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More Questions about the Origins of the Imperial Opsikion

One of Ralph Lilie's first major projects was embodied in his now classic book, *Die byzantinische Reaktion auf die Ausbreitung der Araber*, which examined in careful detail the process through which the eastern half of the late Roman empire was able to weather the storm of the early Arab-Islamic invasions in the period ca. 640–800. Part of that project entailed, of course, a discussion of the origins of Byzantine military administrative arrangements, a topic that he followed up shortly afterwards with two equally important contributions to the discussion, on the origins of the Thracian and Thrakesion commands, and on what he dubbed 'the two-hundred year reform'.¹ One of his most recent projects has been the wonderful resource of the *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit*. In recognition of his achievement in both respects, and in particular with regard to the prosopographical materials collected and evaluated in the latter work, I want in this short contribution to return to one small but important aspect of the changes that took place in east Roman military administration in the seventh century, namely the question of the beginnings of the so-called Opsikion army, and at the same time to take an intriguing entry in the *PmbZ* as a pointer to some answers.²

The question of the origins of the Opsikion is hardly new, and several scholars have made important contributions since the 1970s and 1980s.³ Yet there is still a

1 R.-J. LILIE, *Die byzantinische Reaktion auf die Ausbreitung der Araber (Miscellanea Byzantina Monacensia 22)*. Munich, 1976; R.-J. LILIE, „Thrakien“ und „Thrakesion“. Zur byzantinischen Provinzorganisation am Ende des 7. Jahrhunderts, *JöB* 26 (1977) 7–47; R.-J. LILIE, Die zweihundertjährige Reform: zu den Anfängen der Themenorganisation im 7. und 8. Jahrhundert, *BSI* 45 (1984), 27–39, 190–201.

2 R.-J. LILIE, C. LUDWIG, T. PRATSCH, I. ROCHOW et al., *Prosopographie der mittelbyzantinischen Zeit*. Erste Abteilung (641–867), 6 vols. Berlin 1999–2002, #10698, discussing a scholion to a passage in the Acta of Maximos the Confessor (see n. 18, below).

3 See in particular W. BRANDES, Philippos ὁ στρατηλάτης τοῦ βασιλικοῦ Ὀψικίου. Anmerkungen zur Frühgeschichte des Thema Opsikion, in: *Novum Millenium. Studies on Byzantine history and culture dedicated to Paul Speck*, ed. C. Sode – S. Takacs. 21–39; T. C. LOUNGHIS, A Deo conservandum imperiale obsequium. Some notes concerning Byzantine field troops during the Dark Ages, *BSI* 52 (1991), 54–60; *id.*, The decline of the Opsikian domesticates and the rise of the domesticates of the Scholae, *Symmeikta* 10 (1996) 27–36; J. F. Haldon, Trouble with the *Opsikion*: some issues concerning the first *themata*, in: *In Memoriam Nikos Oikonomidès. Essays in honour of Nikos Oikonomidès*, ed. F. EVANGELATOU-NOTARA. Athens 2003, 154–178; and see additionally the relevant sections in B. BLYSIDOU – E. KOUNTOURA-GALAKI et al., *Η Μικρά Ασία των θεμάτων. Έρευνες πάνω στη γεωγραφική φυσιογνωμία και προσωπογραφία των Βυζαντινών θεμάτων της Μικράς Ασίας (7ος –11ος αι.)*. Athens 1998, 163–178, 235–244. For a prosopography of the Opsikion, see *ibid.*, 391–405. The most recent comment on the Opsikion is V. PRIGENT, *La Sicile de Constant II: l'apport des sources sigil-*

good deal of uncertainty about it, partly a reflection of the limited source material, but also to some extent a reflection of misconceptions about the nature of the changes that were taking place at that time. A great deal of ink has flowed since the 1970s in connection with the ‘themes’ and what was once thought to be the related question of the ‘military lands’. But there is now a general consensus that the structures that eventually led to what can, by the ninth and tenth centuries, be called a ‘theme system’ evolved only gradually, and that the older civil administrative establishment that had managed the state’s fiscal affairs in the late Roman period subsisted within the new arrangements for some time after the seventh century. Additionally, we also know that the so-called military lands are a product of tenth-century legislation to protect the government’s fiscal interests in the provinces as well as to protect a base for the financing of the provincial armies. This is not to suggest that land and soldiers’ own resources were not a significant element of the way in which provincial forces were recruited and supported in the eighth and ninth centuries, for a few surviving documents show that soldiers’ households were recognised by the government as contributing to soldiers’ upkeep already by the 740s and probably earlier.⁴ More recently, I have argued that the term *thema* itself was introduced only under Nikephoros I or an immediate predecessor, and is at origins a fiscal term representing the introduction of new arrangements for the recruitment and maintenance of provincial soldiers.⁵

In short, the situation with regard to the origins of much of the middle Byzantine administration, both military and fiscal, is now much clearer than it was, even if many questions remain.⁶ Yet the origins of one of the most important military and later administrative regions of the empire, the *Opsikion*, remain shrouded in mys-

lographiques, in: *La Sicile de Byzance à l’Islam*, ed. A. NEF and V. PRIGENT. Paris 2010, 157–187. For a recent review of much of the evidence and discussion: G. LEBENIOTIS, *Obsequentes – privatum – obsequium – Obsequium – Obsequion – Opsicion – Οψίκιον. Η εξέλιξη ενός τεχνικού όρου και η πρώιμη περίοδος του „θέματος“ Οψικίου*, in: *Φιλοτιμία. Studies in honour of Alkmene Stavridou-Zafraka*, ed. Th. KORRES, P. KATSONI, I. LEONTIADIS AND A. GKOUTZIOUKOSTAS. Thessaloniki 2011, 361–410.

⁴ See LILIE, *Die zweihundertjährige Reform*; the arguments and evidence are discussed in detail in J. F. HALDON, *Military service, military lands and the status of soldiers: current problems and interpretations*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 47 (1993) 1–67 (repr. in J. F. HALDON, *State, Army and Society in Byzantium: Approaches to Military, Social and Administrative History, 6th–12th Centuries*. Aldershot 1995, no. VI).

⁵ See C. ZUCKERMAN, *Learning from the enemy and more: studies in „Dark Centuries“ Byzantium*, *Millenium* 2 (2006) 79–135, at 128; J. F. HALDON, *A context for two „evil deeds“: Nikephoros I and the origins of the themata*, in *Le saint, le moine et le paysan. Mélanges d’histoire byzantine offerts à Michel KAPLAN*, ed. O. DELOUIS, S. MÉTIVIER AND P. PAGÈS, *Byzantina Sorbonensia* 29. Paris 2016, 245–265.

⁶ On the fiscal side, see W. BRANDES, *Finanzverwaltung in Krisenzeiten. Untersuchungen zur byzantinischen Administration im 6.–9. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt am Main, 2002; BRUBAKER – HALDON, *Byzantium in the iconoclast era, 680–850. A History*. Cambridge 211, 665–722.

tery. What I would like to do next is briefly to summarise what we know and how to fit it into the broader picture. To some extent, the problem has been made worse by unwarranted assumptions about a seventh-century theme system and soldiers' lands – for which there is not a shred of evidence. As soon as we abandon such notions we can make some headway.

Our starting point has to be the now undeniable fact that, with a few small exceptions to meet local circumstances, after the end of the war with Persia the emperor Heraclius re-established the system of military organisation he had inherited. But the losses in manpower and the effects of between 15 and 20 years of Persian occupation appear to have resulted in the end of the *limitanei* as a specific and distinctive category of soldiers – at least, there is only limited and indirect evidence of such soldiers in Syria, Palestine and Egypt.⁷ On the other hand, this had been since at least the middle of the sixth century a formal and, in practical respects, probably largely unimportant distinction, to judge by the ways in which the two categories of troops were frequently and regularly involved in the same operations.⁸ By the same token, the actual size of the garrison forces throughout the eastern provinces, especially the field divisions of the *magistri militum* of Oriens and Armenia, however they were classified (as *limitanei* or as *comitatenses*, assuming this distinction still had any practical significance), was probably greatly reduced. Heraclius was compelled to rely more heavily than ever before on Arab federates and allies.⁹ In any case, what we seem to have in the period ca. 629–634 is a slimmed-down and under-manned version of the old arrangements, with far fewer, or at least much smaller, units as garrison and field forces under their *duces* and their *magistri militum* and a far greater reliance on Arab federates and allies of one sort or another.¹⁰

After the collapse of Byzantine defences in the east and Egypt it is some time before evidence of the state of the armies emerges. From the names of the armies later based in Anatolia, beginning in the 660s, it has been assumed that the battered and defeated imperial forces were withdrawn into that region. Thus the army of the east reappears as that of Anatolikon, while the troops under the *magister militum per*

7 See O. SCHMITT, Untersuchungen zur Organisation und zur militärischen Stärke oströmischer Herrschaft im Vorderen Orient zwischen 628 und 633, *BZ* 94 (2001) 197–229, at 204–220; also A.-M. KAISER, Militärorganisation im spätantiken Ägypten (284–641 n. Chr.) (Diss. Wien 2012), esp. 257–273; and J. F. HALDON, Seventh-century continuities and transformations: the Ajnâd and the “thematic myth”, in: States, resources and armies: papers of the third workshop on late Antiquity and early Islam, ed. AV. CAMERON – L. A CONRAD, Princeton 1995, 379–423, see 399–402 and 420–422.

8 See P. RANCE, The Strategikon of Maurice: translation and commentary. Aldershot forthcoming, ch. 6, with sources, literature and detailed discussion.

9 See in particular SCHMITT, Untersuchungen 204–213, 228–229.

10 The unusually long time it took to organise a new field army to confront the Arabs in Syria in the period leading up to the battle of the Yarmuk in 636 is indicative of the extremely limited manpower at the emperor's disposal: see LILIE, Die byzantinische Reaktion 41–42 and n. 4.

Armeniam are identified with the so-called Armeniakon. The army of the *magister militum per Thracias*, which was active in the east before the fall of Egypt (although it is not clear when it was transferred to this theatre of operations), must have been withdrawn along with the others – there is no other explanation for its establishment as the Thrakesion army in western Anatolia.¹¹ The origins of the *Karabisianoï*, or ‘ship troops’ remains disputed, but it does appear to have had some connection with the old *Quaestura exercitus* established in the sixth century.¹² Without being able to go into any real detail of when and how, therefore, we can at least make the reasonable assumption that these three armies had been operating under their own commanders at some point in the 630s before being withdrawn, although the forces under the *magister militum per Armeniam* will have been withdrawn from Syria, returning to their quarters in Armenia I–IV and remaining there at least into the 660s before further Arab conquests in that region. How the field armies were established in their new districts and how their logistical demands and strategic roles were met is another story.¹³ But the fourth of the imperial land armies which appears by the later seventh century is the Opsikion, and it has no obvious antecedent, indeed in a sense it appears from nowhere.

The word *Opsikion* is the Hellenised version of the Latin *Obsequium*, and it had a variety of meanings. But it is agreed that by the early seventh century it could certainly be employed to mean a retinue or following, and by the middle of the seventh century, regardless of whether or not the term was used in any imperial context, it could be applied to a military body: pope Martin describes the soldiers who accompanied the exarch Theodore Calliopas as an *obsequium*.¹⁴

¹¹ The *Magister militum per Thracias* Marinus was defeated with his forces fighting the Arabs in Egypt: Nicephorus, patriarch of Constantinople. Short History. Text, trans. and commentary by C. Mango (*CFHB*, ser. Washingtoniensis 13 = DOT 10). Washington D.C. 1990, §23.4–6; with LILIE, *Die byzantinische Reaktion* 49; idem, „Thrakien” und „Thrakesion” 27 and n. 92. Whether his forces were among those evacuated under treaty in 641–642 is unknown: LILIE, *Die byzantinische Reaktion* 50–51.

¹² See BRUBAKER – HALDON, *Byzantium in the iconoclast era 725–726*, note 4 with sources and literature cited there; and V. PRIGENT, *Notes sur l'évolution de l'administration byzantine en Adriatique (VIIIe–IXe siècle)*, *MEFRM* 12/2 (2008) 393–417, at 393–398. A growing consensus argues that there is no association to be assumed between the *Quaestura* and the *Karabisianoï*: see C. ZUCKERMAN, *Learning from the enemy and more: studies in ‘Dark Centuries’ Byzantium*, *Millenium* 2 (2006) 79–135, at 111–119; and in detail A. GKOUTZIOUKOSTAS and X. MONIAROS, *Η περιφερειακή διοικητική αναδιοργάνωση της Βυζαντινής αυτοκρατορίας από τον Ιουστινιανό Α' (527–565): η περίπτωση της Quaestura Iustiniana Exercitus*. Thessaloniki 2009, with older literature.

¹³ See LILIE, *Die zweihundertjährige Reform*; HALDON, *Military service, military lands and the status of soldiers*; idem, *Byzantium in the seventh century: the transformation of a culture*. Cambridge ²1997, 215–232; and BRUBAKER – HALDON, *Byzantium in the iconoclast era 723–728*, 734–739.

¹⁴ See esp. S. Martini *papae epistulae*, in PL 87, ep. 15, 200, and PmbZ I, #7295; *Prosopography of the Byzantine Empire 641–886 (PBE)*, ed. J. R. MARTINDALE. London 2000, Theodoros 163; and see J. F. HALDON, *Byzantine Praetorians: an administrative, institutional and social survey of the Opsikion*

Until recently it was generally agreed that the first reference to the Opsikion as a military unit occurs in the letter from Justinian II to the pope in 687 confirming the emperor's acceptance of the acts of the sixth council of 680; and that the first mention of its commander is as a signatory to the acts of the council of 680.¹⁵ Wolfram Brandes introduced an important piece of previously neglected evidence, pointing out that in the acts of the council of 680–681 (14th session, held on 5th April 681) reference is made to a story told by a certain Philippos, στρατηλάτης τοῦ βασιλικοῦ Ὀψικίου. While resident in Constantinople at the time of the council, this Philippos had some time beforehand brought a manuscript of the Acts of the fifth ecumenical council with him 'from the West'.¹⁶ As Brandes points out, the reference to 'the west' almost certainly refers to Italy and/or Sicily, and he concluded that Philippos may well have been in Sicily or Italy at the time of the emperor Constans II's expedition to the west in the early and mid-660s, or at the time of the rebellion of Mizizios and the assassination of Constans in 668.¹⁷ In any case, this mention makes it clear that, whatever *Opsikion* might have meant, it was clearly a military unit; it was presumably a substantial division, since it was commanded by a *stratelates*, the Greek equivalent of a *magister militum*; and it clearly existed before the council of 680. If Brandes' suggestion is correct, and Philippos had held his command as a *stratelates* of the Opsikion in Italy under Constans II, it seems reasonable to take the existence of an *Opsikion* back into the 660s. Naturally, this says nothing about whether or not the *Opsikion* had any sort of territorial identity.

and Tagmata, c. 580–900 (Bonn 1984), 175 and n. 356. For a discussion of the evolution of *Obsequium/Opsikion*, see BRANDES, Philippos 24–25.

15 Justinian II's letter: Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum (hereafter ACO) II 2: Concilium universale Constantinopolitanum tertium, ed. R. Riedinger. Berlin 1990–1992, 2, 886.20–25: quosdam de Christo dilectis exercitibus, tam ab a Deo conservando Obsequio, quamque ab Orientali, Thraciano, similiter et ab Armeniano, etiam ab exercitu Italiano, deinde ex Caraviensis et Septensiensis seu de Sardinia atque de Africa exercitu. For the komes of the Opsikion Theodore in 680: ACO II/2, 1, 14.20–21. See PmbZ I, #7345; PBE, Theodoros 48.

16 The story concerned interpolations made by monotheletes: ACO II/2, 650. 3–4. See PmbZ I, #6153 with literature and sources; PBE, Philippos 1.

17 BRANDES, Philippos 30–33. The events surrounding the assassination of Constans II and the rebellion of Mizizios have been substantially re-interpreted by PRIGENT, La Sicile de Constant II 175–185, who argues that the assassination was inspired by Constantine IV and that the rebellion of Mizizios/Mzez was in effect a loyalist response to this action, all in the context of a series of disastrous imperial defeats in N. Africa, an Arab seaborne attack on Sicily, and the first major siege of Constantinople, now persuasively re-dated to 668–669 rather than in the period 674–678: see M. JANKOWIAK, The first Arab siege of Constantinople, *TM* 17 (C. ZUCKERMAN, ed., Constructing the seventh century): 237–320. Further detailed discussion, with a slight redating to 669–670 for the blockade, in V. PRIGENT, Des pères et des fils. Note de numismatique sicilienne pour servir à l'histoire du règne de Constantin IV, in: Mélanges Michel Kaplan, ed. O. DELOUIS, S. METIVIER and P. PAGES, Paris forthcoming.

But there is in fact good evidence that the Opsikion existed already by the middle 650s. In September of the year 656, and following upon the failure of the imperial negotiators to reach an agreement between Maximos the Confessor and the emperor, the former was held for a few days at Selymbria. The text of the *Disputation at Bizye with Theodosios the bishop of Caesarea in Bithynia*, which recounts the events, notes that Maximos was received in a kindly manner by ‘the general, or rather the general’s deputy...’, and a scholion to that comment notes that this was ‘Theodore of Koloneia, who replaced the *komes*, which is to say, the emperor’s brother’ (Θεόδωρον λέγει τὸν Κολονίας ποιῶντα τὸν τόπον τοῦ κόμητος ἦγουν τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ τοῦ βασιλέως).¹⁸ We do not need to pursue here either the career of Theodore of Koloneia, one of Constans II’s most important advisers, nor that of ‘the emperor’s brother’. This can only have been the ill-fated Theodosios, the brother of the emperor Constans II, who had been executed, probably as the result of his implication in a plot, in 659 (at least one other high-ranking military officer, an otherwise unknown George, was executed along with him).¹⁹ But the mention of a very high-ranking senior officer, described as a general, whose title was *komes*, and who was in charge of a field force in Thrace, does attract our attention.

Now it could be that the *komes* in question was the commander of the palatine guards unit of the *Excubitores*, who remained important throughout the seventh and into the eighth century, and whose senior officers, the *skribones*, were close to the emperor and were often entrusted with special missions. Anastasios, the deputy, or *topoteretes*, of this *komes* was present among the high-ranking senior officers who accompanied the emperor at the sessions of the sixth ecumenical council in 680.²⁰ But two facts militate against this: first, the passage makes it clear that there was a substantial body of soldiers based at the encampment at Selymbria, and that it was the deputy of the general in command of these troops who greeted Maximos. A high-

¹⁸ See PmbZ I #10698, and *Disputatio Bizyae cum Theodosio*, in: Scripta saeculi VII vitam Maximi Confessoris illustrantia, ed. P. Allen – B. Neil (*Corpus christianorum. Series Graeca* 39). Turnhout – Leuven 1999, 53–151, at 765–766. The passage is discussed briefly by M. JANKOWIAK, *Essai d’histoire politique* 346; for a detailed discussion of the text as a whole: F. WINKELMANN, *Die Quellen zur Erforschung des monenergetisch-monotheletischen Streites. Klio* 69 (1987) 515–559 (publ. in revised version as: *Der monenergetisch-monotheletische Streit [BBS 6]*. Berlin 2001, no. 145); and W. BRANDES, «Juristische» Krisenbewältigung im 7. Jahrhundert? Die Prozesse gegen Papst Martin I. und Maximos Homologetes. *Fontes Minores* 10 (1998) 141–212, at 156. For the career of the emperor’s brother Theodosios, his military commands, and eventual execution, see PmbZ I #7797.

¹⁹ On George, see PmbZ I #2075. For Theodore of Koloneia, PmbZ I #7312, probably the same as the Theodore who was the general’s deputy in 656 (PmbZ I #10698); also to be identified with the Theodore mentioned as *komes* of the Opsikion in 680: PmbZ I #7345 (PmbZ entries provide all relevant sources and literature).

²⁰ See ACO II/2, 1, pp. 14.27–28; 26. 28–29; 36. 9–10 etc. For a detailed account of the *Excubitores* and their development from the later fifth into the eighth century see HALDON, *Praetorians* 136–139, 161–164, 228–235.

ranking commander referred to as a general can only mean an officer in charge of an army of some sort, not just a small unit. Secondly, this army is clearly encamped at one or more bases in Thrace, and we know from the acts of the council of 680 that the commander of the Opsikion army was a certain Theodore, almost certainly Theodore of Koloneia, and that he held the position of ἐνδοξότατος ἀπὸ ὑπάτων πατρίκιος, κόμης τοῦ βασιλικοῦ ὀψικίου καὶ ὑποστράτηγος Θράκης. Whether or not the new military division of Thrace was established at this time, it is likely that the Opsikion army had been responsible for the defence of the region.²¹

Now in the acts of 680 Philippos is described as *stratēlatēs tou Opsikiou*. As Brandes has shown, it is fairly certain that this was an active functional title, not merely a dignity without a function.²² Philippos was thus a *magister militum*.²³ But the commander of the *Opsikion* was a *komes*, as the titles of Theodore, *komes* of the Opsikion in the acts of 680 demonstrate, and all other Opsikion commanders known thereafter were likewise *komites*. Since, however, the same Theodore is described elsewhere in the Acts of the council as a *stratēgos*, the usual title for field commander, and since the same title is occasionally used in later sources for the *komēs tou Opsikiou*, this again is no obstacle to Philippos being understood as commander – *komes* – of the Opsikion. An active *stratēlatēs* only had significance in the context of an active field army, and this further reinforces the likelihood that the *Opsikion* existed as a field army.²⁴ We may thus conclude with some degree of certainty that a *komes* of a significant military force was operating in Thrace in 656 and that this force was the *Opsikion* army. This might well have been in connection, as the editors of the entry in the *PmbZ* suggest, with the expedition that Constans II undertook into the *Sklaviniai* at that time.²⁵ Whether this was in fact the case or not, the reference demonstrates that, contrary to Brandes' doubts,²⁶ the Opsikion was a field army

21 BRANDES, Philippos 28 and *PmbZ* I #7345; PBE Theodorus 48. For Thrace and the Opsikion, see LILIE, „Thrakien“ und „Thrakesion“ 33–35; BRANDES, Philippos 29–30.

22 The two terms *magister militum* and *stratelates* were used until at least the middle of the seventh century if not later as functional equivalents, and *stratelates* appears in both the written sources as well as on lead seals sources for the period: see BRANDES, Philippos 33 and notes 74–76; HALDON, *Byzantine Praetorians* 441–442 (n. 350). The opening stage in the process whereby the older title of *magister militum/stratēlatēs* was pushed into the background may date from the appearance of the title *stratēgos* in the reign of Heraclius (albeit in a poetic context) to refer to the commander of the imperial field army. By the end of the seventh century *stratelates* appears to have become a purely titular rank. Cf. A. PERTUSI, ed., *Giorgio di Pisidia, Poemi I: Panegirici Epici*. Ettal 1959, 84–136, see iii.336–337; followed by Theoph., *Chronographia* 306.7.

23 On the title and its significance, see the literature cited by BRANDES, Philippos 33 and n. 74–76.

24 See ACO II/2, 2, 696.4; BRANDES, Philippos 28 and n. 41 (other examples); cf. J. NESBITT – N. OIKONOMIDÈS, ed., *Catalogue of Byzantine seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art*, 3: west, northwest and central Asia Minor and the Orient. Washington DC, 1996, 55.

25 *PmbZ* I #10698; cf. Theoph. 347. 6f. (trans. Mango – Scott, 484).

26 BRANDES, Philippos 36.

before 680 (and indeed at least as early as 656), and that it was already commanded by a *komes* at this point.

As I noted in 2003, a final indication that the Opsikion existed at this time comes from the *Liber diurnus*, a compilation made over a period of two centuries or more in Rome, and whose first section includes material from the middle of the seventh century. One of the chancellery superscriptions, probably dating to the period before the sixth council, is addressed ‘ad comitem imperialis obsequii et ad exarcum’.²⁷ If this address was required while a *comes imperialis Obsequii* was in Italy, it can only have been in the period 662–668, when the armies of the exarch at Ravenna and the emperor, in Sicily, were both present (although this is not to deny the possibility that a pope might have a correspondence with such a high-ranking imperial officer, especially in the period of papal-imperial negotiations leading up to the sixth ecumenical council in 680–681. To further underline this point, we may note several seals of the *Basilicu opsiciu* from Sicily, dateable to the second part of the seventh century, which would appear to confirm that the imperial *Obsequium* – the *basilikon Opsikion* – was in Sicily with Constans II on the years 663–668.²⁸ In either case, this is further evidence for the existence of an officer who commanded an imperial *Obsequium* before 680, whatever the term actually meant.

That the *Opsikion* army was commanded by a *komēs* (even if he could be described common-sensically as a *strategos* or *stratelates*), unlike the other field armies of the empire, has its origins probably in the fact that he is the descendant of the commander of the imperial palatine retinue and guards units based in Constan-

²⁷ HALDON, Trouble with the *Opsikion* 117–118. See *Liber Diurnus Romanorum Pontificorum*, ed. H. Förster. Berlin, 1958, 77 and 181. The *Liber diurnus* is difficult to date as a whole, and it is generally admitted that it is the result of an extended process. That the first group of chancellery superscriptions, however, can be dated to the second half of the seventh century, and probably before the council of 680–681, is also generally accepted: see the comments of the editor, FÖRSTER, *ibid.* 21–36; and discussion in L. SANTIFALLER, *Liber Diurnus: Studien und Forschungen*. Stuttgart, 1976.

²⁸ See HALDON, Praetorians 194–195. The seals: G. MANGANARO, Sigilli diplomatici bizantini in Sicilia, *Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte* 53/54 (2003/2004 [Munich 2005]) 73–90, see 76, nos. 19, 20, pl. II 19. A third similar seal from a private collection (Syracuse, Museo Paolo Orsi, no. 14974), of the *spatharii* of the *Opsikion* has been discussed by PRIGENT, La Sicile de Constant II 168–169. Prigent (169–173) also notes a fourth, misidentified, seal of the Opsikion in the Dumbarton Oaks collection: E. MCGEER – J. NESBITT – N. OIKONOMIDÈS†, Catalogue of Byzantine seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art, V: The East (continued), Constantinople and environs, unknown locations, addenda, uncertain readings. Washington D.C. 2005, 107.1. Prigent, La Sicile de Constant II 167–175 discusses these seals in detail and concludes that the Opsikion was a field army and that it was in Sicily with Constans II. He burdens his discussion unnecessarily with the suggestion that there was also an Opsikion of the exarch, and that some of these seals may belong to this body (*art.cit.* 174). This is based on an unnecessary emendation he makes to the above-mentioned formulae of the *Liber diurnus* (see V. PRIGENT, Une note sur l’administration de l’Exarchat de Ravenne, in: Ἀμειλοκήπιν, Studi di amici e colleghi in onore di Vera von Falkenhaitzen [Νέα Ῥώμη 2. 2005], 79–88, at 84).

tinople and its hinterland, thus the *comes domesticorum*. In the course of the sixth century this officer came to command all the palatine military entourage, and in particular the *protectores et domestici* and the *scholae* (the latter had been under the practical command of the *comes domesticorum* since the fifth century at least). The *scholae* and related units, including the *domestici*, were based largely in the Anatolian hinterland of Constantinople – districts which were later part of the *Opsikion* theme, such as Phrygia Salutaris (at Dorylaion and Kotyaion), Bithynia (at Nikomedeia, Kion, Prousa) and in Hellespontus (at Kyzikos); and there were *domestici protectores* in Galatia I (at Ankyra and Anastasioupolis).²⁹ Some of them were for a while during the early 560s transferred to Thrace, but seem later to have been back in their Asia Minor quarters.³⁰

But the problem here is that in 687 the *scholae* and the *excubitores* were clearly separate and distinct from the *Opsikion*. So while there seems little reason to doubt that the *comes domesticorum*, who commanded also the *scholai*, is the later *komês tou Opsikiou*, how this evolved, and when he lost authority over the palatine units, is not at all clear. Perhaps the *comes domesticorum* accompanied Heraclius on his final campaigns against the Persians, and thus came to command a praesental field force; perhaps such a force was reconstituted at the end of the war; perhaps it was created anew by either Heraclius or by Constans II.

The question arises as to whether or not any of the praesental armies survived the Persian wars and into the last years of the reign of Heraclius at all. The idea that the Opsikion division evolved out of a single praesental force that had come into existence in the course of the warfare of the later sixth and early seventh century³¹ has been plausibly challenged, and I would agree that the evidence for any sort of a praesental force is at the least problematic before Heraclius' Persian wars; even then it remains ambiguous.³² The scarcity of references to either praesental commanders or their troops might also suggest a gradual reduction in the strength of these armies across the sixth century, most likely the effect of constant transfers of units to reinforce field armies elsewhere.³³ This process undoubtedly speeded up considerably in

²⁹ *Scholae* under the authority of the *comes domesticorum*: HALDON, Praetorians 143–145 with sources. Soldiers of these units might occasionally be found elsewhere also, in Cappadocia or Galatia Salutaris (at a later date within the Anatolikon and Armeniakon zones). See J. F. HALDON, Byzantium in the seventh century. The transformation of a culture. Cambridge ²1997, 217ff.

³⁰ Theoph., *Chronographia*, loc. cit. and the references in the preceding note from the *Life* of Theodore of Sykeon.

³¹ HALDON, Praetorians 164–182.

³² See the critique of O. SCHMITT, From the late Roman to the early Byzantine army. Two aspects of change, in: The Late Roman Army in the Near East from Diocletian to the Arab Conquest. Proceedings of a Colloquium held at Potenza, Acerenza and Matera, 10–14 May 2005, ed. A. S. LEWIN – P. PELLEGRINI (*British Archaeological Reports International Series* 1717). Oxford 2007, 411–419.

³³ See A. H. M. JONES, The Later Roman Empire: a Social, Economic and Administrative Survey, 3 vols. and maps. Oxford, 1964, 685–686. Only one holder of the post of *magister militum praesentalis* is

the context of the Balkan and then Persian wars from the 570s onwards, and it is likely that this weakened the distinction between the two praesental forces. But this may itself have encouraged the evolution of a single command, which had perhaps become established by the later 620s.³⁴ This is as far as the evidence from the period of Maurice and Heraclius and earlier can reasonably take us, and there is no evidence for a formally-established praesental army of any size into the 630s.³⁵ Only with the appearance in the 650s of a high-ranking *komes* commanding a field army of some sort operating in Thrace and close to the imperial capital do we begin to have concrete evidence for such a force once more. Brandes noted that in neither the title given to Philippos, nor in the title of Theodore, the *komês* who was present for

documented after 550, Comentiolus (Theophylact Simocatta I 7.4 [ed. C. DE BOOR – P. WIRTH, *Theophylacti Simocattae Historiae*. Stuttgart 1972, 53,18]; see PLRE IIIA 322, Comentiolus 1, for the year c.585–586); and see E. STEIN, *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Reiches, vornehmlich unter den Kaisern Justinus II. und Tiberius Constantinus*. Stuttgart 1919, 131; HALDON, *Byzantine Praetorians* 444–446; and cf. PLRE IIIB 1501. For transfers of praesental forces to the east: JONES, *Later Roman empire* 655 and 661; D. HOFFMANN, *Das spätrömische Bewegungsheer und die Notitia Dignitatum* (*Epigraphische Studien* 7.1–2). Düsseldorf 1969–1970, I 222–225; II 85 with n. 117; to Italy: SCHMITT, *For the late Roman to the early Byzantine army* 413–414; T. S. BROWN, *Gentlemen and officers. Imperial administration and aristocratic power in Byzantine Italy A.D. 554–800*. Rome 1984, 84–88; A. GUILLOU, *Régionalisme et indépendance dans l'empire byzantine au VII^e siècles. L'exemple d'Exarchat et de la Pentapole d'Italie*. Rome 1969, 153–158.

34 See O. SCHMITT, *Die Bucellari. Eine Studie zum militärischen Gefolgschaftswesen in der Spätantike*, *Tyche* 9 (1994) 147–174, at 173, n. 222. Major transfers of soldiers from the Balkans to the east took place in the early 570s: e.g. Menander Protector. 25.2, 13–16 (ed. R. C. Blockley, *The History of Menander the Guardsman. Introductory Essay, Text, Translation, and Historiographical Notes*. Liverpool 1985, 222); John of Ephesos vi. 25 (E. W. BROOKS, trans., *Iohannis Ephesini Historiae ecclesiasticae, pars tertia*. CSCO, *Script. Syri*, III, 3. Louvain 1936, 248–249); and the reverse was the case, with transfers from the east to the Balkans, in 591–592: Theophylact Simocatta V 16.1 (220–221 DE BOOR – P. WIRTH) (Theoph. 267.31–34); Sebeos 16, 18, 20 (trans. R. W. THOMSON, in J. D. HOWARD-JOHNSTON and R. W. THOMSON, *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, 2 vols. Liverpool 1999, 88, 90–92). Large numbers of troops were then transferred back to the east in 603–604 (Theoph. 292.11–14) and in 622 (Theoph. 302.27–30).

35 The dubious reference to a *komes Opsariou* (which can be emended either to *Opsikiou* or *Opsoniou*) and has been taken to be the first indication of an Opsikon, should perhaps be left to one side for the moment: *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. L. Dindorf (CSHB 14). Bonn, 1832, 715.20; *Chronicon Paschale*, 284–628 A.D., trans. M. and M. Whitby. Liverpool 1989, 201–202; PLRE III 780f.: an official named Leontios, κόμης ὀπαρίου, appears together with the praetorian prefect Alexander in an entry in the Paschal Chronicle for the year 626, when the soldiers of the *scholai* and their families and supporters protested at a proposed rise in the price of their bread ration. Many years ago Diehl proposed that this should be read as κόμης ὀψικίου, and although this has met with some acceptance, it remains problematic: CH. DIEHL, *BZ* 9 (1900) 677 (review of H. GELZER, *Die Genesis der byzantinischen Themenverfassung* [*Abhandlungen d. königl. sächsischen Gesellschaft d. Wiss., phil.-hist. Kl.*]. Leipzig, 1899/Amsterdam, 1966); also STEIN, *Studien* 131; and J. KARAYANNOPOULOS, *Die Entstehung der byzantinischen Themenordnung* (*Byzantinisches Archiv* 10). Munich 1959, 31; rejecting the identity with an official or officer of the Opsikon: BRANDES, *Philippos* 26–27.

some of the council sessions with the emperor in 680, is the *Opsikion* described as *theophylaktos*, ‘guarded by God’. He concludes that it must therefore be a different sort of *Opsikion* from that of the *iussio* of 687, which did have the epithet *theophylaktos* and was clearly distinguished from the palatine corps of *scholai* and the *excubitores*.³⁶ He may well be right.

But it seems on the face of unlikely that a field army operating in Thrace in the mid-650s, under a general who held one of the highest-ranking palatine commands in the empire (*comes domesticorum*), had no previous history. Indeed, were it a newly-established force, it is unlikely, I suggest, that it be known by a well-established Latin term.³⁷ That there was a field army called the *Opsikion*, under the command of a high-ranking officer with the title of *komes*, throughout the period from the middle of the seventh century on appears to be certain; and it is therefore more than likely that it was in existence from the time of Heraclius’ Persian wars. It was in action with the emperor in Sicily, as we have seen, and later in Thrace near Constantinople.³⁸ But some change in status, perhaps associated with the creation of the new command of Thrace and possibly also with the separation of the palatine units from the *Obsequium*, probably took place between the end of the council in 681 and the issue of Justinian II’s *iussio* in 687, as Brandes suggests. All of which brings us back to the work of Ralph-Johannes Lilie, the scholar who first pointed out the importance of the question of the origins of the military commands of Thrace and Thraakesion.

³⁶ BRANDES, Philippos 36.

³⁷ Such as the ‘army of Thrace’, perhaps: yet as Lilie has shown, this force was already based in western Anatolia at this point.

³⁸ These considerations, and the sigillographic evidence from Sicily noted above, in fact make it more likely that Mizizios/Mzez was indeed the *komes Opsikiou* (as PRIGENT also suggests, *La Sicile de Constant II* 166–175, 184–185), as claimed in the forged early ninth-century letter ascribed to pope Gregory II (*BHG* 1387d): ed. J. Gouillard, *Aux origines de l’iconoclisme: le témoignage de Grégoire II?*, *TM* 3 (1968) 243–307: text at 277–297, 299–305, see 295.251–253 (repr. in J. GOUILLARD, *La vie religieuse à Byzance*. London, 1981, IV; see BRANDES, Philippos 32, n. 70; H. GROTZ, *Zwei Briefe Papst Gregors II*, *Archivum Historiae Pontificae* 18 (1980) 9–40; M.-F. AUZEPY, *L’hagiographie et l’iconoclisme byzantin. Le cas de la Vie d’Étienne le Jeune* (*BBOM* 5). Aldershot 1999, 262–268; TH. PRATSCH, *Untersuchungen zu De thematibus Kaiser Konstantins VII. Porphyrogennetos*, in: *Varia V (Poikila Byzantina* 13). Bonn 1994, 13–145, see 111–114. For Mizizios: *PmbZ* I, #5163; *PBE*, Mizizios 1.

