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“Islands in the stream”: toward a new history of the large islands of the Byzantine Mediterranean in the early Middle Ages *ca.*600–*ca.*800

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Byzantine historiography has often regarded the large Mediterranean islands (Cyprus, Crete, Sardinia, Malta and the Balearics) as mere peripheral additions to the Byzantine heartland – defined as the coupling of two different geographical zones: the Anatolian plateau and the Aegean. As a result, Byzantinists seem not to have fully moved away from an interpretative framework which regards islands as either strategic military bulwarks along the Arab-Byzantine Mediterranean frontier, or as neglected marginal outposts soon to be lost forever. A partial exception to this historiographical periphericity of large islands is represented by Sicily, because of its relevance as a secure source for grain after the disruption of the Egyptian tax-spine in the 640s. In fact, by comparing material and archaeological evidence with literary and documentary sources, an alternative interpretation of the political, economic and cultural role played by large islands will be proposed, this by pairing two main themes: the first revolving around the economics of insular societies; and the second stressing the importance of islands as connective hubs with peculiar local political, social and cultural structures which remained within the Byzantine sphere of influence for longer than previously thought. This approach allows us to tip the unbalanced dialogue between margins and metropolis by pointing to a relatively higher welfare of the insular world as stemming from the uninterrupted, although diminished, “connective” role the abovementioned islands played within the Mediterranean shipping routes linking the eastern and western basin of the Mediterranean. In this light, the adaptive strategies of insular administrative structures as influenced by the political or military difficulties of the hour, as well as the urban socio-political and economic structures on some of the abovementioned Byzantine islands, will also be documented. This is because the construction of urban models, settlement strategies and infrastructures – although often based on diverse political and administrative policies – nevertheless point to the presence of common, cross-cultural insular developments such as: the role of members of urban-oriented aristocracies as cultural brokers; the creation of commercial and artisanal facilities; the construction or restoration of religious buildings as foci of settlement and regional as well as interregional pilgrimage; the resilience of local elites as catalysts of patronage; and the persistence of levels of demand often based upon regular if not frequent regional and sub-regional trans-maritime contacts.

Keywords: Islands; Byzantium; Mediterranean; cities; cross-cultural interactions; Islam; aristocracies

I. “Listening without prejudices”: islands in and beyond Byzantine history

*And what is in 't, the never-surfeited sea
Hath caused to belch up you – and on this island
Where man doth not inhabit, you 'mongst men
Being most unfit to live. I have made you mad,*

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*And even with suchlike valour men hang and drown
Their proper selves*
[Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 3, Scene 3]

Indeed, Shakespeare's *Tempest* represents a good summary of the literary attitudes toward insular spaces; these have been effectively summarized by Paul Rainbird in his well received book entitled *The Archaeology of Islands*. "Shakespeare's island is a strange outwardly place that suffers most from its desolate conditions."¹ According to Rainbird, islands can become a sort of limbo, a place where a castaway – be he Robinson Crusoe or Tom Hanks – can atone for his sins in isolation while confronting his most terrible nightmares, only to survive this emotional journey to emerge as a new man.²

One can also think here of a less dramatic but nevertheless still "static" idea of insularity for islands, like Thomas More's *Utopia*, which can often be described as those mythical places where mankind can find the ideal conditions to nurture and realize the perfect socio-political community. Here one should admit that More was not the first to toy with this concept of islands as places of utopian isolation or escape. As Constantakopoulou argues: "Indeed, insularity and utopia have always been linked concepts. From Homer's Scheria to the Hellenistic writers of paradoxography, islands were the favourite locations for utopian communities and their 'utopian' fantastic and bizarre characteristics."³

In this light, it is compelling to note that More, Shakespeare and Defoe seem to have (of course unconsciously and in completely different ways) drawn from what Cosentino describes as the two opposite attitudes that the Greek (and later Roman and Byzantine) culture had towards islands.⁴ "On the one hand, [islands] evoke an idea of remoteness and marginality. On the other hand, their function in commerce and connectivity cannot be ignored."⁵ In other words, it seems that one can seldom escape from a trap made of the opposites – static–dynamic, isolation–connectivity, conservatism–openness – which de facto encompasses and concludes any attempt to propose a definition of an island. A possible way around this impasse could be offered by the idea of islands as gateway communities that promote social encounters and cultural interchange: an idea which Veikou has introduced when examining the mid-sized (i.e. neither urban nor rural) character of some Cypriot urban settlements.⁶

In particular, Byzantine literary sources provide us with good examples of this peculiar mentality; it suffices to mention here the episode of the rebellion of Emperor Heraclius's illegitimate son Athalaric, his nephew Theodore and other conspirators of Armenian origin.⁷ The episode is mentioned in both the seventh-century Armenian Chronicle attributed to Sebeos and the ninth-century Short Chronicle written by the Patriarch Nikephoros.⁸ Indeed, when the conspirators were exposed and apprehended, Athalaric was "simply" exiled to one of the Prinkipos' islands off the coast of Constantinople, while Theodore was sent to Gaudemelete (modern Gozo in the Maltese archipelago), with instructions to the local governor to cut off one of his legs upon arrival. But islands were not only places of exile for political prisoners or conspirators; for example the Justinian's Code of Law (*Corpus Iuris Civilis*) specifically mentioned the condemnation to *gypso* (forced marble quarrying) in the Proconnesian Island,⁹ whereas even intellectuals or bishops who did not align with the current orthodoxy could be confined to islands. One could mention here Euthymios of Sardis, who in the first half of the ninth century was forced to spend some time in Pantelleria, a small outlet off the southern Sicilian coast, together with two other bishops.¹⁰ A few centuries earlier, Victor of Tunnuna, author of a sixth-century Chronicle, lamented over his exile to the Balearics due to his adamant obedience to the Three Chapters.¹¹

Here one could be tempted into seeing in the above-mentioned episodes a clear example of the place islands had in the Byzantine imaginary: marginal and liminal spaces concurrent with their cited role as peripheral and uncivilized places. One should however admit that islands were not the only regions of the empire to which those not in line with the religious orthodoxy or imperial policy of the hour could be banished.¹²

By using archaeology and material culture it becomes possible to move away from literary tropes and speculations, for Byzantine chroniclers and hagiographers alike regarded islands as remote areas belonging to the frontier of the empire.¹³ As I will return to this later I would like to conclude this section by pointing out how archaeology has shed new light on the island of Malta. Indeed, recent excavations, the reassessment of old archaeological surveys, and numismatic and sigillographic evidence have all demonstrated that from the mid-seventh century the Maltese archipelago was not simply a distant outpost on the imperial frontier. Instead, the island shows a “degree of autonomous action in communal terms, managing to economically bridge the political divide existing between the Byzantines and the Arabs”.¹⁴ The best example of this peculiar role is an eighth/ninth-century seal of Niketas, *archon kai drouggarios* of Malta, which was not found on the archipelago or in a nearby region under Byzantine control, but rather surprisingly in Tunisia: tantalizing evidence of political contacts across the supposed north–south Mediterranean divide as well as the active role of insular authorities in maintaining open political backchannels with the Arabs.¹⁵

* * * * *

This prominence of archaeology (and material evidence) in trying to propose a different analytical approach to the fate and historical development of large Byzantine islands in the period under scrutiny should be regarded as the methodological complement to four crucial points I wish to present in the following pages.

The first has to do with the selection of islands I am proposing here. Indeed, the focus of my attention will be on some of the largest islands or archipelagos of the Mediterranean basin, such as Cyprus, Crete, Sardinia and the Balearics. Corsica will not be included in this selection because it was completely lost to the Lombards (and later to the Carolingians) at the beginning of the eighth century, and in any case its archaeology remains underdeveloped for the period under scrutiny.¹⁶ I am also deliberately leaving aside the pulverized Aegean insular system as an integral part of the Byzantine heartland, whereas Sicily and (partially) Malta will also be used in a comparative perspective.

Indeed, Sicily is the exception here partially because in the last 10 years it benefited from better (and better published) archaeology. As Vaccaro states: “The archaeology of Sicily has changed significantly in the last decade, with a marked increase in research on settlement patterns [...] in the period [between] the fourth to ninth century.”¹⁷ Moreover, Sicily has always attracted the attention of numismatists because its coinage maintained itself with far better continuities than even that of Constantinople itself in the Aegean half of the Byzantine heartland.¹⁸ Finally, Sicily has always been more familiar to Byzantine historiography due to its elevation to the rank of *theme* by Justinian II in ca.700, its importance as a source of grain for Constantinople after the loss of Egypt in 642, and by the famous journey of Constans II to the island, where he met his fate in

668.¹⁹ In this light it is not by chance that Laiou, Morriison and more recently Haldon have included Sicily as one of the two constitutive geo-political pillars of the empire.²⁰

The second point partially stems from the previous one, for I will try to move away from the historiographical perception of islands as lying at the margins of the political, military and strategic interests of Byzantium in a time when the Mediterranean became an economically fragmented, politically conflicted, religiously divided and culturally disputed space.²¹ In other words, islands have often been regarded by Byzantine historians and archaeologists simply as peripheral to the political, social and economic changes the Byzantine heartland was experiencing, from the mid-seventh century until they were recaptured by the gravity of an expanding empire in the tenth century (Crete and Cyprus), or were lost forever (Sardinia and the Balearics).²²

In fact, and this represents the third and most important point I would like to stress in this article, the archaeology of major urban sites on Byzantine islands prompts us to sketch a clearer, comparative picture of the process of socio-economic transformation experienced by the Mediterranean during the fragmentation and localization of a former unified exchange system. As Cosentino cogently proved: "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."²³ Here it is indeed important to note that Cosentino remains one of the unavoidable reference points of this contribution, as he has dedicated at least two important articles to the fate and developments of Byzantine islands during the transition from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages.²⁴ In these he focuses on both an assessment of the concept of insularity as expressed by Greek and Roman literary sources and a comparative overview of the archaeology and material culture of the islands of the Byzantine Mediterranean to draw a picture of an economically vital insular world. Indeed, Cosentino is perhaps the first to have used numismatic, sigillographic and ceramic evidence as well as archaeology to point to a more resilient economic insular world than the other regions of the Byzantine heartland, at least until the beginning of the ninth century.²⁵ One must nevertheless admit that ultimately it is Crete, Sicily and Cyprus which remain at the heart of his analysis, and some issues, like the importance of coastal urban sites and their relation to their territory, remain inevitably underexplored. In this light, and in a sense following in Cosentino's footsteps, I would use the idea of economic resilience as a starting point to also show that Constantinople remained vigilant and rather interested in their affairs (as showed by the persistence of Byzantine structures of fiscal, military and religious governance), whereas the local aristocracies and ecclesiastical elites revolved around Byzantium in terms of economic interests, political solidarities and socio-cultural identities.

The latter assertion should allow me to conjure up a fourth and final point to be addressed throughout the article. This has to do with the peculiarity of the insular administrative, fiscal structures, along with the socio-cultural and political flexibility showed by the fiscal representatives of the central government as well as the civic, military and religious authorities: a ruling class (the so-called *potentiores*) characterized essentially by the ownership (at different and various levels) of locally entrenched social and economic power.²⁶ Among their ranks one can find the actors of a cross-cultural dialogue which actively transcended the so-called Islamic-Byzantine frontier.²⁷ As we face a dearth of Byzantine or Muslim documentary and narrative sources mentioning Mediterranean insular spaces in the period under scrutiny,²⁸ it is indeed important to stress the geo-strategic vocation of islands to act as bridges connecting two or more political, cultural, religious and ethnic actors. This idea finds echoes once more in the selection of the islands in this contribution.

On the one hand, some of them (like the Balearics, Cyprus and possibly Malta) seem to have experienced a stronger political, cultural and economic influence on the part of the Islamic world, mainly owing to their proximity to the coasts of the major Muslim polities (both Caliphate and Emirate). On the other hand, others (like Sardinia, Crete and Sicily) remained embedded in the Byzantine political, military and fiscal structures of power. Nevertheless, they all actively participated (as demonstrated by the presence of Islamic seals and coins from different Sardinian sites)²⁹ in the creation of the peculiar medieval concept of frontiers defined as dynamic processes embodying cultural interactions often promoted by merchants and artisans, as well as diplomats, pilgrims, officials and even mercenaries.³⁰

II. Shedding archaeological light on the urban economic life of large Byzantine islands in the so-called Dark Ages

As already mentioned, scholarly interest in the large Byzantine islands in the period between the mid-seventh and early ninth centuries has been always limited. This partially owes to the fact that when we look at the major categories of archaeological material (in particular, coins and pottery) of the seventh to ninth centuries we are in uncharted territory.³¹ Indeed, this assertion holds even more validity for the insular spaces I have mentioned before. This is not to deny that we have good archaeology for at least some of the islands under scrutiny here, or that scholars have produced detailed and coherent studies for single islands as based upon material evidence coupled with the few literary and documentary sources (in Arabic and Greek).³² Nevertheless, Byzantine historiography has not produced an updated systematic account for large Byzantine islands in the early Middle Ages which can replace Malamut's book, entitled *Les îles de l'Empire Byzantin, VIIIe–XIIe siècles*. Malamut's survey still retains validity since it describes the peculiar notion of insularity for Byzantine chroniclers and hagiographers defining islands as the result of the intercourse between land and sea.³³

Exposed to the repeated Arab threats and often left to their own devices by the central Constantinopolitan authorities, insular aristocracies and local populations had no choice but to abandon the previously prosperous late antique urban settlements and find shelter either in the hilly countryside or in fortifications hastily built (or refurbished) to occupy a small portion of the classic urban landscape.³⁴ This model of urban development has, for instance, been proposed for Cyprus and Sardinia and also used in Sicily, as it often relied upon the difficulties (for different reasons) in pursuing urban archaeology on these islands.³⁵ For Cyprus, Veikou has indeed recently proposed to contextualize the location and relocation of urban sites (with particular reference to the Roman and Byzantine capitals of the islands) within a larger historical context of settlement.³⁶ This has allowed her to stress connectivity and exchange as key elements in explaining the development of Cypriot urban sites although incorporating political changes in the choice of new settlement.³⁷ In this light we are indeed in luck, because one of the best excavated and stratigraphically documented Byzantine cities for the period under scrutiny is Gortyn, the Byzantine capital of the island of Crete.

Notwithstanding the fact that Gortyn represented the main political-administrative and ecclesiastical centre of Crete, it seems to present remarkable similarities with other insular contexts (like Salamis-Constantia and Polis-Arsinoe in Cyprus, Olbia in Sardinia, and Agrigento and Syracuse in Sicily) in terms of the maintenance of urban fabric, spaces and planning, and/or the socio-economic vitalities of their religious and secular elites whose level of demand underpinned the

development of urban artisanal and commercial functions.³⁸ In Gortyn we are confronted with an urban landscape, which seemed to have maintained its coherence in terms of fabric and morphology well into the eighth century, although revealing the first traces of a changing type of urbanism (according to a model which Wickham and others have labelled as a “city of islands”).³⁹ “Classic” monumentality (for instance, the orthogonal road network around the Roman *Praetorium*), indeed, coexisted with artisanal workshops and commercial activities encroaching onto the public space and pointing to the considerable social and economic vitality of the ecclesiastical and administrative elites.⁴⁰

A good comparison for the urban social, cultural and economic dynamics documented for Gortyn can be found in Syria-Palestine. In this area, Walmsley and more recently Avni have indeed clearly shown that the “mechanisms of change [...] were not tightly connected with the major political events [Arab invasions], but rather with long term economic and social processes”.⁴¹ These included shifting priorities on the part of local elites concerning demand, production and consumption of goods; decline in international commerce and expansion of regional commercial trade networks; and a productive agricultural society which characterized the hinterland of cities.⁴² In fact, archaeological excavations and findings yielded in Gortyn seem to point to the eighth century as the real turning point in the socio-economic history of the city, as the Muslim attacks against the island did not affect the mobility of goods and people along the eastern Mediterranean trading routes.⁴³

Excavations in the area of the Roman *Praetorium* have shed light on a rather densely built residential/artisanal complex encroaching onto a former public space (the so-called “Byzantine houses” dated to the mid-seventh century).⁴⁴ It is worth noting that similar two-storied structures with a ground area and a mixed residential-artisanal destination have been unearthed in mid-seventh-century Palmyra, Scythopolis-Bet Shean and Pella-Fihl in Syria-Palestine, as well as in Salamis-Constantia in Cyprus (in the so-called “Huilerie” complex, dated to the second half of the seventh century).⁴⁵ It is, however, important to avoid a purely economic interpretation of the above-mentioned buildings in terms of a continuous level of demand (and production) as underpinned by resilient and urban-oriented elites. This not to discount the fact that, as Avni and Wickham have concluded, it is not useful to regard demonumentalization, the narrowing of streets, and the projection of private buildings onto public spaces as a sign of decay and decline, but rather as markers of change of use and reconversion for a wide range of artisanal and commercial purposes.⁴⁶

However, one should also focus on a socio-anthropological approach so as to highlight aspects of the history of urban contexts conceived as place, toward an archaeology of people and their everyday lives. In this light, recent research has pointed to the importance of investigating structures meant to satisfy the two most basic needs of an urban population: bread and water.⁴⁷ Tracing the latter helps us to better grasp the organization of the urban spaces destined to everyday activity, whereas the former allows us to understand how those spaces were functioning.⁴⁸ In particular, the multifaceted relationship between the water system, the built landscape and the inhabitants has been interpreted as an indicator of population levels, density and occupation of urban landscape and the political status and power of new “private” individuals presiding over the management and location of the distribution outlets.⁴⁹

Indeed, the attention given to the urban water-supply system and its development in Gortyn encourages us to further reassess phenomena like infilling/encroachment,

squatting and industrialization, along with the ruralization of urban spaces as not the outcome of a pauperization of economic and social lives, or of diminishing control over the urban fabric and planning on the part of the local political authorities. We can trace the emergence of a polycentric but still coherent urban landscape with “islands of settlement” made of commercial shops and artisanal workshops with residential housing. In Gortyn the archaeological evidence focusing on the problem of water supply seems to point to a double water system (rain and cistern-fountains) that collected, stored and redistributed water within single properties as water availability was more localized and/or privatized. This should mirror the abovementioned changing character of the urban ruling class with religious, administrative and military functions: a social group whose political power and status may be elusive in terms of archaeological evidence, but whose traces are preserved in the flow of Gortynian waters.⁵⁰

Last but not least, an analysis of the systems of water adduction and distribution allows us to fully weigh up the changing aspects of the osmotic relation between *polis* and *chora* in the passage from late antique to the early Middle Ages: a middle class made of artisans and peasants which seemed to have left the countryside to migrate to a city which retained its role as main actor of a socio-economic system based upon non-parasitic elites and monetary circulation.⁵¹ This is even more important for urban insular spaces, for islands like Crete have often been documented as places where refugees found shelter de facto, thereby tipping the demographic balance and helping to fill the population gaps brought about by Persian and later Arab raids, as well as plagues.⁵²

In this light, Gortyn emerged as a hub connecting the microsystem of local artisanal and agricultural productions with the larger (and increasingly fragmented) Mediterranean macro-system linked to production and distribution of goods on a larger (regional) scale.⁵³ This functional and virtuous relationship was broken only from the 720s (possibly due to a catastrophic earthquake) as also enhanced by the analysis of numismatic, ceramic and architectural evidence.⁵⁴ On the one hand, a real interruption of the remarkably continuous monetary circulation has been documented only from 715 onwards.⁵⁵ On the other hand, the analysis of pottery showed the presence of locally produced, highly decorated painted wares and imported Glazed White Wares (a type of pottery produced in Constantinople from the mid-seventh-century onwards) have been yielded together with amphorae of a type found exclusively in the Imperial capital in late seventh- and early eighth-century contexts.⁵⁶ In this light, ceramic evidence seem to point to the importance of the city within the local (micro) and medium-distance (macro) Eastern Mediterranean exchange patterns, also underscoring the consistency of shipping links with Constantinople.⁵⁷

Finally, one should mention here the Cretan archbishop Andreas, whose hagiography was compiled by one *patrikios* and *kouaistor* Niketas.⁵⁸ According to Niketas, the archbishop had a long and successful career, culminating with his appointment as Metropolitan of Crete (an office he held from 711 to his death in 740). He seems to have sponsored a large spate of building activity, focusing on the systematic restoration or erection of churches.

A good example of the latter is offered by the construction of a large complex including a hospital and a church dedicated to the *Theotokos Blachernitissa* (possibly the modern church of St Titos) with clear reference to the homonymous church in Constantinople.⁵⁹ The evergetism of the archbishop was clearly aimed at enhancing the importance of Gortyn as both the main religious centre of the island (as shown by the refurbishment of the Cathedral of Mitropolis along the River Mitropolianos) and a hub

along Eastern Mediterranean pilgrimage routes. Central to his purpose was also the promotion of the memorial cult of St Titus, as evidenced by the new iconography appearing on the archbishopric's lead seals.⁶⁰

This tallies with the increasing role played by the local clergy and the Metropolitan in the insular administrative-bureaucratic machinery and political structure of governance, which in all probability were located in the walled area of the acropolis, where the local governor and military authorities also resided.⁶¹ Bearing this in mind, it is worth mentioning that the lead seals belonging to *kommerkiarioi*, *archontes*, *spatharioi* and *stratelates*, as well as to a *Vestitor* and *Protonotarios* of the Imperial Treasury, all dated to the eighth century. They prove that the island was integral both to the Byzantine administrative system and to its military machinery.⁶²

The picture that can be drawn from Gortyn seems to be confirmed by recent archaeological studies of the Byzantine fortifications on the island, which have prompted us to move beyond the idea of depopulated and abandoned coastal sites being replaced by smaller inland fortified settlements due to the Arab raids.⁶³ As Tzigonaki and Sarris argue:

Through the study of the fortifications [of coastal sites like Matala], the issue of the abandonment of the cities of Crete in the seventh century is placed on a new footing [for] strong similarities of the masonry style, building technique and general forms with Gortyn and Eleutherna postpone them to the seventh-beginning of the eighth century.⁶⁴

Moreover, ceramic, sigillographic and numismatic evidence indicate a continuous frequentation and development of sites like Pseira, Elutherna and Priniatikos-Pyrgos.⁶⁵

To sum up, the archaeology and material culture supplementing the scarce literary sources allow us to draw a picture of the complex political and socio-economic dynamics presiding over the changing urban character of an insular capital city. The urban fabric and planning seems to have developed along a “city of islands” model as different foci of settlement emerged across the classic urban landscape: the walled acropolis; the ecclesiastical complex of *Blachernitissa* (St Titos); and the area around the cathedral (which seemed to have been in use well into the ninth century).⁶⁶ These foci allow us to reconstruct the presence of local religious, military and political elites within the urban landscape. Meanwhile, the localized system of adduction and distribution of water points to the existence of suburbs where artisanal and commercial activities continued at least until the first decades of the eighth century.⁶⁷ Therefore, archaeology and material evidence can be used to push the focus of the urban “analysis beyond the imperial-aristocratic end of the spectrum”,⁶⁸ since we are able to trace the tangible footprints of those daily activities that characterized urban life at other than an elite level, as also reflected by the above-mentioned presence in different areas of the city of locally made pottery dated to the seventh/eighth century.⁶⁹

A similar interpretation of the changes of urban social structures, political governance and economic life as reflected in urban fabric and planning can be proposed for other insular urban sites, although these have not been as systematically excavated and investigated as Gortyn. As I have mentioned elsewhere, it is, for instance, possible to document a multifunctional image with different foci of settlement in seventh-to-ninth-century Salamis-Constantia, the ecclesiastical and political capital of the island of Cyprus.⁷⁰ Indeed, the city did not simply shrink in size during the passage from late

antiquity to the early Middle Ages. The construction of a new, well-built fortified enclosure, presumably in the second half of the seventh century, which deliberately cut one of the main axes of urban circulation (the *Cardo Maximus*), reflects a degree of planning on the part of the local elites, and also the availability of resources. Recent excavations have also revealed that a monumental gate was constructed at the former intersection of the *Cardo* and *Decumanus*, proving that the new fortifications were carefully and deliberately devised to retain part of the ancient street grid.⁷¹ The walled area occupied a large (and elevated) portion of the classic cityscape and clearly responded to defensive needs; one should, however, point out that it also boasted the church of St Epiphanius, an early fifth-century basilica that was repeatedly refurbished and remained in use until the ninth century as the seat of the Cypriot archbishop.⁷²

In other words, architectural and archaeological evidence speaks against the idea of a forced retreat of the local population behind hastily built fortifications in the face of the Arab invasions. In this light, we should also note that although a new wall cut the aqueduct supplying the city, a huge cistern (the so-called *Vouta*) was built inside the walled area, and at least a second one seemed to have been in use *extra-moenia*, reminiscent of the water-supply system documented for Gortyn.⁷³ The ban on archaeological activities in the city (and the whole northern half of Cyprus) due to the Turkish occupation in 1974, however, makes it impossible to document the “flow of Salaminian water” any further. It is nevertheless possible to surmise that the urban fabric and social structures were not simply heavily militarized or reduced to the *intra-moenia* area.

Outside the fortified enceinte, a late seventh-/early eighth-century artisanal phase of occupation of the abovementioned “Huilerie” complex, a former Roman urban villa, provides evidence of economic activity and continuity. It is not by chance that the complex composed of three residential/workshop units lay along the long road (the former *Decumanus*) connecting the monumental gate with the harbour. It is interesting to note that a similar complex has been documented in Polis-Arsinoe (on the north-westernmost corner of the island) and dated to the mid-eighth century.⁷⁴ Another important religious building stood a few metres from the “Huilerie”. It was an important religious marker within Salamis-Constantia’s urban landscape known as the Campanopetra Basilica.⁷⁵ The church (originally built in the early fifth century) hosted an unknown relic (possibly a fragment of the True Cross), and therefore lay at the heart of the pilgrimage routes for the Holy Land (together with the cathedral of St Epiphanius). Both churches were indeed visited by an English pilgrim, Willibald, who made a layover in Cyprus on his way to Jerusalem in the 720s.⁷⁶

Members of the high clergy, pilgrims, local aristocrats and state officials all contributed to sustain the economic resilience of the city as revealed by ceramic, sigillographic and numismatic evidence. Red-slip wares imported from the Levant well into the eighth century, as well as locally hand- or wheel-made pottery exported to south Anatolia and Syria-Palestine, suggest that the harbour of Salamis-Constantia remained active, frequented and also enhanced by those Cypriots (probably merchants) who travelled in two ships to and from the Syrian harbour of Gabala (modern Jabala), thus presenting us with a good parallel to those eighth-century Arab cargo owners who left their inscriptions on some amphorae unearthed in Paphos (where an artisanal and domestic quarter with traces of Arab occupation has been unearthed in the harbour area).⁷⁷

Coins are a good complement to the ceramic evidence because the local coinage record includes specimens issued by the Constantinopolitan authority, along with late seventh- and early eighth-century Arab-Byzantine and Islamic post-reform coins.⁷⁸ If we

also consider that Islamic *fulus* seem to have circulated widely within the city, it is possible to point to a trans-cultural and trans-regional acceptance of different monetary units (Byzantine and Umayyad), possibly owing to the peculiar political status of Cyprus as mentioned by Theophanes the Confessor:

In this year [685–86] Abimelech sent emissaries to Justinian to ratify the peace which 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 part the tax revenues of Cyprus, Armenia, and Iberia.⁷⁹

The treaty is reminiscent of the aforementioned settlement (later) ratified by the Spanish Umayyads and the Byzantines. It is also interesting to note here that lead seals issued by the caliphal authorities were circulating on the island, bearing the peculiar denomination *Qubrus*, which led Prigent to think of original forms of long-term socio-political coexistence.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, sigillographic evidence from Salamis-Constantia speaks of a city (and an island) deeply ingrained in Byzantine administrative structures, fiscal machinery and a political hierarchical relationship of power. Lead seals bearing high-court titles like *spatharioi* prove that the middle-ranking officers and state officials came from a local privileged background: that is, from families having a network of patronage, ample wealth and sufficient literacy to attain imperial dignities. One of these families – the *Phaggoumenes* – is in all probability referred to by Constantine Porphyrogenetos as part of an embassy the Byzantines sent to the Caliph during the second reign of Justinian II (705–711 AD).⁸¹

It is thus possible to conclude that in Salamis-Constantia, as well as Gortyn, local ecclesiastical and secular elites remained urban oriented and preserved a resilient though flexible degree of loyalty to Constantinople. The coherence of the urban landscape and fabric as well as urban economic life benefited from the presence of the wealthy classes, for life in the city was not hemmed in by the walls, but “overflowed” the fortified enceinte with myriad foci of artisanal and commercial activities, along with religious and pilgrimage presences around the harbour.

This concurs with the interests of the Byzantine state, which had clearly invested political and administrative effort and injected conspicuous wealth in the city, as evidenced by the massive and astutely designed defence walls. Such investments were part of the strategic role Cyprus acquired vis-à-vis the Caliphate, especially from the last quarter of the seventh century onwards.⁸² The presence of the army (and navy) provided the urban economy with a stimulus that helped the city and its harbour to survive well into the ninth century. Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the ability of local elites to navigate the fluctuating tides of eastern Mediterranean politics without undermining what Haldon describes as the Christian-Roman ideological solidarity with the Capital.⁸³

This allowed the city and its harbour (and the island in general) to become a hotbed of cross-cultural interactions, mainly owing to the geographical position at the intersection of regional and sub-regional Mediterranean shipping routes.⁸⁴ It should be noted that the evolving socio-political and socio-economic conditions also dictated the tempo of the encounters between different cultural systems; but one should also assume the importance of the geographical mobility and the variety of socio-political actors in the circulation of goods and ideas, and likewise in the moulding of local political and cultural identities. On islands like Cyprus and the Balearics the fluidity of these

processes can be witnessed beyond the obvious military and diplomatic interactions between Damascus (or Cordoba) and Constantinople, as local aristocrats and traders “are living witness to the formation and existence of third spaces of hybridity, that is of areas of transition between cultural areas”.⁸⁵ That islands could play such a role is further endorsed by Vionis, who cogently observes that islands were more often zones of cross-imperial interaction than cultural barriers between antagonistic empires. Notably, there are two features intrinsic to the island condition, the first indicating material connectivity and religious affiliation with Constantinople; the second entailing intensive encounters with new people and the acceptance of the social, cultural and political values of their counterparts.⁸⁶

However, as Haldon himself asserts, things are not so simple: “The notion of [Christian]-Roman identity needs to be deployed with care, since it has different valences according to social and cultural circumstances and according to the demands of the moments.”⁸⁷ The latter conclusion implies an unproductive, monolithic approach to the ideological and territorial bond between Constantinople and its periphery, particularly as its validity needs testing with regard to insular spaces other than the Balearics and Cyprus, such as Sardinia.

Notably, after the 660s Sardinia gradually acquired increasing importance as a Byzantine naval base in the central Mediterranean against the Muslims and other enemies (the Lombards and later the Franks).⁸⁸ Moreover the loss of North Africa to the Muslims (Carthage fell in 698) brought about the transfer of the African mint to Cagliari, which remained active until the first quarter of the eighth century.⁸⁹ Unfortunately no material evidence remains of these rather scarce references to monetary circulation on the island, though it is intriguing to note that Lombard gold coins were in use in the eighth century, as evidenced by various *tremisses* dated to the reign of Liutprand found in a burial within the *martyrium* of San Lussorio, along with others in the Ossi hoard, and in at least two different rural settlements across the island.⁹⁰ For Fois, the gold *tremisses* relate to the trade of such holy relics as the body of St Augustine, which was translated to Pavia in the third decade of the eighth century.⁹¹

Such evidence suggests that Sardinia did not simply turn into a military outpost on the frontier of the Muslim world, but was rather a hub of intersection between regional (in particular with Rome, Naples and Ischia as showed by Misenian amphorae and the so-called Forum Wares found in different sites across the island) and medium- and long-distance commercial networks reaching as far as Constantinople in one direction and Umayyad Spain in the other.⁹² In this light, it is worth noting that recent excavations at the urban harbour of Olbia have yielded evidence of continuous commercial activities well into the ninth century (though falling drastically in the seventh century), a fact that runs counter to the traditional narrative of the city’s abandonment in the sixth century after a Vandal incursion.⁹³ Unfortunately, urban archaeology so far covers only a limited number of Sardinian sites for the period under scrutiny here. This lacuna is due not so much to the repeated Arab raids targeting the island from the mid-seventh century⁹⁴ as to the lack of attention urban archaeologists gave to the Vandal and Byzantine layers before the 1980s.⁹⁵

As already mentioned, the raids indeed caused the elevation of Sardinia to “a higher naval status due to the increased Muslim (and Lombard) pressure with the following (687–695) transfer of the Byzantine military command of the exarchate to Sardinia”.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, excavations in Cagliari and Olbia have shown that the demise of Sardinian cities can be explained simply in the opposition of shrinkage–fortification versus

Christianization–sanctuary, as proposed by Spanu.⁹⁷ Cagliari acted as the religious and political capital of the island.⁹⁸ The Sardinian Metropolitan resided in the city, as repeatedly mentioned in letters by Gregory the Great, who also attests to the existence of both urban and suburban monasteries and religious institutions.⁹⁹ In particular, it is worth mentioning here the well-excavated sanctuary of St Saturno, which apparently lay outside the city walls and has been generically dated to the sixth/early seventh century on the basis of archaeological and documentary evidence.¹⁰⁰ A church (dated to the sixth century) was built around the site of the supposed *martyrium* of the saint, in an area to the east of the classic urban centre. Soon afterward a cemetery developed around it for burials belonging to local bishops and Byzantine officials; this remained in use until the late seventh century, and possibly even beyond.¹⁰¹

St Saturno was also an important pilgrimage site, and its peripheral location with regard to the central and fortified urban areas is not a feature unique to Cagliari; indeed, other sanctuaries similarly developed in other Sardinian cities, such as Sulcis, where a group of catacombs developed into a shrine, and eventually a church dedicated to St Antioch; the church had a Greek-cross plan with a dome, and was refurbished and redecorated in the eighth and again the ninth/tenth century.¹⁰² To return to Cagliari, it is clear that the city was the main administrative and political centre of the island – as confirmed by literary (Ehinard's *Annales*) and material evidence (the transfer of the African mint mentioned earlier) – while its harbour may have hosted a detachment of the Byzantine fleet.¹⁰³ The multi-functional role played by Cagliari and its importance for the Constantinopolitan elites may have translated into an urban landscape of a polycentric nature (reminiscent of the fate of other urban centres such as Salamis-Constantia and Gortyn), a pattern also fostered by the distinct geo-morphologic character of the territory itself.¹⁰⁴

In the absence of a broad range of documented excavations, we must seek other types of evidence to confirm (or disprove) the picture of resilient Sardinian urbanism in Olbia and Cagliari. One starting point could be the continuous use of some of the Roman roads crisscrossing the island, or the rather curious case of Arithianis, a city documented for the first time in the seventh century, where sixth-century officials boasting Byzantine titles have been documented, along with a church dedicated to the Virgin, which was restored in the ninth century.¹⁰⁵ The most significant item of evidence, however, is a cache of over 90 Byzantine lead seals in Latin and Greek that were discovered in the area of San Giorgio di Sinis, not far from Cagliari.¹⁰⁶

These date to the period between the sixth and eighth centuries and point to the continuous correspondence between the local authorities and the Constantinopolitan court. They point to the capacity of the island to defend itself against the Arabs and a squadron of the Byzantine navy has been documented as active in the western Mediterranean into the ninth century and possibly even beyond.¹⁰⁷ The seals also point to the strong links and loyalty of the local elites as further enhanced by the famous Greek inscription celebrating a great victory of the Sardinian consul and *dux* Constantine, possibly dated to the mid-eighth century.¹⁰⁸

Like in other areas of Italy like Naples and Venice, the *dux* was most probably at the head of a complex hierarchy of local administrators which included the medium-rank officials bearing Byzantine titles of rank (like *kubikouarios* or *ypatos*) mentioned in some of the above-mentioned seals and deeply enmeshed in the political Byzantine ideology. This emerges from Constantine's inscription, which evinces both a notably high level of Greek literacy and an unusual dedicatory formulation in tune with the

Christian imperial theology cited earlier.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the celebration of the “position held by Imperial authority in the chain of ideological connections between divine authority and God” ties in with the continued use of the Greek language by the local elites, as denoted by the number of religious buildings dedicated to Byzantine military saints dotting the Sardinian rural landscape between the sixth and tenth centuries.¹¹⁰ Some of these churches boasted celebratory inscriptions (dated to the late ninth/tenth century), once again using refined Greek, and related to local aristocratic families actively financing the construction or refurbishment of ecclesiastical buildings. That these families were ideologically and politically seeking the type of legitimacy that stems from Constantinopolitan socio-cultural models is further endorsed by the title of *archon Sardiniae*, which is mentioned in the tenth-century *De Ceremoniis Aulae Byzantinae*.¹¹¹

Material evidence yielded at different Sardinian urban and rural sites testifies to the presence of compact military contingents located along the main terrestrial routes. Worth mentioning here are the large quantities of military accoutrements such as belt buckles, armour plates and weapons, found in seventh/eighth-century burials at Nuoro and Orifici.¹¹² In particular, the excavations at the so-called “Tomba della Cintura” (Tomb of the Belt) in St Lussorius-Forum Traiani have unearthed a belt made of re-used copper coins, whose latest specimens were issued by Tiberius III Apsimar (r. 698–705), and a so-called “Bologna-type” buckle dated to the first decade of the eighth century.¹¹³ Similar buckles have turned up in tombs created from megalithic *nuraghe*, dated to the period between the sixth and eighth centuries, with inscriptions referring to “Byzantine troops” detached on the island.¹¹⁴ As Decker has noted, bronze buckles could be ideally paired with the Byzantine-style jewels also found in Sardinia, along with “additional material [metalwork] found in Olbia [which] underscores [...] the persistence of an elite in the Balkans and the Mediterranean who, through personal adornments, displayed a preference for Constantinopolitan fashion and the survival of an imperial cultural *koine*”.¹¹⁵ As I have already mentioned, proof of Sardinia’s belonging to the Constantinopolitan *koine* could be traced both through material culture (architecture and inscriptions) and language (Greek) well into the tenth century.

Effectively, this evidence bolsters the conclusion that Sardinia retained a resilient political, military and ideological bond with Constantinople, although this link did not exclude “un-orthodox” political initiatives (along the lines drawn for the Balearics), as exemplified by the tribute paid to the Umayyad emirate, or the embassy sent to the Carolingians in 815 to request their help against the Andalusians. In this light, it is the very peculiarity of the local insular administrative and political patterns of government which help us to reassess the supposed political and military marginality of Byzantine Mediterranean islands. Indeed, as will be seen, Sardinia – as well as Cyprus, Crete, Malta and the Balearics – never became part of a formal thematic organization. In fact, sigillographic evidence seems to show a rather deliberate strategy on the part of the Byzantine authorities tending towards the creation of *themes* in areas regarded as political and military outposts (like Sicily) crucial to the survival of the capital; whereas *archontes* (as chosen among the ranks of the local elites) were appointed as head of local administration in areas of the empire, and remained formally under control of Constantinople (because of their strategic importance) while de facto enjoying a large degree of autonomy. In other words, we may trace the sort of adaptation of the insular structures of governance common to territories that were integrated into the empire’s culture and religion, despite being located on its fringe. For instance, the existence of decentralized and flexible political structures has been recently documented for Cyprus,

which became a real “middle ground” between the Byzantines and the Umayyads.¹¹⁶ In light of this it would also be interesting to assess the role the *archontes* played with regard to the local squadrons of the Byzantine navy, since we know for instance that in a later period the Sardinian fleet patrolled the western Mediterranean waters, and indeed won a crushing battle against the Andalusian pirates in 812.¹¹⁷

Taking all this into account, it is important to use Sicily as a backcloth against which to project the image of socio-economic transformation experienced by the cited Byzantine islands during the fragmentation and localization of the Mediterranean exchange system. On the one hand, Sicily has been rightly identified as the imperial territory par excellence. As Haldon argues: “The importance of resources of the island meant that the government paid a great deal more attention to it and it remained under the more direct imperial management and [...] control until the second decade of the ninth century.”¹¹⁸ As Nef and Prigent cogently showed, Sicily was a fiscal catalyst for the southern Italian territories (Calabria and Puglia) still in Byzantine hands, while being an effective bridge (especially after the creation of the Sicilian *theme*) between the Constantinopolitan court and the western Mediterranean, owing to the island’s major role as a source of grain for the imperial government since the time of Heraclius.¹¹⁹ On the other hand, Sicily provides us with a picture of socio-political and economic life which bears striking similarities with other insular contexts; as Molinari and Vaccaro conclude, the introduction of a thematic system did not cause the “castralization” of rural sites or “the incastellamento” of towns and rural settlements. In particular Molinari argues that “[the model of Byzantine *incastellamento*] in Sicily finds insufficient support from the available archaeological evidence [as] it is largely based on the evidence provided by the Arab chronicles compiled after the [Aghlabid] invasion”.¹²⁰ Indeed, notwithstanding its role as naval base for Byzantium, Sicily continued to lie at the very heart of an inter-regional system of exchange, as shown by the ceramic assemblages and circulation of coins for the seventh-to-ninth century period.¹²¹

Indeed, in Sicily, material indicators point to an island roughly divided into its western and eastern halves, based upon the distribution of globular amphorae (see later in this article) and lead-glazed wares.¹²² On the one hand, western Sicily was part of the Tyrrhenian system of exchange connecting it with Sardinia and the Balearics, and also with western Italy. As Vaccaro has cogently stressed: “The circulation of these [ceramic] types links a series of sites in central and southern Tyrrhenian sea including those in north-western Sicily, the bay of Naples, Rome, Ostia, Portus and Cagliari where the Church of Rome has substantial landholdings.”¹²³ On the other hand, eastern Sicily was more linked to the Aegean and Constantinople via the “ancient trunk route” as identified by McCormick.¹²⁴ The analysis of the abundant sigillographic evidence yielded on the islands also shows that – at least until the ninth century – Sicilian elites identified themselves in full with the imperial administration reproducing a model (that of an aristocracy of function reflected by the resilience of a diminished monetary economy), which indicates the extraordinarily strong political bond with Constantinople in a way reminiscent of Sardinia.¹²⁵ This bond is further demonstrated by sigillographic evidence, to which I will return shortly.

It comes as no surprise that secular and ecclesiastical elites remained mostly urban-oriented. If until a few years ago Sicilian urban life could only be conjured up *in absentia*, and although we are still without the same amount of controlled stratigraphic archaeology as in other insular capitals like Cyprus (Salamis-Constantia), Crete (Gortyn) or Sardinia (Cagliari), it is now clear that “Sicily remained a land of cities during the

entire Byzantine period”.¹²⁶ Indeed, one should remember that “it was from his new capital Syracuse [that] Constans II issued legislation on fiscal matters regarding western provinces [including Sardinia]”.¹²⁷

Furthermore, Syracuse can – as Maurici and Kislinger have shown – be regarded as exceptional because it was the main administrative, ecclesiastical, political and military centre of the island (*polis basileousa* in the words of the ninth-century Theodosios the Monk) until the Aghlabid invasion in the first half of the ninth century.¹²⁸ Although the city shrank and tended to focus on the island of Ortygia, whose harbour was still frequented by pilgrims such as Willibald and protected by a double enceinte (generically dated to the seventh/eighth century), we know that in Syracuse the Temple of Athena was converted into the city cathedral sometime in the late seventh century, as it had become the seat of the newly appointed local autocephalic archbishop.¹²⁹ Moreover, an eighth- or ninth-century inscription showing the existence of an *embollator ton krouseion* (a functionary certifying the quality of gold) indicates the existence of local workshops specialized in metalworking.¹³⁰ To this one should also add the evidence of (possibly) locally produced D-shape type buckles which correspond with finger rings, earrings, locks and keys, *hystera* amulets and weights – all of which bear strong resemblance to examples within the empire. At best, these items are tenable indicators of vectors of cultural exchange and sustained contacts between Sicily and the rest of the Byzantine world. Some may indicate trade.¹³¹

Notably, other Sicilian cities – even those located on the coast – survived, while experiencing functional and structural changes of their urban landscape and socio-economic fabric. In Agrigento, located on the southern coast of the island, there is archaeological evidence of a requalification of the urban life which was not confined to the old acropolis (Girgenti), but continued in some parts of the former classic landscape, as shown by the continuous occupation of the area of the so-called Hellenistic-Roman residential quarter, where new houses were built (possibly dated to the eighth century),¹³² and the classic street grid was still operational (in a way reminding us of Gortyn as well as of Naples and Kherson).¹³³ While “a low-intensity occupation characterized most of the old city of Agrigento”, its harbour remained in use and clearly benefited from the Tyrrhenian–Aegean link with connection to Carthage, Palermo and Rome (as enhanced by numismatic and ceramic evidence).¹³⁴ Finally, the presence of two pottery workshops, the continuity of the necropolis well into the eighth century, the erection of the new cathedral dedicated to St Gregory (possibly in the seventh century), and a second basilica near the so-called Villa of Athena (restored in the ninth century), run counter to the idea of an abandonment of coastal urban sites or their survival simply as centres fortified against Arab raids.¹³⁵

This is not to deny that Sicilian cities like Catania, Taormina and Palermo were not endowed with new fortified areas, but rather to question that that urban life was limited to small *intra-moenia* areas.¹³⁶ This surmise is backed up by numismatic and above all sigillographic evidence, and not least by the analysis of the circulation of globular amphorae – the most widespread ceramic containers in this period. In point of fact, in the eighth and ninth centuries Syracuse hosted one of the very few Byzantine operational mints outside Constantinople, and its coinage (both copper and gold) enjoyed far greater continuity in the Aegean half of Byzantine heartland than did coins minted in Constantinople itself.¹³⁷ Not only did seventh-to-tenth century coins minted in Syracuse travel across the Mediterranean and beyond, but lead seals belonging to local authorities also made their way far and wide.¹³⁸

There is insufficient space here to address in detail the large number of seals yielded on the island.¹³⁹ However, it is important to conclude with Kislinger that Sicilian lead seals (as found in Palermo, Syracuse, Cefalù and Catania) provide us with a thorough overview of the different levels of provincial civil administration, while documenting the presence of military detachments, local magnates and *kommerkiarioi*.¹⁴⁰ As Nef and Prigent have stated, the analysis of Sicilian lead seals (their title and functions) reveals the extraordinary level of loyalty shown by local elites toward the Constantinopolitan power, a fact endorsed by the diffusion of the Greek language among the local elites (in a way reminiscent of Sardinia), and by the circulation of the so-called chafing dishes circulating on the island.¹⁴¹ These dishes illustrate the reinforcement of socio-cultural ties through the exchange of gifts between Constantinople and the local Byzantine elites and military officers.¹⁴² Worth mentioning here is the discovery in Cyprus of two eighth-century lead seals belonging to a Sicilian *kommerkiarios* and to one Konstantinos, *spatharios* and *strategos* of Sicily.¹⁴³ The sigillographic link between the two islands ties in with the presence of at least two *folles* of the Syracusan mint yielded on the island which seem to point to some kind of connectivity between the so-called Eastern and Western Mediterranean early medieval shipping networks (respectively centred on Cyprus and Sicily).¹⁴⁴ Connectivity was further enhanced by the circulation of globular wine amphorae, a relative standardized container (dated to the eighth century and beyond), which testify to regional and interregional Mediterranean commercial and non-commercial (state-supported) shipping networks.¹⁴⁵ Globular amphorae were imported and were related to a partially monetarized economy, and have helped to identify resilient commercial activities in sites like Malta and Cyprus, where economic life was not hampered by their location along the Byzantine-Muslim maritime frontier.¹⁴⁶

Without doubt, Sicily was one of the fiscal foci of the empire after the fall of the eastern provinces to the Arabs, a fact shown by the confiscation of the large papal landowning patrimony (famously documented by Gregory the Great in his late sixth-/early seventh-century letters) by Emperor Leo III in the 720s.¹⁴⁷ This fact is confirmed by the closure of the African mint, which moved to Cagliari in the first half of the eighth century, and by a series of ecclesiastical and fiscal reforms introduced by the Constantinopolitan government in the same period.¹⁴⁸ Notwithstanding its socio-political, administrative and fiscal peculiarities (which led Haldon and Laiou-Morrisson to “attach” Sicily to the heartland of the Byzantine Empire), one should regard the island less as an exception to the process of marginalization of the insular world by Byzantium and more as an augmented reality for the economic resilience, urban-coastal continuity and socio-political inclusivity of islands within an empire that would never die. Finally, the comparative example of Sicily is significant in methodological terms, owing to “the dearth of literary evidence and the impossibility of proposing an alternate discourse based on archaeology, which until few decades ago was completely underdeveloped”.¹⁴⁹ The recent developments of Byzantine and medieval archaeology have indeed shed new and unexpected light on the *siècles obscurs* of Sicilian history, countermanding some of the traditional historiographic narratives;¹⁵⁰ one can only imagine how new excavations and the analysis of material indicators (ceramic containers, pottery, coins and particularly lead seals) might similarly contribute to an overall reassessment of the role played by the large islands at the so-called periphery of the Byzantine Empire in transition from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages.

III. Conclusions

As seen in the previous pages, archaeology and a refined analysis of material indicators as paired with the meagre literary and documentary sources available clearly show that although the large islands of the Byzantine Mediterranean experienced the consequences of the fragmentation and compartmentalization of the Mediterranean, and the significant downturn of trading activities from the late sixth century onwards, the mid-seventh century Arab raids did not sever the political, cultural, social and commercial links between the islands and the nearby Mediterranean regions.¹⁵¹ Islands were not relegated to the margins of the Byzantine political and administrative system, and likewise the ecclesiastical exchange even with “distant” outposts like the Balearic archipelago remained under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople.¹⁵² Although experiencing rather diverse geo-political and socio-cultural trajectories, the islands of Cyprus, Crete, Sardinia, the Balearics (and Malta) played an important role in the survival of the empire in the passage from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, a role that Sicily embodied in a more “archaeologically visible” way thanks to its fiscal, administrative and political proximity to the Constantinopolitan court.

More importantly, the islands’ local ecclesiastical and secular elites (often with the help of fiscal administrators or officials sent from Constantinople) remained sufficiently vital and cohesive to sustain levels of economic demand and foster networks of medium-distance (regional) and even interregional exchange. This picture is vindicated by the fact that coastal urban settlements like Salamis-Constantia, Gortyn, Cagliari and Syracuse – and to some extent Agrigento, Paphos and Olbia – did not disappear or shrink behind hastily built walls, but instead showed resilience in economic, political, ecclesiastical and administrative terms, while changing and adapting their functional urban landscape, fabric and planning.¹⁵³

This scenario allows us to conclude not only that the Mediterranean islands experienced a rather peculiar but nevertheless persistent “incorporation of the vested interests of the provincial elites into the ideological and political concerns of the Imperial court” well into the eighth century.¹⁵⁴ This incorporation may have come with the occasional setback, exemplified by the request for help against Muslim pirates issued by the inhabitants of the Balearics to the Carolingians at the end of the eighth century, or the payment of a tribute to the Umayyad Spanish Emir “independently” decided by the Sardinians in 752–753, or the division of local taxation between the Caliph and the Emperor in Cyprus. Such setbacks are less an indication of the betrayal of a monolithic Christian-Roman imperial identity, and instead show the ability of local elites and populations to fashion flexible and malleable identities required when facing peculiar and temporary political or military difficulties. As mentioned, flexible political tactics and administrative structures (*dux* and *archontate*) were also adopted by the Constantinopolitan government, which seemed well aware of the ability of insular inhabitants to exercise cross-cultural interaction. Expressions of this that come to mind include Cyprus and the Balearics, which Arab sources defined as *dar al-Ahd*; or objects like the Mozarabic prayer-book owned by one *Fl[avius] Sergius bicidominus S[anc]t[is] Ecl[esie] Caralitane* in the eighth century; or the role of secular or ecclesiastical members of Cypriot elites acting as diplomats and ambassadors to Baghdad (such as the eighth-century *Phangoumeneis* and the tenth-century Archbishop Damianos).¹⁵⁵

Nevertheless, the political and diplomatic records point to the continuous significance that the western Mediterranean had for Byzantium, and to the enduring socio-political and ideological loyalty that the insular elites showed to a distant emperor – and this notwithstanding the existence of viable political alternatives (al-Andalus for the

Balearics, Carolingians for Sardinia and the Caliphate for Cyprus), as well as the absence of a strong central thematic army (although local detachments of the navy existed).¹⁵⁶ If the Constantinopolitan homeward bond lingered, insular elites also showed a good degree of creative cultural political strategies taking advantage of their position at the frontier between different areas of influence; therefore, the Christian-Roman ideology became only one of the components contributing to the creation of local identities. As Holmes points out, identities should be understood less as an imposition of boundaries, and instead as a development of shared beliefs and practices.¹⁵⁷ These, as mentioned earlier, were often implemented by local actors (often but not exclusively the elites) as mediators and cultural brokers whose multicultural skills made them incapable of fitting into established patterns of ethnic, cultural or religious identity.

Although the history of the large Byzantine islands in the ninth and tenth centuries represents another chapter that still remains partially unwritten, it is worth noting that islands continued to play an important role for Constantinople as connective hubs across the frontier with peculiar local political, social and cultural structures. Odd as it may seem, their importance can be also documented even for those islands located at the farthest extreme of the Byzantine Mediterranean immediately after the fall of the Sicilian thematic outpost in the year 902. It is moreover worth noting that before and after the Balearics finally fell into al-Andalusian hands in 903, an intense commercial and diplomatic activity can be documented between Cordoba and Constantinople.¹⁵⁸ Also worth mentioning is the proposal of a military alliance between al-Andalus and the empire against the Egyptian Fatimids, contained in a letter sent by the Caliph Abd-al Rahman III to Constantine Porphyrogenetos (who eventually rebuffed it) in 955–956.¹⁵⁹ In fact, the fall of the Balearics owed less to the lack of interest on the part of the Byzantines in the fate of a supposedly distant outlier of the empire than to an unconventional exercise of *realpolitik*. In a sense, the surrender of the archipelago should be interpreted as a deliberate choice made by Constantinople, which sacrificed a territory in order to bolster a tacit political-military and commercial bond with Cordoba.¹⁶⁰

To conclude, two intertwining themes run through this brief contribution. The first revolves around the economics of insular societies, while the second stresses the importance of islands as connective hubs with peculiar local political, social and cultural structures which remained within the Byzantine sphere of influence for longer than previously thought. I hope my readers will be clement here, as I am perfectly aware that this foray marks merely the start of a long enquiry, since some islands (like Corsica) have not been included, while others (like Crete or Malta) require further attention; of course numerous other aspects of island economies (*in primis* the rural landscape) have also not been included.

Readers may also object to the fact that the peculiarities discussed earlier may also be characteristic of some contemporary coastal or even small mid-sea islands. One could think for instance of the site of Limyra on the Cilician coast, or Comacchio on the Adriatic lagoon-crescent, where analysis of pottery has revealed that these cities remained active commercial hubs across trans-Mediterranean shipping routes until the late ninth century.¹⁶¹ Alternatively we could also mention the recent survey of the islands of Dana-Boğsak on the southern coast of Anatolia, which in most periods functioned as an occasional, opportunistic port and refuge for sailors, peaking only in the Hellenistic and Roman times when “it was the site of a permanent settlement; a maritime station comprising a large variety of services”.¹⁶² In light of this, clearly what characterizes

large islands is in fact more than simply the ease of travel on the waters, or the variety of products produced and traded through their coastal regions.

That said, I have managed to present at least some of the elements that can help to define these islands not only as resilient economic spaces, but also as places where political expediency, complex socio-cultural interactions, and creative identity-building processes are mirrored in the archaeological record; moreover, these elements may be more perceivable in places like Cyprus and the Balearics owing to their geopolitical location.

In other words, it seems to me that large islands were not simply marginal frontiers or far-flung outposts stranded between two enemy coastlines and victims of the decline that supposedly engulfed the periphery of the empire in the aftermath of the Muslim invasions. This perspective alters under the new light brought by the extensive findings of material culture, whereby coinage, seals and ceramics shift the balance between margins and metropolis, and point to the relatively stronger welfare of the insular world compared to the Anatolian plateau and the Aegean region; a welfare that reflected both the uninterrupted, albeit diminished, role the islands played within the Mediterranean shipping routes linking the eastern and western basin of the Mediterranean with the Aegean and Constantinople, indicating the persistence of levels of demand, and of regular if not frequent regional and sub-regional contacts; and, lastly, underscoring the peculiar political and administrative structures moulded by the political or military difficulties of the hour.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Rainbird, *The Archaeology*, 8.
2. *Ibid.*, 6–10. I am referring here to Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner* (better known as *Robinson Crusoe*) first published in 1719 (Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*), and to the movie *Castaway* (2008) starring Tom Hanks.
3. Constantakopoulou, *The Dance*, 5.
4. Cosentino, "Mentality", 65–70; Cosentino, "A Longer Antiquity", 93–7.
5. Cosentino, "Mentality", 67. On connectivity, see mainly Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*.
6. As Rainbird states: "Those who live with the seas may be regarded as having [...] a willingness [...] to participate in the [...] expectations of continual encounter with otherness, at home or elsewhere." Rainbird, *The Archaeology*, 64. See also Veikou, "Mediterranean", 49–51, and Veikou, "Byzantine Histories".
7. Kaegi, *Muslim Expansion*, 115.
8. Patriarch Nikephoros, *Short History*, 190; 229; Pseudo-Sebeos, *The Armenian History*, 97.
9. *Corpus Juris Civilis* II, *Constitutiones*, IX, 47, 25; *Novellae* CXLII, 1, 705. See on this Bulgarella, "Bisanzio e le Isole".
10. *Vita Euthymii Sardensis*, 36–46.

11. Victor of Tunnuna, *Chronica*, 27; see also Baxter Wolk, *Conquerors and Chroniclers*, 5; and Vallejo Girvès, *Hispania Y Byzancio*, 450–1.
12. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 18.
13. Cosentino, “Mentality”, 70ff.
14. Bruno and Cutajar, “Amphorae”, 28–9.
15. Molinari, “Sicily”; and Nef and Prigent, “Per una nuova storia”.
16. As opposed to the sixth–seventh century period on which some archaeological light has been shed by the studies of Daniel Istria and Philippe Pergola (Istria and Pergola, “La Corse”, with further bibliography).
17. Rizzo, “Agrigento”; Rizzo, “Anfore”; Rizzo and Zambito, “Ceramiche”; Prigent, “La Sicilie”; Molinari, “Sicily”; Fallico and Guzzetta, “Recenti”, 713ff; Zanini, *Le Italie*, 282ff.; Christie, *From Constantine*, passim; Valpreda, “Bisanzio”. Quotation from Vaccaro, “Sicily”, 35.
18. Morrison, “La Sicile”; Guzzetta, “Moneta locale”; Fallico and Guzzetta, “Recenti”; Callegher, “Annotazioni”.
19. Nef and Prigent, “Per una nuova storia”, 3–30.
20. Laiou and Morrison, *Byzantine Economy*; Haldon, *The Empire*.
21. McCormick, *The Origins*; Decker, *Byzantine Dark Ages*, 155–9 with further bibliography. Also (but now outdated) Ahrweiler, *Byzance et la Mer*.
22. See for instance Haldon, *The Palgrave Atlas*; Jeffreys, Haldon, and Cormack, *Oxford Handbook*; James, *A Companion* and Decker, *Byzantine Dark Ages*. It is also interesting to note that the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* has no entry concerning the concept of island or insularity.
23. Cosentino, “Mentality”, 73.
24. Cosentino “A Longer Antiquity”, and Cosentino, “Mentality”.
25. Ibid.
26. Zanini, “Archeologia”, 27.
27. Eger, *The Islamic*.
28. For a full account of the Muslim and Byzantine sources which deals directly and indirectly with the cited islands see Picard, *La Mer del Calife*, Balard and Picard, *La Méditerranée*, and Jeffreys and Pryor, *The Age of Dromon*.
29. Spanu and Zucca, *I Sigilli*, 142–5.
30. Balard, “Les acteurs”, 54; Eger, *The Islamic*, 10.
31. Decker, *Byzantine Dark Ages*, 43.
32. Worth mentioning here are the contributions of Bruno on Malta (Bruno, *Roman and Byzantine*; Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus*) and Zavagno (Zavagno, *Cyprus*) on Cyprus, Tzougarakis (Tzougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*) on Crete and Signes-Codoñer (Signes-Codoñer, “Bizancio”) on the Balearics. However, one must admit that on some of these islands, like Malta, the Balearics and to some degree Crete, archaeology is still in its infancy and analysis of ceramics is often missing; seals and coins are also only published piecemeal.
33. Malamut, *Les îles*, 2; 33–4.
34. Malamut, *Les îles*, 286–8.
35. Spanu, *La Sardegna*; Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus*, 490ff.; Maurici, “La città”.
36. Veikou, “One Island, Three Capitals”.
37. Veikou, “One Island, Three Capitals”, 362–3.
38. Zanini “Città”; Zanini “Creta”; Baldini et al., “Gortina”, 241–8; Giorgi, *Archeologia*.
39. Wickham, *Framing*, 669–90.
40. Zanini, “Indagini”.
41. Avni “From Polis”.
42. Avni, “From Polis”, 329.
43. Baldini et al., “Gortina”, 246, 253.
44. Zanini, “Città”, 114–16.
45. Tsafir and Foerster, “Urbanism”; Wickham, *Framing*, 616–17; Walmsley, *Early Islamic*, 127–32; Walmsley, “Households”; Zavagno, “A Wonderful”, 126.
46. Wickham, *Framing*, 615–19. Also Avni, “From Polis” and Kennedy, “From Polis”.
47. Zanini, “Appunti”; Giorgi, *Archeologia*.
48. Zanini, “Appunti”, 373.
49. Giorgi, *Archeologia*, 91.

50. Zanini, "Coming to an End", 136.
51. Zanini, "Città", 119.
52. Baldini et al., "Gortina", 279.
53. Zanini, "Appunti", 373.
54. Baldini et al., "Gortina", 268.
55. Ibid.
56. On the local painted wares and their distribution see Vroom "Lymira", 272 and Vroom "From One Coast", 368–70.
57. Vroom, "From One Coast", 280–90.
58. *Vita Andreae Hierosol*, 169–79.
59. Baldini et al., "Gortina", 275–8.
60. Baldini et al., "Gortina", 252.
61. Taramelli, "Gortyna".
62. Tzougarakis, *Byzantine Crete*, 176–7; Baldini et al., "Gortina", 246.
63. On this, see Tzigonaki-Sarris "Recapturing", with further bibliography.
64. Ibid., 6–7.
65. Poulou-Papademetriou and Nodarou, "La céramique"; Klontza-Jaklovà, "The Byzantine Sequences"; Yangaki, *La Céramique*.
66. Baldini et al., "Gortina", 276.
67. See Zanini, "Coming to an End", 136.
68. Rautman, "Archaeology", 145.
69. Baldini et al., "Gortina", 280–90.
70. Zavagno, "A Wonderful".
71. Öztaner, "Salamis-Constantia", 208–10.
72. Stewart, *Domes of Heaven*, 62–73.
73. Zavagno, "A Wonderful", 118–20, with further bibliography.
74. Caraher-Papalexandrou, "Arsinoe", 273–4.
75. Megaw, "Campanopetra Reconsidered".
76. Willibald, quoted in Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 22.
77. Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus*, 177, 445; Megaw, "Reflections". See also Zavagno "At the Edge" for a full account of the economy of the island in the transition from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages.
78. See Callot, *Salamine*, and Zavagno, "Betwixt".
79. Theophanes, *Chronicle*, 506. On the treaty, see Zavagno, *Cyprus*, 80–2, with further bibliography.
80. Prigent, "Chypre", 82.
81. *De Administrando Imperio*, 224–5.
82. Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, 324–43.
83. Haldon, *The Empire*, 93–119.
84. Veikou, "Mediterranean", 39–41.
85. Abdellatif et al., "Les acteurs", 16.
86. Vionis, "Reading Art", 116–17.
87. Vionis, "Reading Art", 111.
88. Kaegi, "Byzantine Sardinia", 51.
89. Grierson, *Byzantine Coins*, 122; Cosentino, "La Sardegna", 65.
90. Spanu, *La Sardegna*, 72–3; Manunza, "I recenti scavi", 92; Rowling Jr., *The Periphery*, 139.
91. Fois, "Il ruolo", 19.
92. Martorelli, "Status Quaestionis", 76–7.
93. D'Oriano, Pietra, and Riccardi, "Nuovi dati"; Christie, *From Constantine*, 316ff.
94. Kaegi, "Byzantine Sardinia", 49–51.
95. Rowland Jr., *The Periphery*, 126–30.
96. Kaegi, "Byzantine Sardinia", 51.
97. Spanu, "Iterum est", 605. For Cagliari, see Pani Ermini and Spanu, *Aspetti*; Spanu, *La Sardegna*, passim; Martorelli, "Status Quaestionis"; Cisci, "Cagliari"; Spanu, "Iterum est", 606–8, with further bibliography; for Olbia, D'Oriano, Pietra, and Riccardi, "Nuovi dati".
98. Spanu, *La Sardegna*, 20–38.
99. Gregory, *Epistolae*, XIII, 4.
100. Procopius, *Bell. Goth.* IV, 24–31–32; Spanu, *La Sardegna*, 22–6.

101. Spanu, *La Sardegna*, 31–2; Pani Ermini, “La Sardegna”, 311–6; Salvi, “Ad Ovest”, 141–2; Rowland Jr., *The Periphery*, 130.
102. Rowland Jr., *The Periphery*, 131–2.
103. Eginardo, *Annales*, 202: 815 A.D. *legati Sardorum de Carali civitate dona ferentes venerunt*.
104. Mongiu, quoted in Pani Ermini, “La Sardegna”, 309.
105. Georg. Cypr., *Descriptio*, 35; 110–1; Spanu, *La Sardegna*, 64–5; Zecca, “I centri urbani”, 109.
106. Spanu and Zucca, *I Sigilli*.
107. Cosentino, “Re-Analyzing”, 78.
108. Rowland Jr., *The Periphery*, 144; also Cosentino, “Potere e Istituzioni”, 7.
109. Haldon, *The Empire*, 79–119. The quotation in the next sentence is from 81.
110. Rowland Jr., *The Periphery*, 146; also Cosentino, “Re-Analyzing”, 73–5.
111. Cosentino, “Potere e Istituzioni”, 9–10; *De Caerimoniis*, II, 48, 690.
112. Cosentino, “Potere e Istituzioni”, 11. See also Rowland Jr., *The Periphery*, 144.
113. Zecca, “I centri urbani”, 113–4; Manunza, “I recenti scavi”, 104.
114. Spanu, “Viabilità”, 120–2.
115. See Decker, *Byzantine Dark Ages*, 171.
116. Zavagno, *An Island*, 83–94.
117. Signes de Codoñer, “Bizancio”, 39–42.
118. Haldon, *The Empire*, 210–12.
119. Nef and Prigent, “Per una nuova storia”, 35–6, 9–63; also Vaccaro, “Sicily”, 50–5; Prigent, “Le Rôle”; and Prigent, “La circulation”; Zanini, *Le Italie Bizantine*, 89–99; Haldon, *The Empire*, 240–1.
120. Vaccaro, “Sicily”, 38.
121. Molinari, “Sicily”, 106; Vaccaro, “Sicily”; *contra* Kislinger, “La città”.
122. Vaccaro, “Sicily”, 57–60.
123. *Ibid.*, 57.
124. Molinari, “Sicily”; Vaccaro, “Sicily”, 58–9; McCormick, *The Origins*, 501ff.; Curta, “Postcards”, 97.
125. Nef and Prigent, “Per una nuova storia”, 40–2.
126. Maurici, “La città”, 113.
127. Haldon, *The Empire*, 207.
128. See Satta, *La conquista*, 43–5.
129. Maurici, “La città”, 122–4; 126; Kislinger, “La città”, 151.
130. Valpreda, “Bisanzio”, 80–1.
131. See Decker, *Byzantine Dark Ages*, 171.
132. Rizzo, “Anfore”, 414–15 (dating was made possible by pottery sherds yielded in the area and in particular so-called “Lucerne a ciabatta” and LRD type Hayes 105 and 91); also Maurici, “La città”, 124–5.
133. Curta, “Postcards”, 98–9.
134. Maurici, “La città”, 125.
135. Kislinger, “La città”, 150.
136. Maurici, “La città”, 155–7.
137. Morrisson, “La Sicile”, 307–34; Prigent, “La circulation”; Vaccaro, “Sicily”, 50–5; Fallico and Guzzetta, “Recenti apporti”; Guzzetta, “Moneta locale”; Callegher, “Annotazioni”.
138. Morrisson, “Byzantine Money”, 929ff.; Vaccaro “Sicily”, 47–8.
139. Kislinger and Seibt, “Sigilli Bizantini”; Nef and Prigent, “Per una nuova storia”, 13–15; Kislinger, “La città”, 152–3; also Ragia, “The Geography” and Brandes, *Finanzverwaltung*, 331–44.
140. Kislinger, “La città”, 152–3.
141. Nef and Prigent, “Per una nuova storia”, 22.
142. Vaccaro, “Sicily”, 60.
143. Zavagno, *An Island*, 88.
144. Chris Wickham (pers. comment delivered during his lecture at the Congress “Patterns of Transition in Economy and Trade throughout Late Antique, Early Medieval and Islamicate Mediterranean”, Berlin, Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 4–7 October 2017).

145. Molinari, “Sicily”, 106.
146. Vaccaro, “Sicily”, 57.
147. Haldon, *The Empire*, 240–61; Zuckermann, “Learning”, 100–5.
148. Nef and Pringent, “Per una nuova storia”, 23–4.
149. Zavagno, *An Island*, 16.
150. Nef and Pringent, “Per una nuova storia”, 148.4.
151. Martorelli, “Status Quaestionis”.
152. Signes-Codoñer, “Bizancio”.
153. Zanini, “Archeologia”, 27.
154. Haldon, *The Empire*, 291.
155. Rowling Jr., *The Periphery*, 149; Zavagno, *An Island*, 82–4, 93–4; Brubaker, “The Elephant”, 190.
156. Haldon, *The Empire*, 290–1.
157. Holmes, “Shared”, 32.
158. Signes-Codoñer, “Bizancio”, 62–5.
159. Al Qadi al-Nu‘man, *Kitab al-Majalis*, 166.
160. Signes-Codoñer, “Bizancio”, 67.
161. On Lymira and Comacchio, see Vroom, “Lymira”; and Vroom, “The Byzantine Web” with further bibliography.
162. Varinoğlu et al., “The 2010 Dana Survey”, 58.

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