within the Heraclian dynasty stemmed from the fact that there was no widely accepted principle of inheritance and members of the ruling family clashed in their efforts to uphold either the principle of primogeniture (which gave the right of succession to the firstborn son) or the principle of seniority, which favored the eldest member of the family. These reasons led to ruthless conflicts between brothers or nephews and uncles, as evidenced by other examples from the time of the Heraclian dynasty as well as the period of the Syrian dynasty.

The first instance of physical mutilation with the intention of rendering an individual incapable of performing imperial duties was inadvertently caused by Heraclius himself after the emperor declared his two sons from two different marriages co-heirs to the throne.¹⁷ Heraclius expressed his wish to be succeeded by his two sons as joint emperors of equal rank (τοὺς υἱοὺς αὐτὸν βασιλεῖς ἰσοτίμους εἶναι): his elder son

¹⁴ For an overview of the evolution of corporal punishment including examples from the later period, see *Maleon*, Impossible return 31–49.

¹⁵ *Idem*, Political Exile 173–187.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 175–177.

¹⁷ Heraclius was married twice: first to Eudokia and then to Martina (PmbZ # 4842) – the daughter of his sister Maria.

from his first marriage Constantine III and Heraklonas, his son by his niece Martina.¹⁸ The conflict between the two branches of the family marked the period between Heraclius's death (11 February 641) and the dethronement of Martina and Heraklonas (January 642). During the same year, Constantine III suddenly died (June 641) and Heraklonas was forced to accept his son Constans II as co-emperor (September 641). In an effort to strengthen his own line of succession, Heraklonas promoted his younger brothers David Tiberios and Marinus to the rank of co-emperor (September or October 641).¹⁹ However, David Tiberios was entirely unsuitable for the role of co-ruler and potential heir to the throne, as he was deaf-mute.²⁰ Thus, until January 642, the Empire had four bearers of the imperial title. Martina and her sons were toppled in a revolt organized in favor of Constans II. In an effort to permanently eliminate this problematic branch of the family from the line of succession, its members were subjected to physical disfigurement. Martina's tongue was cut out and Heraklonas's nose was slit.²¹ Martina's youngest child Marinus was castrated. This is recounted only by John, Bishop of Nikiu, who goes on to explain that castration was performed in fear that he would attempt to claim the throne when he grew up. The same source informs us that the wounds caused by the surgical operation of castration – evidently performed incompetently – were too much for the child and that he immediately died.²² The only member of the family branch to be spared mutilation was the deaf-mute David Tiberios, whose birth defect made him unsuitable for the imperial throne. In this case, physical disfigurement was accompanied by the banishment of the imperial family to the distant island of Rhodes, which meant that they suffered political and social isolation in addition to physical disability.²³

The treatment of Martina's branch of Heraclius's heirs established a clear gradation of chosen corporal sanctions. In the 7th century the severing of the nose – the visible disfigurement of the face as the most prominent and exposed body part – with tonsure and exile, was entirely sufficient for the complete political and social elimination of Heraklonas. At this time as well as later, castration was seen as a kinder method of achieving the political disqualification of a rival than rhinotomy and other forms of maiming.

Conflicts between the members of the Heraclian dynasty continued in the third generation: Heraclius's grandson Constans II (641–668) disqualified his own brother Theodosius by forcing him to take monastic vows before murdering him in 659.²⁴ In an effort to strengthen his line of succession, Constans crowned his three sons

¹⁸ Nikeph., *Breviarium* 76.10–13.

¹⁹ For prosopographical information and dating, see PmbZ # 2565 (Heraklonas); # 3691 (Constans II); # 1241 (David Tiberios); # 4774 (Marinus).

²⁰ The *Cronicle* of John, Bishop of Nikiu (*Charles*) 197.

²¹ Theoph. 341; The *Cronicle* of John, Bishop of Nikiu (*Charles*) 197.

²² *Ibid.* 197.

²³ *Ibid.* 197–198.

²⁴ Theoph. 347, 351. For prosopographical information see PmbZ # 7797.

– Constantine IV, Heraclius and Tiberios as co-emperors, passing on the dynastic conflict to the fourth generation.²⁵ Constantine IV (668–685) removed his brothers from power by having their noses cut off in 681.²⁶ However, neither Constans II nor Constantine IV chose castration to eliminate their brothers. The only case of political castration in this period was that of the future Patriarch Germanus I of Constantinople (715–730). According to John Zonaras, after the assassination of Constans II in Sicily, unrest broke out in the army. Constantine IV put down the revolt, sentencing to death *patrikios* Justinian, the father of the future Patriarch Germanus, and had Germanus castrated (ἐκτομίαν ἐποίησεν), although he was past the usual age for undergoing the procedure (ἤδη παρηβηκότα καὶ ὑπερβεβηκότα τὴν ἡλικίαν, καθ’ ἣν εὐνουχίζεσθαι δεδοκίμασται).²⁷ The brutal punishment of *patrikios* Justinian and the castration of his son could have been related to the assumption that they belonged to a prominent family which had kinship ties to the former emperor Justinian I.²⁸

The effectiveness of rhinotomy as a form of maiming that inevitably led to political disqualification was challenged by Justinian II, the only son and heir of Constantine IV. His first reign ended in 695, when he was deposed by Leontios, the strategos of Hellas. Justinian’s tongue and nose were cut off and he was exiled to Cherson.²⁹ The severing of the nose was successful and the emperor was later nicknamed Rhinotmetos in literary tradition. However, his tongue seems not to have been cut out completely, as he retained his ability to speak.³⁰ Against all odds and despite his handicap, Justinian retook the throne in 705. Beginning his second reign, the emperor ruthlessly dealt with the usurpers, executing Leontios (695–698) and his successor Tiberios Apsimaros (698–705).³¹ He did, however, spare Theodosios, the son of Tiberios II, and allowed him to take monastic vows; he could have, it has been surmised, had Theodosios castrated. This would have allowed him to show mercy and spare the son of the deposed Apsimaros a more brutal physical disfigurement.³²

The fact that no Byzantine emperor after Justinian II was disqualified by rhinotomy³³ shows the impact of his remarkable and unexpected return to the throne in

²⁵ For prosopographical information see *ibid.* # 3702 (Constantine IV); # 2556 (Heraclius); # 8484 (Tiberios).

²⁶ Theoph. 352, 360.

²⁷ Zonaras XIV, 222. Vie du patriarche Germain Ier, ed. Lamza, I 222.300–303. Cf. Messis, *Les eunuques*, 128 n. 48.

²⁸ PmbZ # 2298, p. 31.

²⁹ Theoph. 369; Nikeph., *Breviarium* 96. Leontios spared Justinian’s life and instead punished him with castration only out of respect for Justinian’s father Constantine IV.

³⁰ Cf. *Maleon*, *Impossible return* 37.

³¹ Theoph. 375.

³² *Treadgold*, *Seven Revolutions* 214. Theodosios later became the Archbishop of Ephesus. He was a proponent of iconoclasm and one of the close associates of Constantine V, himself a fervent iconoclast. PmbZ # 7845.

³³ *Ostrogorski*, *Istorija* 154–155.

705 on the changing view of the purpose and political effectiveness of a certain type of physical maiming. The assassination of Justinian and his young son Tiberios in 711 marked the end of the Heraclian dynasty. After a few years of political turmoil and the short-lived reigns of Philippikos Bardanes (711–713), Anastasios II (713–715) and Theodosios III (715–717),³⁴ Leo III ascended to the throne.

THE RISE OF THE DYNASTIC PRINCIPLE – THE PERIOD OF THE SYRIAN DYNASTY

In the early days of the reign of Leo III (717–741) it seemed that the political situation had settled down: the new emperor made an agreement with his ally Artabasdōs, awarding him the rank of *kouropalates* as well as his daughter's hand in marriage. The agreement was supposed to secure the succession of his only son Constantine V, who was crowned co-emperor already in 720 without any resistance either in the extended imperial family or outside. Leo III's long reign and the fact that he had secured his son's inheritance in time created the preconditions for the more lasting rule of a single family. This was the beginning of the reign of the Syrian (incorrectly also called Isaurian) dynasty (717–802).

The multidecadal reigns of the first Syrians, Leo III and Constantine V (741–775), were accompanied by two opposing traditions: the negative, iconodule tradition that did not favor them and the positive one, which was less iconoclastic than military. Both traditions can be said to have been focused on Constantine V, the greatest of iconoclastic emperors as well as emperors-military commanders.³⁵ Capable and well-educated, Constantine strove to strengthen his autocracy by using propaganda and self-promotion. After his brother-in-law Artabasdōs briefly threatened his position, following the end of the civil war in 743 Constantine persistently and ruthlessly proceeded to remove his political enemies. Blindings, executions and banishments became an important element of his reign.³⁶ However, there was another, more public facet to this policy: the emperor never missed an opportunity to promote his successes in front of the Constantinopolitan masses, organizing public celebrations of his political and military victories. This propaganda – which he oversaw personally, even commissioning painters to eternalize his triumphs – contributed to the emergence of his subsequent traditional image as a warrior-emperor and victorious ruler, and this tradition was reflected in the strong political loyalty to his sons.³⁷

³⁴ Only Philippikos Bardanes (PmbZ # 6150) was blinded after being deposed. His successors Anastasios II (ibid. # 236) and Theodosios III (ibid. # 7793) were forced to take the vow and exiled. Theodosios was guaranteed safety by Leo III; he took the vow and withdrew together with his son, which allowed him to spend the rest of his life in peace, Theoph. 390.

³⁵ For a monographic account of the reign of Constantine V, see *Rochow*, Kaiser Konstantin V.

³⁶ His treatment of twelve dignitaries in 766 is well-known. He first publically shamed them in the Hippodrome; then he had two of their leaders decapitated and the rest blinded and exiled, Theoph. 438.

³⁷ *Rochow*, Kaiser Konstantin V, 123–176; cf. *McCormick*, Eternal victory 134–137.

Constantine V was married three times: from his first marriage to the Khazar princess Irene he had one son, Leo (IV); the sources provide no information about any offspring he might have had from his second marriage; his third marriage to Eudokia was remarkably prolific and bore him five sons and a daughter. The fact that Constantine V had as many as six sons was enough to alleviate all fears in regard to succession. However, intra-dynastic plots and conflicts would annul this advantage.³⁸

In terms of dynastic policy, Constantine V adhered to the principle of primogeniture. He crowned his eldest son Leo co-emperor in 751, at the time when the boy was barely two years of age.³⁹ This gave Leo an advantage over his younger half-brothers, Constantine's sons from his third marriage. His sons by Eudokia did not receive the imperial title, but were given the highest dignities in the Empire. In 769 the eldest two, Christopher and Nikephoros, were awarded the title of caesar, which put them right behind Leo in both family hierarchy and the line of succession. Two of his younger sons, Niketas and Anthimos, were awarded the title of nobelissimos.⁴⁰

Although Constantine V clearly determined the line of succession, the two branches of the ruling family clashed after his death. The conflict was not provoked by the accession to the throne of Constantine's eldest son, but by the fact that Leo IV (775–780) hastened to secure the throne for his son Constantine VI and crowned him co-emperor in April 776. The new emperor respected the ranks of the titles bestowed by Constantine V on his younger sons and awarded his youngest half-brother Eudokimos the title of nobelissimos. The family rift caused by the coronation of Leo's son Constantine VI as co-ruler in April 776 was revealed by the fact that in May 776 Caesar Nikephoros was accused of conspiring against his half-brother Leo IV. Historical sources mention that Nikephoros enjoyed the support of some 'spatharioi, stratores and others in imperial service.'

The sensitive position of the newly crowned Leo IV is also evidenced by the fact that the emperor chose to punish the transgressors via a silentium rather than personally. The Imperial Council was the body that demanded punishment for the conspirators, although its members had sworn that after the death of Constantine V they would not do anything to harm his children.⁴¹ The punishment seems to have included not only Nikephoros and his accomplices, but all of Constantine's and Eudokia's sons, although the sources are silent on any support Caesar Nikephoros might

³⁸ The number of male offspring was remarkably important for the survival and development of aristocratic families. In the case of imperial families, however, it is doubtful if this was truly an advantage: on one hand, multiple potential heirs ensured the future of the dynasty; on the other, it usually led to intra-dynastic conflicts.

³⁹ PmbZ # 4243 (Lav IV). *Rochow*, Leon IV., in: *Lilie*, Eirene 1–33.

⁴⁰ Theoph. 443–444, 449, 450. For prosopographical information on Constantine V's sons from his third marriage, see PmbZ # 1101 (Christopher); #5267 (Nikephoros); # 5403 (Niketas); # 487 (Anthimos); # 1635 (Eudokimos).

⁴¹ Theoph. 450–451.

have received from his four brothers. To protect the inheritance rights of Leo IV and Constantine VI, the five sons of Constantine V had to be exiled from Constantinople. It seems that they were stripped of their honorific dignities (Nikephoros is described by Theophanes as a former caesar⁴²), forced to take monastic vows and exiled to Cherson.⁴³ The punishment was not particularly harsh, but it was enough to allow Leo IV to continue his reign unhindered.

The death of Leo IV opened a new chapter of conflicts within the Syrian dynasty. Another contributing factor was the fact that power was now concentrated in the hands of a woman: Irene, the widow of Leo IV, ruled the Empire on behalf of her ten-year-old son Constantine VI. Throughout her regency (780–790), Irene found no support among the relatives of her late husband, who became her political opponents. Barely forty days after the passing of Leo IV, Irene's and Constantine's rule was challenged by the supporters of the former Caesar Nikephoros. This movement seems to have been led by the Logothete of the Drome Gregory, with the support of other dignitaries.⁴⁴ As Theophanes does not mention the potential involvement of the remaining four uncles of Constantine VI in the plot, little can be said of their political positions. It seems that the conspiracy involved dignitaries in the capital, who challenged Irene with or without the knowledge of Constantine's sons from his third marriage. It also remains unknown if the remaining male offspring of Constantine V received the news of the death of their half-brother Leo IV in exile in Cherson or if for some unknown reason they had been brought back to the capital.

Although the conspiracy of 780 did not prove a more serious threat to Irene, it did indicate that her position was vulnerable and intimate the potential turn of events in the future. In a bid to strengthen her own and her son's position at court, during the Christmas procession in the capital Irene publically shamed the sons of Constantine V and forced them to take monastic vows (again).⁴⁵ It should be noted that Irene had not dared take more drastic measures against the sons of Constantine V. Her position was made more difficult by her intention to resume an iconodule policy, further complicated by the fact that iconoclasts had been appointed to key positions in the state during the First Iconoclasm and particularly under Constantine V. However, what made Irene's situation especially difficult was the fact that she could not personally serve as a military commander, which was one of the most important prerogatives of imperial power and one that had been so successfully performed by Leo III and

⁴² Theoph. 468.9: τὸν ἀπὸ καيسάρων.

⁴³ Crimea was one of the favored destinations for political exile in the 8th century; later on, islands became the preferred choice due to their isolated location, *Maleon*, Political Exile 174sq; *idem*, Impossible return 34–35.

⁴⁴ Theoph. 454–455.

⁴⁵ Tonsuring, especially if performed in public, was a form of political disqualification; however, in comparison with physical maiming (blinding or severing of the nose, ears and tongue) it was the mildest of political sanctions, *Patlagean*, Le blason pénal 414–416.

Constantine V. Her efforts to establish control over military circles in the capital and provinces would remain one of the most notable characteristics of her reign first as her son's regent (780–790) and then as *basileus* (797–802).⁴⁶

The reign of Constantine VI (790–797) as sole emperor showed the importance of a successful military policy for the stability of a ruler's position. The emperor's military losses, especially his defeat at the hands of the Bulgarians in 792, revealed the deep discontent simmering in military circles. Having returned from Bulgaria, the members of Constantinopolitan *tagmata* (the *scholai*, the *exkoubitoi*) tried to find a solution in the ruling family and publically declared support for the former caesar Nikephoros, one of the sons of Constantine V. Although the sources do not mention if the plot was inspired by the political ambitions and actions of any of Constantine VI's uncles, the emperor nonetheless ruthlessly dealt with them: Nikephoros was blinded, while the remaining four – Christopher, Niketas, Anthimos and Eudokimos – had their tongues cut out.⁴⁷ Mutilation was meant to result in the permanent political disqualification of the members of the secondary branch of the family, i.e. Constantine V's sons from his third marriage.

However, a new chapter in dynastic plots began with Irene's decision to remove her son Constantine VI from power. His blinding (which probably quickly led to his death⁴⁸) in August 797 delegitimized the line of Leo IV. But, as it turned out, this act made Irene's position on the throne very precarious. In October 797 a conspiracy in favor of the imprisoned sons of Constantine V was organized. Its organizers remain unknown (Theophanes mentions only some instigators – *τινὲς νεωτερισταί*), but there is little to suggest that Constantine V's sons encouraged the plot in any way. We know only that the conspirators' plan was for the brothers to seek refuge in the Great Church and request guarantees of their security; the capital's population was expected to rally to them and proclaim one of them emperor. The plot seems to have originated in influential circles in the capital and probably clerical circles too. Irene's eunuch Aetios managed to thwart the attempt; the sons of Constantine V were exiled to Irene's native Athens and removed from the reach of dignitaries in the capital and the army of Asia Minor.⁴⁹

However, in March 799 the Sclavenes of 'Belzetia' rose in a rebellion led by their archon Akameros, which found support among the population of the theme of Hellas. The rebels' aim was to liberate the sons of Constantine V who were imprisoned in Athens and to declare one of them emperor. The rebellion was put down and Irene no

⁴⁶ Irene's reign was characterized by the marked influence of eunuchs on the military affairs of the Empire. When appointing military commanders, Irene conspicuously chose to sideline official hierarchy, i.e. professional soldiers. For a detailed account of Irene's reign, see *Lilie, Eirene; Herrin, Women in Purple* 51–129.

⁴⁷ Theoph. 469.

⁴⁸ See n. 51.

⁴⁹ Theoph. 473.

longer had any qualms about using corporal punishment on the sons of Constantine V. Although they had already been maimed, Irene now had them blinded too.⁵⁰

The plots against Irene and her son showed two things: first, previously performed physical mutilations did not necessarily lead to political disqualification; and second, the political support for the sons of Constantine V – regardless of whether they had instigated it by their own actions or not (the latter seems more probable) – indicated that the dynastic principle was strengthening in the Byzantine society. It was precisely this change that would henceforth influence the use of physical maiming with the aim of political and dynastic disqualification.

TRADITIONS OF THE SYRIAN DYNASTY AFTER 802

Irene's deposition in 802 and the accession of Nikephoros I ended the reign of the Syrian dynasty. However, the ruling traditions of this family were remarkably strong and hence claiming continuity with them was seen as a confirmation of or contributing factor to the legitimacy of subsequent emperors.

Nikephoros I (802–811) was the first to attempt to establish continuity with the traditions of the Syrian dynasty. An edict by Emperor Nikephoros, whose contents were related by Theodore the Studite in one of his letters, shows how much the dynastic principle had strengthened during the reign of this dynasty. The edict is believed to have been written sometime after the coronation of Nikephoros's son Staurakios as co-emperor (December 803) and before 808, when Studite probably composed his letter. This edict proclaims the second marriage of (the blind and by then probably deceased⁵¹) Constantine VI to Theodote illegal and states that a child born from this adulterous relationship (τὸ μοιχογέννητον τέκνον) had no right of succession (ἄκληρον) as it would be illegitimate (ὡς ἀθέμιτον καὶ ἀνομώτατον).⁵² The referenced child could not have been Constantine's son Leo, as he is known to have died in 797. Leo was the only son Constantine VI is reliably known to have fathered; however, Theodore the Studite's letter allows the possibility that this emperor also had a younger son,⁵³ who was declared illegitimate in Nikephoros I's edict. At the same time Nikephoros I strengthened the legitimacy of his own family by evoking the Syrian dynasty. The link was established indirectly, through Empress Irene. In violation of church canons, Nikephoros I married his son Staurakios to Theophano, a relative of Irene's.

⁵⁰ Ibid.473–474. The blinding could have been performed only on those sons of Constantine V whose tongues had been cut out in 792. Since no names are mentioned, it remains unclear which of them was alive in 799.

⁵¹ According to a tradition recounted in some sources, Constantine VI survived blinding and Irene's deposition in 802; for more details, see *Lilie*, *Eirene* 273–277.

⁵² Theod. Stud., Ep. 31 (*Fatouros*), p. 86.53–58. Constantine VI had two daughters from his first marriage to Maria and son Leo by Theodote, PmbZ # 4351; 7899A.

⁵³ *Lilie*, *Eirene* 274 ; PmbZ # 7899A, pp. 532– 533.

The dynastic policy of Nikephoros I secured the needed legitimacy for him and his son Staurikios. However, in 811 conflicts with Krum's Bulgarians, the death of Nikephoros and the abdication of the severely injured Staurakios reopened the question of succession. Nikephoros's son-in-law Michael I Rhangabe (811–813) was appointed emperor, but his legitimacy was soon challenged.

The Bulgarian offensive and the Empire's failure to achieve a military breakthrough to protect its Balkan provinces revived the traditions about Constantine V, a military emperor who was renowned precisely for his victorious wars against the Bulgarians. Some discontented subjects in the capital organized a plot in favor of the 'blinded.' The aim was to depose Michael Rhangabe and install one of the younger sons of Constantine V on the throne (τυφλοὺς βουλόμενοι βασιλεύειν). At this time, the last male representatives of the Syrian dynasty were imprisoned on Panormos in the Prince Islands,⁵⁴ where they had probably been moved from Athens. The sources do not reveal which of Constantine's sons from his third marriage were alive in 812. We do know that Rhangabe foiled the plot and changed the location of their exile for security reasons, sending them to Aphousia, south of the peninsula of Kizik.⁵⁵

The plot of 812 was also the last report of the political movements organized in favor of the living members of the Syrian dynasty. The sources provide no information about the sons of Constantine V after 812 and henceforth evocations of the tradition of the Syrian dynasty acquired a different form.

The supporters of the sons of the late Constantine V took action occasionally but persistently throughout three decades (776–812), disregarding monastic vows, persecutions and even physical mutilations of their favorites. This persistence can only be explained by the strengthening of the principle of hereditary rule, which led to the strong support for the members of a certain dynasty despite the lack of legislation that would regulate succession. The dynastic program of the Syrians as well as the political-ideological tradition centered on this dynasty, the central role was played by Constantine V. Notably, loyalty to this ruling family was not expressed as strongly towards Constantine VI, the son of Leo IV, as towards the sons of Constantine V from his third marriage – Nikephoros, Christopher, Niketas, Anthimos and Eudokimos.

Historical sources are silent on the political ambitions that the five sons of Constantine V might have harbored. However, there is no doubt that they symbolized the ruling rights of the Syrian dynasty and represented a real threat to other emperors, even if plots in their favor had been planned and executed without their knowledge. This is evidenced by the need for the double physical disfigurement of Christopher, Niketas, Anthimos and Eudokimos – the severing of their tongues under Constantine VI and their blinding on Irene's orders in 799. In addition, maiming was accompanied

⁵⁴ On the importance of the Prince Islands for the system of political imprisonment, see *R. Janin, Les Iles des Princes. Étude historique et topographie*, EO 23 (1924) 178–194; *Maleon*, Impossible return 35.

⁵⁵ Theoph. 496.

by exile; the princes were forced to take monastic vows, constantly guarded and occasionally relocated to various parts of the Empire based on the current needs and security assessments (Cherson, Therapia palace on the shoreline of the Bosphorus straight, Athens, Prince Islands, Aphousia).

This political disqualification put an end to the Syrian dynasty, but not to the ruling traditions of this house. In the 820s Constantine VI as the previously neglected member of the dynasty received new significance. First the usurper Thomas the Slav, who revolted against Michael II the Amorian, revived the memory of the long blinded, deposed and already deceased emperor. A letter from Michael II the Amorian to Louis the Pious (824) informs us that Thomas the Slav falsely claimed to be Constantine VI, Irene's son,⁵⁶ in a bid to 'win the support of the Rhomaioi.'⁵⁷ It should be noted that Thomas the Slav could not claim ties to some other dynastic tradition, precisely because the princes from the houses of Nikephoros I and Michael I Rhangabe, as well as the sons of Leo the Armenian (see below), had been subjected to castration. Around the time he wrote his letter to the king of the Franks, Michael was himself trying to strengthen his dynastic claim by establishing ties to the Syrian dynasty. After the death of his first wife, he married Euphrosyne, the daughter of Constantine VI who had been made a nun in her childhood and lived in a convent in the Prince Islands.⁵⁸ The marriage probably took place around 823/824 and can be associated with the political effects of the revolt led by Thomas the Slav on Michael's reign. The legitimacy of Michael II the Amorian was blighted by the fact that he had risen to the throne by assassinating Leo V the Armenian, his former colleague and benefactor. After he finally quelled the revolt of Thomas the Slav, Michael II's marriage to Euphrosyne established ties to the very same dynasty previously evoked by his opponent Thomas the Slav. The marriage of Michael II and Euphrosyne was met with strong disapproval in some ecclesiastical and particularly monastic circles, leading to the emperor's conflict with the influential Theodore the Studite.⁵⁹ The report that Michael the Amorian tried to win the support of the *synkletos* for this marriage could perhaps be indicative of his plans: namely, Michael asked and received assurances from this body that it would protect his wife and their potential offspring in the event of his death and that it would not be deprive them of their imperial dignities.⁶⁰ However, the marriage seems to have been barren and therefore irrelevant for the fate of the Amorian dynasty. After his accession

⁵⁶ Mansi XIV 417D.

⁵⁷ Theoph. Cont. 78. Cf. Scyl. 29.

⁵⁸ Theoph. Cont. 114–116; Scyl. 44. Euphrosyne (PmbZ # 1705) was Constantine's daughter from his first marriage to Maria. *Herrin*, *Women in Purple* 130–184.

⁵⁹ PmbZ # 1705, p. 541.

⁶⁰ Michael II probably had no issue from his second marriage. However, according to Eastern tradition about the son of Michael II and Euphrosyne, the boy, who was supposedly born between 824 and 829, was killed by his mother either out of her fear that he might stain that branch of the imperial family because his father was of Jewish origin, or out of fear that her son might be raised in the Jewish faith, PmbZ # 1705A. At the time of her marriage to Michael II the Amorian, Euphrosyne was over thirty years old and would have been considered past her child-bearing age.

to the throne, Michael's successor Theophilos (829–842) sent Euphrosyne back to the monastery, clearly demonstrating that he needed no connection to the Syrian dynasty to bolster his legitimacy. Theophilos's legitimacy was not challenged and all the new emperor had to ensure in the future was a male heir.

THE CASTRATION OF THE SONS OF MICHAEL I RHANGABE AND LEO V THE ARMENIAN

As we have seen, efforts to secure the ruling position of one family and establish its legitimacy could involve various measures ranging from establishing marital ties with a member of another ruling family (who in this case acted as the bearer or transmitter of legitimacy) to drastic measures such as physical disfigurement of potential or real opponents. In the latter case, the choice of the type of corporal punishment depended on the assessment of its effectiveness as a means of political disqualification. If the return of Justinian II to the throne in 705 revealed the ineffectiveness of rhinotomy and put an end to the use of this type of disfigurement on deposed emperors,⁶¹ then the maiming of the five sons of Constantine V challenged the efficacy of severing of the tongue and blinding – penal methods that did not necessarily lead to the victim's political disqualification. Although the movements in favor of Leo IV's half-brothers were neither large (except the revolt in Hellas, which initially had other causes) nor well-organized and usually remained limited to the opposition actions of dignitaries in the capital (whose names and offices are rarely reported in historical sources), they nonetheless illustrated the importance ascribed to the Syrian dynasty. The remarkable persistence of attempts to promote the claims of Constantine V's sons – ignoring their severe disabilities and possibly their political passivity – can only be explained by the strengthening of the dynastic principle in the Byzantine society. The decisions of two emperors from the first half of the 9th century – Leo V the Armenian and Michael II the Amorion – to have the sons of their predecessors castrated need to be considered in this context.

Reports of Byzantine authors on physical mutilation mostly pertain to deposed bearers of the imperial title (emperor *autokratōr* and his co-emperors), usurpers or to intra-dynastic conflicts among relatives. In very few cases, however, they provide some information about the fate of the children of those who had been punished. It seems that they were rarely subjected to maiming, although they certainly had to endure the consequences of their parents' political actions and were usually forced to take monastic vows and exiled. Therefore the drastic decision to castrate the princes of a deposed ruler, made consecutively by both Leo V and Michael II, deviates from the previous Byzantine practice.

Leo V the Armenian acceded to the throne in July 813 after the voluntary abdication of his predecessor Michael I Rhangabe. This change at the top of the pyramid of power was preceded by the defeats of the Byzantine army at the hands of the

⁶¹ *Осїуроїорски, Историја* 154–155.

Bulgarians, especially the disastrous Battle of Versinikia (22 June 813). The threat to the capital forced Rhangabe to abdicate in favor of Leo the Armenian, the strategos of the Anatolic theme. The new emperor exiled the members of the imperial family to monasteries, tonsuring and castrating Rhangabe's two sons.⁶² Rhangabe's older son Theophylact had been crowned co-emperor in December 811, which made him the heir apparent. At the time of his castration, he was twenty years old – at an age deemed risky for this kind of operation.⁶³ His younger brother Niketas was fourteen years old. He was also tonsured and castrated, although he had not been declared co-emperor. Niketas took the monastic name Ignatios and went on to become the Patriarch of Constantinople.⁶⁴

Following in the footsteps of Leo V, in late 820 Michael II the Amorian subjected the sons of his predecessor to the same treatment. After the assassination of Leo V the Armenian, his four sons – Symbatios, Basil, Gregory and Theodosios – were exiled to the island of Prote, where they were castrated and tonsured.⁶⁵ As Leo's eldest son, Symbatios was crowned co-emperor and renamed Constantine; at the time of castration, he was 13–15 years of age.⁶⁶ Leo's younger son Basil was also crowned his father's co-ruler, replacing his birth name Constantine by the name Basil. As he is believed to have been born shortly before his father's coronation (813), it would seem that he was castrated in his boyhood and certainly before puberty.⁶⁷ Gregory and the youngest son Theodosios were also castrated; the latter died from complications of the castration surgery and was buried with his father on the island of Prote.⁶⁸

Despite the different circumstances of the dethronement of Michael Rhangabe and Leo V, their male heirs suffered the same punishment. Rhangabe abdicated without putting up any resistance to Leo the Armenian and there is nothing in the sources to suggest any conflicts between them before the defeat of the Byzantine army at Versinikia.⁶⁹ By contrast, Michael II the Amorian and Leo the Armenian began as allies and close associates and ended as enemies; in this context, the assassination of Leo

⁶² Vita Ignatii 8; Gen. 6; Theoph. Cont. 32; Scyl. 9.

⁶³ Theoph. 494. Theophylact was born in 793 and died in January 849 as monk Eustratios, surviving his father Michael Rhangabe (monk Athanasios) by five years, PmbZ # 8336.

⁶⁴ For an overview of prosopographical information on Patriarch Ignatios, see PmbZ # 2666; # 22712. Rhangabe's middle son Staurikios (PmbZ # 6890) was also crowned co-emperor like Theophylact, but died before his father's abdication.

⁶⁵ Theoph. Cont. 64, 72; Vita Ignatii 10; Scyl. 24.

⁶⁶ PmbZ # 3925. The year of his birth was probably closer to 810, as he was still a boy at the time of his father's coronation, Scr. Inc. 346: ἔστειψεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ μικρὸν ὄντα.

⁶⁷ PmbZ # 927.

⁶⁸ Vita Ignatii 10; cf. PmbZ #7871. On Gregory see also *ibid.* # 4274.

⁶⁹ The Byzantine defeat in the Battle of Versinikia was the subject of two contradictory narrative traditions with Leo the Armenian, the strategos of the Anatolic theme, in the central role. While the first portrays him as a brave military commander, the second sees him as a traitor who caused the defeat and used the difficult situation to launch a coup and rise to the throne. Contrary to traditional opinions, Turner argues for his rehabilitation, see *Turner*, Leo V 187–193.

V would have been the expected outcome of their conflict.⁷⁰ Both Michael I Rhangabe and Leo V the Armenian suffered one of the sanctions that had usually accompanied changes on the throne in previous periods: tonsuring and exile or capital punishment. It follows that the motive for the castration of their heirs – an uncommon type of mutilation – had a deeper social and political meaning.

Markedly, in both cases castration involved all sons of the deposed ruler with no distinction between the bearers of the imperial (co-ruling) title that made them heirs apparent and others. In addition, castration was performed regardless of their age and the fact that the risks increased as the victim grew older. Like in other cases of mutilation in the previous period, castration was accompanied by exile and tonsuring. The most important things that the sons of Michael Rhangabe and Leo the Armenian were deprived of by their castration were any future claims to the throne. Therefore, the primary social purpose of castration was to prevent the paternal line of succession, which could, in radical cases like these, lead to the extinction of a bloodline or family name. Hence, the growing aristocratization of the Byzantine society and the strengthening of the dynastic principle made castration the most efficient means for the political elimination of an entire bloodline (γένος).

Leo V the Armenian resorted to castration under pressure from the strengthening idea of hereditary rule in the Byzantine society, as evidenced by the example of the Syrian dynasty. The principle of familial rule prevailed once again in 811, when the successor of Nikephoros I was sought within his immediate family and the accession of his son-in-law Michael Rhangabe remained unchallenged. To consolidate his power, Leo the Armenian had to prevent any potential threats from Rhangabe's supporters and his male descendents, who could lay claim to the throne based on both their paternal and maternal lineage. It should be noted that Michael Rhangabe had not been an unpopular ruler.⁷¹ Had there not been for the aggressive Bulgarian offensive that threatened the imperial capital, it is uncertain how the reign of this emperor might have unfolded. Rhangabe certainly enjoyed the favor of ecclesiastical circles (his closest associates included Patriarch Nikephoros and Theodore the Studite) as well as many dignitaries in the capital. However, military defeats and the discontent of the eastern army, as well as the chaotic situation in European themes, cost him the support in the Empire's military circles. His popularity and voluntary abdication spared the life of Michael Rhangabe, who spent the following three decades as a monk imprisoned in a monastery.⁷² Although Leo V the Armenian treated his

⁷⁰ Leo Armenian and Michael the Amorian both served in the army of Bardanes Tourkos and later in the Anatolic theme. Having acceded to the throne, Leo V rewarded Michael by appointing him first as his *prōtostratōr* and then Domestic of the Excubitors. Unhappy with the reign of Leo V, Michael became the leader of the conspirators who assassinated Leo V on 25 December 820.

⁷¹ Byzantine authors describe him as a 'man of peace' (εἰρηνικός ... ἄνθρωπος) but 'inept at handling administrative affairs' (περὶ δὲ τῆς τῶν πραγμάτων διοικήσεως ἀκυβέρνητος), Scyl. 8; Theoph. 499–500.

⁷² It is assumed that Michael was born around 770. He was 43 at the time of abdication and died in January 844, when he was over 70 years old, PmbZ # 4948.

deposed predecessor and his family with care (and even gave him an annual allowance), the separation of the spouses,⁷³ tonsuring and exile of his daughters and sons and the castration of Theophylact and Niketas as well as the coronation of Leo's own two sons as co-emperors (Symbatios-Constantine and Constantine-Basil) indicates that Leo was primarily driven by his intention to establish and ensure the hereditary rule of his own family.

In a bid to secure both the future line of succession and his own legitimacy (shaken by the fact that he had risen to the throne by assassinating his predecessor⁷⁴), Michael II castrated the four male heirs of Leo the Armenian to prevent potential turnarounds in their favor. Support for the sons of the murdered emperor could have easily come from provincial military circles, which held Michael the Amorian in much less regard than Leo the Armenian even before the former's accession to the throne.⁷⁵ Although the decision to have Leo's sons castrated could have had roots in Michael's personal desire for vengeance against the family of his detested predecessor, its primary purpose was to prevent any future claims to the throne.⁷⁶

The castration of the sons of Michael Rhangabe and Leo Armenian went beyond individual political disqualification. Preventing their children from having their own offspring made these families unfit to claim the role of bearer/transmitter of legitimacy. This was plainly evident in the case of the Rhangabe family: unlike Leo the Armenian who had no female issue, Michael I fathered two daughters – Georgo and Theophano, who were made nuns after his abdication and spent the remainder of their lives in political and social isolation.⁷⁷ However, Euphrosyne, the daughter of

⁷³ Theoph. Cont. 32.

⁷⁴ From the 9th century onwards, the Byzantine society increasingly disapproved of assassination in the case of emperors *autokratores*. This is evidenced by the punishment of the murderers of Leo the Armenian by Theophilos the Amorian, the ceremonial reburial of Michael III the Amorian organized by Leo VI the Wise or the so-called 'Walk to Canossa' of John I Tzimiskes for the murder of Nikephoros II Phokas.

⁷⁵ Regardless of whether we accept the narrative tradition which portrays Thomas the Slav as Leo the Armenian's comrade-in-arms (see J. Signes Codoñer, *The Emperor Theophilos and the East, 829–842: Court and Frontier in Byzantium during the Last Phase of Iconoclasm*, VR, Burlington 2014), it should be noted that Michael II faced a military revolt and civil war that made Thomas his opponent and a pretender to the throne. Notably, this tradition recounts that Thomas, the *tourmarchēs* of the Foederati, rose in rebellion 'under the pretence of avenging his benefactor (Leo V), but driven by his own interests' (ἐκδικῶν τάχα τὸν εὐργέτην, ὁμοῦ δὲ καὶ θυμὸν ἴδιον ἐμπιπλάς), Scyl. 30; cf. Theoph. Cont. 78–80. Hence, the rebellion of Thomas the Slav implicitly indicates the support that the sons of Leo the Armenian could have garnered in thematic armies if they had not been castrated.

⁷⁶ Michael II also showed mercy to the widow and children of Leo V and gave them a part of Leo the Armenian's confiscated personal property as an allowance, as well as a number of servants. He was particularly considerate towards Leo's widow Theodosia and ensured she could live safely at a monastery and even keep some of her rights (ἐν ἀσφαλείᾳ ζῆν κελεύσας αὐθεντικῶς), Theoph. Cont. 72. Theodosia might have earned this kindness when she saved Michael the Amorian from certain death: Leo V had wanted to burn Michael alive and ordered him thrown 'like firewood' into the furnace in the imperial bath, *ibid.* 54–56.

⁷⁷ It has been surmised that Georgo could have been not only Rhangabe's older daughter, but also his eldest child born before Theophylact (before 770), PmbZ # 2290. This would have made her over twenty years of age at the time of her father's abdication. Both Georgo and Theophano (*ibid.* # 8164) were sent

Constantine VI, retained her relevance at least in the eyes of Michael II. She was taken out of her convent against her will and married to an emperor who saw her as a symbolic conduit of the Syrian dynastic tradition – the same family used by his opponent Thomas the Slav to bolster his own political pretensions.

CASTRATION – PUNISHMENT AND SALVATION

From the social point of view, castration was the mildest form of maiming of all types of mutilation. Unlike the victims of rhinotomy, severing of the tongue or blinding, castrates were not necessarily destined for permanent social and political marginalization. The reason for this was the ambivalent view of eunuchs in the Byzantine Empire: despite (often purely theoretical) condemnations, eunuchs were an acceptable phenomenon in the religious and secular sphere of the Byzantine society.

The criterion for the gradation of corporal sanction was realistic and came down to the degree of hampering or limiting the functionality of the mutilated person. Since in these cases the state of being socially handicapped stemmed from physical disability, disfigurement carried a certain symbolism. As we have seen, the most common method of political disqualification in the 7th century was the severing of the nose. Although this sanction was symbolic and did not severely limit the victim's physiological abilities, in the social sense it meant shaming. Disfigurement of the face – the most prominent part of the human body – was a form of stigmatization that could not be hidden (even with a golden nose which is traditionally believed to have been made for Justinian II). The *Ecloga* informs us that it was precisely this punishment that severely disfigured and shamed the victim which was used to sanction various types of heterosexual offenses.⁷⁸ Unlike rhinotomy, punishments such as severing of the tongue and blinding caused real disability and limited the victim's normal functioning. The severing of the tongue represented a milder form of mutilation than rhinotomy or blinding. In political disqualification, after Justinian II rhinotomy was gradually abandoned in favor of blinding, a type of corporal punishment with strong political and ideological symbolism which became the usual sanction for those who dared rebel against imperial authority.⁷⁹

Compared to the above-mentioned types of mutilation, castration had a more complex social meaning, which stemmed from the ambivalent treatment of eunuchs in the Byzantine society. This ambivalence was reflected in the openness of official hierarchy for this category of subjects on one hand and their condemnation and derision on the other. Categorizing officials into 'the bearded' and eunuchs led to the classification of duties and honorific dignities intended for each of these categories, which is detailed in the *Klētorologion* of Philotheos. Many offices and titles were not

to a monastery after 813. The sources provide no information on whether they were engaged or married during their father's reign.

⁷⁸ See, for example, *Ecloga* (*L. Burgmann*) c. XVII.23–28, 30–34.

⁷⁹ *O. Lampsidis*, Η ποινή της τυφλώσεως παρά Βυζαντινοίς, Athens 1949.

only available to eunuchs but reserved for them (τάξεις τῶν εὐνούχων).⁸⁰ On the other hand, eunuchs were explicitly banned from occupying certain positions.⁸¹ This institutionalized need for eunuchs in the Byzantine society encouraged not only the import of castrates but also the expansion of so-called voluntary castration. There is no doubt that many Rhomean families decided to ‘sacrifice’ a male child or even multiple children. Mutilation of reproductive organs (whatever method may have been used to effect it) became just another alternative choice that could ensure and accelerate upward social mobility of the individual and his family. Hence the affirmative treatment of eunuchs in the Byzantine society was equally apparent in the public sphere – institutionalized positions occupied in Byzantine history by eunuchs at court, as members of the emperor’s closest entourage; in state administration; and especially in the church, as well as in the private sphere – in the households of aristocratic and affluent families.⁸²

On the other hand, the traditional Byzantine society also harbored a negative view of eunuchs, which was based on three fundamental characteristics: sterility (which is also the basic definition of a eunuch); physical and psychological resemblance to women; and eunuchs’ sexuality. The *childlessness* of eunuchs was the key reason for their condemnation: due to their inability to father children, eunuchs were considered useless in the socio-religious sense.⁸³

The negative social view of eunuchs rested on the general censure of the act of castration, as evidenced by Byzantine legislation. However, there was a marked difference between genital mutilation and other forms of disfigurement. Firstly, castration did not involve readily evident stigmatization of the victim, regardless of the changes to the physical characteristics of the castrate (gaining weight, baldness, hairlessness, wrinkly skin, elongated limbs etc.) or the changes in their behavior that reduced them to the ‘female nature.’⁸⁴ Secondly, institutional openness of the society towards eunuchs meant that castration did not necessarily entail their social marginalization – they did not suffer the isolation that inevitably accompanied other forms of physical mutilation. Although the castration of members of imperial families was followed by other security measures such as forcible tonsuring and imprisonment in monasteries far from Constantinople (as demonstrated by the cases of Heraklonas’s brother Marinus and the sons of Michael Rhangabe and Leo the Armenian), the castrates

⁸⁰ Listes 125–135.

⁸¹ Eunuchs could not serve as eparch of the city or questor; in addition, they could not occupy the positions of *domestikoi*, *ibid.* 135.9–10. In the last case, this rule was abandoned over time, as evidenced by the example of the Domestic of the Schools.

⁸² The growing influx of domestic eunuchs can be traced to the 8th century, *Ringrose*, Perfect Servant 23. The social acceptability of eunuchs was also evident in the castration of aristocratic illegitimate sons, which removed them from the family inheritance but at the same time opened the path for service in official positions and advancing their careers (e.g. Basil Lekapenos).

⁸³ *Krsmanović – Todorović*, *Odrbrana* 98–101, 104–107.

⁸⁴ *Gautier* I, 293–295; 317.8; *Krsmanović – Todorović*, *Odrbrana* 101–102.

who managed to survive the surgery could achieve remarkable careers in the church (Niketas-Ignatios Rhangabe became the Patriarch of Constantinople). Most importantly, in these cases castration was not a punishment intended to sanction the victim's individual offense. Therefore, the meaning of castration did not rest on a specific individual wrongdoing, but was directed at the family of the victim (innocent individual). Performed on the heirs of a ruler rather than the ruler himself (who was instead forcibly tonsured, killed or subjected to other forms of mutilation – but not genital), castration was meant to prevent a situation that could arise in the future. Since it emerged under pressure of the dynastic principle, i.e. the need to preserve power in the hands of one family (branch), this form of stigmatization was used to ensure the permanent political disqualification of the members of a particular bloodline. Thus, the castration of the sons of Michael I Rhangabe and Leo V the Armenian deprived their families of the possibility of positioning themselves as bearers or transmitters of dynastic legitimacy in the future.

Michael the Amorian was the last ruler to use castration as a means of political disqualification of his predecessor's family members. The ascendancy of the Macedonian dynasty created the preconditions for the evolution and consolidation of the dynastic principle and the preservation of throne rights within one bloodline. However, the struggle of the Macedonians was not without obstacles, especially during the reigns of the first rulers from this house. During the period of the Macedonian dynasty, castration was used occasionally, but not as drastically as had been the case between 813 and 820.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ A relatively similar and more radical example of castration pertains to the castration of the two grandsons of Romanos I Lekapenos. In 945 Constantine VII ordered the castration of Romanos, the son of Emperor Stephen Lekapenos, and Romanos, the son of Emperor Constantine Lekapenos, both in their boyhood. However, they were not marginalized; instead they later received prestigious titles and were thereby included into the τάξεις τῶν εὐνούχων. In addition, Manuel, the secondborn and only surviving son of the late Emperor Christopher Lekapenos was not castrated and was only divested of his 'red sandals' and appointed a magister and a rector, Theoph. Cont VI, 438; Scyl. 238. Basil, the illegitimate son of Romanos I Lekapenos who went on to become one of the most powerful eunuchs, was also castrated to regulate the line of succession Psellos, Chron. I, 3. The case of Theophylaktos Lekapenos is debatable: in my opinion, he seems to have become a eunuch as a result of a childhood illness or injury and not a deliberate decision of Romanos I Lekapenos.

Emperor Alexander also considered castrating Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos, but never executed his plan, Theoph. Cont. VI, 379; Scyl. 194–195. After the rebellion of Constantine VII Doukas was put down in 913 and the deaths of Constantine, Constantine's son Gregory and his nephew Michael, his youngest son Stephen was castrated and exiled to the family estate in Paphlagonia, Theoph. Cont. VI, 385; Scyl. 200. Nikephoros II Phokas reportedly also considered having Basil II and Constantine VIII castrated, Psellos, Hist. Synt. 100; Zon. XVI, 516. A more drastic case of castrating members of one's own family is associated with Michael V Kalaphates, who allegedly had his male relatives neutered to secure the throne for himself, Attal. 11–12. However, this example does not refer to the ruler's direct descendants.

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КАСТРАЦИЈА

КАО ПОСЛЕДИЦА ЈАЧАЊА ДИНАСТИЧКОГ ПРИНЦИПА

У раду се разматрају примери телесног сакаћења који су пратили обрачуна унутар династија или обрачуна са претендентима – потенцијалним или стварним – на царску власт. Уочљиво је да је кастрација била позната али ретко примењивана мера у политичким превирањима током 7. и 8. века. Зато је одлука о кастрирању свих синова свргнутог цара Михаила I Рангабеа (813), а затим и синова Лава V Јерменина (820) одударала од дотадашње уобичајене

византијске праксе. Установљено је да је у наведеним случајевима избор кастрације као најефикаснијег средства за будућу политичку дисквалификацију принчева и њихових породица био последица јачања династичког принципа у византијском друштву, што је било врло изражено у случају потомака Константина V из трећег брака. Истакнуто је, такође, да се кастрацији никад не подвргава свргнути цар автократор, већ носиоци царске титуле (цареви савладари) или, једноставно, принчеви без царског звања. Нотирано је да се у примерима примене кастрације у циљу политичке дисквалификације није радило о санкцији за индивидуалну кривицу (дакле, није реч била о казни која је пратила конкретан преступ); ако се у тим случајевима говори о казни, она је била намењена породици, тј. роду (γένος) а не (невином) појединцу.

У односу на друге начине телесног сакаћења (сечење носа, језика, ушију, ослепљење) кастрација је спадала у блажи вид санкција. Због амбивалентног односа византијског друштва према евнусима, кастрација није водила обавезној друштвеној маргинализацији жртве. Зато је у време владавине Македонске династије чешће примењивана, али су угледни кастрирани појединци укључивани у службену хијерархију, у *евнушки ред* (τάξεις τῶν εὐνούχων).