
ON THE MUTILATION AND BLINDING OF BYZANTINE EMPERORS FROM THE REIGN OF HERACLIUS I UNTIL THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Abstract: Whoever reads about Byzantine history probably realises sooner or later that besides killing a pretender or emperor it was quite common to blind him – or to cut off his nose. This latter practice is called rhinotomy. It is the aim of this paper to examine the frequency of and the reasons for these forms of punishment in Byzantium from the beginning of the 7th century until 1453. The article takes a diachronic approach to the questions regarding Byzantine emperors and pretenders who were blinded or mutilated. The multiple brief case studies provided in the first part thus make up the core of the paper. But the statistical analyses in the second half are nevertheless crucial for the conclusions drawn at the end.

Keywords: *Blinding in Byzantium – mutilation – regicide – rhinotomy – rhinokopia*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Niccolò Machiavelli gave the following advice in his best-known work *The Prince*:

“Cruel acts are used well (if we can apply ‘well’ to wicked acts) if they are needed for political security and are all committed at a single stroke and then discontinued or turned into something that is to the advantage of the subjects.”¹

Reading about Byzantine history, it becomes apparent that besides killing a pretender or emperor it was quite common to blind him – or to cut off his nose. This latter practice is called rhinotomy. It is the aim of this paper to examine the frequency of and the reasons for these forms of punishment in Byzantium in a somewhat similar way as M. Eisner has examined the frequency of violent death and regicide amongst 1,513 monarchs in 45 monarchies across Europe between AD 600 and 1800.² As there can be identified “at least three distinct waves of regicide” in the Byzantine Empire,³ it might be possible to distinguish different waves of blinding and *rhinotomy* as well. The focus lies on punishments of emperors and pretenders, for it is they who exercise or

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli (BENNETT) 2010, 19.

² EISNER 2011, 1–22.

³ I. e. between 641 and 715 (six out of eight rulers killed), 945 to 976 (four subsequent rulers murdered) and 1180 to 1205 (again six out of eight suffered a violent death); see EISNER 2011, 15.

have the capability to exercise political and military power which makes them both vulnerable and potentially harmful in regard to political security⁴ – depending on the angle of perspective. It must be noted that unfortunately the author was not able to obtain a copy of O. Lampsidis' doctoral thesis *The Penalty of Blinding by the Byzantines*⁵, but J. Lascaratos' and S. Marketos' *Medical Remarks*⁶ on the subject have been of great help by drawing the writers attention to the Byzantine sources mentioning the punishment of blinding. Even though several studies which compared Wikipedia entries to more conventional sources of information generally found that Wikipedia information was "as accurate and often more comprehensive than traditional general encyclopaedias", as Eisner points out,⁷ the author has in this paper relied more heavily on the online encyclopaedia *De Imperatoribus Romanis* for the purpose of gathering information on the Byzantine emperors who were blinded or had their noses cut off, because the latter online encyclopaedia is edited by historians "whose entries are thoroughly peer-reviewed".⁸

The article takes a diachronic approach to the questions regarding Byzantine emperors and pretenders who were blinded or mutilated. The multiple brief case studies provided in the first part thus make up the core of the paper. But the statistical analyses in the second half are nevertheless crucial for the conclusions drawn at the end.

2. BLINDING AND RHINOTOMY BEFORE BYZANTINE TIMES

The practice of blinding as a form of physical punishment dates back to Antiquity. It was generally used as an act of vengeance and torture.⁹ Shalmaneser I, who was king of Assyria from 1274 BC – 1245 BC or from 1265 BC – 1235 BC, claimed to have blinded 14,400 enemy prisoners in one eye. Although this might seem to be a harsh treatment of prisoners, he was one of the first Assyrian kings who didn't just simply slaughter all captured enemies.

In the great mythologies, blinding is mentioned several times. In the Bible, Samson was blinded by the Philistines¹⁰, and the mythical Greek king Oedipus deliberately blinded himself by gouging out his own eyes after realising that he had by accident fulfilled the prophecy that he would eventually kill his father and marry his mother.¹¹ If we are to believe the Greek historian Herodotus, the Scythians

⁴ The term *political security* has been used in many different ways in the past. While the term is "widely used in the rhetoric of decision-makers or in compilations of a variety of subjects on security problems, political security is not an unequivocal label" (DA COSTA 2008, 561). In this work it relates solely to the stability of a state, to the stability of its social order and thus to the absence of inter-state conflict and civil war. It is therefore closely linked to *military security*. It may also address threats to sovereignty as B. Buzan, O. Wæver and J. de Wilde state in their book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (BUZAN/WÆVER/DE WILDE 1998, 239). Unlike in other publications, when used here, the term *political security* has nothing to do with the level of respect for human rights and democracy or the participation of citizens in the political system etc.

⁵ LAMPSIDIS 1949.

⁶ LASCARATOS/MARKETOS 1992.

⁷ See EISNER 2011, 5; studies mentioned by EISNER are: GILES 2005; HAMMWOHNER 2007; LORENZ 2009 and ROSENZWEIG 2006.

⁸ See EISNER 2011, 6.

⁹ Cf. GOES 2013, 234.

¹⁰ Buch der Richter 16, 21, Lutherbibel; cf. HARTSTOCK 2008, 107.

¹¹ Cf. ROSE 2003, 81–82.

used blind slaves for milk production in the 5th century BC.¹² Although Roman writers find the penalty of blinding to be typical for the Sasanian Empire, it was at times also used in the Roman Empire to punish Christians.¹³

The second major form of punishment this paper deals with is the so-called rhinotomy or rhinokopia. N. M. Spikes gives a very brief definition of the term in his *Dictionary of Torture*. He writes:

"Rhinokopia: To cut off someone's nose. *Even though Justinian lost his nose to Rhinokopia, he rose to become the emperor nonetheless.* The word *Rhinokopia* is Greek; however, nose amputations originate in ancient India, and amputation of any kind came from ancient Israel."¹⁴

G. Sperati makes reference in his article *Amputation of the Nose throughout History* to the "great harem conspiracy" at the time of Pharaoh Ramses III (XX dynasty, 1192–1166 BC) in the aftermath of which a famous trial was held. In this trial some of the people found guilty – including two judges – "were condemned to mutilation of the nose and ears".¹⁵ At the time, this was not a new form of punishment for the Egyptians. In fact, there was already a decree that dated back to General Horemheb (XVIII dynasty) which punished magistrates who had taken advantage of their role "with deportation and amputation of the nose".¹⁶

In the *Ramayana*, an ancient Indian epic poem about the struggle of the divine prince Rama to rescue his wife Sita from the demon king Ravana, the demon Shurpanakha attacked Sita but was thwarted by Lakshmana, who cut off her nose as well as her ears. Since *rhinotomy* was practiced in India in ancient times, also nasal reconstruction dates back to about 1000 BC in that region.¹⁷ In early India this penalty was commonly used to punish acts of adultery. It later became quite prevalent among the Arabs for the same kind of offenses.¹⁸

3. BLINDING AND RHINOTOMY IN BYZANTIUM

In Rome amputations were originally not used as penalties.¹⁹ It was not until late Antiquity that cutting off a hand became an established form of punishment. This kind of penalty was usually applied to counterfeiters of diplomas and forgers of coins in early Byzantine times. Leo III introduced new measures for criminal offences in his code entitled *Ecloga*, most probably published in 726,²⁰ notably

¹² Herodotus, Histories 4, 2.

¹³ Cf. PEARMAN 2010, 89.

¹⁴ SPIKES 2014, e-book.

¹⁵ SPERATI 2009.

¹⁶ SPERATI 2009.

¹⁷ Cf. MAZZOLA 1987, 4; according to other scholars written evidence for nasal reconstruction can be found in 6th-century BC India (cf. YALAMANCHILI *et alii* 2008, 3).

¹⁸ Among the Arabs men usually got away with 100 strokes of the cane or by paying a fine while the husband of the unfaithful wife was instructed to act as the executioner (cf. SPERATI 2009).

¹⁹ Although *rhinotomy* was very rarely performed also in ancient Greece and Rome (cf. SPERATI 2009). In addition, revenge for adultery in form of *rhinotomy* was tolerated already by "Roman law (Marziale, *Epigrammi* II, 83; III, 85) and could be inflicted upon either of those committing adultery. Sometimes, the offended party limited the reaction to requesting compensation, from the rival, in the form of money, instead of amputation of the nose" (SPERATI 2009).

²⁰ There was some debate over the exact year in the past. For further information cf. OSTROGORSKY 1963, 126.

substituting mutilation for the death penalty in many cases.²¹ Rhinokopia was now officially the punishment for adultery – but it had occurred and it would further occur in Byzantium in other contexts as the following chapter shall reveal.

3.1. RHINOTOMY

In 637 Athalarichos, who was an illegitimate son of the emperor Heraclius and had been involved in a plot against his father, became the first well-known victim of political mutilation in Byzantium. His cousin Theodore, who also had been involved in the plot met a similar destiny. Instead of having the traitors killed, Heraclius ordered the amputation of each plotter's nose and hands. Theodore, in addition, lost one leg as well. Both were exiled to a different island.²² Soon thereafter, in 641, another son of Heraclius should face a similar punishment: When Heraclius died on February 11, 641, he left the empire to both of his legitimate sons, who were half-brothers.²³ Heraclius Constantine (Constantine III), however, died shortly after his father had perished, and rumors spread that Martina, Heraclonas' mother who acted as a regent for her young son, had poisoned him. After Heraclonas had been deposed by the Senate, his nose was slit and his mother's tongue was cut out. Both were expelled to the island of Rhodes.²⁴

In the second half of the 7th century there would be three more incidents in which deposed emperors and co-emperors lost their noses. First we have to look at the reign of Constantine IV who had his brothers mutilated in 681 in order to make them ineligible to govern.²⁵ Even though Constantine had been made a co-emperor besides his father Constans II prior to his brothers Heraclius and Tiberius, who were elevated to this rank in 659, the attempt to demote the latter from their imperial position after the death of Constans II was not well received by the troops in the Anatolic Theme.²⁶ They revolted and insisted on Heraclius' and Tiberius' status as co-emperors.²⁷ R. S. Moore sums up the consecutive events as follows:

“Constantine, acting quickly, arrested and executed the leaders of the protest, thus quelling the dispute. He did, however, rescind his order and had his brothers reinstated as co-emperors. After the council concluded [i. e. the Third Council of Constantinople which is counted as the Sixth Ecumenical Council], Constantine removed his brothers from their positions, had their noses slit, and proclaimed his

²¹ A striking parallel is to be found on the British Isles: Around 350 years later William the Conqueror established blinding as a penalty for rebellion in order to replace the death penalty. Blinding was also utilized by his son Henry I of England who used it against his opponent William, Count of Mortain and at the same time established it – alongside with castration – as a punishment for thieves (cf. EVANS 2007, 37, 89–90).

²² Nicephorus (MANGO) 1990, 73.

²³ Cf. MOORE 1996.

²⁴ Cf. MOORE 1996; R. S. Moore states that this “is believed to be the first time that the oriental practice of mutilation was practiced by the Byzantines. It was used to signify that the mutilated person was no longer able to hold political power” (MOORE 1996). While one must agree with his second sentence, it has been demonstrated above that Heraclonas was not quite the first to suffer from this oriental treatment.

²⁵ Cf. MOORE 1997.

²⁶ Cf. BURY 1889, 308.

²⁷ Cf. BURY 1889, 308; They “marched to Chrysopolis and sent over the straits to Constantinople a deputation demanding that the two brothers should be crowned Emperor” (BURY 1889, 308).

son Justinian II as co-emperor.”²⁸

And it was his son, Justinian II, who would become most famous in regard to the subject of this paper. Not because of his *rhinotomy*, but because of the fact that he took his empire back nevertheless. The first years of his reign, which started in 685, proved to be quite successful for the empire. To mention just one of his achievements, Justinian II regained possession of the Balkans, which had by then been almost entirely lost to Slavic tribes.²⁹ However, the emperor's bloody persecution of the Manichaeans, as well as his suppression of some popular traditions led to disputes within the Church.³⁰ And while he was trying to protect the rights of free peasants against the aristocracy, which apparently had a lust for new land,³¹ his tax policies weren't favoured by the common people, making him unpopular both in Constantinople and in the provinces.³² It was the ongoing religious discontent, combined with his disregard for the Senate, his unpopular resettlement policy, his problematic relationship with large parts of the aristocracy and especially the heavy taxation which eventually led to the events that took place in 695 when Leontius, the *strategos* of Hellas, was proclaimed emperor by the Blue Circus faction that had led a successful coup in the city of Constantinople.³³ Leontius then ordered “that Justinian's nose and tongue be slit” and “exiled him to the city of Cherson”.³⁴

Ironically, only three years later, following the revolt of a group of officers and a siege of Constantinople by Apsimar, which lasted for several months, Apsimar had Leontius' nose slit and imprisoned him in a monastery. Apsimar took the name Tiberius II as emperor but was eventually executed along with Leontius upon Justinian's return to power in 705.³⁵

3.2. BLINDING

It was also in the year of 705 that the first well-known political mutilation by blinding occurred, when Patriarch Callinicus I of Constantinople, who had helped to depose Justinian II, was blinded and thereafter imprisoned in a monastery.³⁶ And many blindings of different styles³⁷ would follow throughout the next centuries. It is however not the object of this paper to chronologically enumerate all the instances of blinding mentioned in Byzantine sources – for there are hundreds of them³⁸ – but to present some typical examples and to reflect upon the reasons for the punishment.

We don't have to proceed much further down the line

²⁸ MOORE 1997.

²⁹ Cf. BURY 1889, 321.

³⁰ Cf. HOLLINGSWORTH 1991, 1084.

³¹ Cf. OSTROGORSKY 1956, 116–122.

³² Cf. MOORE 1998.

³³ Cf. MOORE 1998; cf. also BURY 1889, 327 and OSTROGORSKY 1956, 116–122.

³⁴ MOORE 1998; cf. also NORWICH 1990, 334.

³⁵ Cf. MOORE 1999; NORWICH 1990, 337.

³⁶ Cf. KIMINAS 2009, 44; LASCARATOS/MARKETOS 1992, 133; see also the sources the latter have gathered: Cedrenus 781, 3–4; Theophanes 574, 12–13; Grammaticus 169, 3–4; Nicephorus 777, 7; Glycas 518, 14–16.

³⁷ J. Lascaratos and S. Marketos write that the “penalty of blinding in Byzantium was enforced by various means and in order of frequency, (a) by destroying or enucleating the eyes with a sharp instrument, (b) by fire held close to the eyes and finally, (c) by pouring a boiling liquid in the eye orbits” (LASCARATOS/MARKETOS 1992, 141).

³⁸ Cf. LASCARATOS/MARKETOS 1992, 134.

of emperors to find the next prominent example of blinding. It was Justinian's successor Philippicus Bardanes. After being involved in a successful war against Armenians and having repelled "a Bulgarian raid against Thracian Bosphorus which reached the outskirts of Constantinople",³⁹ however now facing Arab raids, Philippicus Bardanes was blinded by officers in the hippodrome on June 3, 713⁴⁰ in the wake of a rebellion of Opsikion troops which had just broken out in the month before.⁴¹ He had only been emperor for a year and a half.⁴² Like many other emperors and pretenders who were mutilated, Philippicus was also exiled – but died in the following year.⁴³

After Theodosius III abdicated in favor of Leo III on 25 March 717⁴⁴ came the dynasty of the Isaurians, and with it the reign of Leo's son Constantine V Copronymos or "the Dung-named" who put his mark on Iconoclasm after Leo III had already set the agenda. Soon after Constantine V had assumed power⁴⁵ he faced the usurpation of his brother-in-law Artabasdos, the commander of the Opsikion theme.⁴⁶ Artabasdos' usurpation would last over two years – recognized not only by the patriarch of Constantinople⁴⁷ but also by the pope.⁴⁸ It is important to note that Constantine V received a very hostile treatment in the Iconophile sources (and those are the only sources that have survived), such as the *Chronicle* of Theophanes or the *Life of Stephen the Younger*.⁴⁹ Therefore S. TOUGHER does not trust Theophanes' narrative that Artabasdos is to be seen as innocent and that the icons played a crucial role in his uprising. To him it seems more likely that it had been "a deliberate coup launched by a strong candidate".⁵⁰ Eventually Constantine V reoccupied Constantinople in 743 and had Artabasdos and his sons blinded, "um sie als mögliche Thronprätendenten endgültig auszuschalten".⁵¹ What is remarkable is the fact that also Sisinnios, Constantine's ally in the civil war, was blinded. He was suspected to have planned on reaching for the diadem himself.⁵² In any case, Machiavelli would have applauded if we recall what he wrote about "cruel acts": that they were used well if they were "needed for political security" and were "all committed at a single stroke and then discontinued".⁵³

We shall now take a look at the life and reign of Constantine's grandson: Constantine VI. Due to his young age when his father died, his mother Irene and her chief minister exercised the regency on his behalf for ten years until he finally came to real power in 790 in the wake of a

³⁹ NEIL 2000 a.

⁴⁰ There remains some uncertainty about the date of his blinding; cf. NEIL 2000 a and GRIERSON 1962, 51–52.

⁴¹ Cf. Theophanes (TURTLEDOVE) 1982, 79.

⁴² See NEIL 2000 a.

⁴³ Cf. NEIL 2000 a.

⁴⁴ Cf. NEIL 2000 b.

⁴⁵ About a year after his father Leo III had died; cf. BRUBAKER/HALDON 2011, 157; for the chronology see *ibid.* footnote no. 9; cf. also STEIN 1980, 259.

⁴⁶ Ironically it was this theme "upon which the emperors also depended for their own defence" (BRUBAKER/ALDON 2011, 157).

⁴⁷ See TOUGHER 2004.

⁴⁸ Cf. BRUBAKER/HALDON 2011, 158–159.

⁴⁹ Cf. TOUGHER 2004.

⁵⁰ TOUGHER 2004.

⁵¹ STEIN 1980, 260.

⁵² Nicephorus (MANGO) 1990, 66; cf. also TOUGHER 2004 and ROCHOW 1994, 30.

⁵³ Niccolò Machiavelli (BENNETT) 2010, 19.

rebellion against his mother.⁵⁴ He was engaged to Rotrude, a daughter of Charlemagne, who was hence educated in Greek language and manners⁵⁵, but the alliance between Byzantium and the Frankish Empire had eroded in 786 and his mother Irene broke off the engagement in 787 or 788.⁵⁶ Constantine VI, once in command, did not prove to be a second Alexander, since his army was humiliatingly defeated by the Bulgarians in the Battle of Marcellae, which was fought in the year of 792.⁵⁷ Because of the rough terrain, the advancing Byzantine army broke its order so that the counterattack of the Bulgarians eventually became a great success and many Byzantine officers perished. However, in 793 he did manage to crush the revolt of his former Armenian supporters who had turned against him after he had blinded their General Alexios Mosele.⁵⁸ He also had his uncle blinded in order to remove an instant threat to his throne since a movement had formed in favor of the aforementioned. Besides that he had the tongues of his father's four other half-brothers cut off as well, thus dealing with other potential threats to political security in a cold-blooded manner that would have probably been appreciated by Machiavelli. Constantine VI himself was blinded "in a cruel and grievous manner"⁵⁹ in late April 797 by his mother's supporters⁶⁰ and then exiled to Principo.⁶¹ It was she who had vocally agitated against her own son beforehand.⁶² While Constantine VI is often seen as incapable of sound governance, L. Garland chooses her words more carefully when summing up his reign:

Constantine appears to have lacked diplomatic finesse and judgement, but since he was only 26 years of age at the time of his death, and clearly not without support from within the army, it is probably unwise to label him too categorically as an ineffectual commander, nor one who needed to be removed for the good of the state.⁶³

Even Theophanes – being highly critical of Constantine VI and favouring his mother for her uncompromising iconophile stance – suggests that the cruel and grievous blinding of Constantine was undertaken in order to make "him die at the behest of his mother and her advisers".⁶⁴ While Constantine eventually survived his blinding, many others were not as fortunate.⁶⁵ Among them was the Byzantine emperor Romanos IV Diogenes, who was blinded on 29 June 1072 and endured a painful and lingering death soon thereafter, because his wound had become infected.⁶⁶ Michael Attaliates (also Attaliota and Attaleiates) was a

⁵⁴ Cf. CUTLER/HOLLINGSWORTH 1991, 501–502.

⁵⁵ Cf. GSCHWIND 1995, col. 1054.

⁵⁶ Cf. GSCHWIND 1995, col. 1054.

⁵⁷ Cf. CUTLER/HOLLINGSWORTH 1991, 501–502.

⁵⁸ Cf. CUTLER/HOLLINGSWORTH 1991, 501–502.

⁵⁹ Theophanes AM 6289 [AD 796–797] (MANGO/SCOTT) 1997, 649.

⁶⁰ See GARLAND 2002.

⁶¹ Cf. GARLAND 2002.

⁶² Cf. CUTLER/HOLLINGSWORTH 1991, 501–502; cf. also GARLAND 1999, 85–87.

⁶³ GARLAND 2002.

⁶⁴ Theophanes AM 6289 [AD 796–797] (MANGO/SCOTT) 1997, 649; cf. also Cedrenus 27, 13–18.

⁶⁵ For other cases than the following mentioned cf. LASCARATOS/MARKETOS 1992, 142.

⁶⁶ Cf. CANDUCI 2010, 272; cf. also LASCARATOS/MARKETOS 1992, 141–142; in their medical research paper Lascaratos and Marketos state that "the resulting infections were often a common cause of the death of the victim" (LASCARATOS/MARKETOS 1992, 142).

Byzantine public servant and historian who was active in the second half of the 11th century and can thus be relied on for the matter at hand. Hence his vivid account of Romanos' blinding and death shall be cited here:

"And they permitted some unpractised Jew to proceed in blinding the eyes. And they tied him from four sides and tied his chest and belly and many fell upon him to hold him [...] and they brought the Jew who put out his eyes most painfully with an iron tool, while the victim below roared and bellowed like a bull and no one pitied him. And when this was repeated his punishment was ended [...] and his eyes were finally destroyed and their liquid spilled. When he rose his eye orbits filled with blood, truly a pitiful and deplorable sight, bringing unbearable sorrow to those who saw him, half dead, finished also from the disease he had. Then he was sent seated on a humble animal until he arrived at the Sea of Marmara. He dragged himself, exactly like a rotten corpse with his eyes put out and his head and face, from which grubs or worms appeared and fell, were swollen. After he lived several days in pain and exuding a bad odour, he finally died and was buried on the island of Poti, on the mountain peak [...] leaving the memory behind him that his troubles surpassed even Job's".⁶⁷

The blinding of Romanos IV Diogenes took place after he had been told by Andronikos Doukas that his life would be spared if he resigned the purple and retired to a monastery.⁶⁸

The last emperor that shall be mentioned in this part of the paper is Isaac II Angelus, who initially ruled for the period of ten years from 1185 till 1195. He is known to have exercised the penalty of blinding to a great extent, "his sons Andronicus I, John and Manuel being his first victims".⁶⁹ Ironically, he himself was blinded and imprisoned when overthrown by his brother Alexius III – whom he had failed to blind, as well, one might sarcastically remark. Isaac II Angelus should however become the first and only fully blind Byzantine emperor when eight years later he was raised from the dungeon to the purple once more for a short second reign (1203–1204) with his son Alexios IV Angels acting as the effective monarch. After being deposed a second time in 1204, he eventually died in prison.⁷⁰

3.3. CASTRATION

Castration was another means of eliminating potential opponents, since castrated men were not seen as actual men – in fact, they were viewed as being half dead.⁷¹ It was supposedly this deficiency which prevented Basil Lekapenos, the illegitimate son of Romanos I Lekapenos, from becoming emperor.⁷² Other examples of castrated pretenders were the sons of Leo V the Armenian, who was deposed in 820, after Leo himself had overthrown his predecessor Michael I Rhangabe and had had the sons of the latter castrated in 813.⁷³ Finally, acting very consequently indeed, Michael V

had all male members of John the Orphanotrophos's family castrated.⁷⁴

3.4. STATISTICS

After looking at characteristic mutilations of emperors and pretenders more closely in the last section, it is now time to think about total numbers and frequencies. Since mutilation was established as a common punishment for usurpers and traitors during the reign of Heraclius I,⁷⁵ it seems reasonable to begin the evaluation of data regarding Byzantine emperors who were blinded or mutilated with this emperor. Another reason to start the headcount with this particular emperor is that it was he who changed the official language of the empire from Latin to Greek in 620.⁷⁶ From Heraclius I (he ruled 610–641) until the fall of Constantinople in 1453 there were a total of 73 emperors – not counting the co-emperors or powerful regents.⁷⁷ The usurper Artabasdos is counted as an emperor because he was recognized as such by both the patriarch⁷⁸ and the pope.⁷⁹ It is further important to note that this section only contains information about emperors, not pretenders or patriarchs. The following questions will be answered:

Were there certain waves of mutilation affecting emperors in Byzantium, or is the phenomenon to be found in more or less the same frequency throughout Byzantine times?

If there are "bundles" of mutilations to be recognized, do they differ in style?

Did the likelihood of an emperor to be mutilated increase if his predecessor or pre- predecessor had been mutilated?

Was a Byzantine emperor more likely to be killed, or was he more likely to be blinded, and so on?

When in this section we attempt to elicit whether a Byzantine emperor was more likely to be killed or to be mutilated, we have to take into account those who were blinded and died soon thereafter of their wounds, Romanos IV Diogenes being the most prominent example. In this case, the intention to "only" maim the emperor is more important than the eventual outcome in the opinion of this writer. Romanos IV Diogenes will therefore be regarded as "blinded", not as "killed".⁸⁰ We also have to be aware of the fact that Justinian II was mutilated at the end of his first

⁷⁴ Cf. RINGROSE 2003, 62.

⁷⁵ Cf. KAZHDAN 1991, 297.

⁷⁶ Cf. DAVIS 1990, 260.

⁷⁷ The number of co-emperors is tremendously high for at least 50 emperors (out of the total amount of Byzantine emperors from the days of Constantine I "the Great" until the loss of Constantinople in 1453) had at least one co-emperor.

⁷⁸ See TOUGHER 2004.

⁷⁹ Cf. BRUBAKER/HALDON 2011, 158–159.

⁸⁰ Other examples are Heraclonas (641) and Michael V (1042) but perhaps not Constantine VI who was blinded 797 but may have lived until 804 (cf. CUTLER/HOLLINGSWORTH 1991, 501–502); it is however possible – even likely – that he died soon after he was blinded due to an infection of the wound. Eisner hence treats him as having been assassinated (cf. EISNER 2011, 18); yet, like in the aforementioned cases, he will be counted simply as "blinded" in this work. Andronicus I Komnenus on the other hand who was publicly tortured for three days – one hand was cut off and one eye gouged out before an Italian soldier "mercifully plunged a sword into his body" (CHISHOLM 1911, 976) – will neither be counted as blinded nor as mutilated since death was most definitely the intended outcome of the martyrs he had to endure in 1185.

⁶⁷ Attaliota 178, 10–23, 179, 4–11, 15–17 (cited in LASCARATOS/MARKETOS 1992, 141).

⁶⁸ Cf. NORWICH 1993, 357.

⁶⁹ LASCARATOS/MARKETOS 1992, 138; cf. Choniata 466, 11–19, 472, 7, 553, 16–18, 554, 8–11, 556, 20–21, 561, 1, 572, 14, 560, 13–14.

⁷⁰ Cf. VAN DIETEN 1976, 238–240.

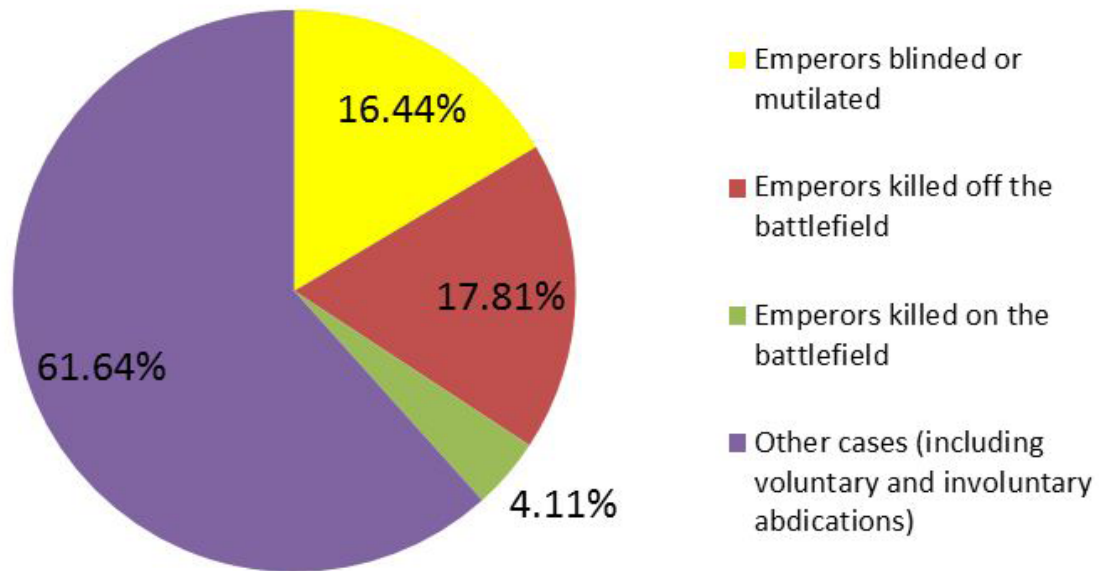
⁷¹ Cf. RINGROSE 2003, 62.

⁷² Cf. TALBOT/SULLIVAN 2005, 143.

⁷³ See Scriptor Incertus 341, 10–11; cf. also TREADGOLDT 1988, 188–189.

Fig 1

The percentage of Byzantine emperors blinded or mutilated between 610 and 1453



reign and killed at the end of his second. He will be treated as being two different emperors for statistical reasons. Furthermore, doubtful cases (i. e. suspected poisoning etc.) will be neglected in this paper.⁸¹

Looking at the emperors who were blinded or mutilated in a chronological order, we can distinguish different waves of mutilations⁸² – although what is most noticeable is the absence of any such treatment of an emperor between 797 and 1042. Another thing we notice at first glance is the fact that there were three cases of rhinotomy within a little more than half a century (641 till 698) and then this form of punishment does not occur again for any emperor throughout Byzantine times. It has been suggested before that rhinokopia had proven to be ineffective, with Justinian II regaining the throne in 705 despite the mutilation he had suffered at the end of his first reign, and was thus replaced by blinding. This assumption strikes this writer as fairly reasonable. Although it must be pointed out that after the blinding of Isaac II Angelus in 1195, who did regain the purple for a short time after having spent eight years in prison, the penalty of blinding for emperors and usurpers was not discontinued. The reason for this may be

⁸¹ All in all there are four such doubtful cases to be mentioned: Constantine VII (959), Romanos II (963), John I Tzimiskes (976) and Romanos III Argyros (1034). M. Eisner has them listed with a D indicating the uncertainty of their murder (see EISNER 2011, 18). John II Komnenos could be seen as such a doubtful case as well (cf. MAGDALINO 1993, 41), but he most likely died of septicaemia after accidentally cutting his hand with a poisoned arrow while hunting.

⁸² From 641 until 713 there were four emperors mutilated or blinded, from 743 till 797 two, from 1042 until 1071 again two, and from 1195 till 1261 three emperors were blinded.

that the second reign of Justinian II was much longer and of a different quality than that of Isaac II Angelus, who had to be “led by the hand”⁸³ and was obviously incapable of commanding troops on the battlefield.

In order to answer the third question – whether the likelihood of an emperor to get blinded or mutilated increases if his predecessor or pre-predecessor has been mutilated – we first have to find out the number of emperors whose predecessors or pre-predecessors met a similar destiny. This number is 3. That means that 3 out of 12 emperors – which is exactly a quarter (!) – were treated in a quite similar way as their pre- or pre-predecessors in this respect. While the probability of an emperor to be blinded or mutilated from 610 till 1453 was generally 12/73, this risk increased to ¼ if either a predecessor or a pre-predecessor had suffered such a treatment. This points to the significant autoregressive component of the phenomenon. The same is also true for regicide as M. Eisner has demonstrated.⁸⁴

When at last we compare the cases of regicide with those of blinding and rhinotomy we realize that the percentage of emperors who were killed is nearly the same as the percentage of emperors who were mutilated, the former being 17,81 % and the latter accounting for 16,44 %. Given that the number of doubtful cases of regicide (4 or 5) is relatively high for Byzantine times and that some of them might have been in fact actual regicides, we can conclude that a Byzantine emperor was slightly more likely to get killed than to get blinded or mutilated.

⁸³ LASCARATOS/MARKETOS 1992, 138; see also Choniata 727.

⁸⁴ Cf. EISNER 2011, 1, 15.

4. CONCLUSIONS

While the aim of this paper was not to describe in minute detail all the cases of blinding and rhinotomy throughout Byzantine history, as stated before, the brief case studies of characteristic mutilations of emperors and pretenders have shown one thing very clearly: The deposed or overthrown emperors, as well as the numerous pretenders and usurpers where blinded or mutilated in order to remove the threat of them rising again. A successful usurper viewed an overthrown emperor as a threat to his personal wellbeing *and* to the security of the state in the same way as a long established emperor saw any other pretender as a potential threat to political security, because a second person genealogically fit for the throne was naturally always likely to crave for power or to have been persuaded by some of the emperor's enemies to seize the crown for himself. "Not a good thing were a Caesar too many", the philosopher Areius said to Octavian in order to persuade him to have Caesarion (Ptolemaios XV), Julius Caesar's son by Cleopatra, killed.⁸⁵ As we have seen, the death penalty was in many cases substituted with a form of mutilation under Leo III. The penalties of rhinotomy and blinding provided the emperors or usurpers with an opportunity to achieve exactly what Octavian, the future Augustus, had achieved – yet without having to order an assassination or execution. That this conclusion is not a breakthrough discovery can easily be understood by reading what J. Lascaratos and S. Marketos have to say in their medical paper on blinding during Byzantine times:

"As strange as it may seem today this brutal and inhuman penalty was a lenient and philanthropic form of expression for that era, because it was enforced in order to limit the death penalty, without the emperors or insurgents, as the case might be, losing sight [an involuntary word play] of their main goal which was the removal to a safer distance of the dangerous foe from the throne or the crushing of every ambition to covert it."⁸⁶

The statistical approach of this paper however did lead to some new findings: while the fact that rhinotomy was replaced by blinding in the wake of Justinian's spectacular comeback had been pointed out before, the autoregressive nature of the phenomenon was never highlighted or even observed at all, according to this writer's knowledge.⁸⁷ Furthermore, this statistical approach has provided an opportunity to compare the frequency of regicides to that of mutilations of emperors in Byzantium from 610 till 1453. The data suggests that a Byzantine emperor in this period was slightly more likely to get assassinated, after all. Unfortunately, all the pretenders and usurpers had to be ignored in this study in order to keep the subject manageable. It thus remains a most desirable task to gather all information on mutilated and killed usurpers available in the sources for an all-embracing statistical analysis, although some cases may have never been recorded.

⁸⁵ Plutarch, Antonius 81, 2.

⁸⁶ LASCARATOS/MARKETOS 1992, 133–134.

⁸⁷ Although it is possible that O. Lampsidis in his doctoral thesis mentioned in the introduction to this paper does dwell on this particular aspect.

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