

JASON FOSSELLA, *The dromos and Byzantine communications, diplomacy, and bureaucracy, 518–1204* (The Medieval Mediterranean 137). Leiden – Boston: Brill 2023. XV, 202 pp. – ISBN 978-90-04-68127-9.

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The study of postal services and the long-distance transmission of news, ideas, and people is an active area of research in adjacent fields, especially early modern Europe.¹ The study of such networks is typically linked to the development of states and central authorities' need for accurate and timely information. Byzantium was no exception to this, and that it possessed a postal system, the *dromos*, whose leader, the *logothetes tou dromou*, often appeared at the highest levels of politics and diplomacy, is well known. The Byzantine *dromos* has traditionally been considered as an intelligence agency, or at a minimum closely connected to surveillance and foreign affairs.² This book by JASON FOSSELLA takes a wider approach and studies the *dromos* in its entirety, examining its history and its functioning.

Based on the author's 2014 St Louis University (USA) PhD dissertation but subsequently updated, FOSSELLA's book is divided into two long but clearly organized chapters that parallel each other structurally. After a short but effective introduction that compares states' desires for controlling information flows across human history, FOSSELLA launches into the study of the *cursus publicus*. FOSSELLA picks up the story in AD 518, which is where ANNE KOLB ended her study of the Roman post, and territory that remained largely untouched by the more recent work of LUKAS LEMCKE.³ This chapter covers where the post operated, how the post operated, who

1. See, for example, IOANNA IORDANOU, *Venice's Secret Service: Organizing Intelligence in the Renaissance*. Oxford 2019; GREGORY AFINOGENOV, *Spies and Scholars: Chinese Secrets and Imperial Russia's Quest for World Power*. Cambridge MA 2020; RACHEL MIDURA, *Postal Intelligence: The Tassis Family and Communications Revolution in Early Modern Europe*. Ithaca NY 2025.

2. FRANCIS DVORNIK, *Origins of Intelligence Services: the Ancient Near East, Persia, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, the Arab Muslim Empires, the Mongol Empire, China, Muscovy*. New Brunswick NJ 1974, pp. 122–140.

3. ANNE KOLB, *Transport und Nachrichtentransfer im römischen Reich* (Klio, Beihefte N.F. 2). Berlin 2000; LUKAS LEMCKE, *Imperial Transportation and Communication from the Third to the Late Fourth Century: the Golden Age of the *cursus publicus** (Collection Latomus 353). Brussels 2016.

ran the post, how it was paid for, and its place in diplomacy, espionage, and the economy. The evidence is set forth cleanly, although whether everyone will be convinced with the conclusions that are drawn is another matter.

The first chapter opens and closes with the claims made by Procopius in the *Secret History* about how Justinian damaged the economy and reduced the state's intelligence functions by cutting back on the post. FOSSELLA's aim here seems to be to prove Procopius and John Lydus right. Through some back-of-the-napkin calculations (pp. 51–52) FOSSELLA argues that Justinian's postal austerity programme 'would have had catastrophic effects on local economies' (p. 52). The use of 'would' here is indicative of the strength of this conclusion, because FOSSELLA offers no evidence that it did. War and plague feature prominently in discussion of how the vast empire of Justinian became the much-truncated one of Leo III, but cut-backs in the postal budget are not part of that debate and this book presents no convincing reason that the post has a key role in that story. As FOSSELLA outlined earlier (pp. 14–16), the wagon post service had already been reduced some three-quarters of a century before Justinian, and Lydus noted that this was not applied universally. Further discussion of this point would have been appreciated: from the description of Procopius and Lydus, it seems that at least part of the post the sixth century was funded through cash purchases rather than in-kind requisitions of the sort known elsewhere for both the *cursus* and *dromos*. Local landholders whose livelihoods depended on supplying the post might have had their lives disrupted when this system was curtailed, but it is difficult to see this as deleterious to the entire economy of the late Roman East.

While FOSSELLA's conclusion that Justinian's cuts to the post crashed the rural economy cannot stand, the conclusions of its place in diplomacy and espionage are on firmer ground. His argument that the post had a role in moving embassies around is clear and sets the stage for what is to come in the next chapter. The section on espionage is important and convincing, though, and FOSSELLA argues that the post was not an intelligence agency. While this idea is not strictly original, it is worth emphasizing, given how much the activity of the *dromos* has been associated with spying in the secondary scholarship.

The second chapter turns from the *cursus publicus* to the *dromos*. FOSSELLA argues that the *cursus* and the *dromos* were two separate entities on the basis that the institution was already being wound down in the sixth century, and then that there is no direct evidence for the existence of the

dromos' administration until the middle of the eighth century (p. 54). The argument is that *dromos* was an entirely new service that had to be built from the ground up. That FOSSELLA chooses not to engage with the difficulties surrounding this matter is disappointing. So much of the debate over how Roman state organization became recognizably 'middle Byzantine' in the seventh and eighth century ultimately boils down to state redistribution of goods, so the dismissal of one of the primary systems that moved things around is problematic. An argument either for or against continuity is difficult given the limited evidence, although one does wonder why, if an entirely new postal system was being constructed, was the official put in charge given the office of *logothetes*, otherwise associated with financial matters? Here FOSSELLA also pushes the line that the *dromos* only operated the fast, or horse-based relay post (pp. 54–56). This argumentation is based upon the lack of evidence for wheeled vehicle transport, particularly in Asia Minor, but does this exclude the possibility of a slower post using draft animals? The case has been made that the *dromos* was part of the Byzantine state's efforts to redistribute goods following the seventh-century crises.⁴

Like in the previous chapter, FOSSELLA wants to find out where the post operated. He toys with using a least-cost paths model but ultimately adopts two criteria: whether the route was under Byzantine control, and whether there was a reason for the state to do so. This line of reasoning generally works, and FOSSELLA plausibly traces the routes and roads that the *dromos* might have operated on, acknowledging that prior to the eleventh century there is little direct evidence. He concludes that in total by the eleventh-century territorial peak this meant something like 6400–8000 km of postal routes and 800–1000 stations. On the basis that the tenth-century Arab geographer Ibn Hawqal described the *dromos* inns and relays in a way that very closely matches what we know about the *cursus publicus*, FOSSELLA opines that we should also accept Procopius' figure of 40 horses per station (pp. 73–74). This would mean some 32,000–40,000 post horses, a number that seems out of proportion when the military treatises' talk about horses in the hundreds being mustered for campaigns. FOSSELLA claims that such 800–1000 stations is within the capacity of the empire (p. 69) but later suggests that the number of horses stationed at them was probably much lower (pp. 73–75).

4. ARCHIBALD DUNN, *The kommerkiarios, the apotheke, the dromos, the vardarios, and the West. Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 17 (1993) pp. 3–24.

After a discussion on the condition of middle Byzantine roads comes the best part of this book, the study of the officials who ran the *dromos*. FOSSELLA has examined a large number of seals and has done good work with prosopography. The prosopographical tables are useful and built on good sigillographic publications, although the functions of the *dromos* officials largely follow the interpretation of DEAN A. MILLER.⁵ This is unfortunate but understandable since even RODOLPHE GUILLAND was taken in by this and it has yet to be challenged directly.⁶ Are the *chartoularioi tou dromou* mainly responsible for warrants for use of the post (pp. 100–105), as MILLER suggested and GUILLAND and FOSSELLA followed? That may well have been so, but FOSSELLA's own thorough prosopographical tables note a good number of high titles associated with these individuals. Rather than overseeing a provincial office staffed with a few scribes, perhaps these *chartoularioi* were also administering estates that belonged to the *dromos* and which helped to fund its activities? The possibility has been raised by CHRISTOS MALATRAS.⁷

A few other minor quibbles remain. For example, the loss of lead mines in the twelfth century is said to explain the decline in seals of the *logothetes tou dromou* (pp. 81–82). However, while recycled metal was always an option, and a variety of fresh lead sources seem to have been available from the eleventh century on, so changes in sealing habits is more likely.⁸ FOSSELLA builds his case on postal routes across the Anatolian plateau being broadly similar to those in antiquity partially on the testimony of Harun ibn Yahya (p. 65), yet Harun ibn Yahya was captured in Ascalon, taken by sea to Attaleia, and then transported via the *dromos* to Nicaea in three days.⁹ One might also wish for a more full discussion of the *dromos* in the twelfth century. FOSSELLA presents difficult and intriguing evidence (pp. 131–

5. DEAN A. MILLER, *The Logothete of the Drome in the Middle Byzantine Period*. *Byzantion* 36 (1966) pp. 438–470, at pp. 442–446.

6. RODOLPHE GUILLAND, *Les Logothète : Études sur l'histoire administrative de l'empire byzantine*. *Revue des études byzantines* 29 (1971) pp. 5–115, at pp. 40–42.

7. CHRISTOS MALATRAS, *The thema of the Anatoliki: Prosopography and Administrative Structure*. In: OLGA KARAGIORGOU – PANTELIS CHARALAMPAKIS – CHRISTOS MALATRAS (eds), *Τακτικόν: Μελέτες για την προσωπογραφία και διοίκηση των βυζαντινών θεμάτων*. Athens 2022, pp. 277–401, at pp. 296, 305.

8. OLGA KARAGIORGOU – STEPHEN MERKEL – MARCIN WOŁOSZYN, *A Contribution to the Technology and Sources of Lead in Byzantium: Lead Isotope Analysis of Ten Byzantine Seals*. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 114 (2021) pp. 1161–1204.

9. Translation in: ALEXANDER VASILIEV, *Harun-ibn-Yahya and His Description of Constantinople*. *Seminarium Kondakovianum* 5 (1932) pp. 149–164, at p. 154.

138) but never really goes on to explain how the system functioned in the empire of the Komnenoi.

FOSSELLA has marshaled an impressive array of evidence, supplementing the sparse but generally well-known textual references to the post with seals, documentary evidence, and geography. At least to this reviewer's knowledge, the corpus is basically complete, save for a curious mention of a *servitium* of the *via* in a document from eleventh-century Longobardia and a few seals, only one of which, that of the *logothetes* Elpidios, might have had any real impact on FOSSELLA's prosopography.¹⁰ Another important point that FOSSELLA makes briefly is the place of the *dromos* in regards to sea travel. For an empire bounded for much of the middle period by the Adriatic, Aegean, Black, Mediterranean, and Ionian seas, maritime communication was indispensable and features prominently in the source material. Thus it is surprising that the best evidence that FOSSELLA can find for the *dromos* operating any sort of sea communication infrastructure is that maybe they ran a ferry around Constantinople, and even that is uncertain (pp. 79–80, 128). The absence of evidence over such a long period sets the *dromos* almost entirely on land and is key to understanding its place in the broader history of Byzantine communications.

FOSSELLA ultimately convinces that the *dromos* was not an intelligence agency. Instead, the association of the *logothetes tou dromou* with spying is incidental, a side-effect of the rather more mundane task of operating the state communication network. At times this book makes effective use of challenging evidence, and it will be a departure point for studies of Byzantine state communications for some time. The study of the officials who ran the post is especially thorough and valuable, and sits nicely alongside other

10. FRANCESCO NITTI DI VITO (ed.), *Codice diplomatico barese: la pergamene di S. Nicola di Bari*, vol. 4. Bari 1900, p. 44, lines 28–29; MARIA CAMPAGNOLO-POTHITOU – JEAN-CLAUDE CHEYNET, *Sceaux de la collection Zacos au Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève*. Milan 2016, pp. 77, 126, nos. 58, 104; VUJADIN IVANIŠEVIĆ – BOJANA KRSMANOVIĆ, *New Byzantine Seals from Morava (Margum) and Braničevo*. *Starinar* 68 (2018) pp. 111–124, nos. 1, 9; KRASIMIRA KOSTOVA – PANTELIS CHARALAMPAKIS, *The Seal of Elpidios, logothetes of the dromos, Found in Debelto*. In: ALEXANDR AIBABIN (ed.), *Χερσώνος θέματα: Империя и Полис. XIII Международный Византийский семинар*. Simferopol 2021, pp. 163–170; KURT REGLING, *Byzantinische Bleisiegel*. In: ALEXANDER CONZE et al. (eds), *Altertümer von Pergamon*, vol. I/2: *Stadt und Landschaft*. Berlin 1913, no. 15; VALERI GRIGOROV – ZHENYA ZHEKOVA, *Печат на Теоктист, патриций и логотет на дрома, открит в Плиска*. *Нумизматика, сфрагистика и епиграфика* 11 (2015) pp. 155–161. I owe this last reference to Pantelis Charalampakis.

recent work that combs through Byzantine officialdom.¹¹ While questions remain and some of this book needs to be used with caution, FOSSELLA has shed ample light on the operation of the Byzantine state post.

Keywords

Byzantine postal service; cursus publicus

11. KARAGIOURGOU – CHARALAMPAKIS – MALATRAS (eds), *Τακτικόν*.