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## “No Island is an Island”: The Byzantine Mediterranean in The Early Middle Ages (600s-850s)

Luca Zavagno \*

### Abstract

Large islands of the western and eastern Byzantine Mediterranean are often caught in a historiographical vacuum because they are regarded as isolated and marginal places at the peripheries of Constantinopolitan empire. In fact, although literary and sources dismiss them simply as places of exile or distant military outposts along maritime frontiers, archaeology and material culture have recently shed light on the role they played as “spaces of connectivity”. This is due not only to their strategic locations along the commercial shipping routes crisscrossing the Mediterranean but also because islands often presented peculiar adaptive administrative strategies molded by the military and political exigencies of the hour.

In fact, this paper will argue that archaeology and material evidence (like coins, lead-seals and above all ceramics) as paired with the rather scarce literary and documentary sources give us enough evidence pointing to a certain degree of economic prosperity on the abovementioned islands during the period under scrutiny as they continued to play an important role in the political, fiscal, administrative and religious structures of the Byzantine empire. Indeed, this paper will also try to show that a resilient insular economy paired with the continuity on local production of artefacts entailed by the persistence of levels of demand on the part of the local secular and religious elites and regular if not frequent regional and sub-regional contacts with other areas of the Mediterranean (Carolingian or Muslim) as well as remaining part and parcel of the a Byzantine political, socio-cultural and economic “coastal” *koiné*.

**Keywords:** Byzantium, Islands, Mediterranean, Sicily, Cyprus.

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## “Hiçbir Ada Sadece Ada Değildir”: Erken Orta Çağ’da Bizans Akdeniz’i (600-850)

### Öz

Batı ve Doğu Bizans Akdenizinin büyük adaları, Konstantinopolitan imparatorluğunun çevresinde izole ve marjinal yerler olarak görüldüğü için tarih yazımının boşluğunda kaybolurlar. Edebiyat ve diğer kaynaklar adaları sadece sürgün yerleri ve deniz sınırlarındaki askeri karakollar olarak görmezden gelmelerine rağmen son zamanlarda arkeoloji ve materyaller/ maddi kültür adaların “bağlantı alanları” olarak oynadıkları role ışık tuttu. Bunun nedeni Akdeniz’i çaprazlayan ticaret yolları boyunca stratejik konumlarının yanında aynı zamanda adaların genellikle günün askeri ve siyasi gereklilikleri tarafından şekillendirilen uyarlanabilir özel stratejiler sunmasıdır.

Aslında, bu makale, arkeoloji ve maddi kültürün (madeni para, kurşun mühürler ve her şeyden önce seramikler gibi) oldukça kıt edebi ve belgesel kaynaklarla eşleştirilmiş olarak bize yukarıda belirtilen adalarda, belirli bir ekonomik refah düzeyine işaret eden yeterli kanıt sağladığı tartışılacaktır. Bu makale aynı zamanda,

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\* Doç. Dr. Bilkent Üniversitesi, e-mail: luca.zavagno@bilkent.edu.tr, ORCID No: 0000-0003-2450-3182.

yerel, seküler ve dini elitlerin talep seviyelerindeki devamlılıktan kaynaklanan yerel eser üretimindeki süreklilik ile birleşen dirençli ada ekonomisi, Akdeniz'in diğer bölgeleri (Karolenj veya Müslüman) ile sık olmasa da düzenli olarak bölgesel ve alt-bölgesel temaslarının yanı sıra Bizans siyasi, sosyo-kültürel ve ekonomik "kıyı şeridinin" bir parçası olduğunu göstermeye çalışacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bizans, Adalar, Akdeniz, Sicilya, Kıbrıs.

### **No island is (only) an island (even in Byzantium)**

In a little pamphlet that rather contrasts with his traditional research interest, Carlo Ginzburg evokes the importance of islands as both real and imaginary places.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, Ginzburg takes cue from the famous seventeenth-century poem of John Donne entitled "No Man's is an Island."<sup>2</sup> The Italian historian indeed asserts that as no man is simply an island in his entire self but rather a piece of a continent and a part of a totality, so famous literary examples of islands like Thomas More's Utopia stem from famous classical works on the same topic (like Plato's *Timeo* or Lucian's *A True Story*, or Cicero's *De Officiis*). This may seem obvious in the case of a great Renaissance Man like More who lived in the shadow of the Classics. Several passages of More's Utopia are either echoes of, or allusions to, texts widely read by humanists.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, one can also notice that Ginzburg indirectly points to the ontological character of any (utopian or not) island. In fact, the *Oxford Dictionary* provides us with a rather univocal and clear-cut definition of island as a piece of land completely surrounded by water.<sup>4</sup> Clearly this is a characterization most of us are familiar with: for islands trigger either images of far, often exotic lands facing the sunset, and constantly bathed in sunny days; or -in a rather dramatic contrast with a holiday destination- they conjure up pictures of outlets for rogue adventurers (like the famous pirate island of Tortuga) or even more hostile places where castaways like Robinson Crusoe or Tom Hanks fight for their lives.

Nevertheless, like Ginzburg reminds us, when it comes to islands there is more than meets the eye. Islands are unresolved places of a paradox;<sup>5</sup> a paradox which Greek and Roman authors of the likes influencing More, have repeatedly set forth. Salvatore Cosentino has taunted at the opposite attitudes towards islands as deeply embedded in the Greek and Roman culture:

*on the one hand islands were imagined as a microcosm with their peculiar traits, which are different from those of the continent, and just for this they evoke an idea of remoteness and marginality. On the other hand, their function in commerce and connectivity could not be ignored, especially when the whole Mediterranean came under Roman rule.*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *No Island is an Island. Four Glances at English Literature in a world perspective*, New York 2000, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> John Donne, *No Man is an Island*, London 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *No Island is an island*, p.1.

<sup>4</sup>"Island,"in *The Oxford Learner Dictionary* <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/island?q=island> retrieved on 15/6/2020

<sup>5</sup> Nick Kardulias, "Response: Mediterranean Archaeologies of Insularity in the Age of Globalization," Ed. Anna Kouremenos-John M. Gordon, *Mediterranean Archaeologies of Insularity in the Age of Globalization*, Oxford 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Salvatore Cosentino, "Mentality, Technology and Commerce: Shipping amongst Mediterranean islands in Late Antiquity and Beyond," Eds. Enrico Zanini, Philippe Pergola, and Demetrios Michaelidis, *The Insular System of Byzantine Mediterranean. Archaeology and History*. Oxford 2013, p. 67. See also Salvatore Cosentino, "A longer antiquity? Cyprus, Insularity and the Economic Transition," Eds. Maria Parani-Demetrios Michaelides, *The Archaeology of Late Antique and Byzantine Cyprus (4th–12th centuries AD). Conference in Honour of Athanasios Papageorgiou. Cahiers du Centre d'Études Chypriotes*, 43. Paris 2013, pp. 93-98.

Building on the abovementioned paradox, in the Greek and Roman culture, islands were also identified as remote places of exile; nevertheless, isolation could also have positive connotations like in the case of the utopian Atlantis or more prosaically the paradisiacal “Happy Islands”.<sup>7</sup>

The duplicity of the insular world as expression of connectivity and substitute for isolation has been repeatedly stressed by anthropologists, archaeologists and historians.<sup>8</sup> As there is no space here to delve into the countless works focusing on the role played by islands in the Mediterranean history<sup>9</sup>, I would like instead to offer few preliminary remarks on Byzantine historiography and its rather problematic relation with the islands of the Empire. These should be regarded as in tune of an introduction to this contribution which will try to offer a holistic analytical approach to the insular world of Byzantium in the early Middle Ages; an approach taking its methodological cue from an extensive use of the better and better published archaeology (and material culture) yielded in large insular contexts like Cyprus, Sicily and the Balearics.<sup>10</sup> Here a further preliminary caveat seems necessary as related to the selection of islands proposed in this article. This has to do primarily with their size and/or location across trans-Mediterranean shipping routes. It is indeed important to place islands in the wider framework of the archaeology of the seas, emphasizing among other aspects, connectivity, interaction and the role of local population.<sup>11</sup>

Although, islands can be perceived as “the unconventional other” even when not so distant from the continent, only those which did not belong to a pulverized exchange system (Aegean) and which (with the exception of Sicily) were not within immediate sight of land, could play a relevant role with regards of the mechanism of production and distribution of the Mediterranean world.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as will be shown in the second part of this article, in the transition from a unified “Roman” Mediterranean to a fragmented Great Sea, large islands boasted a rather sustained economic vitality and socio-cultural resilience as paired with peculiar administrative and governmental structures as well as political expediency on the part of the local elites.<sup>13</sup> In this light, and in tune with a coda, the third part of the article will

<sup>7</sup> Gabriele Amiotti, “Le Isole Fortunate: mito, utopia, realtà geografica”, Ed. Mario Sordi, *Geografia e Strotiografia del Mondo Classico*, Milano 1988, pp. 166-77. See also Filippo Bulgarella, “Bisanzio e le Isole,” Ed. Paolo Corrias, *Forme e Caratteri della Presenza Bizantina nel Mediterraneo Orientale: La Sardegna (secoli VI-XI)*, Cagliari 2012, pp. 33-41, and Karl Kopaka, “What is an islands? Concepts, Meanings and Polysemies of Insular Topoi in Greek Sources,” *European Journal of Archaeology* Vol. 11, Issue 3, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Christy Constantakopolou, *The Dance of Islands. Insularity, Networks, the Athenian Empire and the Aegean World*. Oxford 2017, p. 2; Paul Rainbird, *The Archaeology of Islands*, Cambridge 2000.

<sup>9</sup> See for instance, John M. Gordon-Anna Kouremenos, “Introduction. Mediterranean Archaeologies of Insularity in the Age of Globalization,” Ed. Anna Kouremenos-John M. Gordon, *Mediterranean Archaeologies of Insularity in the Age of Globalization*, Oxford 2020 with further bibliography.

<sup>10</sup> Enrico Zanini, “Introduzione. Le ragioni di un seminario. Le ragioni di un libro.” Eds. Enrico Zanini, Philippe Pergola, and Demetrios Michaelidis, *The Insular System of Byzantine Mediterranean. Archaeology and History*, Oxford 2013, pp. 3-16; Miguel Cau Ontiveros-Catalina Mas Florit, *Change and Resilience. The Occupation of Mediterranean Islands in Late Antiquity*, Providence 2019. This not to diminish the importance of written sources but rather to recognize that as Wickham asserts early medieval history-writing is a permanent struggle with the few sources available, as historians try, often over and over again, to extract nuanced historical accounts from them.” (See Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome. Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000*, London 2009, p. 12.)

<sup>11</sup> Miguel Cau Ontiveros- Catalina Mas Florit, “Islands, Change and Late Antiquity,” Eds. Miguel Cau Ontiveros-Catalina Mas Florit, *Change and Resilience. The Occupation of Mediterranean Islands in Late Antiquity*, Providence 2019, p. xxi.

<sup>12</sup> Günder Varinoğlu, “‘Imagine there is no (is)land’: Conceptualizing Byzantine Islands in Southern Asia Minor,” Eds. Koray Durak-Ivana Jevtić, *Identity and the other in Byzantium. Papers from the Fifth International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium*, Istanbul 2019, p. 101; Salvatore Cosentino, “Mentality, Technology and Commerce,” p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> Salvatore Cosentino, “Mentality, Technology and Commerce.”

assess the islands' degree of economic and political integration in a wider Byzantine *koinè* which encompassed liminal coastal spaces as well as insular communities promoting social contact and cultural interchange.<sup>14</sup> This area seems to coincide with the territories and the seas on which the Byzantine Empire retained a political and naval rulership.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it boasted a peculiar sets of material culture indicators (like lead seals, coins and globular amphorae) suggesting a certain common cultural unity;<sup>16</sup> in fact, the peculiar political-administrative infrastructures (as documented in most of the abovementioned islands and gateway communities like Amalfi and Comacchio) *de facto* pointed to a other-than-Imperial Greco-Roman identity.<sup>17</sup>

This should allow me to conjure up the multifaceted and complex role played by islands along frontiers and border zones.<sup>18</sup> One conception of the frontier is as contact zone, but what made [islands and island-like territories] most “between” and interstitial for contemporaries was rather a lack of contact, a separation.<sup>19</sup> After all, islands can indeed be located on a rather broad connectivity spectrum swaying like a pendulum between relative isolation from hegemonic political and economic systems to integration in such system.<sup>20</sup> So, as a pendulum remains in a constant state of movement, so are islands when examined in a cross-regional and diachronic perspective. Therefore, they were more than peripheral figments of a distant Imperial center. They were actors shaping an everchanging cultural and economic balance at the interface between Mediterranean polities in the early Medieval period while at the same time remaining part and parcel of a Byzantine Mediterranean coastal system. A system stemming from an Empire retaining its maritime face well into the ninth century as it controlled the main sea roads, important coastal gateway communities as well as the most important insular hubs.<sup>21</sup> It is indeed to these and their role in the historiography of Byzantium that I am moving to in the following section of this paper.

### Islands and Byzantine Historiography

Islands have not attracted a great deal of attention on the part of Byzantinists at large. Almost all the most recent syntheses encompassing the history of Byzantium have toned down the role of major islands of Byzantine Mediterranean to that of mere peripheral additions to the so-called Byzantine heartland (as combining the Aegean and the Anatolian

<sup>14</sup> Myrto Veikou, “Mediterranean Byzantine Ports and Harbors in the Complex Interplay between environment and Society. Spatial, Socio-Economic and Cultural Considerations Based on Archeological Evidence from Greece, Cyprus and Asia Minor,” Eds. Johann Preiser Kapeller-Falko Daim, *Harbours and Maritime Networks as Complex Adaptive Systems*. Mainz 2015, p. 51.

<sup>15</sup> Paolo Delogu, “Questioni di Mare e Costa.” Eds. Sauro Gelichi-Richard Hodges, *Da un mare all'altro. Luoghi di scambio nell'Alto Medioevo europeo e mediterraneo Atti del Seminario Internazionale Comacchio, 27-29 marzo 2009*, Turnhout 2012, p. 463.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Arthur, “From Italy to the Aegean and back – notes on the archaeology of Byzantine maritime trade.” Eds. Johann Preiser Kapeller-Falko Daim, *Harbours and Maritime Networks as Complex Adaptive Systems*. Mainz 2015, pp. 339-40.

<sup>17</sup> Luca Zavagno, “I am going home by sea/ For the first time in years’: urban-like coastal spaces across the early medieval Mediterranean.” Ed. Nikos Kontogiannis, *Byzantine Anatolia: Space and Communities. Proceedings of the 5th Sevgi Gönül Symposium*, forthcoming.

<sup>18</sup> Lynn Darling, “The Mediterranean as a Borderland,” *Review of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1, Summer 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Jarrett, “Nests of Pirates? “Islandness” in the Balearic Islands and La Garde-Freinet,” *Al-Masāq* 31/2, 2019, p. 177.

<sup>20</sup> John M. Gordon-Anna Kouremenos, “Introduction,” p. 3

<sup>21</sup> Chris Wickham, “Comacchio and the central Mediterranean.” Eds. Sauro Gelichi-Richard Hodges, *Da un mare all'altro. Luoghi di scambio nell'Alto Medioevo europeo e mediterraneo Atti del Seminario Internazionale Comacchio, 27-29 marzo 2009*, Turnhout 2012, p. 511. On the west-east route (Trunk route) see Michael McCormick, *Origins of European Economy. Communications and Commerce AD 300-900*. Cambridge Mass., 2001.



peninsula).<sup>22</sup> Only in few instances Byzantinists have examined the idea of insularity as a social and cultural construction or analyzed the notion of island as expressed by Byzantine sources at large.<sup>23</sup> In other words, and in a way that is curiously in tune with the etymology of the word itself (for island comes from the Greek verb indicating the action of floating and swimming), it seems that as Late Antiquity faded into the Middle Ages, large Byzantine islands moved away from their role as connecting swims of communication for they were regarded as part and parcel of a systematic border between empires (Byzantines, Umayyad and later Carolingian).<sup>24</sup> As I will return to the importance of islands as related to the concepts of frontier and border in few moments, it suffices to say here that this approach seem to put the fate of islands in between the Braudelian and Pirenne theses.

On the one hand, Braudel's categorized big islands as micro-continent and worlds apart from civilization: that the sea surrounds the islands and cuts them off from the rest of the world more effectively than any other environment is certainly true whenever they are situated outside the normal sea routes.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, Pirenne stressed the rupture caused by the Arab invasions. Indeed, he described how at the turn of the eighth century a different Mediterranean emerged from the unified *Mare Nostrum*: an economically fragmented, politically conflictual, religiously divided and culturally disputed liquid space.<sup>26</sup> Both for Braudel and Pirenne, islands are therefore liminal spaces, or integral parts of a frontier between irreconcilable, or at best conflicting, worlds. More often than not Byzantinists have therefore written off the socio-economic and political importance islands like Sicily, Cyprus and the Balearics (as well as Sardinia, Malta and Crete) had for the Empire beyond their role as military bulwarks vis-à-vis the Arab threats.<sup>27</sup> This interpretative framework had also the consequence of excluding the Western half of the Mediterranean basin from any discourse about Medieval Byzantium.<sup>28</sup> So, islands like Malta, Sardinia and the Balearics were considered as lost to Byzantium from the mid-eighth century onwards

<sup>22</sup> See Luca Zavagno, "Not the Last Frontier: Insular Model in Early Medieval Mediterranean c. 650-c.850." Eds. Giuseppe D'Angelo-Jean Marie Ribeiro, *Borders and Conflict in the Mediterranean Basin*, Salerno 2016, p. 58. On the Byzantine Heartland see Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800*, Oxford 2005, pp. 29-31.

<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, islands resurfaced in Byzantine literary or documentary sources as distant places of exile like in the case of the iconophile bishop Euthymius of Sardis whose *bios* (*Vita Euthymii Sardensis*) recounts of its relegation to Pantelleria in the first half of the ninth century (Gouillard, pp. 36-46) or those iconophile monks and nuns who -according to the Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor- were blinded and banned to Cyprus (Cyril Mango-Roger Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near East History, A.D. 284-813*, Oxford 1997, pp. 614-5); on the other hand, islands like Sardinia and Sicily were often regarded as nest of pagan traditions like in the case of Life of Leo the Martyr who fought "the magician" Heliodorus in Catania in the eighth century (Alexis. G. Alexakis, *The Greek Life of St. Leo Bishop of Catania (BHG 981b)*, Brussels 2011, pp. 79-85). See also Myrto Veikou, "One Island, Three Capitals. Insularity and the Successive Relocations of the Capital of Cyprus from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages." Eds. Sabine Rogge-Michael Grünbart, *Medieval Cyprus. A place of Cultural Encounters*, Munster 2015, pp. 353-63.

<sup>24</sup> Jody Michael Gordon-William Caraher, "One Island, Two Romes: Globalizations and Insularities in Early and Late Roman Cyprus," Ed. Anna Kouremenos-John M. Gordon, *Mediterranean Archaeologies of Insularity in the Age of Globalization*, Oxford 2020, pp. 156-87; see also Telemachos Lounghis, *Byzantium in the Eastern Mediterranean: Safeguarding East Roman Identity (407-1204)* Nicosia, 2010, pp. 77-115.

<sup>25</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Los Angeles 1996 (Original work published 1966), p. 150; see also Lucien Févre, *La Terre et l'évolution humaine*, Paris 1922, pp. 207-8.

<sup>26</sup> Henry Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, New York 1957, pp. 17-20.

<sup>27</sup> Telemachos Lounghis, *Byzantium in the Eastern Mediterranean*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>28</sup> Luca Zavagno, "Going to the Extremes': The Balearics and Cyprus in the Early Medieval Byzantine Insular System." *Al-Masāq* 31/2, 2019.

although lead seals and literary sources attest to the continuous Constantinopolitan interest in the Thyrrenian military, economic and political affairs well into the tenth century.<sup>29</sup>

On the one hand, the abovementioned analytical model is nurtured by a rather pronounced lack of literary and documentary sources concerning the fate of large Byzantine islands; this indeed a methodological problem Anthony Kaldellis has enhanced as common to many regions of the empire.

Our [Byzantinists'] sources were written either in the capital or with a Constantinopolitan bias, their authors were men who had reached high office and believed that writing history concerned [almost exclusively] the center of power. They were no more interested in provincial politics [...] unless they impacted the capital.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, if for the two main regions of the Byzantine heartland we have good syntheses incorporating archaeology and material culture (hand in hand with the available literary evidence), the same cannot be said for Byzantine islands for they suffer from the lack of a systematic account.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Byzantine historiography has not yet produced an all-encompassing alternative to the only existing account on the history of the Byzantine insular world that is the volume written by Elizabeth Malamut in the late 80s.<sup>32</sup> Malamut's narrative moved from a Braudelian standpoint as her attention focused on the eastern Mediterranean islands for only Crete and Cyprus retained a certain importance in the historical trajectories of the Byzantine empire mainly owing to their strategic role along the frontier with the Muslim world.<sup>33</sup> The sea is a frontier that all powers tried to push back from them as far as possible and so islands turned into hubs to be occupied in order to control the sea and its shipping routes.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, from Malamut's refined viewpoint, Byzantine insularity remains a micro-cosmos defined by sea-driven isolation;<sup>35</sup> a world explored mainly through literary evidence.

In fact, in the last decades one can document a surge of studies on single islands or insular urban and rural sites.<sup>36</sup> They are mainly based on the magnified scope of archaeology and material culture as yielded through extensive and intensive surveys as well as excavations.<sup>37</sup> However, only recently some attempts to propose a diachronic and archaeologically-aware approach to Byzantine insular spaces and their societies have emerged. These are represented by two volumes: *The Insular System of the Early Byzantine Mediterranean* and *Change and Resilience. The occupation of Mediterranean Islands in Late Antiquity*.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Paolo Corrias, *Forme e Caratteri della presenza Bizantina nel Mediterraneo Occidentale. La Sardegna (secoli VI-XI)*. Cagliari 2012. See also Salvatore Cosentino, "Byzantine Sardinia between West and East. Features of a Regional Culture," *Millennium* 1/2004.

<sup>30</sup> Anthony Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic. People and Power in New Rome*, Cambridge Mass. 2015, p. 150.

<sup>31</sup> For the Balkans and Greece see Florin Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages 500-1250*, Cambridge 2006 and Florin Curta, *The Edinburgh History of the Greeks, c. 500 to 1050: The Early Middle Ages*, Edinburgh 2011; for Anatolia see Philippe Niewöhner, *The Archaeology of Byzantine Anatolia From the End of Late Antiquity until the Coming of the Turks*. Oxford 2016. One should also notice that the ponderous scholarly endeavor going under the headings of *Tabula Imperii Bizantini* (<https://tib.oeaw.ac.at/index.php?seite=status> retrieved on 15 June 2020) which does not include any big Byzantine island (Crete, Rhodes, Cyprus or Sicily) neither as published or in progress.

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Malamut, *Les îles de l'Empire byzantin. VIIIe-XIIIe siècles*, Paris 1988.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Malamut, *Les îles*, p. 67.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Malamut, *Les îles*, p. 65.

<sup>35</sup> Enrico Zanini, "Introduzione," p.2.

<sup>36</sup> For instance, see Dimitris Tzougarakis, *Byzantine Crete, From the 5th Century to the Venetian Conquest*, Athens 1988; Annaliese Nef-Vivien Prigent, "Per una nuova storia dell'alto medioevo siciliano," *Storica* 2006, pp. 35-6.; or David Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus (492-1191 AD.)*, Nicosia 2009 and Pier Giorgio Spanu, *La Sardegna Bizantina tra 6. e 7. Secolo*, Oristano 1998.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Decker, *The Byzantine Dark Ages*, London 2016, pp. 43-81.

<sup>38</sup> See above ftm. 10.

The former (edited by Enrico Zanini, Demetrios Michaelides and Philippe Pergola) presents us with two transversal themes revolving around the economics of insular societies and the importance of large islands as connective hubs. Indeed, the book has the merit of trying to define a so-called Insular System as a third geographical and political pillar alongside the two constituting the Byzantine heartland.<sup>39</sup> All the contributions of the volume use archaeology and material culture as a starting point to enhance the importance large Byzantine islands had as *plaques tournantes* along the fragmented shipping routes in the so-called Mediterranean Dark Ages. In turn this is reflected by the economic resilience boasted by the insular world: throughout the seventh and eighth century islands seem to remain an economic space relatively more developed than northern and central Italy, the Balkans or Asia Minor.<sup>40</sup> The concept of resilience as the main characteristic of islands in a changing Mediterranean is also the lowest common denominator of the contributions included in the volume edited by Miguel Cau Ontiveros and Catalina Mas Florit. The authors stressed the importance of connecting the fate and historical trajectories of islands to a wider Mediterranean seascape which experienced deep transformations and moments of crisis. Insular socio-ecological systems seemed however to have the capacity of shaping change and learn to live and adapt to periods of turbulence (in tune with the very meaning of the word resilience).<sup>41</sup>

All in all, the abovementioned volumes have the merit of bringing the western and eastern Byzantine islands in an archaeological dialogue as well as defining some homogenous characters (in economic as well as socio-cultural and political terms) acting as a catalyst for defining an insular identity. As a result, it seems like Byzantinists have finally started distancing themselves from the idea of islands as simply ancillary and tributary to Constantinople.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, we should sharpen our focus and come to terms with the fact that we are dealing not with a monolithic and homogeneous space encompassing the whole Mediterranean but with a rather complex patchwork of insular and coastal sites as part and parcel of a system of intra-regional shipping routes as well as regional and sub-regional nodes for interlocking economies. In other words, we should rather talk of a set of Byzantine insular worlds in a constant and everchanging dialogue with the Imperial structures of government, the “other” hegemonic polities like the Carolingian Kingdom or the Caliphate and the wider picture of economic, social and political developments around the shores of the [Byzantine] Mediterranean.<sup>43</sup> Poised to benefit from the constant ebbs and flow of Mediterranean politics (as well as repeated military confrontations), islands boasted “elastic” modes of government defined by the ability to withstand the adversity of the hour and as a measure of their sensitivities to the change of different regional and supra-regional variables.<sup>44</sup>

With this preliminary historiographic caveat in mind, in the next paragraph I will be dealing with three insular key-studies as located at two extremes and the very heart of the Medieval Mediterranean. Indeed, Cyprus and the Balearics fully experienced the gravitational pull of those polities (the Umayyad and later the Abbasid Caliphate, the first and the Carolingians and later the Spanish Umayyads) sharing the Medieval control over the Great Sea with Byzantium; whereas Sicily gravitated around Constantinople in political,

<sup>39</sup> Enrico Zanini, “Introduzione,” p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Salvatore Cosentino, “Mentality, Technology and Commerce,” p. 73.

<sup>41</sup> Miguel Cau Ontiveros-Catalina Mas Florit, “Islands, Change and Late Antiquity,” pp. xxii-xxiv.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Herrin, *Margins and Metropolis: Authority Across the Byzantine Empire*, Princeton 2013.

<sup>43</sup> David Abulafia, “Islands in Context,” Eds. Miguel Cau Ontiveros-Catalina Mas Florit, *Change and Resilience. The Occupation of Mediterranean Islands in Late Antiquity*, Providence 2019, p. 288.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Shepard, “Introduction: Circles Overlapping in Upper Adriatic,” Eds. Mladen Ančić, Jonathan Shepard, Tripmir Vedriš, *Imperial Spheres and the Adriatic. Byzantium, the Carolingians and the Treaty of Achen (812)*, New York-London 2018.

administrative and economic terms for it became one of the most important supplier of grain to the Capital after the end of the Egyptian tax-spine in 640s.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, it retained a rather persisting ability to act as a bridge between the Thyrrenian exchange system and Muslim North Africa as showed mainly by literary and documentary sources both in Greek, Latin and Arabic.<sup>46</sup>

These examples will allow me to explore the different ways Byzantine insularity rhymed with the history of Medieval Mediterranean at large while at the same time actively moulding and being shaped by the political, economic and military trajectories of the Byzantine Empire. As a result, it will be clear that the economic resilience of the three islands stems from a connectivity predicated upon their ability to combine “horizontal” and “vertical” thrusts following by and piercing through the fault- lines of a permeable “frontier”. In this light, it will be seen that since the Mediterranean can only be controlled by ruling its islands, and as no-hegemonic power could fully boast hegemonic power over the seas, insular spaces were the main actors (together with insular-like or coastal communities) in the construction of a Medieval Mediterranean.<sup>47</sup> This should indeed be seen less as a Dark Ages’ Game of Thrones than as shared space where modality of interactions, control and regulation of both exchange and conflicts were constantly constructed and reconstructed in a kaleidoscope that de facto permitted the re-creation of a unity lost after the fall of the Roman Empire.<sup>48</sup>

### From Cyprus to the Balearics (via Sicily) and Back Again

Lying at the western and eastern edges of the Great sea, Cyprus and the Balearic archipelago surprisingly shared a common feature as they were the only Mediterranean territories which Arab sources defined as the land(s) of the truce (*Dār-al ʿAhd*).<sup>49</sup> This actually implied the existence of a nominal truce between the Byzantines and the Caliphate as involving the territory occupied by a third -and to a degree- independent population. The *al ʿAhd* did not simply [concern] two parties that went through constant cycles of warfare, treaty, and the usual seasonal raiding; the case of the Muslims and the Byzantines in Cyprus [and the Balearics] reveals instead the complexity this relationship could take based on perceived need.<sup>50</sup> Building upon their peculiar legal status Cyprus and the Balearics were often regarded as two regions *de facto* lost to Byzantium in the Dark Ages. The former was supposedly neutralized in what has been often hastily (and incorrectly) described as a condominium between the “Greeks and the Saracens” only to be “restituted” to the Byzantine rule in 965.<sup>51</sup> The latter was purportedly severed from Constantinople at an uncertain time between the mid seventh century (when the last remnants of the Byzantine Spanish enclave were conquered by the Visigoths) and 707 when the first Arab raid against the island has been recorded.<sup>52</sup> In truth

<sup>45</sup> Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 789-90.

<sup>46</sup> Sarah Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds Met: Sicily in the Early Medieval Mediterranean*, Cornell 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Christophe Picard, *La Mer Des Califes. Une Histoire de la Méditerranée Musulmane*, Paris 2015, pp. 229-235.

<sup>48</sup> Dominique Valérien, “The Medieval Mediterranean,” Eds. Peregrine Horden- Sharon Kinoshita, *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, London, 2014, p. 78-80.

<sup>49</sup> Juan Signes Codoñer, “Bizancio y les islas Baleares en los siglos VIII y IX”, Ed. Robert Durán Tapia, *Mallorca y Bizancio*, Palma de Mallorca 2005, pp. 46–7.

<sup>50</sup> Ryan J. Lynch, “Cyprus and its Legal and Historiographical Significance in Early Islamic History,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136/3, 2016, p. 550.

<sup>51</sup> On the rather negative connotation of Cypriot Dark Ages see Luca Zavagno, “Two hegemonies, one island: Cyprus as a “Middle Ground” between the Byzantines and the Arabs (650-850 A.D.),” *Reti Medievali - Rivista*, XIV, 2 (2013). url: <<http://www.rmojs.unina.it/index.php/rm/article/view/401>> [retrieved 15.6.2020].

<sup>52</sup> Josep Amengual i Batlle, *Els orígens del Cristianisme a les Balears I el su desenvolupament fins a l'època Musulmana*, Palma de Mallorca 1991.



both islands continued to remain part of the political and administrative Byzantine *oikumene*, as in both instances one cannot object to the conclusions that they were ruled by *archontes*.<sup>53</sup>

In fact, *archon* is a rather neutral title as it generally defines any officials possessing powers and later mainly governors.<sup>54</sup> *Archontes* could also refer to the urban ruling class coming from prominent local landowning families.<sup>55</sup> Treadgold concludes that *archontes* were in charge of the most isolated enclaves of the Empire, but this remains a rather general connotation and hints at a disinterest on the part of Constantinople towards its periphery.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, they were not exclusively found on islands: we have for instance evidence of the existence of the so-called Archon's House in Butrint: a urban palace which yielded a cache lead seals (dated to the second half of the ninth century onwards) attesting to the presence of a Byzantine *archon* with administrative powers over the local community;<sup>57</sup> seals pair with other material evidence (including Byzantine silver and bronze coins and southern Italian ceramics as well as jewels) pointing to the political and economic importance of this little south-Adriatic enclave de facto part of a sub-regional exchange system which included other Byzantine territories including Apulia and eastern Sicily.<sup>58</sup>

As I will return to this later, it is important to stress here that both on islands like the Balearics and Cyprus as well as in coastal hubs like Butrint *archontes* were not synonym for a distant and uninterested Constantinopolitan power. *Archontes* could not only promote local political initiatives as they were often chosen from the local landowning (although still at least partially urban oriented) elites. Moreover, they were actively basing their legitimacy, status and political pre-eminence on the recognition (in terms of dignities, titles and offices) received from Constantinople. In other words, *archontes* presided upon regions (or towns) that like Cyprus and even the farther Balearic outpost never ceased to institutionally and politically belong to the Byzantine empire although this appurtenance showed peculiar local connotations.<sup>59</sup>

This is can be more easily documented for Cyprus as we possess rather scanty but coherent literary and documentary evidence in Greek, Arabic and Syriac as paired with good archaeology and analysis of material sources like lead seals, coins and ceramics.<sup>60</sup> This allows us to assert that in Cyprus, the Emperor and the Caliph shared the tax revenues as famously stated by a treaty mentioned by Theophanes the Confessor in his Chronicle.

In this year [685/6] Abimelech sent emissaries to Justinian [II] to ratify the peace and it was concluded on these terms [...] that Abimelech would give to the Romans every day 1,000 gold pieces, a horse and a slave; and that they would share in equal parts the tax revenue of Cyprus, Armenia and Iberia.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Salvatore Cosentino, "A Longer Antiquity," p. 97.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Kazhdan, "Archon", Ed. Alexander Kazhdan et al., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Vol. I, Washington D.C. 1993.

<sup>55</sup> Alan Harvey, *Economic expansion in the Byzantine Empire*, Cambridge 1989, p. 225.

<sup>56</sup> Warren Treadgold, *The Byzantine Revival 780-842*, Stanford 1988, p. 15.

<sup>57</sup> William Bowden-Richard Hodges, "An 'Ice Age settling on the Roman Empire': Post-Roman Butrint between Strategy and Serendipity," Eds. Neil Christie-Andrea Augenti, *Vrbes Extinctae: Archaeologies of Abandoned Classical Town*, Aldershot 2012, pp. 228-9.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Arthur, "From Italy to the Aegean," pp. 348-52.

<sup>59</sup> Salvatore Cosentino, "A Longer Antiquity," p. 99.

<sup>60</sup> Luca Zavagno, *Cyprus between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. An Island in Transition*, London 2016; see also David Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus*.

<sup>61</sup> Cyril Mango- Roger Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, pp. 506-7.

Indeed, both Islamic and Byzantine lead seals yielded on the islands testify to the presence of Imperial and Caliphal fiscal authorities.<sup>62</sup> Cyprus was clearly wealthy enough in terms of agricultural produce, pastoral economy and more important trading activities to be fiscally exploited by both powers.<sup>63</sup> Once again literary and material evidence combine in providing a picture of an islands were peddlers regularly traveled to and fro the Syrian coast (as mentioned in the Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787) bringing back to the island a wide array of goods as well as bronze coins.<sup>64</sup> The rather sustained level of commercial activity with the neighboring regions under Muslim rule is documented by ceramics and in particular the distribution of small globular amphorae. They are described as perfect liquid containers for short and long distances and for local/regional distribution;<sup>65</sup> this because they were easy to handle during loading and unloading cargos in often less equipped harbours.<sup>66</sup>

As this type of amphorae were made in different coastal and insular areas of the Byzantine empire (including Cyprus) between the seventh and late ninth century, they also pair with painted wares and chafing dishes produced in various workshops (located in Cyprus as well as Crete, southern Anatolia, Cherson and southern Italy) and circulating throughout the Mediterranean.<sup>67</sup> In other words, ceramic evidence of the type documented in Cyprus pairs with that yielded in other areas of the Byzantine Mediterranean (including islands like Sicily and coastal island-like settlements like Amalfi and Comacchio on which I will return in few moments). They point to an intra-regional long distance or cabotage movement of wares/small globular amphorae as well as an active interregional exchange between shipping zones (with overlapping networks of production and distribution).<sup>68</sup> In the case of Cyprus, ceramics bespeak of an island at the center of three interlocking regional and sub-regional exchange systems: the Syrian-Palestinian, Egyptian and southern Anatolian.<sup>69</sup> In Cyprus we can document the presence of a Muslim minority through literary and material sources. Muslim tombstones have been found in Paphos dating to the seventh and eighth centuries, Kufic inscriptions were found on a column at the basilica of Kourion (late seventh century) as well as on some Islamic amphorae.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, the strategic location of Cyprus between the Greeks and the Saracens did not lead to the creation of a neutralized no man's land but a rather resilient socio-cultural and economic interaction between two worlds: Arab-Muslim and Byzantine-Christian. This is showed by the abovementioned sigillographic as well as numismatic evidence for in Cyprus specimens issued by Byzantine Imperial authority couples with late-seventh and early eighth century Arab-Byzantine coins and Islamic post-reform coins as found in cities like Kourion, Paphos and the capital Salamis Constantia.<sup>71</sup> Although circulation of coins seems to have

<sup>62</sup> Vivien Prigent, "Chypre entre Islam et Byzance," Eds. Jannic Durand-Dominique Giovannoni, *Chypre entre Byzance et l'Occident (IVème-XVIème) siècle. Catalogue de l'exposition organisée par le musée du Louvre et le Département des Antiquités de Chypre à l'occasion de la Présidence Chypriote du Conseil de l'Union européenne*, Paris 2012, p. 82.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Decker, *Byzantine Dark Ages*, pp. 139-40.

<sup>64</sup> Mansi, Johannes, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collection*, 13, Paris–Leipzig 1901–27, pp. 78–80.

<sup>65</sup> Joanita Vroom, "From one coast to another: early Medieval ceramics in the southern Adriatic region," Eds. Sauro Gelichi-Richard Hodges, *Da un mare all'altro. Luoghi di scambio nell'Alto Medioevo europeo e mediterraneo Atti del Seminario Internazionale Comacchio, 27-29 marzo 2009*, Turnhout 2012, p. 374.

<sup>66</sup> Joanita Vroom, "Ceramics," Ed. Philippe Niewöhner, *The Archaeology of Byzantine Anatolia. From the End of Late Antiquity until the coming of the Turks*. Oxford, 2016, pp. 182-6.

<sup>67</sup> Joanita Vroom, "Ceramics," pp. 181-2.

<sup>68</sup> Joanita Vroom, *From one coast to another*, p. 391.

<sup>69</sup> Luca Zavagno "At the Edge of two Empires. The Economy of Cyprus between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 65/6, 2011-12, pp. 134-142.

<sup>70</sup> Luca Zavagno, *Cyprus between*, p. 86 with further bibliography.

<sup>71</sup> David Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus*, p. 482.

been very limited on the island, the evidence of Islamic coinage points to a trans-regional and trans-cultural acceptance of different monetary units (Byzantine and Umayyad).<sup>72</sup> So, sigillographic, ceramic and numismatic evidence concur in drawing a picture of an island which although politically moored in the Byzantine administrative and political Imperial structure, revealed an institutional, fiscal and commercial proximity with the Caliphate. In turn this is echoed by the role local elites often played as cultural brokers across “shared worlds” like in the case of the *Phangoumeneis* (an eighth-century Cypriot noble family) or the tenth-century Archbishop Demetrianos who served as part of embassies sent to the Caliph.<sup>73</sup>

A rather similar picture can also be surmised for the Balearics for which however we do not possess but a smaller fraction of the evidence available for Cyprus. In the Balearic archipelago (composed by two pairs of islands of rather large -Mallorca and Menorca- and small -Ibiza and Formentera- size), numismatic points to a concentration of Byzantine issued coins.<sup>74</sup> These included bronze and gold coins issued between sixth and early eighth century and circulating on the archipelago even later;<sup>75</sup> moreover, two recently yielded lead seals of an *archon* of Mallorca (named Gordo), and additional (but unfortunately not fully published) specimens belonging to Byzantine administrative and military officials, all tally with the abovementioned coinage lifespan.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, material evidence clearly enhances the important role the Balearics continued to play in the political and fiscal structures of the Byzantine empire.<sup>77</sup> The latter role resurfaces in Arab literary sources as on the occasion of the 707 raid against the Balearics, the commander of the Arab fleet took prisoners the *mulūk* (kings) of Mallorca and Menorca. In the light of the sigillographic evidence just presented, they should be regarded as the local representatives of the Byzantine government who continued to rule the islands even after the raids.<sup>78</sup>

As I will return on the role of local Byzantine governance in few moments, it is important to stress that the analysis of ceramics helps us to draw a picture of at least partial integration of the Balearic archipelago in the shipping routes linking the western basin of the Mediterranean to the Tyrrhenian system of exchange possibly using the Sardinian stepping-stone (as ruled by a Byzantine *dux*).<sup>79</sup> For instance, the abovementioned chaffing dishes as made in the eastern Mediterranean seem and found in Mallorca seems to point once again to a Byzantine cultural and dietary *koinè*. As already mentioned, chafing dishes started appearing in Anatolia around 700 and although mostly made locally in different areas of the Byzantine Mediterranean, they show the same shape in almost all part of the Byzantine world. They were placed on or near the table as a sort of multipurpose portable brazier/cooking utensils with an *authepsa* (hot water samovar) to heat food.<sup>80</sup> As Paul Arthur has cogently concluded, the distributive pattern of chafing dishes should be regarded as both a commercial and cultural one for it is an illustration of specific culinary custom mainly practiced in those areas under

<sup>72</sup> Luca Zavagno, “‘Going to the Extremes’,” p. 151.

<sup>73</sup> Romolo Jenkins- Gyula Moravczik, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus De Administrando Imperio*, Washington D.C. 1993, p. 47; Henry Grégoire, “St. Démétrianos, évêque de Chytri (île de Chypre)”, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 16, 1907, pp. 232-3.

<sup>74</sup> Miguel Cau Ontiveros-Catalina Mas Florit, “The Early Byzantine Period in the Balearic Islands,” Eds. Enrico Zanini, Philippe Pergola, and Demetrios Michaelidis, *The Insular System of Byzantine Mediterranean. Archaeology and History*. Oxford 2013, p. 41.

<sup>75</sup> Beatrice Moll, “L’Imperi Romà d’Orient a Menorca: El testimoni numismatic,” *Gaçeta Numismàtica* 157 (2005).

<sup>76</sup> Miguel Cau Ontiveros-Catalina Mas Florit, “The Early Byzantine Period,” p. 40.

<sup>77</sup> Miguel Cau Ontiveros-Catalina Mas Florit, “The Early Byzantine Period,” pp. 40-41.

<sup>78</sup> On the *mulūk* see Margarita Vallejo Girvés, *Hispania y Bizancio: Una relación desconocida*, Madrid 2012, pp. 470-5 with further bibliography.

<sup>79</sup> Juan Signes Codoñer, “Bizancio y las islas Baleares”, pp. 15-16.

<sup>80</sup> Joanita Vroom, “Ceramics”, p. 180.

Byzantine control.<sup>81</sup> One cannot but notice that a similar pattern can be surmised for the circulation of globular amphorae. As partially mentioned, Joanita Vroom has cogently showed how this type of transport vessel, was found in eighth to ninth century archaeological contexts from the northern Adriatic rim (Ravenna, Classe, Comacchio, Verona, Torcello, and Venezia), [as well as] in a Byzantine shipwreck near Otranto, on the island of Malta, across the eastern Mediterranean on Crete [and Cyprus] as well as Sparta, Isthmia, [Lymira], Istanbul and Athens and finally in the Black Sea region.<sup>82</sup>

One should however stress once again that the geo-strategic location of the Balearics at the intersection of three areas of political-military influence (Carolingian, Spanish Umayyad and Byzantine) often led the local representatives to cave in and adapt to the historical circumstances. This is showed for instance, by the 798 Balearic petition for aid to the Carolingian ruler Charlemagne discussed below, which brought the Frankish fleet to fight and defeat Muslim forces in Mallorcan waters.<sup>83</sup> This does not imply that the local elites gave up entirely on Byzantium, but rather that they will quick to realize the advantages (and problems) of their peculiar situation at the fringes of the Empire. In other words, the rules of the political game were different in those insular territories (like Cyprus and the Balearics) which experienced the gravitational pull of massive Mediterranean polities, which in the case of the Balearic included the Carolingians.<sup>84</sup> On the one hand, it is important to notice the ability of the local Cypriot and Balearic elites to quickly adapt and overcome the difficulties of the hour by appealing to different to diverse political patrons without fully abandoning the Constantinopolitan allegiance; on both islands one can indeed document an ideological proximity and political filiation of local ruling classes as framed not only by the governmental structure of the archontate but also by the presence of officials whose titles clearly stemmed from the Byzantine political hierarchy of titles and dignities.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, it is also essential to understand that the same gravitational pull could work in the opposite direction and force islands to revolve around a single planet-like polity, like in the case of Byzantine Sicily; this however without fully neutralizing side-thrusts as sub-regional contexts can act as diplomatic or commercial bridges between the Thyrrenian and the north African coastline.

Both literary, documentary and material evidence witnessed to a contiguity between Sicily and Constantinople.<sup>86</sup> One should however notice that this has less to do with geography (after all Cyprus is closer to the “City” than Syracuse) than with its close fiscal link with Constantinople based on grain transport.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, ease of communication between the capital and the island should comes as no surprise for Sicily acted as economic interface at the intersection of the eastern and western Mediterranean. Indeed, the island lay astride the trunk-route linking the Tyrrhenian with the Aegean and southern Anatolia.<sup>88</sup> Coins and coinage confirm the exceptional economic vitality of Sicily: the mint of Syracuse was the only one issuing gold and bronze coins together with Constantinople in the period under scrutiny, as its

<sup>81</sup> Paul Arthur, “Pots and Boundaries. On cultural and economic areas between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Age,” Ed. Michael Bonifay, *LRCW 2. Late Roman Coarse Wares, Cooking Wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean: Archaeology and Archaeometry, I*, Oxford 2007, p. 19.

<sup>82</sup> Joanita Vroom, “The Byzantine Web. Pottery and Connectivity Between the Southern Adriatic and the Eastern Mediterranean,” Eds. Sauro Gelichi-Claudio Negrelli, *Adriatico altomedievale (VI-XI secolo). Scambi, porti, produzioni*. Roma 2017, p. 293.

<sup>83</sup> *Royal Frankish Annals*, Ed. Georg Heinrich Pertz, “Annales Laurissenses et Einhardi”, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica [Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores in folio, volume I]* Hannover 1826, p. 143.

<sup>84</sup> Jonathan Jarrett, “Nests of Pirates,” pp. 209-12.

<sup>85</sup> Luca Zavagno, “Going to the Extremes,” p. 159.

<sup>86</sup> Sarah Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds Met*, pp. 29-70.

<sup>87</sup> Chris Wickham, *Framing*, p. 737. See above fn. 45. From Cyprus to Constantinople a boat should cover ca. 1300 km, as opposed to the almost 2000 separating Syracuse from the capital of the Empire.

<sup>88</sup> Michael McCormick, *Origins of European Economy*, p 235.



output found its way across Mediterranean, Balkans, central European and Scandinavian trade routes.<sup>89</sup>

The hagiographic and literary evidence complement with the analysis of Sicilian coinage's circulation as these all point to the resilience of Mediterranean commerce and the continuous role Sicily played in it as well as the level of monetization of the local economy which was higher than in most other regions of the empire.<sup>90</sup> One could quote for instance the travel log of the eighth century English pilgrim Willibald who after a long land journey across Europe, reached Syracuse where it was easy to find a boat lift to the Aegean and from then to the Holy Land.<sup>91</sup> In a rather similar fashion, Gregory of Decapolis's adventurous travel to Sicily in 830s shows that Christian ships continued to sail from the eastern Mediterranean to Sicily during times of naval warfare and Muslim invasion, even if at times there was resistance or delay.<sup>92</sup> Both these travelers indirectly point to the rather busy shipping-routes irradiating from the central Mediterranean as Sicilian harbors crawled with ships ferrying goods and people across the Thyrrenian or Ionian waters.<sup>93</sup>

Indeed, Byzantium started developing its Navy as a response to the Caliphal naval forces storming the Mediterranean and sieging Constantinople. As the commander of the *Karabisianoï* mutinied at least twice and could not prevent the fall of Carthage to the Arabs in 698, a regionalization of the navy commands ensued and Sicily became a *strategia* on a par with Hellas (later) and the *Kybirrhaeotai* based in Attaleia.<sup>94</sup> The study of lead seals as found in large number on the island has allowed to reconstruct the social profile as well as the political strategies and cultural background of a number of Sicilian *strategoï* between the early eighth to the invasion of the Aghlabids in 828 which *de facto* split Sicily in two for roughly one century.<sup>95</sup> Sicilian *strategoï* were indeed often eunuchs and members of the *Cubiculum*, one of the most important offices of the central administration, as they also boasted peculiar diplomatic and financial abilities.<sup>96</sup> After the fall of Ravenna to the Lombards in 751 and the end of the Exarchate, the Sicilian *strategos* therefore became the main authority overseeing the complex nexus of political, religious, and economic relations characterizing southern Italy and the Tyrrhenian as including the Lombard duchies of Spoleto and Benevento, Papal Rome, the rising Frankish empire, the newly born Umayyad Spanish Emirate as well as Arab north Africa.<sup>97</sup>

Once again, the networks of ceramic production and distribution help us to refine the picture proposed for Sicily as an island politically and economically bound to Constantinople

<sup>89</sup> Cécile Morrisson-Vivien Prigent, "La Monetazione in Sicilia nell'età Bizantina." Ed. Lucia Travaini, *Le Zecche Italiane fino all'Unità*, Roma 2011.

<sup>90</sup> Cécile Morrisson, "La Sicile byzantine: un lueur dans les siècle obscurs," *Numismatica e Antichità Classiche. Quaderni Ticinesi* 27(1998).

<sup>91</sup> Clearly the trunk route was therefore well frequented as also proved by his westbound return trip from the Holy Land as he touched upon Syracuse and Catania to reach Naples: see Michael McCormick, *Origins of European Economy*, pp. 504-5.

<sup>92</sup> Sarah Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds Met*, p. 60; see also Cyril Mango, "On Re-reading the Life of St. Gregory the Decapolite," *Byzantina* 13 (1985).

<sup>93</sup> Michael McCormick, *Origins of European Economy*, pp. 244-7.

<sup>94</sup> Papadopoulos-Kerameus, Athanasios, *Sulloge Palaistinhw kai Suriakon Hagiologia* [Pravoslavniĵ Palestinskiĵ Sbornik 57] 19.3 (1907), pp. 199-200; see on this Salvatore Cosentino, "Constans II and its Navy," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 100(2) 2008 and Elizabeth Jeffreys-John Pryor, *The Age of the Δρομων, the Byzantine navy ca 500-1204 [The Medieval Mediterranean, volume LXII]*, Leiden 2006, pp. 30-5 with further bibliography.

<sup>95</sup> Mikaël Nïchanian-Vivien Prigent, "Les stratèges de Sicile. De la naissance du thème au règne de Léon V," *Revue des études Byzantines*, 61 (2003).

<sup>96</sup> Mikaël Nïchanian-Vivien Prigent, "Les stratèges," p. 98.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Brown, "Byzantine Italy 680-876", Ed. Jonathan Shepard, *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire c. 500-1492*, Cambridge 2009.

but also located at the interface of the Tyrrhenian, southern Ionian and central Mediterranean exchange networks.<sup>98</sup> The analysis of Sicilian oval lamps, table wares and globular amphorae bespeak a double-fold networks of connectivity as the eastern coast (centered on the capital Syracuse) slanted towards the southern Adriatic and the Peloponnese, whereas the north-western coast was oriented towards the Tyrrhenian and its main harbors/cities (mainly Rome but also Cagliari and Naples) as well as Muslim north Africa.<sup>99</sup> One should not forget indeed that Sicilian waters were infamously known for the Mediterranean slave trade that involved the Amalfitans and the Venetians, but bespoke of an island which operated within the orbit of the Islamic world long before the official conquest by Muslim rulers from North Africa.<sup>100</sup> In this light one should consider the Arab raids hitting the islands from the late seventh century onwards not simply as an attempt to conquer or better neutralize an important Byzantine military outpost.<sup>101</sup> They often went hand in hand with diplomatic connections. As Sarah Davis Secord asserts: the semiannual military incursions from Ifrīqiya were several times halted by truces that were officially concluded between embassies traveling between Syracuse and Qayrawān as ships could also travel (commerce) without meriting record from textual sources.<sup>102</sup>

Two conclusions can be drawn as we consider the three abovementioned islands in a comparative perspective. The first has to do with the rather complex mix of isolation and connectivity as defining geo-political characteristics of insular spaces. On the one hand, islands like Cyprus and above all the Balearics seem to lay at the political and economic edges of the Byzantine Empire, far away from its socio-administrative, political and military center, and along a maritime frontier with other Imperial and Mediterranean-oriented polities. In fact, as Anthony Kaldellis concludes:

*the frontier consisted of a series of concentric zones moving from a predominantly Roman areas to areas where Roman or non-native subject were mostly non-Roman [...] This does not however mean that imperial borders were necessary fuzzy or fluid [...] Borders were certainly zones of interaction as well as zones of exclusion.*<sup>103</sup>

I suspect the latter assertion holds rather more validity for a terrestrial frontier than for a sea borderland.<sup>104</sup> As Lynn Darling cogently remarks we are confronted with two paradigms: the frontier one implies a division between one society from another; on the contrary the borderland paradigm builds upon an integrative and connective function: versatility is required to the “borderlanders” boasting an ability to be multilingual and multicultural.<sup>105</sup> As the Mediterranean border therefore functioned to channel- not to prevent- the movement of people, goods, and ideas [for] these movements tend to disappear from narratives of conflict and alienation.<sup>106</sup> Cyprus and the Balearics played exactly the role of socio-cultural

<sup>98</sup> Paul Arthur, “From Italy to the Aegean,” pp. 346-7.

<sup>99</sup> Emanuele Vaccaro, “Sicily in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries AD: A Case of Persisting Economic Complexity?,” *Al-Masāq*, 25:1, 2013, p. 38.

<sup>100</sup> Sarah Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds Met*, p. 14; for the slave trade see Michael McCormick, *Origins of European Economy*, pp. 741-71.

<sup>101</sup> On the political and military nature of these raids against Sicily and in the Tyrrhenian sea see Piero Fois, “Il ruolo della Sardegna nella Conquista Islamica dell’occidente (VIII secolo),” *Rivista dell’Istituto di Storia dell’Europa Mediterranea*, 7 (Dicembre 2011) and the all-encompassing Walter Kaegi, *Muslim Expansion and Collapse in North Africa*, Cambridge 2010.

<sup>102</sup> Sarah Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds Met*, p. 75.

<sup>103</sup> Anthony Kaldellis, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood. The Rise and Fall of Byzantium, 955 A.D. to the First Crusade*, Oxford 2017, p. 151.

<sup>104</sup> On the terrestrial Arab-Byzantine frontier see Asa Eger, *The Islamic-Byzantine frontier. Interaction and Exchange among Muslim and Christian Communities*, London 2015 with further bibliography.

<sup>105</sup> Lynn T. Darling. “The Mediterranean as a Borderland” pp. 58-9.

<sup>106</sup> Lynn T. Darling. “The Mediterranean as a Borderland” p. 59.

facilitators and political brokers as their elites remained fully integrated in the legitimizing Byzantine Imperial ideology although experiencing and showing remarkable adaptation to the expanding (and contracting) gravity of rival Imperial zones. In fact, insular non-elites easily moved through the shipping routes connecting zones of low connections with areas of high interaction levels adding to the economic resilience that both Cyprus and the Balearic showed. In other words, these islands should be considered spaces where material connectivity and political affiliation with Constantinople seem to have been also molded by the strong and pulling magnitude of closer giant polities like the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphate and the Spanish Umayyads and the Carolingians. Both Cypriot and Balearic elites and non-elites were therefore helping to project the Byzantine political, ideological and economic hegemony across the border while at the same time promoting what Jonathan Shepard described as ‘un empire sans frontières’, with a call upon the political allegiance, religious veneration or material collaboration of churchmen, elites and communities scattered far beyond its chief territorial holdings.<sup>107</sup>

On the other hand, Sicily supposedly presents us with a rather straightforward picture: an island deeply embedded in the Tyrrhenian-Aegean-Constantinople line of shipping and communication. To the contrary of Cyprus and the Balearics (both administered by *archontes*), it boasted a thematic (*strategia*) organization more in line with the administrative and military infrastructures of the Byzantine heartland.<sup>108</sup> The local *strategos* was indeed carefully chosen among the most loyal and trustworthy members of the Constantinopolitan Palace, for Sicily remained the most extraordinary and unwaveringly loyal province of the Empire.<sup>109</sup> However, as one is tempted to describe it as a sort of exclusive hunting ground for the Byzantine court officials, Sicily also reveals as floating in the ambiguity between a barrier and a junction, acting as a threshold lending itself to the maximum variety of interrelated-ness and the variability of connectivity.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, Sicilian minted coins traveled across the Mediterranean and northern Europe as far as England and Scandinavia (both as diplomatic gifts and in traders’ pocket), whereas ceramic evidence (in particular globular amphorae’s distributive pattern) points to sub-regional division markers as eastern and western parts of Sicily gravitated towards different exchange system.<sup>111</sup> The eastern coast linked the island to the so-called southern Ionian shipping network at the intersection with the Adriatic sea-road.<sup>112</sup> The north-western coast was fully integrated with the Thyrrhenian exchange system (and via Sardinia with the western basin of the Mediterranean) as well as connected with Muslim north Africa. This is chimes with literary and hagiographic evidence enhancing the well-trodden sea-paths between Byzantine Sicily and Umayyad and later Aghlabid *Ifriqiya* as walked by diplomats, slaves, warriors and traders.

With this in mind, one should look at large islands as a complex array of spaces which seldom show neat and clear-cut political, administrative, social and economic historical trajectories in the early Middle Ages. One should rather talk of different insular systems as tectonic plates navigating through the interstices of a magmatic Mediterranean. It is the

<sup>107</sup> Jonathan Shepard, “Introduction”, pp. 4-5.

<sup>108</sup> Rudolf Riedinger, *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum. Series secunda. 2, Concilium universale Constantinopolitanum tertium*, Berlin 1990, p. 886.

<sup>109</sup> Mikaël Nihanian-Vivien Prigent, “Les stratèges de Sicile,” pp. 135-40.

<sup>110</sup> Nicholas Purcell, “On the significance of East and West in today’s ‘Hellenistic’ history: reflections on symmetrical worlds, reflecting through world symmetries,” Eds. Jonathan W. Prag- Josephine Crawley Quinn, *The Hellenistic West. Rethinking the Ancient Mediterranean*, Cambridge 2013, p. 374.

<sup>111</sup> Alessandra Molinari, “Sicily between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> century: villae, villages, towns and beyond. Stability, expansion or recession?” Eds. Enrico Zanini, Philippe Pergola, and Demetrios Michaelidis, *The Insular System of Byzantine Mediterranean. Archaeology and History*. Oxford 2013, pp.104-5.

<sup>112</sup> Chris Wickham, “Comacchio”, pp. 505-7.

plates' convergence to determine the typology of boundaries: conservative/transform, constructive/divergent or destructive/convergent;<sup>113</sup> in turn we should keep in mind the momentarily economic, political, military forces which determined this junction at overlapping or divergent sub-regional, regional and interregional levels. As the Balearics and Cyprus expediently changed their orbits around gas-giant planets whose mass can vary in time and space, so Sicily reminds us of a two face moon as the bright side was always more visible and looking at Byzantium while its "dark side" connected it with the Muslim world of north-Africa and the Tyrrhenian exchange system pulsing around Papal Rome. In other words, they all contributed to the creation of the abovementioned typologies of borders. Sicily remained a strong military outpost for withstanding Arab raids (destructive), a loyal province to Byzantium (conservative) and an essential interface at the center of economies (constructive). For Cyprus and the Balearics their economic resilience (transforming) was a reflection of their peculiar location bringing unforeseen and everchanging threats (destructive) but also resulting in their ability to rein in (divergent) politics.

The latter assertion is in tune with the second conclusion I would like to draw here. Indeed, the abovementioned islands seem to have been characterized less by isolation and more by a consistent pragmatic connectivity. This chimes with their various but still coherent structures of local government (thematic for Sicily and archontate for Balearics and Cyprus). In turn, these predicated upon the continuous interest of Byzantium in the political affairs of the western Mediterranean and the ability on the part of insular elites of piercing through different Mediterranean borders revealing their socio-cultural, political and economic porosity. Officials and administrators could be directly sent from the center (Sicily) or rather stemming from an expedient alliance between local aristocrats and Constantinopolitan court as based on a legitimizing but distant Imperial ideology (Cyprus and the Balearics); they could have more pronounced religious connotations (as embodied by a clergy revolving around the autocephalic Archbishopric in Cyprus or the Sicilian Syracusan Metropolitane) or rather showing a pervasive secular penchant (Balearics). Nevertheless, they were all contributing to create a variable-sweep wing Empire whose local administrative structures adapted to the changing velocity of regional politics although retaining control on areas which remained nodal hubs as part and parcel of different economic systems. The latter, as will be seen in the last and conclusive part of this paper, is a characteristic that islands share with coastal and island-like spaces as dotting the Byzantine Mediterranean. All (insular and coastal island-like spaces) should indeed be regarded as prominent members of what Jonathan Shepard has cogently defined as a "Byzantine club"; [a club] for which membership fees are not high and where benefits seem intangible to external observers but are the opposite to those who could yield all sort of advantages."<sup>114</sup> It is not by chance that most of this "club" was part and parcel of the sea-routes crisscrossing the Mediterranean as connecting areas bounded to the political, administrative and economic Byzantine power structure.<sup>115</sup>

**Conclusions (or best of an island is when you get there you cannot go any further [or can you?])<sup>116</sup>**

The previous section concluded by stressing the adoption of expedient political (and military) tactics on the part of local insular elites and even by the Imperial administrators who -like in the case of Sicily- were capable of and even chosen for their abilities to stand on different political, social, cultural and economic planks. This echoed with similar skills

<sup>113</sup> Rongsing Guo, *Cross-Border Resource Management*, Amsterdam-Oxford 2018, p. 29.

<sup>114</sup> Jonathan Shepard, "Bunkers, Open Cities and Boats in Byzantine Diplomacy," Eds. Danjuel Dzino- Ken Perry, *Byzantium, its neighbors and its cultures*, Leiden 2017, p. 28.

<sup>115</sup> Chris Wickham, "Comacchio," p. 509.

<sup>116</sup> Agatha Christie, *And Then There Were None*, New York 2011, p. 86.



boasted by coastal communities as similarly (but often only nominally) ruled by *magistri militum* or *dukes*.<sup>117</sup> Here, one should indeed consider that, as repeatedly mentioned, some of these communities were *de facto* island (or as I described them island-like settlements) due to the peculiar geo-morphology, ecology and environment of the area they were located. Once again, sea connectivity is the key to interpret their historical trajectories, although linked with what Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell called the characteristics of microregions. They conclude that:

*in the pattern of relationship between microregions, the coastal enclaves that are part of the world of the sea but interact with the depths of hinterland have always played a special role; [moreover] places linked by the sea are always close while neighbors on land may, in terms of interactions, being quite distant.*<sup>118</sup>

In this light, two examples will suffice here as in tune with island-like coastal sites as part and parcel of the abovementioned economic and political Byzantine club: Comacchio and Amalfi.<sup>119</sup> The former funneling eastern Mediterranean imports (like spices, *garum*, wine and olive oil) into the central Europe;<sup>120</sup> the latter in truth a fragmented city including different neighboring settlements jutting onto the sea as separated by the steep mountain ridges of the Sorrentine peninsula and often regarded by outsiders as one single significant commercial community.<sup>121</sup>

Comacchio took off in the seventh-eighth century as located on the so-called north Adriatic crescent and at the intersection of fluvial, lagoon (the Po river delta) and maritime routes linking the Po valley with the Adriatic (and the Mediterranean).<sup>122</sup> The area where Comacchio thrived was indeed at the interface between the Carolingian and the Byzantine political sphere as the northern Adriatic crescent was only nominally if not loosely under Constantinopolitan rule in particular after the fall of Ravenna to the Lombards in 751 and the incorporation of northern Italy in the Carolingian political sphere of control.<sup>123</sup> Ceramic evidence (in particular globular amphorae) points to good degree of local production as paired with import for Comacchio soon became a point of reference for the lagoon itineraries and for the fluvial trade routes which linked the mainland to the sea.<sup>124</sup> As built on a set of mounds surrounded by canals and marshes it eventually developed (at least partially) urban functions framed by a vital economy based upon trade relationship between the western and Byzantine worlds; in fact, its landscape and fabric remind us of the so-called north European emporia.<sup>125</sup> Indeed,

<sup>117</sup> Thomas Brown, *Gentlemen and officers: imperial administration and aristocratic power in Byzantine Italy, A.D. 554-800*. Rome 1984; Salvatore Cosentino, *Storia dell'Italia Bizantina (VI-XI Secolo). Da Giustiniano ai Normanni*. Bologna 2008, pp. 135-41.

<sup>118</sup> Peregrine Horden, Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea. A Study in Mediterranean History*, Oxford 2000, p. 135.

<sup>119</sup> David Abulafia, "Islands," p. 294

<sup>120</sup> Andrea Augenti, *Città e porti dall'Antichità al Medioevo* Roma 2011, p. 151.

<sup>121</sup> David Abulafia, *Islands*, p. 294.

<sup>122</sup> Michael McCormick, *Origins*, pp. 631-698.

<sup>123</sup> See Gherardo Ortalli, "Il Ducato e la civitas Rivoalti: tra Carolingi, Bizantini e Sassoni," Eds. Gherardo Ortalli-Giorgio Cracco *Storia di Venezia dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima I, Origini ed Età Ducale, sez. II*, Roma 1992.

<sup>124</sup> Claudio Negrèlli, "Towards a definition of early medieval pottery: amphorae and other vessels in the northern Adriatic between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries," Eds. Sauro Gelichi- Richard Hodges, *Da un mare all'altro. Luoghi di scambio nell'Alto Medioevo europeo e Mediterraneo Atti del Seminario Internazionale Comacchio, 27-29 marzo 2009*, Turnhout 2012.

<sup>125</sup> Sauro Gelichi et al., "Castrum igne combussit. Comacchio fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo," *Archeologia Medievale* 2006; Michael McCormick, "Comparing and connecting: Comacchio and the early medieval trading towns," Eds. Sauro Gelichi-Richard Hodges, *Da un mare all'altro. Luoghi di scambio nell'Alto Medioevo europeo e nell'Alto Medioevo europeo e Mediterraneo Atti del Seminario Internazionale Comacchio, 27-29 marzo 2009*, Turnhout 2012.

although *magistri militum* are documented in the settlement, its political ruling class was generically described as *habitatores* in a diplomatic treaty with the Lombards dated to 740.<sup>126</sup>

Located on the southern coast of the rather inaccessible Sorrentine peninsula as jutting onto the southern side of the Gulf of Naples, Amalfi (on a par with Comacchio) developed its reputation as center of trade in the course of the late eighth and early ninth century.<sup>127</sup> As Skinner remarks, although the extent of its urban character is debated, for the myriad of local coastal settlements were constrained by the mountain range of the Lattari, the town was much an ideological construct as a combination of building and people.<sup>128</sup> Indeed, Medieval Amalfi was a host of [insular] tiny towns clung to the vertices of the Sorrentine peninsula like Atrani, Maiori, Minori and Cetara. In short, the whole southern shore of the Sorrentine peninsula was Amalfi.<sup>129</sup> However, and to the contrary of Comacchio, Medieval Amalfi was ruled by an official (the duke) to whom Byzantine emperors bestowed magniloquent titles of honor. In the words of Abulafia:

*in practice the relation was a very loose one but still close enough to win the Amalfitans with trading rights on the Golden Horn. Amalfi also developed close relationship with the Muslims in Sicily and Tunisia [...] providing a channel through which the luxuries of Byzantium and the Islamic world would have reached the Papal court.*<sup>130</sup>

Once again literary sources as well as ceramic (globular amphorae) evidence bespeak of the commercial success of Amalfi.<sup>131</sup> This *de facto* turned the settlement into an emporium-like community abutting into the Tyrrhenian exchange system but also tapping into Mediterranean inter-regional shipping routes. These allowed Amalfitan merchants to reach Constantinople (as mentioned already), north Africa, Egypt (as cogently showed by the Geniza papiri) and even (via Sardinia) the Umayyad Spanish court.<sup>132</sup>

The brief comparison Comacchio and Amalfi allows me to conjure up some conclusive remarks. The first concerns the similarities between the abovementioned coastal insular-like settlements and the large islands cited in the paper. Comacchio indeed reminds us of the Balearics and Cyprus for it was politically less bound to Constantinople (or to any local potentate) and literally built its fortune (as well as its emporia-like city-scape) on the commercial brokerage between two large and structured areas of political and military influence: the Byzantine Venetia and the Lombard, later Carolingian, Kingdom of Italy). The local political actors were the *habitatores* in a way reminiscing the three parties involved in the *Dār-al ‘Ahd* (the locals and the two closer overarching polities). Amalfi instead, had a more structured political authority deriving its legitimacy straight from the Byzantine court hierarchy. This puts Amalfi politically and administratively more in tune with Sicily; from this direct political filiation stemmed an important part of the Amalfitan commercial fortune, for Amalfi was among the first western mercantile communities to have a spot in the Constantinopolitan commercial sun. In the same vein as the two sub-regional sides of the Sicilian economic coin, however, Amalfi was at the same time a shareholder of the

<sup>126</sup> Mladen Ančić, “Church with incomplete biography: plans for the consolidation of Byzantine rule on the Adriatic at the beginning of the ninth century,” Ed. Dzvorno Dzino-Ken Perry, *Byzantium, its neighbours and its cultures*, Leiden 2017, p. 75; Sauro Gelichi et al., “Castrum igne combussit,” p. 75.

<sup>127</sup> Patricia Skinner, *Medieval Amalfi and its diaspora 800-1250*, Cambridge 2017, pp. 27-9; Giuseppe Gargano, *La città davanti al Mare. Aree urbane e storie sommerse di Amalfi nel Medioevo*. Amalfi, 1992, pp. 31-125.

<sup>128</sup> Patricia Skinner, *Medieval Amalfi*, p. 27.

<sup>129</sup> David Abulafia, *The Great Sea. A Human History of the Mediterranean*, London 2011, p. 268.

<sup>130</sup> David Abulafia, “Islands,” p. 294

<sup>131</sup> P. Arthur, “Naples: a case of urban survival in the early Middle Ages?” *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Moyen-Age*, tome 103, n°2. 1991. p. 777.

<sup>132</sup> Armand Citarella, “Patterns in Medieval Trade: The Commerce of Amalfi Before the Crusades,” *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Dec. 1968)

Thyrrhenian exchange system as well as a “rogue One” entertaining fruitful commercial interaction with the Muslim world.

The second observation has to do with the underlying “condition” Sicily, the Balearics, Cyprus as well as Amalfi and Comacchio manifest. This has to do with the extent and density of a multipronged Byzantine political and economic *koinè*. This could be alternatively and variously shaped in terms of more direct (Sicily, Amalfi and later Venice) or indirect administration and rule. The latter can have a rather more expedient (Balearics, and Comacchio) or more forced (Cyprus) connotations but was nevertheless an arrangement based on [...] population concentrations in which Byzantium has certain strategic, economic and (occasionally) ideological interest.<sup>133</sup> As repeatedly showed, archaeology and material culture help us to describe and define this *koinè* as the different political and strategic role played by each of the coastal and insular outposts chimes with their common importance as vectors for regional and trans-Mediterranean commerce. In the words of Paul Arthur, we are confronted with a series of sites and artefacts that have come to light across the Mediterranean that suggest a certain common intent and cultural unity on a number of differing levels across and within Byzantine controlled territory.<sup>134</sup>

Finally, a third point to be driven home has to do with the different picture of an Imperial maritime frontier conjured up by coastal sites as well as islands. This should be regarded less as a distant boundary and more as a kaleidoscope of spaces: for centers did exist (politically, economically, mentally, ideologically, military) but their most conspicuous part is when they met the periphery.<sup>135</sup> This also to stress the concept of connectivity as both intrinsic to the insular (and coastal) “Byzantine” worlds and corollary to the strategic position these hold across Mediterranean shipping routes; indeed, the process of commercial as well as political communication across the Mediterranean boundaries necessitated and at the same time nurtured flexible tactics of political survival.

So, we can safely conclude that the large islands of Byzantium were at the same time satellites revolving around planets (the Mediterranean polities) whose size and gravitational pull do change across space and time; but they were also part and parcel of a larger geographical, political and economic system (like the Byzantine *koinè* described as including coastal and insular-like settlements) immersed in the fragmented but still interconnected Medieval Mediterranean. Indeed, Agatha Christie was actually wrong for the best of an island is actually that it could bring you further than you would possibly imagine.

<sup>133</sup> Jonathan Shepard, “Bunkers,” p. 19.

<sup>134</sup> Paul Arthur, “From Italy to the Aegean” p. 339.

<sup>135</sup> Daniel Harrison, “Boundaries and Places of Power: Notions of liminality and centrality in the early Middle Ages”, Eds. Walter Pohl, Ian Wood, and Helmut Reimitz, *The Transformation of Frontiers. From Late Antiquity to Carolingians*, Leiden 2001, p. 95.

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