

# Behind Early Medieval Economic Transformation in Byzantium, East and West: »Active« and »Passive« Agents?

Over the last two decades intensive and extensive archaeological investigations combined with paleoenvironmental and biological tools have achieved impressive results on the main elements that framed the dramatic changes that affected the Eastern Roman Empire, which we call Byzantium, from the 6<sup>th</sup> through the 9<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. We now have a much more detailed description of the phenomena involved with many regional nuances that are highlighted in this book. These changes in settlement patterns, in demography, in trade networks and volume, in taxation modes, in social and political structures and even in cultural and ideological expressions have been the basis of broader historical interpretations. The pioneering essay by R. Hodges and D. Whitehouse (Mohammed, Charlemagne and the origins of Europe. London, 1983<sup>1</sup>), the influential 15 volumes of the Transformation of the Roman World (1997-2004), M. McCormick's »Origins of the European Economy« (2001), C. Wickham's »Framing the Middle Ages« (2005), B. Ward-Perkins' thought-provoking »Fall of Rome and the end of civilisation« (2005) were factually more focused on the Western part, while the Eastern Roman Empire was the core of J. Haldon's »Byzantium in the Seventh Century« (1990) and its 2016 reassessment »The Empire that would not die«. All these books, with the notable exception of the one by Ward-Perkins, share a positive or at least a relativist view of this »transformation«, partly inspired through hindsight, with the awareness of the later dramatic development of West and East alike from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onward. This relative optimism is embedded in the post-World War II belief in the continuous progress and economic growth that the European economy model, including its North American, Australian and other offshoots, could bring to the world, as indeed they have partly, witness China and the success stories of other countries since the 1990s.

However, when this transformation is translated into figures or »educated guesses«, all indicators point to a decrease: in population, in urbanisation<sup>2</sup>, in wealth, in market produc-

tion, in exchanges, a decrease that affected the Byzantine East later but to a lesser extent than the West and not as deeply on the political level. So, in quantitative terms – devoid of any moral judgment or personal preference for one period or the other – one cannot avoid considering that decline took place, even if one may prefer to use the more neutral term of transformation that includes the way both structures and economic behaviour as well as culture and even religion adapted to new constraints and contexts<sup>3</sup>.

Whichever perspective is chosen, the present section invites us to look into the »Bearers of Transformation«. The »Träger der Transformation« are defined by the organisers of the colloquium and editors of the present book as »Personen, die aufgrund ihrer gesellschaftlichen Stellung wirtschaftliche Veränderungen durchführen konnten, bzw. durch Geld bedingte gesellschaftliche Veränderungen durchsetzten. Die Hauptfragen drehen sich daher um die Akteure: wer waren sie und wieso wollten sie [die Akteure] die Wirtschaft oder Gesellschaft verändern?«. Research therefore focuses on individuals or groups that, due to their social position, could enforce economic changes or impose social changes and thus were instrumental in this evolution. A few authors in this venue have mentioned them simply asking like Ine Jacobs »who was responsible?« or Myrto Veikou »who were the agents?« for the transformation they observed in villages or cities. There must have been both motivated and conscious decision-makers on the one hand and actors unaware of the general consequences of their respective behaviour on the other, who could be called »active« or »passive« agents. Such unhappy phrasing – the former being redundant and the latter an oxymoron – is only destined to contrast reflected, deliberate actions from more or less instinctive reactions of producers and consumers that created and exchanged goods. »Bearer« [of transformation] is rarely used<sup>4</sup> and in economics refers only to a financial instrument, a type of check or bond where no ownership information is recorded, and the holder is presumed to be the owner.

1 And its revised, enlarged French version Mahomet, Charlemagne et les origines de l'Europe (Paris 1996) which is too often overlooked.

2 The »blurring between villages and towns« is for instance a nice way to describe what an economist would call de-urbanisation, while many changes in settlement are actual signs of de-population.

3 For a new and sweeping historiographical reflexion on Late Antiquity and »rupture«, rather than transformation, transition or continuity, see Carrié, Rupture.

4 Haldon uses it only incidentally: »the late Roman élite ... was also the bearer of late Roman literary culture and the guardian of the urban-centered cultural traditions of the earlier Roman and Hellenistic worlds« (Haldon, Social Elites 176).

The agents theme itself is a relatively new issue in early medieval economic history. As Haldon declares, one needs to »appreciate the role of the individual and of groups in their social and cultural context as agents, in a way that accounts for both the irrational as well as the intentional (regardless of whether such intentions can be known or not) in individual choice«<sup>5</sup> and he goes on to analyse the constraints to which the individual agents were submitted in their cultural and material environment and analyse the conditions and consequences of their role in the adaptation of the Empire in the long 8<sup>th</sup> century.

As well as with other topics in this period, certainly dark from this point of view at least, we lack the desirable documentation to explore this new theme, which appears to belong more to social and political history than to economic history. Development economics do not consider human individuals or group as »instruments«, in spite of their role, but are essentially concerned by the various economic policies available and their respective factual consequences<sup>6</sup>. What follows will look factually at a few tracks that seem worth of interest for future inquiry and will raise more questions than it will provide answers and a clear line of interpretation.

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When attempting to identify these bearers of transformation, the first that come to mind are clearly unintended ones and just living, not human, beings: the flea-infected rodents or other animals that brought *Yersinia pestis* – a now clearly identified unchallenged bacterium – the bubonic plague that affected East and West between 541 and 750. Though rats are not human beings to which a conscious aim could be attributed, they live from human garbage, flourished in the crowded human settlements that were Late Roman cities and travelled with men as shown by the routes on which the Justinianic plague spread from Egypt to the West, even to remote places like the Altenerding and Aschheim Bavarian cemeteries (fig. 1)<sup>7</sup> and struck all levels of society, affecting even Justinian himself, although he survived (fig. 2)<sup>8</sup>. The consequences of the contacts and travels of the people infected by fleas or lice who transported the pathogen unknowingly either on their usual routes or when fleeing the contaminated cities and their contribution to the »end of the ancient econ-

omy« is not to be denied any more<sup>9</sup>. The comparison with the 14<sup>th</sup> century Black Death that is now endorsed, since both pandemics were due to the same cause (even if the bacterium was not exactly the same), shows its impact on demography and consequently on the whole social and economic life of the Byzantine Empire. Paleomolecular research and modeling enable us to estimate their impact and this quantification with its regional differences is not out of reach in the future.

The »Barbarians« are the most obvious bearers and actors of transformation in our period. Leaving aside their definition as Rome's murderers<sup>10</sup>, »Barbarian« is used here in a neutral way as a convenient summary for all ethnic groups (*die Völker*, the *Gentes*, the peoples) from the steppe or the desert who, as Mark Whittow states: »needed the settled world far more than the latter needed them, and presented a potential threat«<sup>11</sup>, which, often materialised.

This extremely diverse group maintained an ambiguous relation with the Empire, alternately or simultaneously *friends or foes*, insiders or outsiders, or ultimately conquerors, creators of an arch rival empire like the Arabs or settlers in the long run like the Slavs. Many of their leaders contributed brilliantly to the defence of the Empire (Stilicho, Ricimer<sup>12</sup>, Aspar ...), while among the assailants great historical figures (Alaric, Attila, Gaiseric, Theoderic and other founders of *regni*) are as well known as the literary sources allow. The latter were no doubt »active« bearers of transformation, aiming at gaining subsidies<sup>13</sup>, looting or controlling territories, enslaving populations, seizing power for their people and taking part into the benefits of the previous way of life in their new homeland as the Vandals ended up enjoying in Africa<sup>14</sup>.

The peoples and their members themselves are less visible and known either through the few ethnographic indications in Ammianus, Priscus, Jordanes, Procopius or Simocatta, or through archaeological evidence which informs about their *mores* and moves and the transformations induced but little about the underlying philosophy. Peaceful or violent migration and settlement on the one hand secured better grounds and resources for the former nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoral societies but on the other hand entailed severe depopulation, enslavement and deportation for hundreds of thousands of former inhabitants in Thrace and Illyricum in the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>15</sup>. Obviously many of these active bearers, even if they differed in the means employed, in the degree or absence of violence employed, contributed to a major redistri-

5 Haldon, *The Empire* 12.

6 Adelman/Geier/Taft Morris, *Instruments*.

7 McCormick, *Mass Death (I) and Mass Death (II)* 1008 (Altenerding) and 1010 (Aschheim).

8 He was infected but recovered according to Procopius, *Anecdota IV* 1, a fact confirmed by the coin evidence which shows his face swollen on part of the folles dated to his 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> regnal years (Pottier, *Peste*).

9 McCormick, *Bateaux de vie*. – McCormick, *Rats*. – Stathakopoulos, *Pestilence* 110-154.

10 In the famous quote by A. Piganiol: »La civilisation romaine n'est pas morte de sa belle mort. Elle a été assassinée« (*L'Empire chrétien*, 1947).

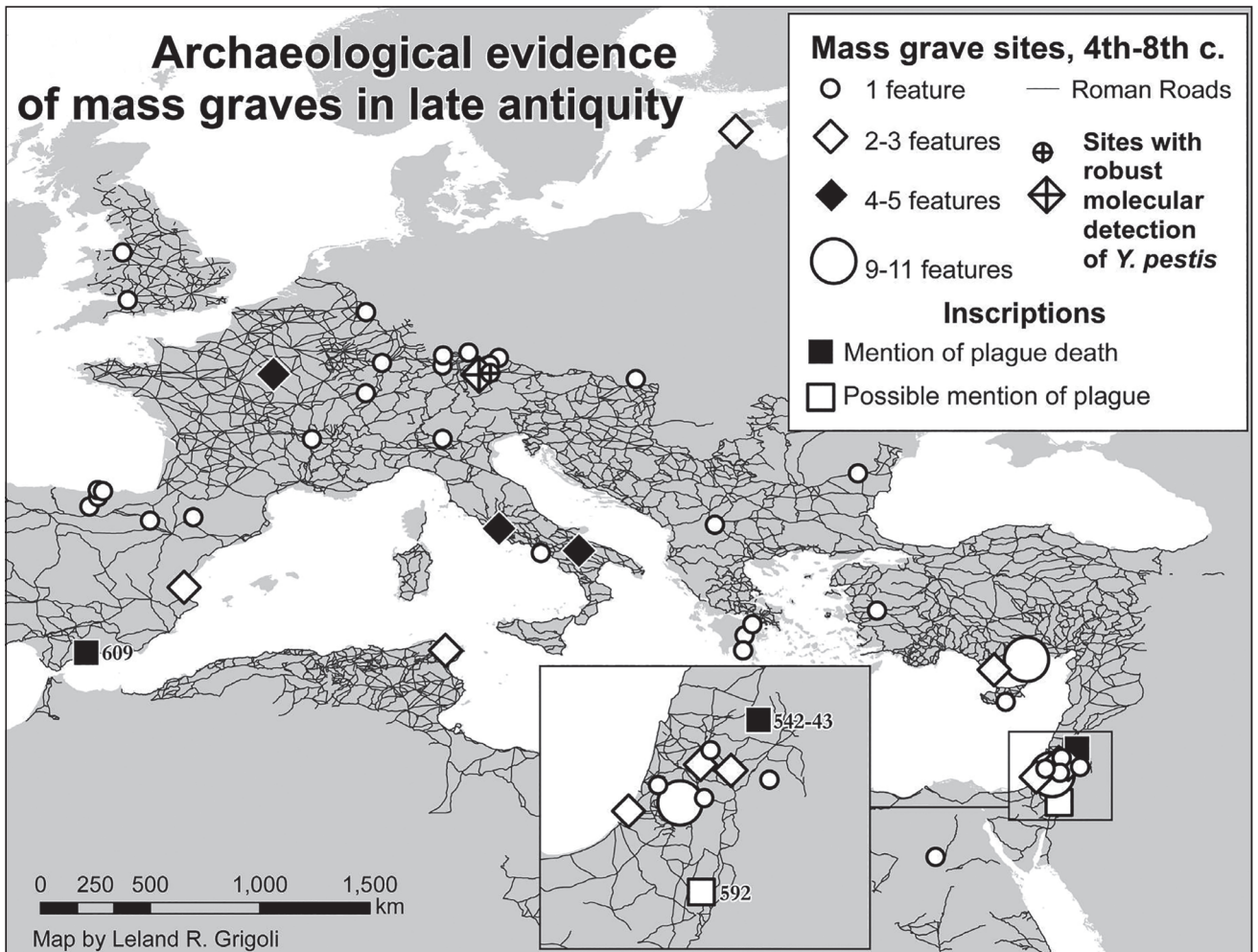
11 Whittow, *Making* 37.

12 Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina*, *Panegyric of Anthemius II* vv 358-385 (p 182 f.).

13 See e.g. the numismatic evidence for Scandinavian mercenaries in 5<sup>th</sup>-century Italy: Fischer, *Sovana* with refs.

14 Recent reassessment of an immense literature by Steinacher, *Rex oder Räuberhauptmann?* – Steinacher, *Wanderung der Barbaren?*.

15 References and figures from contemporary texts in Lenski, *Captivity passim*. No general quantification or even rough estimate of the percentage of population renewal has yet been proposed. But biological research and archaeogenetics open a promising perspective on the biological substrate of the migrations (McCormick, *Molecular Middle Ages* 91-92). See for instance Stamatoyannopoulos et al., *Genetics*, whose results led to the conclusion, however, contrary to previous assumptions, that »the Slavic ancestry of Peloponnesean [sic] subpopulations ranges from 0.2 to 14.4 %«.



**Fig. 1** Mass graves and plague in Late Antiquity. The 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries account for 56 of the 78 »mortality crisis graves« dated to within a century or less. – (After McCormick, *Mass Death I* 327 fig. 1; 356).



**Fig. 2** Justinian's folles from Constantinople showing his face swollen with bubons in years 15 and 16 (542/543). – (After Morrisson, *Catalogue pl. XI*).



**Fig. 3** 'Abd al-Malik, standing caliph dinar 77 H / 696/697 AD. – (After Treadwell, 'Abd al-Malik's Coinage Reforms 380 pl. 1).



**Fig. 4** Tiberius Constantine, consular solidus. Dumbarton Oaks BZC 1948.17.16 (DOC I no. 3). – (Photo Dumbarton Oaks).

bution in wealth at the expense of the former ruling class the extent of which has not been really assessed but which the simple comparison of the description of Olympiodoros of the senatorial riches in the 5<sup>th</sup> century with that of Philaretos or the widow Danelis in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium exemplifies. Throughout the period, tribute, redeeming and ransom<sup>16</sup> transferred enormous sums to polities or social groups who had a very different use of money and »froze« a great part of coined gold and silver into prestige and display. At the same time prevailing insecurity increased hoarding within both East and West, and induced the retreat from a sophisticated multi-tier exchange economy to a less monetised and smaller-scale one, to which the State adapted its taxation practice<sup>17</sup>.

But in the long run the Germanic people paved the way for an essential outcome by introducing in the former Romanized regions in the West a new economic and social pattern based on agricultural practices, like the three-field regime, and tools, e. g. the winged iron ploughshare, that were better adapted to the climate instability and to cooler temperatures in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>18</sup> than was the previously dominant ard-plough (*araire*), which remained however better adapted to the mostly Mediterranean areas of Byzantium<sup>19</sup>. To the long-term action of the Barbarians in the West can be attributed the origin of villages created inside or around the ancient *villae*, the practice of cultivation in smaller units and the disappearance or marked decline in slavery<sup>20</sup>.

## Rulers and leaders

Not all rulers and leaders can be considered conscious bearers of transformation but a consensus would easily be reached for some of the names just mentioned for the West, and certainly for Mohammad or 'Abd al-Malik in the East (fig. 3). Among the Byzantine emperors of the period, a few reform-

ers or transformers were all concerned and committed to ensure a revival of the *gloria Romanorum* in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and its maintenance through adaptation in the 7<sup>th</sup>.

Justinian can be deemed an »investing emperor«, since his generally much criticized »reconquest« brought a mid-term benefit with the recovery of Africa, and a more prolonged one with that of South Italy and Sicily<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, the silk which proved so essential to Byzantium's diplomatic and economic power in the Middle Ages goes back to the introduction of sericulture around the late 530s and the creation of the state monopoly in 547<sup>22</sup>. That it was a deliberate policy is shown by Procopius' famous report that the monks who brought the silkworms from Serinda did so after »learning that the Emperor Justinian entertained the desire that the Romans should no longer purchase their silk from the Persians«<sup>23</sup>.

On an entirely different front, Tiberius (578-582) can be singled out in the cultural field for advocating Christian identity and the protection provided by the Victorious Cross on his coins and seals (fig. 4). A turning point in the construction of Byzantine Medieval official iconography, it sealed its final rupture with Roman imagery<sup>24</sup>.

Maurice stands out for his new strategy<sup>25</sup>: his changing the payment of the military from an all cash to an in kind delivery of equipment, his fighting the Avars and the Slavs by going North of the Danube into their homelands and above all, as he explains himself in the *Strategikon*, analysing the foreigners' tactics and weaponry and advocating an adaptation, already well on its way, of Byzantine warfare with priority given to mobility through smaller units, cavalry and archery<sup>26</sup>. These two reforms aimed at better efficiency cost him his life with the success of a rebellion that was ultimately to cost the empire much more (fig. 5-6). Rebels are another group of bearers worthy of investigation, particularly those who wanted either to set up an independent polity, or seize

16 Figures in Hendy, Monetary economy 260-262 and Lenski, Captivity 235-238.

17 Prigent, Fiscal resources.

18 Henning, Agricultural revolution.

19 Lefort, Rural economy 235.

20 Henning, Archaeology of Slavery 33-53.

21 Counter to the *communis opinio* see the argued defence in Tate, Justinien 800.

22 According to the new chronology proposed by Zuckerman, Silk, and his conclusion that it was »one of the most significant and long-term benefits of Emperor Justinian's reign« (350) with references to the literary sources.

23 Procopius, Wars VIII 17-18 (Dewing 131).

24 Morrisson, Empereur chrétien, with references to sources and previous literature.

25 Whittow, Byzantium 69.

26 Dagron, Ceux d'en face.



**Fig. 5** Maurice. Dumbarton Oaks BZC 1948.17.1774 (DOC I no. 5j.1). – (Photo Dumbarton Oaks).



**Fig. 7** Heraclius in military costume on a follis from Thessalonica dated XX (629/630). The overstrike is a sign of a hurried, slackened process. – (Foto KIKPE Foundation, Athens).



**Fig. 6** The «successful» rebel Phocas. Dumbarton Oaks BZC 1948.17.1971 (DOC II 1 no. 5b.2). – (Photo Dumbarton Oaks).

power in Constantinople, in order to assume a better defence of the province or the whole empire, e.g. the successful Leo III<sup>27</sup>.

The Heraclid emperors were personally responsible for adaptation and resistance. Even if he cannot be credited any more with creating the administrative system of the *themes*, Heraclius is an exemplary resilient and »transforming« emperor: he was the first to revive the Constantinian tradition of commanding the campaigning army in person<sup>28</sup>, as celebrated by his return to a military representation on coin issues after 630 (fig. 7). He developed a new strategy to bypass the Sasanian forces through the Caucasus in his 625 and 626/627 expeditions<sup>29</sup>, relocated the main field armies after the Yarmuk defeat<sup>30</sup>, took drastic financial measures through the suppression of the civic bread and other distributions in 618<sup>31</sup> and the mobilisation of Church resources that allowed a dramatic increase in gold issues and the revival of a silver coinage, the hexagram destined to a widespread use within the empire and beyond. Together with gold and copper coins and imperial seals it proclaimed the new dynastic continuity<sup>32</sup> and the Christian belief in the divine protection bestowed on the embattled Empire (fig. 8).

Constans II maintained and enlarged the policy of his grandfather. The effort to ensure religious cohesion through



**Fig. 8** Heraclius and Heraclius Constantine hexagram with the inscription ΘΕΟΣ ΑΔΙΥΧΑ ROMANIS. Dumbarton Oaks BZC 1948.17.2044 (DO II 1 no. 65.1). – (Photo Dumbarton Oaks).

the monotheite compromise failed but the promotion of Christian identity took a decisive step with the first Greek inscription of the Constantinian motto in lieu of the emperor's name on the widespread copper follis (fig. 9)<sup>33</sup>. On the military front his creation of the first core of a fleet in the East and the West (the *Karabisianoï*)<sup>34</sup> can be considered one of the decisive investments for the mid-Byzantine Empire. True, it could not prevent the loss of Africa to the Arabs, but proved essential in maintaining Sicily and most of the islands within the Empire's domain for two centuries or more and in defending the capital in 677 and 717. The evolution of the official expression of religious ideology was completed by Justinian II when he introduced the image of Christ on the

27 Angelov/Saxby, *Subversion*.

28 See Leppin, *George Pisides' Expeditio Persica*.

29 Zuckerman, *Heraclius*. – Zuckerman, *Khazars*.

30 Haldon, *Empire 269*: a »well thought-out plan through which the empire could continue to maintain and support substantial numbers of troops under arms in extraordinarily difficult circumstances«.

31 *Chronicon Paschale* 711. – Nikephoros, *Short History* 98.

32 Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre* 50.

33 Morrisson, *Byzance et sa monnaie*.

34 Cheynet, *Monde byzantin* 160. – Pryor/Jeffreys, *Dromon* 19-34. – Zuckerman, *Learning from the Enemy* 115-127. – Prigent, *Approvisionnement* 298-299.



**Fig. 9** Constans II revives the Constantinian motto in Greek on his follis. EN ΤΩΤΟ ΝΙΚΑ. (Year 1 = 641/642) (DOC II 2 no. 59d.1). Münzkabinett, Berlin 1909/142 FM Priene. – (Photo Münzkabinett Berlin).



**Fig. 10** Justinian II solidus with the image of Christ Pantocrator (1<sup>st</sup> reign, issued ca. 695). Dumbarton Oaks BZC 1948.17.2348 (DOC II 2 no. 7c.3). – (Photo Dumbarton Oaks).

coins of his two reigns<sup>35</sup>. The attempt was short-lived, failed to secure the assent of the people, and was not pursued by any successor of the hated emperor. However the innovation had far-reaching consequences when it was taken up in the mid 9<sup>th</sup> century and framed the later evolution of Byzantine political message through the 15<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 10).

Due to their increasing responsibilities in running cities, or even the empire itself, as well as the great estates of the Church, the bishops come next as agents of transformation and adaptation. Gregory the Great is the best-known figure through the *Registrum*<sup>36</sup>; his management of the large Church estates in Sicily shows inter alia his concern for fighting the trend toward creeping alienation of ecclesiastical property, and hiring expert *conductores* for the *massae* in order to make them as profitable as possible<sup>37</sup>. In other respects many others can be singled out like John, bishop of Soloi in Cyprus, whose restoration of decaying or destroyed public works after the Arab incursions on Cyprus in 648/649 is recorded in several inscriptions (fig. 11)<sup>38</sup>.

The »people«, insofar as their instinctive and unreflective decisions under the constraints of the time were conducive to the mechanisms of transformation were obviously its most numerous »bearers«, but are also the least well known due to the bias of most sources written by and for the use of members of the élite. Pending a focus on all available documentation, notably in literature and saints' lives for testimonies of motivation, one can only allude to the phenomena that are awaiting extended research or have already begun to attract attention in the light of present-day issues<sup>39</sup>.

In the more secure times of Late Antiquity, the 4<sup>th</sup> through the early 6<sup>th</sup> century in most of the East, ecclesiastical authorities and their imperial or senatorial supporters were transforming the urban space through the building of churches which in Constantinople and other metropoleis soon exceed that of civic constructions or amenities<sup>40</sup>. Offsetting each other, the urbanisation of villages and the ruralisation of towns are perhaps the most important, the former typical of early Byzantium, the latter beginning in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century and going on in the few remaining urban centers in the mid-Byzantine period<sup>41</sup>.

In a time of dislocation and marginal persecution, refugees relocating to secure places of settlement in the Balkans, in Central Italy or Southern Troas transformed the social and economic pattern, leaving some areas depopulated or settled by groups of newcomers, while cramming in places of refuge, bringing a different culture with them, witness the influence of Maximus the Confessor and Eastern religious figures in mid 7<sup>th</sup>-century Africa<sup>42</sup>, the hellenisation or re-hellenisation of Sicily and later on, after the Arab conquest, that of Calabria, the Sila and part of Puglia<sup>43</sup>.

The demise of the »senatorial aristocracy«<sup>44</sup> and of the middle class in the cities<sup>45</sup> and the regionalization of family patrimonies increasingly dependent on the exercise of public charges<sup>46</sup>, show the limited impact of the strategies of adaptation developed by the former elite or wealthier groups, although part of the former or newer military elite managed to preserve or acquire land and shifted to extensive stock raising on their estates<sup>47</sup>. At the same time the scarcity of manpower entailed by the recurrence of plague and insecurity may have empowered to a certain extent the urban and rural workers. Justinian's Novel 122 complaining about »avarice« and forbidding that any artisan, merchant or peasant »demand as salary

35 Spieser, Images du Christ 399-480.

36 Recchia, Gregorio Magno.

37 Prigent, Grand domaine sicilien 220. 224-225. 231.

38 Feissel, Jean de Soloi.

39 E. g. *Hospes eram et collexistis me: Crisis and Migration in Late Antique and Early Medieval Europe and Byzantium*, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 4-5<sup>th</sup> November, 2016, the Tübingen University program on »Migration and Mobility in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages« and the five-year program in the University of Vienna, »Moving in Byzantium: Mobility, Microstructures and Personal Agency« (<http://rapp.univie.ac.at>).

40 Mango, Développement urbain. – Zanini, Early Byzantine Cities 131-133 with refs.

41 See Jacobs, Urbanised Villages and Tsvikis, Messene in this volume. For Asia Minor transformation of villages, see Izdebski, Rural Settlements 82-87. For the balance between resilient cities and abandoned sites in Anatolia, Niewoehner, Urbanism 50-57.

42 Conant, Staying Roman 350-351.

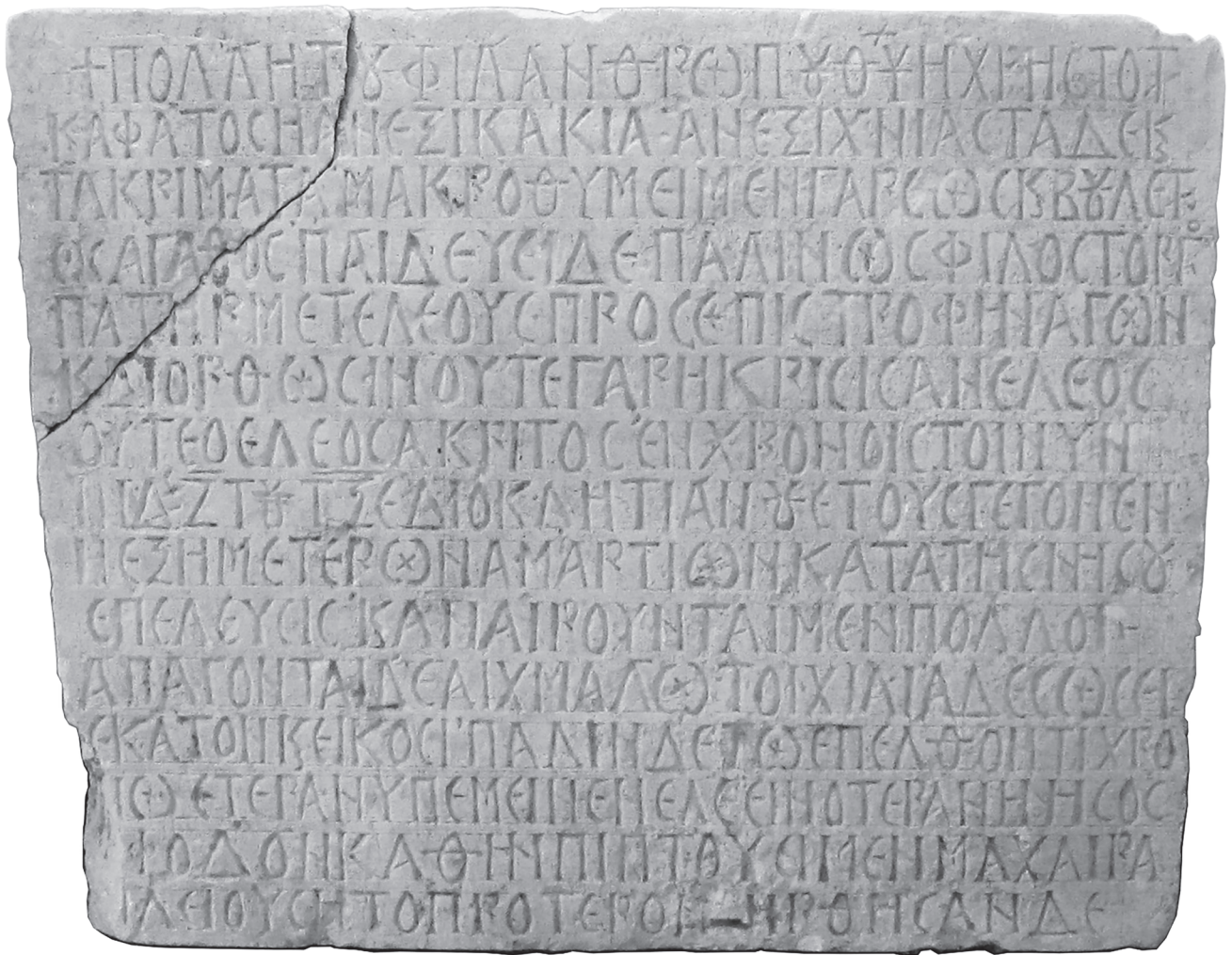
43 Martin, Hellénisme.

44 Haldon, Social Élités 175-176.

45 Described by Courcelle, Invasions germaniques 257, citing e.g. Gregory the Great, In Ezech. II 6, 22 (PL LXXVI, 1009-1010, 593 AD): »Partout le deuil, partout les gémissements [Aen. II, 369]. Villes détruites, places fortes renversées, campagne ravagée, pays réduit en désert. Il ne reste plus d'habitants dans les campagnes, presque plus dans les villes et ces débris du genre humain sont frappés chaque jour sans répit. Les coups de la justice divine n'ont pas de fin, parce que, même sous les coups, notre conduite coupable ne s'est pas amendée. Tels sont emmenés en captivité, tels sont mutilés ... Rome paraissait autrefois maîtresse du monde : nous voyons ce qu'il en reste ...«.

46 Cheynet, Pouvoir et fortune. – Brown, Gentlemen.

47 Lefort, Rural Economy 285. – Kaplan, Hommes et la terre 324.



**Fig. 11** Inscription of John, bishop of Soloi (Cyprus), celebrating the restoration of the cathedral (654/655). »Great is the goodness of God who loves mankind, and ineffable is his forbearance, and inscrutable are his judgements. He endures patiently as long as he wishes, for he is good, but then he punishes as an affectionate father, who with mercy leads one to conversion and correction; for neither is his judgement without mercy, nor his mercy without judgement. Thus, in the time of the seventh indiction, the year 365 of Diocletian, there was an incursion against the island on account of our sins; many perished and some 120 000 were taken captive. And again in the following year the island underwent an attack yet more piteous in which even more fell victim of the sword than the first time and some 50 000 captives were taken together with great riches (?); and this church was consumed by fire along with all the bishop's residence and (the ...) of the saints (...) and other magnificent (...) and houses, and (as in?) other places on the island the aforementioned conflagration occurred. But the goodness of God, in his mercy, was well pleased that this church should be renewed, and roused to zeal and fervour his holy bishop John, who with great earnestness (...); and with God's assistance he raised up the buildings which had collapsed, covering them with a roof and adorning them, and he completed the work, to the glory of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, in the thirteenth indiction, the year 371 according to the era of Diocletian.« (English version thanks to M. J. Featherstone). – (After Feissel, Jean de Soloi 229 fig. 5).

or wages more than ancient custom prescribes<sup>48</sup> is the only testimony of such a trend immediately after the first outburst of the pandemic and the scarce data for Byzantium do not allow any assessment, while better sources suggest that the rise in wages that occurred in the Islamic Middle East in the 8<sup>th</sup> century can be attributed to this cause<sup>49</sup>. In the countryside however one can assume that the demographic decline together with the weakening of the successor states and the related falling of Late Roman laws into desuetude led to the

disappearance of the colonate, and more generally to a greater autonomy and reduced taxation, if any, of the peasants as can be observed in most Western regions and the Balkans at least in the early Middle Ages<sup>50</sup>. Lack of sources in the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries do not allow of any statement for the territory that remained under Byzantine control<sup>51</sup>.

Peasants' adaptation to the changing climatic environment, the cooler period that succeeded some time in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century the milder Beyşehir occupation phase, are now

48 Corpus Iuris Civilis, Novellae 122 (544 AD): *Cognovimus post castigationem quae secundum domini dei clementiam contigit eos qui negotiationes et artificia exercent et diversarum artium opifices et agricultores nec non nautas, cum potius meliores fieri deberent, avaritiae se dedisse, et duplicia atque triplicia pretia mercedesque contra veterem consuetudinem exigere. Placuit igitur nobis per sacrum edictum omnibus eiusmodi avaritiam interdicere, neve ullus in po-*

*sterum negotiator aut agricola aut artifex ex quacumque arte vel negotiatione vel agricultura maiora quam secundum veterem consuetudinem pretia mercedeve exigere.*

49 Pamuk/Shatzmiller, Plague.

50 Wickham, Framing 525-526. 534. 549.

51 Oikonomides, State 972.



**Fig. 12** Late Roman image of beach landing with the wares being weighed on a balance scale. Mosaic from Hadrumetum, Tunis, Musée du Bardo. – (After McCormick, *Movements and Markets* 89 fig. 3.15).



**Fig. 13** Amphorae fitted for camel transportation. Mosaic from Kissufim, 576-578. – (After McCormick, *Movements and Markets* 72 fig. 3.9).

approached through many all-inclusive surveys and palynological studies – e.g. in Bithynia or Macedonia, at Caričin Grad, Sagalassos, Pisidia, Avkat, Pontus, Mangup, Crimea, etc.). With all due caveats for the uncertainty in dating the samples, their patchy coverage and regional variance, pollen data document the diffusion of a simplified mixed cereal and pastoral regime and a more sylvan system, with a partial shift from wheat toward barley and millet<sup>52</sup>. The changes in agricultural practices undoubtedly represent the «unreflective response of farmers and landlords to climatic changes» and an adaptation to market changes as well as to the state

incentive, since they allowed peasants to »respond to fiscal pressure or compulsory purchases to meet state demands for grain, livestock and similar produces«<sup>53</sup>.

In trade and transportation, the actors accordingly adapted their practices to the constraints of the new context; the decrease in the size of vessels being the best known of the transformations, one closely interrelated with the frequent use of lighter containers like the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century LR1 amphorae whose thin walls allowed to transport more content for the same tare and which were better adapted to beach-side or smaller-scale landings as well as to reuse (fig. 12-13)<sup>54</sup>.

52 Decker, *Dark Ages* 150-153.  
53 Haldon, *Empire* 281. 290 with refs.

54 Pieri, *Exchanges* 44 f. – McCormick, *Movements and Markets* 61-68.



Thus the bearers surveyed in this subjective selection are mostly defined and understood by the changes they brought about. Except for public officials that justified their decisions in legal preambles or have them expressed and embellished by their entourage in speeches and enkomia, or analysed by favourable or hostile chroniclers, their motivations and processes are rarely expressed and must be assumed from the nature or effects of their actions. As regards private agents,

whether affluent or poor, decisions that led to transformations were determined mostly by the economic, politico-military and physical environment. The cultural and religious system that informed the lives of individuals had become a major element and asset of social sense of belonging together in *Krisenzeiten* in the East, while in both East and West the cohesion of the rural society was built on the village immediate solidarity and networks. The heuristic value of the concept remains to be vindicated but will be explored or exploited further and better than in this sketch.

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## Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

### Hinter dem frühmittelalterlichen wirtschaftlichen Wandel in Byzanz, Ost und West:

#### »aktive« und »passive« Agenten?

In den letzten Jahrzehnten haben Archäologen und Historiker das Wissen über die Transformation der antiken Welt im frühen Mittelalter in Ost und West erweitert. Dieser Beitrag antwortet auf die Frage der Herausgeber nach den »Trägern« der Transformation, ihre motivierten und bewussten Agenten und die »passiven«, die Produzenten und Konsumenten, die sich instinktiv an veränderte Umstände anpassen. In der ersten Gruppe werden die »Barbaren« herausgegriffen, die zu einer erheblichen Umverteilung des Wohlstands auf Kosten der ehemaligen herrschenden Klasse beigetragen haben, aber auch neue landwirtschaftliche und soziale Praktiken eingeführt haben, sowie mehrere einflussreiche Herrscher in Byzanz wie auch »Führer« wie Papst Gregor der Große oder andere Bischöfe. In der zweiten Gruppe fallen Flüchtlinge auf, die ihre unterschiedliche Kultur in die Regionen brachten, in denen sie sich niedergelassen haben, die städtischen oder ländlichen Arbeitskräfte, die aufgrund der durch die Pest verursachten Knappheit größere Autonomie und ein höheres Einkommen erlangten, Bauern, die sich an den Klimawandel angepasst, sowie Kaufleute, die ihre Praktiken (kleinere Schiffe und leichtere Behälter) änderten, um mit einem angespannten Kontext umzugehen. Die »Träger« können somit größtenteils durch die vielfältigen Veränderungen in allen Bereichen (Verwaltung, Wirtschaft, Religion und Kultur) definiert und verstanden werden, die sie in diesen Krisenzeiten bewirkt haben.

### Behind Early Medieval Economic Transformation in Byzantium, East and West:

#### »Active« and »Passive« Agents?

The early medieval transformation of East and West is now better understood through decades of interdisciplinary studies by historians and archaeologists. This paper responds to the editor's query and looks into its »bearers«, its motivated and conscious agents and the »passive« ones, i.e. the producers and consumers who adapted to changing circumstances. Among the first group this paper singles out the Barbarians, the »Völker«, who contributed to a major redistribution in wealth at the expense of the former ruling class but also introduced new agricultural and social practices, as well as several influential rulers in Byzantium and leaders like pope Gregory the Great or other bishops. In the second category stand out refugees who brought their different culture to the places they settled in, the urban or rural working-force who obtained greater autonomy and increased income because of the scarcity of labour induced by plague, peasants who adapted to the worsening climate and merchants who changed their practices (smaller ships and lighter containers) to deal with a strained context. The »bearers« thus can be mostly defined and understood by the varied changes in all domains (administration, economics, religion and culture) they brought about in these *Krisenzeiten*.

### Derrière les transformations économiques du haut Moyen Âge dans l'Empire byzantin, à l'est et à l'ouest: agents « actifs » et « passifs » ?

Dans les dernières décennies, archéologues et historiens ont fait progresser la connaissance de la transformation du monde antique au haut Moyen Âge. On répond ici à la question des éditeurs concernant les « porteurs » de cette transformation, agents conscients et motivés, ou passifs, c'est-à-dire les producteurs et consommateurs qui se sont adaptés aux nouvelles circonstances. On distingue ici au sein des premiers, d'une part les peuples « barbares » (*Völker*) qui entraînèrent une redistribution des richesses au détriment de la classe dirigeante antérieure et introduisirent de nouvelles pratiques agricoles et une organisation sociale différente, et

d'autre part un certain nombre d'empereurs byzantins réformateurs, des « leaders » influents comme le pape Grégoire le Grand et de nombreux évêques. Au sein du second groupe se signalent les réfugiés qui introduisirent une culture différente dans les régions où ils s'installèrent, formant la main d'œuvre urbaine ou rurale, devenue rare en raison de la peste, et qui obtinrent une plus grande autonomie et de meilleurs revenus, les paysans qui s'adaptèrent au changement climatique et les marchands qui modifièrent leurs pratiques (des navires plus petits et des contenants plus légers) pour faire face à un contexte difficile. Les « porteurs » se définissent et se comprennent ainsi surtout à travers les changements de tous ordres (administratif, économique, religieux et culturel) qu'ils apportèrent en cette époque de crise.