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## LEGITIMACY AND USURPATION IN THE AGE OF ZENO

### ABSTRACT

During the reign of Zeno, the emperor was faced with powerful divergent centres of power that tried to control the emperor. Amongst them there were the barbarian group of the two Theoderics, who tried to gain as much as possible for them and their people, mainly using military force and the threat to plunder the Balkan provinces. Another important group was that of the Isaurians, to which also belonged the emperor, but this group had another important figure as leader, Illus, who tried to create its own pressure group. Finally, there was the so-called legitimists, led by the empress Verina, who systematically opposed Zeno's policy.

Confronted with these groups, there has to be remarked the emperor's ability to manipulate them and to maintain to power. Zeno's policy was mainly to oppose these groups one to another, and he tried to create his own pressure group.

After the extinction of the Theodosian dynasty in the East (AD 450), the legitimacy of an emperor acquired a new aspect. From now on it is more obviously the role played by women from the imperial house, which poses a factor of legitimating ruler<sup>1</sup>. The increase of the women's role in the governmental system had become manifest from the time of Arcadius<sup>2</sup>, and since Theodosius II, the women of the imperial house were able to manipulate their own factions<sup>3</sup>. After the extinction of the Theodosian dynasty, they gained a new role as providers of legitimacy, ensuring a dynastic link with the extinguished ruling house.

Another factor of promoting legitimacy had been the Church. The sources emphasise that, to strengthen the position of the new Augustus, the patriarch of Constantinople crowned Marcianus<sup>4</sup>. So, the middle of the fifth century had witness to the increase in the role of the women and religion as essential factors in proclaiming and maintaining a new Augustus in the centre of power. In these conditions we must re-evaluate the role played by these new factors of power in the context of the short Isaurian dominance during the reign of Leo I (457-474), then Zeno (471-491). If the reign of Leo I was especially marked by the *dominatio* of the barbarian general Fl. Ardabur Aspar (up to 471) and Leo's attempts to get rid of this powerful ally, Zeno's reign was marked by the conflict for power between various factions which competed for primacy. The Isaurian's reign was marked by conflicts on various planes between governmental "pressure groups" and repeated attempts to overthrow Zeno, whose fragile legitimacy, represented by his proclamation as Augustus by his son Leo II<sup>5</sup>, was questioned after the death of the little emperor. As sole link with the dynasty becoming his wife Ariadne, Zeno was forced to face various problems: legitimist usurpations, problems with the Ostrogoths, and even conflicts inside his own *factio*, together with religious problems, the imperial Monophysite policy being confronted with Chalcedonian hostility.

Following, the above-mentioned problems will be discussed, trying to explain the survival of the Isaurian emperor in so difficult frame. His ability was remarkable, because even in a desperate position Zeno had the capacity to manipulate the various political forces and to create his own faction, which maintained him in power.

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<sup>1</sup> At the death of Theodosius II, Pulcheria Augusta, pretending that she was conforming to the last wish of her brother, and in alliance with the barbarian general Aspar, elected Marcianus as Augustus and married him. Thus, on 25 August 450 Marcianus was proclaimed Augustus (Procop., *BV*, I. 4. 7); also, on the accession of Zeno to the supreme power, he had been already married with Ariadne, the daughter of Leo I. Moreover, the approval of the empress Verina was necessary to raise Zeno to the rank of Augustus (*V. Dan. Styl.*, c. 67). During Zeno's reign, Verina played a major role in the court intrigues that had as the ultimate goal the deposition of the Isaurian. At the death of Zeno, Ariadne exercised supreme power during the *interregnum*, and designated Anastasius as emperor (A. A. Vasiliev, *Histoire de l'Empire byzantin*, Paris, 1932, vol. I, tome I (324-1081), p. 139).

<sup>2</sup> On 9 January 400, Eudoxia was proclaimed Augusta, and her portrait was sent in the Eastern provinces; also, her adherence to the anti-German faction offered a powerful ally (E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire*, Paris-Bruxelles-Amsterdam, vol. I-1959, p. 235).

<sup>3</sup> During the Age of Theodosius II, the conflict between Pulcheria and Eudocia, from which benefited Chrysaphius the eunuch.

<sup>4</sup> Leo Gramm., 111B, cf. E. Stein, *op. cit.*, p. 311; another version is that Leo I was the first Augustus crowned by the Patriarch (Jord., *Rom.*, 335; Procop., *BV*, I. 5. 7; see also G. Ostrogorsky, *Histoire de l'Etat byzantin*, Paris, 1956, p. 90).

<sup>5</sup> 9 February 474, cf. *V. Dan. Styl.*, c. 67.

Zeno owed his progress to Leo's appeal to Isaurians, in particular his attempt to get rid of Aspar's guardianship. His arrival at the imperial court and, implicit in this, his appearance in Byzantine history, was in 466. Subsequently, Tarasicodissa<sup>6</sup> accused Ardabur, the son of Aspar and *magister militum per Orientem*, of high treason and collaboration with the Persians, producing some letters to this effect. As a reward the Isaurian received the post of *comes domesticorum* and the hand of Ariadne, Leo's daughter. This event was part of Leo's policy to become closer to the Isaurians, because in the same period we have evidence of the enrolment of Isaurians in the army and the creation of *excubitores*, the new imperial guard, as a counterbalance to the barbarian power<sup>7</sup>.

The death of Leo I (18 January, 474) created a vacuum of power. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 474, with the acceptance of Verina, Zeno was raised to the position of Augustus<sup>8</sup>. In this context, there was registered the reaction of the Ostrogothic chiefs (the revolt of Theodoric Strabo, partially repressed by Illus, an Isaurian general, with an important position at the imperial court, cf. Malch., fr. 4 (*FHG*, IV, 115); Joh. Ant., fr. 210 (*FHG*, IV, 618)). Zeno's position was substantially weakened by the death of little Leo II, his sole link with the dead emperor; thus, a conspiracy was organised by Verina, who gathered the legitimist forces which were hostile to Zeno's rule: Verina herself and the legitimist faction, Theodoric Strabo and the Ostrogoths, Illus and the Isaurian group. In this context, Zeno's sole option was to flee to Isauria<sup>9</sup>. The success of his return was due to Zeno's ability to win over the adverse factions, possible because of Basiliscus' wavering policy. Hesitating in his religious policy (firstly Orthodox, then Monophysite) and perhaps trying to carry on a personal policy, the usurper gradually estranged his allies. Thus we hear of Illus' crossing over to the side of Zeno. However, from this moment on Illus gained an ascendancy over the legitimate emperor, having as a hostage Longinus, Zeno's brother, in Isauria<sup>10</sup>. The crossing of a part of the Ostrogothic faction to the side of Zeno fragmented the barbarian block, hostile to the Isaurian government<sup>11</sup>. In this way, Zeno became able to oppose the barbarian against barbarian, having his faction inside the Ostrogothic bloc. Inside the legitimist group, securing the help of Armatus, Zeno succeeded in his return to Constantinople at the end of August 476. What was different from his usual practice was that after he had secured his position, as emperor he rapidly renounced the services of his new ally, and he had him killed in the next year. This fact leads to the assumption that he either underestimated the importance of the legitimist group (in fact, Ariadne was already a factor of legitimacy, thus undermining the actions of this group, at the ideological level), or his rule was intended to be a military domination, with less stress on legitimacy, and more importance accorded to other factions, i. e. the Isaurians and the barbarians, especially the Ostrogoths. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that Armatus' killer was Onoulph, a barbarian promoted to *magister militum per Illyricum* just by his victim<sup>12</sup>.

On the other hand, the next period (476-479) was dominated by the repeated attempts on the life of Illus, the most prominent person at Constantinople. It cannot be proven that Zeno commanded the

<sup>6</sup> This was Zeno's Isaurian name. The sources have different opinions related to the Isaurian name. Thus, Zeno is named Tarasicodissa in Candidus, Codisseus in Joh. Mal., 375 and *Chron. Pasch.*, s. a. 474, Aricmesius in Evagr., *HE*, II, 15, Trascalissaeus in Theophanes. The name of Zeno was taken from another Isaurian named Zeno, who acted as general during the age of Theodosius II (cf. *V. Dan. Styl.*, c. 55. 65. in.

<sup>7</sup> Joh. Lyd., *De mag.*, I, 16 ex., cf. Joh. Mal., *Exc. de ins.*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> *V. Dan. Styl.*, c. 67.

<sup>9</sup> At 9 January 475, cf. *V. Dan. Styl.*, c. 68 s.; Joh. Ant., fr. 210 (*FHG*, IV, 618).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. E. Stein, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

<sup>11</sup> Theodoric the Amal, the leader of a group of Ostrogoths, passed over to Zeno's side: Anon. Val., 9, 42; E. Stein, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

<sup>12</sup> Procop., *BV*, I, 7, 23; see also *PLRE*, II, s. v. *Armatus*.

attempts: rather, the sources witness the conflict for power between the Isaurians and the legitimists, and the features of the two attempts seem to bear the mark of the empress Verina<sup>13</sup>.

Within the barbarian faction, Theodoric Strabo was neglected in comparison with the other Theodoric, the Amal. The latter, as a reward for his help, received the post of *magister militum praesentalis* and *patricius*; the possession of the territories which his people settled in Moesia Secunda was confirmed, and he also received an annual payment.

Furthermore, the discontent of the legitimist group led to its reaction: at the end of 479, Marcianus, the son of Anthemius, the Western emperor (467-472) and Leoncia, the daughter of Leo I and Verina, managed to gain the support of Theodoric Strabo. In this context, Marcianus tried to usurp the imperial power under the pretence that his wife, unlike Ariadne, was born as a porphyrogenite. The imperial ascendancy, as well as the support of Theodoric Strabo were not enough; with the help of Illus and his Isaurian troops, the rebellion was crushed; thus Marcianus was consecrated priest and sent to Caesarea in Cappadocia. His pathetic attempt to attack Galatia with some bands of peasants was also repressed by Trocundus, Illus' brother. This time, the usurper was imprisoned together with his family in Isauria. Marcianus' failure, as well as the conspiracy discovered the next year<sup>14</sup> demonstrated that the legitimist group, in its attempt to gain the upperhand, was not yet prepared enough to overthrow Zeno. The death of Theodoric Strabo blowed, it seemed decisively, this faction (481); on the other hand, this event strengthened the position of the other Theodoric, the Amal, which whom Zeno was forced to deal in 483. According to the new arrangement, the Ostrogothic chief received again the post of *magister militum praesentalis* (lost around 478), the ordinary consulship for 484, and for his people, land in Dacia Ripensis and Moesia Secunda<sup>15</sup>. Paradoxically, this arrangement weakened Zeno's position; a third attempt on Illus' life persuaded Illus to distance himself from his former ally. Illus' defection deprived the imperial government of one (if not the most important) of its supporters.

The crisis of the year 484 marked the creation of a formidable coalition against the emperor. At Antioch, where he acted as *magister militum per Orientem*, perhaps the strongest military position in the fifth century Byzantium, Illus summoned his supporters; also, he had as a new ally the empress Verina, imprisoned in Isauria since 478<sup>16</sup>. Illus' ability as a political leader also manifested itself in the political forces he managed to muster around him. Thus, he appealed to Odovacar, who declared himself ready to help the rebels, in spite of the favour showed to him by Zeno in 476<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, the Isaurian general asked for help from the Armenian satraps who were vassals of the empire (Procop., *De aedific.*, III. 1. 25) and from the Persian king Peroz, who, because of the Ephtalite invasion, proved unable to keep his promise of help<sup>18</sup>. Also, on the religious plane, Illus tried to gather to him a considerable force: thus, he tried to support beliefs deviant from those of the state religion, such as Catholic Christianity and even paganism, trying in this manner to gain the support of all the forces hostile to the central government and creating a new center of power, at Antioch. This was not a secessionist movement, but rather an attempt to take over the power, in this sense using the

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<sup>13</sup> In the summer of 477, an imperial slave tried to kill Illus; in 478, when Illus was consul, a second attempt was organised by Epinicus, former *praefectus praetorio* of Basiliscus, who after the usurper's fall managed to keep an important position at the imperial court, owing to Verina's favour.

<sup>14</sup> In the summer of 480 the conspiracy organised by Epinicus together with the *praefectus praetorio* Dionysius and *magister militum* Thraustila was discovered, and they were executed (Joh. Ant., fr. 95).

<sup>15</sup> Marcell. comes, *Chron.*, s. a. 483.

<sup>16</sup> H. Elton, *DIR*, 1998, s. v. *Zeno*, as a consequence of the failed attempt on Illus.

<sup>17</sup> Odovacar was made *patricius* by Zeno, cf. Malch., fr. 10.

<sup>18</sup> At the beginning of 484, Peroz was defeated and killed by the Ephtalites (E. Stein, *op. cit.*, vol. II-1949, p. 19).

coalition of the forces hostile to Zeno's government and attempting to replace him with a more pliant person. This substitute was found in the person of Leontius, who as *patricius* was sent with the initial mission freeing the empress Verina. His defection from the emperor's side offered the necessary person for usurpation: Leontius' prestige and his quality of *patricius* were enough to transform him to the emperor needed by the rebels<sup>19</sup>. In this context, it is worth admiring Zeno's political ability. Faced by Illus' refusal to free the emperor's brother, Longinus, imprisoned in Isauria as a guarantee for imperial "good behaviour", then by open revolt, the emperor resorted to the favourite method: promoting dissension inside the Isaurian faction and, something new, attempting to create his own pressure group. This new faction was intended to be recruited from a larger political spectrum. Apart from the Isaurians who remained his supporters, the emperor made an appeal to a military group whose leader was a native from the Balkans. It might be said that from this point on the Thracian faction began to ascend. Through the promotion of Ioannes Scythia the emperor tried to create a counterpart to Isaurian power. Indeed, lacking a solid foundation of legitimacy (the important factors of legitimacy being mainly on the opposite side), Zeno tried through this artifice the creation of his *factio*. Having secured Ostrogothic help through Theodoric the Amal, ordinary consul for this year, and relying on the loyalty of his own Isaurian group, mainly represented by Cottomenes and Longinus of Cardala, promoted to *magister militum praesentalis*, and *magister officiorum* respectively, Zeno deliberately created a breach in the political system dominated by the Isaurians and legitimists, through the promotion of Thracians. The winning over of Ioannes Scythia represented for Zeno a real advantage: in September 484, the rebels were defeated in a great battle at Antioch, in Syria. This victory was especially due to the military capacity of Ioannes Scythia. In the context in which the Isaurian support was fundamental for an emperor who had neither legitimacy nor the religious support, the consequences of this victory were extremely important. The publishing of the Henotikon in 482 effected only a partial conciliation between the Orthodox and Monophysite parties, but the bishops of Antioch and Alexandria remained hostile to the imperial edict, and, externally, the Pope Felix III, by excommunicating the patriarch of Constantinople Acacius, provoked a schism. Zeno's initiative to act as mediator between the two religious parties only resulted in further discontent. The victory at Antioch persuaded most of the Isaurians to cross over to the imperial side.

The next period was marked by a gradual improvement in the emperor's position. Besieged since the battle of Antioch in the fort of Papirius in Isauria, the rebels were decisively defeated in 488; then, after the fall of the fort, Illus and the usurper were executed<sup>20</sup>. The death of Verina at the beginning of siege (484)<sup>21</sup> deprived the legitimist faction of a real leader. On the other hand, we might say, Ariadne benefited from the death of her mother: politically, she became the leader of the legitimist group, fact which became manifest in 491, on Anastasius' election<sup>22</sup>.

Another important aspect is the departure of Theodoric the Amal. A constant source of problems, the group of Ostrogothic barbarians, through its representative Theodoric Strabo, then the Amal, managed to achieve, through military pressure and political manoeuvres, an ascendancy over the imperial person. The departure of Theodoric to Italy has had various interpretations in the sources: firstly, Jordanes, Gothic apologist, as well as the Anonymus Valesii (Jord., *Get.*, LVII; Anon. Val., 11. 49) suggest that Theodoric was sent to Italy to recover the province for the imperial government. The hypothesis seems credible, owing to the fact that Zeno was interested in regaining control over Italy for various reasons. Firstly, during Illus' revolt, Odovacar was his adherent, so it was necessary

<sup>19</sup> On 19 July 484, Verina crowned Leontius as emperor at Tarsus. In the edict published on this occasion, she specified the fact that, as Augusta, and due to her right to dispose on the imperial throne, she deposed Zeno and replaced him with Leontius (cf. E. Stein, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 29).

<sup>20</sup> Marcell. comes, *Chron.*, s. a. 488; Vict. Tonn., s. a. 488; Joh. Ant., fr. 98.

<sup>21</sup> Joh. Mal., 389; Joh. Ant., fr. 214, 6; 214, 12; see also *PLRE*, II, s. v. *Aelia Verina*.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. E. Stein, *op. cit.*, II, p. 77.

to recover Italy for the imperial faction, in order to avoid any danger from the West. Furthermore, even if Odovacar ruled Italy as practically an independent dynast, theoretically Italy still belonged to the empire, so the barbarian was guilty of high treason by supporting the usurper, and in consequence he had to be punished. The other aspect was religious: after the promulgation of the Henotikon, there was a schism between East and West. Even if the emperor was Christian, he still acted as a *pontifex maximus* (even though he did not bear the title) and, in this respect, he tried to solve the religious disputes, having as a precedent Constantine's religious attitude. So, the reconquest of Italy might help, from this point of view, to produce a reconciliation (even a forced one) in the Church. The Pope's ambitions of independence could only be disturbing for the imperial government; and though in Antioch or Alexandria the emperor could interfere as the secular power, Italy became inaccessible through the accession of Odovacar, a barbarian chief, to the supreme power. Before the fall of the Western Empire, the eastern and western emperors could negotiate as colleagues, but from 476, the Roman pride had to humiliate itself in front of a petty barbarian chief, and this was too much for the Roman sense of superiority.

Another approach to the problem is the one according to which Zeno was forced by the Ostrogothic chief to be sent in Italy. This fact indicates that Theodoric's ambitions became incompatible with his position inside the Roman governmental system. So, Theodoric was chosen for an expedition in Italy, Zeno being persuaded to offer him the necessary authority. The subsequent behaviour of the barbarian chief seems to justify this idea, since his imperial ambitions are now known (for instance, as ruler of Italy, his behaviour mimicked that of the Roman emperors; also, he preserved the imperial administrative system and from Anastasius he received back the imperial *ornamenta*, sent to Constantinople by Odovacer)<sup>23</sup>.

Certainly, the fact is that through sending Theodoric to Italy, the emperor managed to get rid of a dangerous pressure group. The hesitating Ostrogothic attitude, which followed rather their interest than the imperial one led to complications during Zeno's government. The barbarian group proved to be the most important factor of equilibrium, and this had to be taken into consideration in the political game.

What is remarkable is the emperor's ability. Combining political intrigue and personal prestige (especially military prestige, because there is known now the military ability of Zeno), the emperor managed to climb up the steps of political hierarchy, from the position of an Isaurian noble to that of Augustus. His hand on power he managed to retain in spite of the lack of a solid legitimacy, through the creation of a personal faction that was extremely heterogeneous, in political terms. His main merit is the promotion of Thracians to power, a fact that made possible the subsequent reigns of Anastasius and the family of Justinian. Inside the Isaurian group, and after Illus' elimination, Zeno managed the assumption of control by this faction, and his policy towards the Ostrogoths persuaded them to join the imperial cause. This context made possible the stabilisation of Zeno's position, which initially had seemed to be without hope with regard to his maintaining as emperor. The gradual elimination of competitor factors of power, after the initial breaking of their unity, seemed to be his favourite *modus operandi*. However, the Isaurians' grouping around him and the exercise of power during two decades contributed to their permanence as a "pressure group", their elimination being possible only after a serious civil war in the reign of Anastasius (from 492 to 498).

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<sup>23</sup> For the title of *semper Augustus*, reserved for the Roman emperors, and borne by Theodoric, see *CIL*, X, 6850=Dessau, 827; for the gold medals issued by Theodoric, which abusively styled him as *princeps*, cf. E. Stein, *op. cit.*, II, p. 119.