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Weather and climate as factors affecting land transport and communications in Byzantium

The importance of geographical conditions that affected the development and evolution of Byzantine society and economy has recently attracted the attention of Byzantinists. The Byzantine Empire was a pre-industrial medieval society highly exposed to the impact of environmental factors. Among those conditions, weather and climate have been emphasised in their historical context either as factors of historical causation or as contributory environmental parameters that affected the economy and everyday life in Byzantium.

Travel, transport and communications have received much attention in modern studies of Byzantine everyday life. Although economic, social and cultural parameters of movement in the Byzantine world have been investigated in depth, the impact of the complex physical geographical factors that affected travel, transport and communications has not been studied in detail. Given that all medieval journeys had to be made on foot, on horseback, or by water, land- and sea-transport was sensitive to changes in weather.

This paper focuses on the meteorological factor and explores various aspects of the impact that weather phenomena and climatic conditions could have upon travel, travellers and communications by land, either in short-term or in long-term contexts, during the Byzantine period. Some of the questions to be discussed are the following:

How can we trace in the Byzantine sources the sensitivity of an individual to weather and climate?

Which weather phenomena are described by Byzantine authors as affecting people on move?

What was the impact of weather phenomena upon land transport and communications?

What concept of weather did people have when travelling?

How can we combine weather reports with the emotional and factual reality of the dangers of medieval travel?

A critical examination of weather- and climate-related accounts derived from chronographical, historiographical and hagiographical texts attempts to explore the factual material of the relevant accounts on the one hand, and to analyze problems of perception and attitude on the other.

It is difficult to trace the thoughts, feelings and ways in which Byzantines perceived meteorological phenomena and changes in the natural environment. Understanding their perceptions requires the investigation of sparse and fragmentary evidence concealed in various texts; there is a discernible tendency among Byzantine authors to combine the occurrence of meteorological events with God's interference in human affairs. But this metaphysical attitude did not prevent the authors from giving some details about the consequences of such phenomena in material and social life.