Intelligence Analysis in 10th Century Byzantium

Andrew Skitt Gilmour

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US Intelligence Community analysts address the capabilities and intentions of foreign actors, a basic national security function of the modern nation state. Intelligence analysts attempt to manage uncertainty and complexity for policymakers, who must make decisions to advance their nations' security interests. State-sponsored intelligence analysis in the modern era is designed to produce a range of finished products including foundational reference works, immediate tactical and threat information, and longer-term strategic assessments.

Such analysis relies principally on individuals schooled in analytic reasoning who are able to communicate their analytic judgments derived from collected, often secret, information. Analysts must also discern the truthfulness and accuracy of such information amid attempts at deception by foreign actors.

The history of all-source national intelligence analysis in the United States usually begins with World War II and the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which demonstrated the strategic consequences of failing to systematically collect, centralize, and assess intelligence information. The establishment in 1947 of the Central Intelligence Agency and the subsequent institutionalization of a national intelligence analysis mission have cast the history of such intelligence analysis as beginning de novo in the modern era. This contrasts with the broad recognition—in government and in the scholarly community—that the collection of intelligence against rivals and enemies dates to ancient times and cultures.

Scholarship on the ancient practice of intelligence collection has largely not included investigations of the beginnings of the analytic part of the intelligence mission. For example, in his discussion of Egyptian, Hittite, and subsequent Assyrian, Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman intelligence activities, Francis Dvornik focused on intelligence collection—especially tactical military information—not analysis. Ancient empires needed information on their enemies and rivals and worked to acquire it through networks of spies and to communicate it rapidly back to palaces—including with fire signaling.[1] The assessment and interpretation of the collected information in the context of a state's security objectives are presumed to have taken place among individuals but without an institutional basis and without being written.

The modern scholarly emphasis on ancient intelligence as a collection mission is consistent with how ancient historians understood intelligence. The sixth century Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea, for example, writing about Byzantium's

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strategic rival Persia, makes clear that intelligence from ancient times was focused on the collection of information:

> *Τὰ δὲ τῶν κατασκόπων τοιαῦτά ἐστιν. ἄνδρες πολλοὶ ἐν δημοσίῳ τὸ ἀνέκαθεν ἐσιτίζοντο, οἳ δὴ ἐς τοὺς πολεμίους ἰόντες ἔν τε τοῖς Περσῶν βασιλείοις γινόμενοι ἢ ἐμπορίας ὀνόματι ἢ τρόπῳ ἑτέρῳ, ἔς τε τὸ ἀκριβὲς διερευνώμενοι ἕκαστα, ἐπανήκοντες ἐς Ῥωμαίων τὴν γῆν πάντα τοῖς ἄρχουσιν ἐπαγγέλλειν ἠδύναντο τὰ τῶν πολεμίων ἀπόρρητα.[2]*

> *And the matter of spies is as such. Many men from the beginning of time were sustained in state service, men who went to the enemy and were in the palaces of the Persians, either with the pretense of commerce or in another way, who after investigating each thing precisely and upon returning to Roman territory were able to announce to those ruling all the secrets of the enemy.*

Four centuries later, around 950, written sources attest to the advent of intelligence activities that are more than the collection of information. Amid a broadly ascendant Middle Byzantine state, the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII took the first halting steps toward developing all-source, secret intelligence analysis in the service of a state's security interests and objectives. His groundbreaking, though flawed, effort comes down to us in a manual

De Administrando Imperio[3] (*On the Management of the Empire[4]*), which Constantine VII addressed to his son and heir Romanus II.

I believe that scholarly reception of *De Administrando Imperio*—though extensive and diverse—has overlooked elements of the text's content and purpose, which suggest the beginnings of state-sponsored all-source intelligence analysis in Byzantium. This development in the wider history of intelligence is especially plausible because the middle of the 10th century in Byzantium saw the convergence of state security needs, cultural trends, state capacity, and the rise to power of a bookish emperor to enable this first shift to written intelligence analysis in *De Adminstrando Imperio*.

Scholarly Reception of *De Administrando Imperio*

De Adminstrando Imperio, was composed in Constantinople between 948 and 952.[5] It comprises an introduction, 53 chapters, and nearly 40,000 words. What Constantine VII wrote, dictated, had written by others, or included from earlier material has fueled scholarly debate over the text's authorship.[6] In its initial chapters, the text mostly provides instructions on the conduct of the empire's foreign policy—with an emphasis on managing relations with a nomadic Turkic people of the Steppe, the Pechenegs (οἱ Πατζινακῖται), who are strategically situated along Byzantium's northern border on the Black Sea.

Addressing Romanus II in the introduction, Constantine VII makes explicit that the work's purpose is to instruct.

> *Διδάχθητι, ἃ χρή σε πρὸ πάντων εἰδέναι, καὶ νουνεχῶς τῶν τῆς βασιλείας οἰάκων ἀντιλαβοῦ.[7]*

> *Be instructed with respect to things which are necessary for you to know before all things, and receive in turn the helms of rule wisely.*

This practical approach to knowledge for the sake of statecraft defines the work at the outset as more than another link in the chain of Byzantine and classical historiography. As Warren Treadgold notes, *De Administrando Imperio* "cannot really be called" a history, though it contains "much information of historical interest."[8] Confirming the text's outlier status, Constantine VII omits from his introduction stylistic tropes about preserving the deeds of men that classicizing Byzantine historians such as Agathias (c. 530–594) and Leo the Deacon (949–991) used to echo Thucydides and Herodotus.

The bulk of the work is more primer and background information than policy proscription. Chapters 14–42 are almost certainly drawn from an earlier geographic and ethnographic work of Constantine VII, the *Περὶ ἐθνῶν* (*Concerning Peoples*).[9] Romilly Jenkins notes that these sections of *De Administrando Imperio* "told the traditional, sometimes legendary stories of how the territories surrounding the empire came . . . to be occupied by their present inhabitants."[10] Anthony Kaldellis has argued that this narrative style is typical of Byzantine texts written "between the seventh and the twelfth centuries,"

which document the movements of different peoples from their "original" homelands.[11]

These chapters provide detailed geographical and historical information on the peoples, lands, and states that mattered to the national security interests of the Middle Byzantine state, including the Arab lands, the religion of Islam, as well the Balkans, Italy, Caucasus, the Rus, and the Turkic peoples of the Steppe. The tour d'horizon Constantine provides would be familiar in scope to the annual global threat survey US intelligence officials provide to members of Congress. The ability of Constantine VII to draw upon state archives of an earlier work also anticipates, in early medieval form, the centralization and retrieval of information that would be essential to modern intelligence analysis.

The role of intelligence collection has also been prominent in scholarly reception of the work. For example, Dvornik argues that *De Administrando Imperio* "illustrates more than anything else the importance the Byzantines attached to the collection of intelligence on foreign peoples and how they utilized it in the administration of state affairs."[12] The broad geographic and ethnographic scope of the work also prompted Arnold Toynbee to observe: "The vast alien world outside the East Roman Empire's frontiers excited Constantine's curiosity, and, the more remote the country, the greater his zest."[13] Such intense intellectual curiosity almost certainly fueled—and was driven by—extensive intelligence collection by Constantine VII.

The diplomatic directives Constantine VII provides in *De*

Administrando Imperio have also led to the reception of the work as a founding document of diplomatic history. Dvornik, for example, argued that the diplomatic and policy focus of the work meant it is "the first attempt at the writing of diplomatic history, thus inaugurating a new genre of historical literature."[14] The secrecy of this diplomacy, however, also places the text in the wider realm of intelligence activity, because such sensitive policy concerns could not have existed apart from collected intelligence information. Paul Stephenson observes that *De Administrando Imperio* "was a work of the greatest secrecy, intended only for the eyes of the emperors Constantine VII and Romanus II, and their closest advisors."[15] Similarly Jenkins argues that the text's secrecy is confirmed "by its manuscript history and by circumstances that later writers betray no knowledge of it."[16] Diplomatic action and intelligence collection appear intertwined in the work.

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The clandestine sources used in *De Administrando Imperio* collected from individuals tied directly or indirectly to the Byzantine state situates the text again firmly in the area of intelligence activity. For example, Dvornik argues that background information on the Pechenegs in chapter 37 "could only come from Pecheneg sources" debriefed by Byzantine sources.[17] Confidential diplomatic contacts with Constantine VII's court were also important sources of information. For example, information on the Magyars in chapters 38–40, according to Dvornik, "must have been gathered at the imperial court from Hungarian sources" amid frequent exchanges of embassies.[18]

Information in chapter 9 on how the Rus were able to navigate the riparian dangers of the Dneiper as well as attacks by Pechenegs to make their way south to the Black Sea for trade with Constantinople is probably derived from Byzantine contacts with

A scene from the 12th century manuscript *The Chronicle of John Skylitzes*. The history was written in the 11th century, but the image is from a 12th century illuminated manuscript. The picture shows a Pecheneg band ambushing a ruler from Kiev who had purportedly signed a treaty with Rome. Image: Madrid Skylitzes, Folio 173ra.

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Russian envoys sent to negotiate a peace treaty with Constantine VII.[19]

The scholarly reception of *De Administrando Imperio*, despite these acknowledgements of the intelligence activity underpinning the work, has emphasized much more its value as a source of historical information, even if not a formal work of history. Robert Browning, for example, sees the text as "a major source for the history of central and eastern Europe and southwestern Asia in the high middle ages,"[20] and D. M. Lang argues that "the book's historical value derives to a large extent from the fact that it includes exhaustive information on many little-known . . . nations by which the Byzantine Empire was ringed about."[21]

A text that stands apart from the main categories of Byzantine historiography and which has defied a single interpretation, however, offers the possibility that *De Administrando Imperio* can also be understood as the beginning of a new genre of intelligence analysis in the West. As Anthony Kaldellis observes, scholarship on *De Administrando Imperio* has "focused narrowly on specific passages or even single words," without considering "the overall structure, purpose, and meaning of the work."[22] To see Constantine VII's work as an inaugural attempt at state-sponsored all-source intelligence analysis can address this deficit.

De Administrando Imperio as Proto Intelligence Analysis

Intelligence analysis requires not only the collection of information relevant to national security, but also its centralization within the state. At the time of the writing of *De Administrando Imperio* in the middle of the tenth century, Byzantium under Constantine VII was at the peak of a literary and cultural trend of organizing information in all fields into encyclopedic works, according to Paul Lemerle.[23] In addition to *De Administrando Imperio*, Constantine VII produced manuals of value to intelligence analysis on court ceremonies (*De Cerimoniis*)—including the reception of foreign officials and leaders—and historical geography (*De Thematibus*).[24] The ability to maintain what modern intelligence analysis would consider a repository of all-source information pertaining to the national security interests of the Middle Byzantine state suggests that the court of Constantine VII met a key precondition for an early attempt at intelligence analysis in *De Administrando Imperio*.
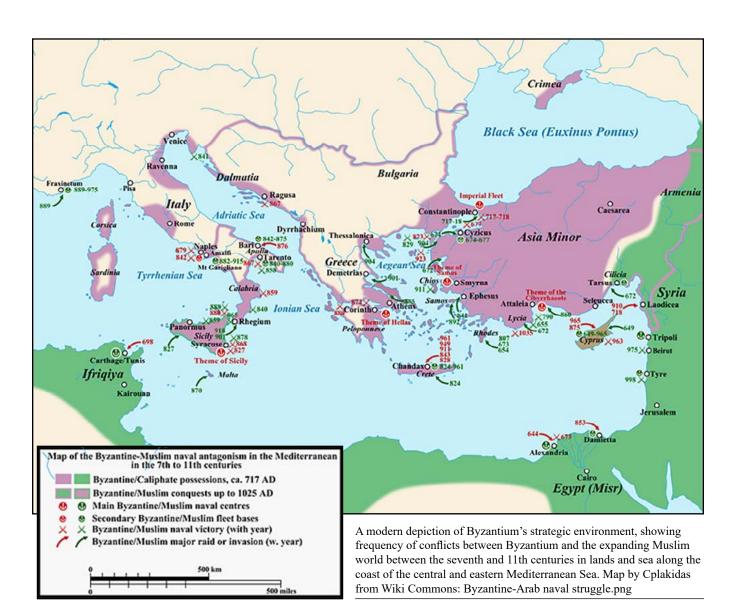
Constantine VII was central to this effort at centralization. He collected books, organized their information, and composed new works to fill in gaps in knowledge. According to Jenkins, "Documents from the files from every branch of the administration, from the foreign ministry, the treasury, the offices of ceremonial [functions] were scrutinized and abstracted."[25] In much the same manner of producing raw intelligence reports as the foundation for modern intelligence analysis, Constantine VII had "the tide of information … coordinated and written down."[26]

The information-driven, bookish character of Constantine VII was similar to that of modern-day intelligence analysts. Analysts always want more information and have, for the most part, assumed contrasting identities with the operationally minded collectors of information. Constantine VII's "belief in the practical value of learning and education"[27] also anticipated what, in the vernacular of modern-day intelligence analysis, is called "policy relevance." Knowledge, and especially intelligence information, must matter to the state's interests to merit analysis. This was true in *De Aministrando Imperio* and is an essential characteristic of today's national-level intelligence analysis.

The Middle Byzantine state's bureaucratic structures not only centralized information to support Constantine VII's encyclopedic writings, but also provided the foundation for dissemination of an analytic written product. Philip Davies notes that the Byzantines "maintained bureaucratically organized security structures . . . that ensured a constant flow of information about the external and internal enemies of the state."[28] Luttwak adds, "However ill-informed they may have been by modern standards, the Byzantines still knew much more than most other contemporary rulers."[29]

These security structures did not include a formal intelligence department or ministry and there is no evidence that the palace disseminated analytic product to other parts of the imperial administration.[30] Nonetheless, the limited distribution

A modern depiction of Byzantium's strategic environment, showing frequency of conflicts between Byzantium and the expanding Muslim world between the seventh and 11th centuries in lands and sea along the coast of the central and eastern Mediterranean Sea. Map by Cplakidas from Wiki Commons: Byzantine-Arab naval struggle.png

of *De Administrando Imperio* to Constantine VII's heir and a small inner sanctum of court officials is an early demonstration of the dissemination of a finished analytic product—a key element of modern-day national-level intelligence analysis. The empire's existing security structures made this finished product and its dissemination possible.

The centralization of information, the presence of an analytically minded emperor, and a bureaucratic organization that could be used to disseminate a finished analytic product allow for the consideration of *De Administrando Imperio* as an early attempt at state-sponsored all-source intelligence analysis. Additionally, the complexity of the security challenges facing Constantinople in the mid-10th century joined with these conditions to make such an early attempt at intelligence analysis by Constantine VII inevitable.

The strategic environment confronting Constantine VII was analytically complex and often constraining of Byzantine power. Well into a recovery from Arab conquests and the internal strife of the Byzantine Dark Age, the Middle Byzantine state still faced threats from peoples of the Steppe to the north, Bulgars to the west, and Arabs to the south and east, including from Arab naval forces. As Toynbee has observed, Constantine VII

> *was aware that the Roman Empire had been transformed in a fundamental way. He recognized that it had ceased to be a world-state and had become one local state among a number of others.*[31]

In this environment, intelligence analysis could efficiently support policies

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that secured Byzantine interests and leverage Byzantine power to maximum effects.

This circumstantial case that *De Admininstrando Imperio* represents a Byzantine prototype of what would become state-sponsored all-source intelligence analysis in the modern era is buttressed by the analytic language in the text itself. Amid the policy proscriptions, practical advice on dealing with foreign peoples, and dense historical information that make up most of *De Administrando Imperio*, Constantine VII demonstrates analytic reasoning in service of Byzantine security interests. In a faint foreshadowing of far better organized and reasoned modern products of all-source intelligence analysis, Constantine VII manages to make analytic judgments and to demonstrate he is thinking analytically about Byzantine security.

In his first chapter, for example, Constantine VII explains at the outset his underlying reason for his detailed treatment of the Pechenegs: their location is strategically significant.

Ὅτι γειτνιάζει τὸ τοιοῦτον ἔθνος τῶν Πατζινακιτῶν τῷ μέρει τῆς Χερσῶνος, καὶ εἰ μὴ φιλίως ἔχουσι πρὸς ἡμᾶς, δύνανται κατὰ τῆς Χερσῶνος ἐξέρχεσθαι καὶ κουρσεύειν καὶ ληΐζεσθαι αὐτήν τε τὴν Χερσῶνα καὶ τὰ λεγόμενα κλίματα.[32]

Because this nation of the Pechenegs is neighboring to the district of Cherson, and if they are not friendly toward

us, they are able to march out against Cherson and ravage and plunder Cherson itself and the so-called districts.

In chapter 4, he also provides an analytic explanation of the military implications for Byzantium of maintaining good relations with the Pechenegs.

Ὅτι τοῦ βασιλέως Ῥωμαίων μετὰ τῶν Πατζινακιτῶν εἰρηνεύοντος, οὔτε ≤οἱ≥ Ῥῶς πολέμου νόμῳ κατὰ τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἐπικρατείας, οὔτε οἱ Τοῦρκοι δύνανται ἐπελθεῖν. . .[33]

When it is the case that the Emperor of the Romans is at peace with the Pechenegs, neither the Rus nor the Turks are able to attack by practice of war against the realm of the Romans. . .

This complex analytic judgment is similar to Constantine's simple analytic judgment in chapter 2 on the strategic intent of the Rus:

Ὅτι καὶ οἱ Ῥῶς διὰ σπουδῆς ἔχουσιν εἰρήνην ἔχειν μετὰ τῶν Πατζινακιτῶν.[34]

And the Russians are zealous to have peace with the Pechenegs.

Constantine VII also explains how history and geography are part of his analytic method. For example, at the beginning of eight chapters providing background information and a history of Arab lands, peoples, and the religion of Islam, he articulates an analytic view that an understanding of history and geography provides

practical advantages to Byzantine security. Constantine VII urges his son to know that:

Τὰ δέ ἐστιν περὶ διαφορᾶς πάλιν ἑτέρων ἐθνῶν, γενεαλογίας τε αὐτῶν καὶ ἐθῶν καὶ βίου διαγωγῆς καὶ θέσεως καὶ κράσεως τῆς παρ᾿ αὐτῶν κατοικουμένης γῆς καὶ περιηγήσεως αὐτῆς καὶ σταδιασμοῦ, καθὼς ἑξῆς πλατύτερον διηρμήνευται.[35]

The matters are again about differences of each of the peoples, of their origins, habits, and way of life and of the setting and climate of the territory inhabited by them and about a geographic description and measurement of it, as how next is explained more extensively.

Constantine VII also shows analytic skill in identifying facts for the reader that matter for assessing the resource base and power of peoples in the regions near the Crimean Peninsula in the vicinity of Byzantium's borders on the Black Sea. For example, in chapter 53 he assesses the Byzantine protectorate and trading center of Cherson.

Ὅτι ἐὰν οὐ ταξιδεύσωσιν οἱ Χερσωνῖται εἰς Ῥωμανίαν, καὶ πιπράσκωσι τὰ βυρσάρια καὶ τὰ κηρία, ἅπερ ἀπὸ τῶν Πατζινακιτῶν πραγματεύονται, οὐ δύνανται ζῆσαι. Ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ ἀπὸ Ἀμινσοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ Παφλαγονίας καὶ τῶν Βουκελλαρίων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν πλαγίων τῶν ρμενιάκων περάσωσι γεννήματα, οὐ δύνανται ζῆσαι οἱ Χερσωνῖται.[36]

If ever the Chersonites do not travel to Romania and sell the

skins and wax candles, which they take in hand from the Pechenegs, they are not able to live. And if ever products do not pass over from Aminsos and Paphlagonia and from the Boukellarioi, and from both sides of the Armenians, the Chersonites are not able to live.

Also in chapter 53, he includes an extensive survey of petroleum deposits in the Caucasus and Armenia. For example:

Ἰστέον, ὅτι ἔξω τοῦ κάστρου Ταμάταρχα πολλαὶ πηγαὶ ὑπάρχουσιν ἄφθαν ἀναδιδοῦσαι.[37]

There exist outside the stronghold of Tamatarcha many springs yielding oil.

Reconsidering the Origins of Modern Intelligence Analysis?

Intelligence analysis that uses secrets, reasoning, and writing to address a state's national security policy priorities is an essential part of national power. By modern standards, *De Administrando* falls short of the full sensemaking of modern, all-source intelligence analysis. Nonetheless, this 10th century text is precedent setting for the future development of intelligence analysis by demonstrating for the first time the beginnings of its key constituent parts. *De Administrando Imperio* is written to support a state's national security, it is written using a centralized information base, it is secret, and it reveals analytic reasoning and judgment. As such, it is groundbreaking.

As much as modern historians in the West look to Thucydides and Herodotus to provide the conceptual frameworks for writing history, it is possible now for intelligence analysts and scholars to look to a medieval Byzantine emperor who undertook the first, albeit limited, attempt at national, all-source intelligence analysis.

In doing so, we can reconsider whether the establishment in 1947 of an all-source intelligence analysis capability in the United States is a unique moment of genesis or a recapitulation of a rubric innovated a thousand years earlier. The circulation since the 17th century of *De Administrando Imperio* in the West as the European state system was emerging also spurs questions about if and how this text was received as the craft of intelligence analysis began to emerge in Europe.

Perhaps the most fundamental consequence of linking modern intelligence analysis to this text would be to gain deeper understanding of the roots of such policy-relevant writing in the works of Aristotle. Constantine VII in his introduction admonishes his son:

Νῦν οὖν ἄκουσόν μου, υἱέ, καὶ τήνδε μεμαθηκὼς τὴν διδαχὴν ἔσῃ σοφὸς παρὰ φρονίμοις, καὶ φρόνιμος παρὰ σοφοῖς λογισθήσῃ[38].

Now hear me, son, and having learned the following teaching you will be wise among the prudent (those having practical wisdom), and reckoned prudent among the wise.

In this passage Constantine has summoned a famous passage from book VI of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Ἡ δὲ φρόνησις περὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπινα καὶ περὶ ὧν ἔστι βουλεύσασθαι[39].

Practical wisdom concerns itself with human affairs and is about things that are deliberated.

As a result, modern intelligence analysis should be considered not only as an evolving craft of information management and analytic reasoning but also as the expression of a practical—not purely theoretical—knowledge first articulated by Aristotle. Like much of the Greek corpus whose transmission we owe to Byzantium, we can also thank a 10th century Byzantine emperor not only for his intelligence analysis innovations but also for reminding us that intelligence analysts do their work in the shadow of Aristotle.

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Endnotes

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32. Constantine VII, *De Administrando Imperio*, 48.

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