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The βασιλεύς on the Move. Encounters between Byzantine Emperors and Foreign Rulers at Places other than Constantinople (7th–12th C.)

Encounters between Byzantine Emperors and other rulers were a central element of Byzantine “foreign affairs”. The choice of the venue was of great importance since it indicated power relations. In principle, three scenarios were conceivable: encounters at the Emperor’s location, encounters at the other ruler’s location and encounters at some location placed between the two. The first two reflected an asymmetrical relationship, since the “weaker” of the two, the ruler of lower standing, tended to visit the “stronger” one of higher standing. Encounters which took place somewhere in between, indicate a rather symmetrical relationship. From the 7th to the 12th c. the Byzantine Emperor usually met other rulers in Constantinople. The infrastructure necessary to a fitting display of his superiority and his guest’s subordination was available there. My paper focusses on those encounters which did not take place in Constantinople but occurred while the βασιλεύς was “on the move”. It became evident that the Emperor took every possible measure to ensure that the hierarchical character of their relationship was preserved and his superiority emphasised. In general he did this by staging the encounters as a reception. The Emperor arrived at the place of encounter first, and only then did the foreign potentate appear. In addition, the Emperor often attempted to provide an ambience similar to that in Constantinople, by involving the population of the city, organising horse racing, etc. Ultimately, therefore, even encounters in some sort of “midway location” remained imperial receptions. This did not alter until the end of the period under investigation. The encounter between John II Komnenos and the Hungarian King Stephen II on an island in the Danube in 1129, which is only recorded by a Latin source, is the first “real” border meeting in the Middle Byzantine era, even if the historicity remains questionable. Since royal encounters on borders, particularly on rivers, are relatively well-known for the Western Middle Ages it is possible that the meeting was a fiction created along the lines of Latin experiences. On the other hand, the event could represent an intermediate stage, for just a few decades later a visit of Emperor Isaac II Angelos (1185-1195) to the Hungarian King Bela III—the first visit paid by a Byzantine Emperor to a foreign sovereign—is attested beyond any doubt. Since this was a complete reversal of circumstances, the sources show that they were very much aware of the possible implications for the balance of power, attempting to counteract detrimental interpretations of the Emperor’s power and hierarchical rank.