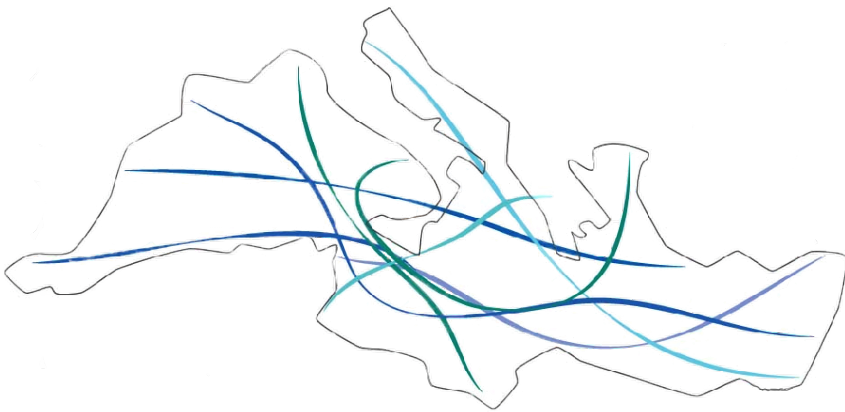


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Economic networks and social interactions in the Byzantine koinè: settlement pattern in the Adriatic Sea between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (ca. 600-ca. 900 CE.)



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Economic networks and social interactions in the Byzantine koinè: settlement pattern in the Adriatic Sea between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (ca. 600-ca. 900 CE.)

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to compare the unfolding of urban trajectories in some coastal urban centers located in the so-called Byzantine koinè during the passage from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages (i.e., between ca. 600 and ca. 900). In this light, the contribution will focus on a few important harbors and/or coastal sites located in Dalmatia (Zadar), southern Adriatic (Butrint), and the so-called Adriatic crescent (Comacchio and Civitas Nova Heracliana) as famously described by Michael McCormick. Indeed, the increased focus on the coins, seals, and ceramics as yielded in stratigraphically-aware excavations allows us to sketch commonalities in the social, administrative, political, and military functions of urban and urban-like settlements located in coastal (like the Adriatic itself) or insular areas too often regarded as peripheral to the so-called Byzantine heartland (the Aegean and the Anatolian plateau) in the period under scrutiny. In fact, these areas were part a geographically scattered but economically and administrative inclusive and socially coherent set of spaces (the Byzantine koinè) also having a common importance as vectors for regional and trans-Mediterranean commerce and social movements.

Therefore, the paper takes its cue from the fragmentation of the Mediterranean as an economically disjointed, socio-politically conflictual, religiously divided, and culturally disputed space at the turn of the eighth century; nevertheless, it summons the scanty literary and documentary sources for the period (as paired with archaeology) to highlight the role played by major harbor-urban sites on the Adriatic coasts as they boasted a good level of socio-economic activity, as predicated upon resilient trade links, shipping routes, and social movements between the western and eastern half on the Mediterranean.

Keywords: Byzantine Empire, Adriatic Sea, Cities, Harbors, Koinè.

Redes económicas e interacciones sociales en la koiné bizantina: patrones de asentamiento en el Mar Adriático entre la Antigüedad tardía y la Alta Edad Media (c. 600 - c. 900 d.C.)

Este trabajo examina el desarrollo de los esquemas de asentamiento a lo largo de los espacios costeros del Mar Adriático entre los siglos VII y finales del IX, con el fin de examinar también el concepto de conectividad como intrínseco a la koiné bizantina altomedieval. De hecho, el término koiné bizantino se refiere a un espacio geográficamente disperso pero inclusivo, y coherente en términos socioeconómicos, así como políticos, fiscales y administrativos. Dicho espacio (que también incluía zonas insulares) estaba formado tanto por una serie de sitios como por aquellos indicadores de cultura material (como las ánforas globulares) que han salido a la luz recientemente en diversas zonas del Adriático, el Tirreno y el Mediterráneo oriental.

Por lo tanto, estos sugieren un cierto propósito común y una unidad de carácter sociocultural extendida a esferas diferentes (en términos sociales, políticos, administrativos y militares), pero siempre dentro del territorio controlado por Constantinopla. A través de una selección de sitios "urbanos" y casi-urbanos incluidos en la ya mencionada koiné -situados a lo largo de la costa adriática (Comacchio, Civitas Nova Heracliana, Zadar y Butrint)- y sobre la base de recientes excavaciones arqueológicas y análisis de la cultura material, se demostrará la capacidad de recuperación de un Mediterráneo fragmentado económica y políticamente, pero aún vital y conectado. De hecho, los sitios incluidos en este artículo deben considerarse centros de una nueva organización social, política y económica del Adriático (y el Mediterráneo) bizantino; una organización que, sin duda, era más fluida que la unificadora del Mare Nostrum romano tardío, pero que seguía dependiendo de las rutas comerciales marítimas tanto locales como transregionales.

Palabras clave: Imperio Bizantino, Mar Adriático, Ciudades, Puertos, Koiné

Reti economiche e interazioni sociali nella koinè bizantina: modelli insediativi nell'Adriatico tra Tarda Antichità e Alto Medioevo (circa 600-circa 900 d.C.)

Sinossi

Il presente contributo esamina lo sviluppo dei modelli insediativi lungo gli spazi costieri dell'Adriatico tra il settimo e il tardo nono secolo, cioè al fine di esaminare, altresì, il concetto di connettività inteso come intrinseco alla koinè bizantina altomedievale. Il termine koinè bizantina si riferisce infatti a uno spazio geograficamente sparso ma inclusivo e coerente sia sotto l'aspetto socioeconomico che sotto quello politico, fiscale, e amministrativo. Tale spazio (che includeva anche ambiti isolani) era costituito tanto da una serie di siti quanto da quegli indicatori di cultura materiale (come le anfore globulari) recentemente venuti alla luce in diverse aree dell'Adriatico, del Tirreno e del Mediterraneo orientale. Essi suggeriscono, quindi, una certa comunanza di intenti e un'unità di natura socioculturale estesa a una serie di ambiti diversi (in termini sociali, politici, amministrativi, e militari), ma sempre all'interno del territorio sotto il controllo di Costantinopoli. Attraverso una selezione di siti "urbani" e quasi-urbani inclusi nella sullodata koinè -ubicati lungo le coste adriatiche (Comacchio, Civitas Nova Heracliana, Zadar, e Butrinto)- e sulla base di recenti scavi archeologici e analisi della cultura materiale, si dimostrerà la resilienza di un Mediterraneo economicamente e politicamente parcellizzato ma ancora vitale e connesso. I siti inclusi in questo contributo, infatti, devono essere considerati come centri di una nuova organizzazione sociale, politica, ed economica dell'Adriatico (e del Mediterraneo) Bizantino; un'organizzazione certo più fluida di quella unificatrice del mare nostrum tardo romano, ma ancora incardinata sulle rotte del commercio marittimo tanto locali quanto trans-regionali.

Parole chiave: Impero Bizantino, Mare Adriatico, Città, Porti, Koiné

*Economic networks and social interactions in the
Byzantine koinè: settlement pattern in the Adriatic
Sea between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages
(ca. 600-ca. 900 CE.)*

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1. The Adriatic facies of the Byzantine koinè.

The role of insular and coastal spaces in the history of the Byzantine empire has often been overlooked by historians and archaeologists alike. For instance, only in the last decade has the importance of the large Byzantine islands lying beyond the Aegean Sea been appraised and brought to scholarly attention (Zanini, Michaelides, and Pergola 2013; Cau Ontiveros-Mas Florit 2019). On the one hand, this has clearly to do with the predominant socio-cultural, economic, political, religious, and administrative importance of Constantinople as a capital of the Eastern Roman empire: a real megalopolis of the Middle Ages around which the whole resources of the so-called Byzantine economic and shipping network gravitated (Zanini 2022; Wickham in press). On the other hand, and partially stemming from this, one should stress the role of islands and coastal settlements. As they were not part and parcel of the so-called Byzantine heartland (comprising the Aegean Sea and the Anatolian plateau (Wickham 2005a, pp. 29-32), Byzantine historiography has often conceptualized these settlements as distant peripheries away from the pumping heart of the socio-economic life of the empire.

As Holmes points out, this owes to:

a negative stereotypization of provinces, for they have been seen as Constantinople's poor relations, the objects of ruthless exploitation by the imperial fisc, as well as cultural backwaters, where any perceptible vibrancy is explicable only

in terms of metropolitan influence. In this context, inhabitants of the [peripheries] have all too often been typified as disgruntled dissidents eager to escape the yoke of the imperial center rather than as participants in a wider imperial project. (Holmes 2010, p. 55)

Byzantinists should be partially excused here, however, for the “people of Byzantium” (or as they called themselves, the Romans inhabiting the eastern provinces of the formerly unified Empire (Sarris 2015, pp. 1-6) did not get on well with the sea at large. This notwithstanding the importance of the *Mare Nostrum* in characterizing a thalassocracy that lasted well into Late Antiquity (Carile 2004) and the very fact that the (Ancient and) Medieval Mediterranean could only be controlled if one rules its islands as well as strategic passageways like straits or peninsulas) (Picard 2015, pp. 229-35) This is shown for instance by the history of the eastern Adriatic coast (with its pulverized insularscape) (Baloup, Bramoullé, Doumerc, and Joudiou 2012, p. 43).

Indeed, two preliminary provisos should be panned out. First, I am perfectly aware that not all coastal or insular areas and not all their foci of habitation are by nature nodes in a continuous chain of structure; if the sea may bring up opportunities for the continuity and unity of human space, its cliffs and coasts are a frontier pointing towards isolation which occurs but does not exclusively dictate the tempo of their existence (Asdrachas 2017, p. 5). Second, it is important to provide an analytical framing that can encompass both the coastal spaces and the islands of an Empire that went through a drastic fragmentation (in terms of economic, fiscal, administrative, and military structures) in the passage from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages (the period under scrutiny here) (McCormick 2001; Wickham 2009; Valérien 2014). This represented a critical period in the history of an “empire that would not die” (Haldon 2016) as it spanned the end of the reign of Justinian I (527-565) to the “naval ambitions” Basil I (867-886) who ruled during a time crucial to the formation of an Orthodox Christian-Roman Empire.

In this light, I will use the term Byzantine *koinè* to define a geographically scattered but economically and administrative inclusive and socially coherent space (Veikou 2015; Arthur 2012; Vroom 2008); a space where the different political and strategic roles played

by each of the coastal and insular outposts chimed with their common importance as vectors for regional and trans-Mediterranean commerce and social movements. Indeed, we are confronted with a series of sites as well as artifacts (like globular amphorae) that have come to light across the Mediterranean and suggest a certain common intent and socio-cultural unity on a number of different (social, political, administrative, and military) levels across and within Byzantine-controlled territory (Arthur 2012, p. 339).

In this paper, I will, therefore, briefly examine the trajectories of the settlement pattern along the coast of the Adriatic Sea. This is in order to stress the concept of connectivity as both intrinsic to the insular and coastal spaces constituting the Byzantine *koinè* and a corollary to the strategic position these hold across Mediterranean shipping routes (Cosentino 2013). This is not simply due to the fact that the Adriatic has been defined as an abridged Mediterranean: a small *sinus* and a maritime corridor configuring the Italian peninsula and the Balkans (Ivetic 2019, p. 11); but also because it presents us with the opportunity to examine the interactions between local Byzantine metropolis (like Sicily and its *thematic* organization) and regional margins (like the Dalmatian archontate) at the frontier between the Carolingian and the Constantinopolitan spheres of influences between the seventh and the late ninth centuries (Skoblar 2021).

As a result, I will address the historical trajectories of three urban-like settlements as centered around the importance of their harbors along Adriatic and Mediterranean shipping lanes: Comacchio, Zadar, and Butrint. Indeed, as Veikou cogently remarks: “throughout the history of Byzantium, ports, and harbors provided a frontline service in the administrative, military and economic chain which linked the different parts of the empire as well as linking the empire with the rest of the known world” (Veikou 2015, p. 39). Taking my cue from this, I will try to drive home a second point. Indeed, my aim is to show how the Adriatic “seasides” of Byzantium (Preiser-Kapeller, Koliass, and Daim 2021) encased the development of the process of commercial and political communication (as well as social movements) across the Mediterranean boundaries which necessitated and at the same time nurtured flexible tactics of political survival.

These tactics were compounded by episodes of conflict. A few could be listed here: the Carolingian attempt to conquer the Byzantine *Venetia Maritima* in the early ninth century (Ortalli 2021, pp. 69-85); the repeated Arab raids in the southern Adriatic culminating in the creation of city-emirates of Bari and Taranto in the mid ninth century (Kreutz 1996, pp. 25-45; Bondioli 2018); the socio-political tensions in early ninth century Istria (as shown by the Plea of Rižana (Brown 1984, pp. 123-39). In fact, the abovementioned flexibility often predicated upon the ability of the Byzantine bureaucratic and fiscal machinery (as well as local detachments of the Constantinopolitan navy and its commanders) to react and adjust to the ebbs and flows of Mediterranean politics like in the aftermath of the fall of Ravenna to the Lombards in 751 or the signing of the treaty of Aachen with Charlemagne in 812) (Brown 2021).

Indeed, in this paper, both literary and documentary sources will be paired with material culture to address the role played by residential state officials and ecclesiastical hierarchies (as often dispatched from Constantinople via the Sicilian theme), as well as local elites, in underpinning resilient urban activities (socio-cultural, commercial, and artisanal) along the Adriatic coast; it will also be seen how these activities reflected a reasonable density and coherence of settlement at the expense of public spaces and monuments (Zavagno 2009, pp. 1-30).

As a result, it is important to stress two further remarks in tune with a conclusion to this introductory section. This concerns the choice of sites to be presented on the following pages. The first has to do with the selection per se. On the one hand, and as partially mentioned, I will be focusing my attention on settlements that cannot simply be defined as “gateway communities.” They are indeed characterized by the promotion of social contact and cultural and economic interchange; they are often morphing into “mid-seized sites neither wholly urban nor wholly rural” (Veikou 2015, 51) as their inhabitants grabbed the opportunity for economic growth by simply taking advantage of their location astride major maritime routes. A good example of these is offered by the harbor of Saranda in the southern Adriatic. Saranda was a flourishing hub of

disembarkation for pilgrims heading to a nearby basilica, which remained frequented until the early tenth century (Molla 2017; Vroom 2017c). In fact, my focus will not be simply on harbors as gateway or hubs located across shipping routes but rather on those sites which often retained urban functions, landscape, and fabric while also continuing to play an important role in the seventh-to-ninth century regional and inter-regional shipping routes.

As a consequence, and this is the final point I want to drive home here, it will be possible to countermand the traditional historiographical narrative. According to it, in the face of two conflicting polities (the Byzantine Empire and the Caliphate or Byzantine and Lombard-Carolingians), coastal sites could only survive if they retained political importance (as the capital of themes, for instance) or military relevance as strategic and fortified strongholds along a maritime no man's land. The fate of sites like Butrint, Comacchio, and Zadar should help us to dispel the notion that only urban sites which played a prominent role in state-oriented shipping networks or were part and parcel of the social, administrative, and military (regionally-based) organization of the empire (in particular of its navy), could boast but faint traces economic, social and political life.

2. The coastal seaside(s) of the Byzantine (and not) Adriatic between the seventh and the tenth century.

Better and better-published archaeology, as well as a more attentive and chronologically aware analysis of the most important material indicator of human activity (i.e., pottery), have been brought to scholarly attention in the last forty years, so it is now possible to sketch a clearer comparative picture which Decker regards as essential to reconstruct the precise nature of urban life in the so-called Dark Ages of the Byzantine Empire (Decker 2016, pp. 81-122). On the one hand, one should point to the existence of the abovementioned Byzantine *koinè* as central to the distribution and consumption patterns of pottery (and amphorae in particular) with an axis from Eastern Mediterranean to the Northwest (Adriatic) and

Northeast (Black Sea) (Vroom 2017c, p. 296). In a fragmented post-Roman Mediterranean, geographical distance mattered less than the distance between nodes of a network. This even when these nodes were not politically or militarily relevant settlements, but they acted more as zones of (social and economic) contact (Negrelli 2012, pp. 232-4; Darling 2012, p. 60); on the other hand, one could notice how these nodes often retained urban functions although expressed throughout concepts of planning, fabric, and landscape and social organization, which clearly differs from the Classical one (Zavagno, 2020).

With this in mind, we should move to the Adriatic in order to examine the interactions between this region (as part of the Byzantine *koinè*) and the imperial world at large (Wickham 2005b). Indeed, in the Adriatic sea, we have two of the best stratigraphically excavated sites for the period under scrutiny: Butrint on the south-eastern corner of the Adriatic (Hodges-Bowden 2005; Kamani 2011; Hodges 2012; Greenslade 2019; Hodges 2021) and Comacchio (Gelichi 2012; Gelichi 2017) on its north-western one; the former was a city with a long Classical past located on a promontory jutting into the north bank of a natural canal (Vivari Channel) connecting it with the Adriatic sea (Decker 2016, p. 92). However, as Decker remarks: “by the early seventh century, it amounted to a little more than a modest village within the ruins of [a big] Greek-Roman city. [Here] scant finds of pottery indicate low-density occupation from the seventh to the ninth centuries.” (Decker 2016, p. 96). So, at first sight, we are confronted with an image of a rather isolated center whose few inhabitants were occupying the former acropolis. It was encircled by a set of walls (built in the fifth century) to be finally abandoned in the mid-eighth century after a rather catastrophic downturn (whose causes remain unknown) (Bowden and Hodges 2012, pp. 213-7; Hodges 2021, pp. 23-24).

Nevertheless, the scant literary sources (the Life of Saint Elias the Younger -on which I will return later- the 754 *Notitia Episcopatum*, and the travels log of Arsenios of Corfu in the late

ninth century¹), as well as archaeological evidence, reveal that the city remained central to the Byzantine administrative and military machinery (although with a nadir in the late eighth-early ninth century (Decker 2016, 98). Excavations have not provided us with a detailed picture of the urban fabric and landscape. Nevertheless, it is clear that Butrint lodged Byzantine political and military authorities. Excavations have shed light on the so-called Archon's house (*oikos*) dated to the ninth century and occupying the ruins of the fifth-century church to the south of the walled town; the *oikos* yielded both a series of bronze folles spanning the mid-ninth to the late tenth century, and a silver *miliaresion* issued by Leo VI (886-912) and, finally, five Byzantine lead seals. They all confirm the role of this building complex as the seat of the local administrative and military authorities (Bowden and Hodges 2012, p. 212). Decorative metal furnishings and jewelry associated with socially prestigious burials have also been documented in Butrint, together with a large array of wine containers of southern Italian provenance and imported and locally-made pottery.

In particular, the ceramic, as well as glass culets and metalwork, yielded in two collapsed towers of the walled enceinte (all dated between the seventh and eighth century) presents us with a complex picture (Hodges 2012, p. 224). In fact, the findings consisted mainly of coarse wares of local production and -in particular- imported globular amphorae (Vroom 2017, p. 288). Poulou-Papadimitriou has cogently defined as: “a new family of transport vessels appearing in the 7th century and soon becoming the main form for trade all over the Empire and those regions maintaining contact with Byzantine heartlands.” (Poulou-Papadimitriou 2018, p. 48). They seem to have been produced between the seventh and the tenth century (with different types, styles, and morphology) in the Eastern Mediterranean (Cyprus, Southern Anatolia, and Eastern Aegean) as a south Adriatic (Otranto). A Tyrrhenian production has also been documented (Arthur 2012, pp. 343-4; Vroom 2016, pp. 182-6). As globular amphorae are recognized as guide fossils for both micro, regional, and long-distance trade in the

¹ Arsenios of Corfu (876–953) apparently visited Epirus to plead with Slav pirates to desist their raids, recorded that Butrint was rich in fish and oysters, with a fertile hinterland (Bowden and Hodges 2012, p. 212).

period under scrutiny, those yielded by excavations at Butrint point to an Aegean provenance (based on petrographic analysis) (Vroom 2017a; Armstrong 2020; Vroom 2021).

However, one should look at the ceramic finds from the point of view of both trade and shipping, as well as their socio-cultural functionality (Arthur 2007; Decker 2016, pp. 175-80). On the one hand, globular amphorae were smaller than their late Roman predecessors and more suitable for short hopping trampling. On the other hand, glazed chafing dishes and portable cooking wares were also found; these types of pottery bear striking similarities with exemplars found in the western coast of the Aegean and Lycia as well as in mid-century layers in Gortyn (so-called *authepsae* or self-cooking vessels) (Vroom 2012b). The appearance of these forms and their widespread distribution across the Mediterranean should indeed point to changing eating habits reflecting as well as a passage from the private kitchen to communal cooking spaces (Vroom 2017b, p. 311). Moreover, the disappearance of dishes and casseroles and their replacement with open forms, cooking jars, and chafing dishes bespeak a transition from cooking on stoves in private kitchens or in ovens to cooking in communal spaces. It also reflects changed environmental conditions but, more importantly, dining habits which can also be documented in other areas of the Byzantine insular and coastal *koinè* like Sicily (Decker 2016, p. 60; Vaccaro 2013).

The analysis of the ceramics found in Butrint, therefore, points to a southern Adriatic commercially, socially, and culturally (as well as politically) connected with the Byzantine world with more “interregional cabotage as well as tramping voyages in the eighth and even ninth century on small status ship similar to some of those found in Yenikapı.” (Arthur 2007) This is shown, for instance, by the presence of Glazed White Wares (a typology of pottery produced in Constantinople from the mid-seventh century onwards) as well as regionally imported lead glaze wares from Otranto (Decker 2016, p. 60; Vroom 2016).

Indeed, by 800, Butrint was reduced to little more than its religious and administrative authority, with a few families scattered around the fortifications south of the acropolis (as enhanced by the

material sealed by the destruction layers in the two towers). However, one should not forget about the important role Butrint played in the so-called southern Ionian shipping network at the intersection with the Adriatic sea-road (Hodges 2021, pp. 23-28). The distribution across sea roads of the Ionian Sea shows us that in the eighth century, the western areas of the Byzantine *koinè* were as economically important as the Aegean half of the Byzantine heartland (Wickham 2012, pp. 507-9). This was mainly because Sicily acted as a fiscal catalyst for the southern Italian territories (Calabria and Apulia), which still remained in Byzantine hands, as well as a real bridge between the Constantinopolitan court and the western Mediterranean due to its role as a valuable source of grain for the imperial government since the time of Heraclius (Prigent 2014; Cosentino 2019); a role further developed in the late seventh century when the island was elevated to the rank of theme and later was at the heart of the fiscal reform promoted by Leo III in the first half of the eighth century (Prigent 2008). It is interesting to notice that exactly from the 730s onwards, we can trace the increasing meddling of the *strategos* of Sicily with the Dalmatian political affairs (Nef and Prigent 2006). This is shown by numismatic evidence (a surge of gold coins of Constantine V (741-775) has been documented in Dalmatia (Budak 2018, 179) as well as a contemporary hagiographic source (the Life of Saint Pankratios of Taormina in the late eighth century (Re 2010, p. 202). The Life mentioned that a ship belonging to a merchant from Rome and carrying a captive from Syria to the Adriatic shores was diverted to Sicily via Reggio because “the southwest wind did not allow him he was not able to sail past the gulfs of Italy.” (Stallman-Pacitti 2018, pp. 316-7)

Indeed, the Life of Saint Pankration belongs to a long string of Sicilian hagiographies witnessing to the direct social, administrative, cultural, and religious link between the Byzantine Thyrrhenian and Constantinople (Davis-Secord 2017). They also point to the large-scale migration processes which characterized the Mediterranean in the Medieval period, as well as voluntary relocation often actively spurred by the Constantinopolitan court. For instance, sigillographic evidence points to the mobility of members of the Imperial *cubiculum* relocated to Sicily. A similar tendency amongst the

exarchs of Italy (residing in Ravenna till the mid-eighth century) attests to the close links between the (socially and administrative) highly prestigious tiers of the imperial administration and the Western territories of the empire (Nichanian and Prigent 2003).

Two great examples of the ideological and physical proximity of Sicily to Constantinople resurface in the Sicilian hagiographies. On the one hand, the ninth-century Life of Saint Leo of Catania famously mentioned the magician Heliodorus who managed to have the Byzantine envoy Herakleides entering a bathhouse in Catania where he submerged his head for a short time and upon re-emerging, he suddenly found himself in the grand Imperial Bath of Constantinople (Alexakis 2011, p. 165). On the other hand, the tenth-century Life of Elias the Younger (as born in Enna in the early ninth century (Taibi Rossi 1962). His extensive voluntary and involuntary (he was twice captured by Muslim pirates) travels across the early Mediterranean prove that migration and movement of people to Sicily was multi-directional. Moreover, they show that the coastal (and insular) areas of the Byzantine *koinè* were connected to the Muslim world through patterns of military raids and to Constantinople through networks of administration and culture as well as military and political communications (Davis-Secord 2021, pp. 29-32). It is not by chance that Elias's travel brought him to touch upon the main stepping-stones along the so-called trunk route (McCormick 2001, pp. 502-8) linking Syracuse with Constantinople with a stepover in Butrint (Von Falkenhausen 2018, p. 147).

In the light of this evidence -and returning indeed to Butrint- we can conclude that in the eighth and ninth centuries, its harbor was the focus of a strategically located and fortified Byzantine enclave in the southern Adriatic coast and part and parcel of overlapping regional and interregional shipping networks. Archaeology shows that around the year 800, the walled harbor had direct control over traffic, including pilgrims as well as glass, globular amphorae produced in Apulia, the Aegean, and Crimea, and Constantinopolitan Glazed White Wares. (Hodges 2012, p. 224)

So, for Butrint we can surmise that the strenuous link with the Byzantine Mediterranean *koinè* was underpinned (at least partially) by the role played by the Byzantine fiscal machinery, local

administrative structures, and military authorities (for the city remained under Byzantine rule until the eleventh century). The same, however, cannot be stated for Comacchio. This settlement was located at the intersection of the fluvial lagoon (the Po River delta) and maritime routes linking the Po valley with the Adriatic (and the Mediterranean). In Comacchio, the tempo of production and distribution of goods, as well as imports and consumption, was not dictated by the Byzantine army or bureaucrats. (Gelichi et al. 2006a; Gelichi et al. 2006c; Negrelli 2012; McCormick 2012; Grandi 2015; Gelichi 2017) The entire Adriatic crescent (from Ravenna to Grado) was only nominally, if not loosely, under Constantinopolitan rule in particular after the fall of Ravenna to the Lombards in 751 and the incorporation of northern Italy in the Carolingian political sphere of control (Ortalli 1992; Azzara 1994; Gasparri 2021). The settlement of Comacchio drastically developed in the seventh and the eighth century on a series of mounds separated by canals resembling islands. The confluence of important waterways provided the motive and the opportunity to endow a large area of the site with wooden platform docks, waterfront, and embankments built in a way that reminds us of later Venetian housing. (Gelichi et al. 2006a, pp. 89-91) The harbor was connected to the external coasts by a wide tidal canal of natural origin conveying salt water towards the inside and was protected by the lagoon. Its function reminds us of the northern European *emporìa*, for Comacchio was clearly an important hub funneling eastern Mediterranean imports (spices, *garum*, wine, and olive oil) into the Lombard and Carolingian world. (Gelichi et al. 2006b; Augenti 2011, p. 151) This is shown by the presence of light fine wares in association with globular amphorae, which circulated across the whole Adriatic crescent as both were produced locally –according to morphological analysis– imported from the eastern manufacturing centers. Indeed, globular amphorae similar to those found in Comacchio have been yielded in Cyprus, Argolid, Kos, and as far as Crimea. (Vroom 2012, Poulou-Papadimetriou 2018).

The comparison with northern European *emporìa* stems not only from the function of these settlements as inter-regional commercial hubs but also from other common characteristics like the relatively small number of inhabitants, the building techniques (wood), the lack

of proper fortifications (in the emporia they start appearing only in the mid-ninth century) and finally the limited number of churches or public buildings. (Gelichi et al. 2006c) Monasteries are the exception, for in Comacchio, more than in northern Europe, they were major players in the local social and economic life (often as big landowners) (Hodges 2012, p. 234). In this light, one should also consider an important difference between the *emporìa* and Comacchio, as the former presented us with strong evidence for local artisanal production. In the lagoon site, instead, local agricultural produce provided local merchants with goods to be exported both to the Carolingian and the Byzantine world. (Gelichi et al. 2006a, p. 97) A good example of this “local” dimension of trade is provided by documentary evidence, for in 740 the Lombard King Liutprand issued an official document allowing the *habitatores* of Comacchio to trade salt and other goods along the Po river (De Angelis 2021, pp. 397-8). Indeed, already in the sixth century, Cassiodorus was praising the inhabitants of the lagoons because “all their efforts are devoted to salt production. Instead of ploughs and sickles, use rollers. [...] Someone may not be searching for gold, but everyone wants to find salt².”

Archaeology builds on the abovementioned literary and documentary sources for extensive traces of canalization and drainage works have been documented both in Comacchio and – more clearly- in a settlement located in the Venetian lagoons, Civitas Nova Heracliana. (Gelichi et al. 2006c) This settlement- to the contrary of Comacchio- represents an extraordinary act of civic-imperial (and so public) patronage pointing to the direct Constantinopolitan interest in this region, although its dedication to Emperor Heraclius seems to be a later interpolation on the part of Venetian chroniclers (Calon 2006, pp. 216-24). The “civitas” fulfilled a defensive need vis-à-vis the Lombard invasion of northern Italy in the mid-seventh century; indeed, sigillographic evidence proves that local Byzantine officials from the former capital of the Byzantine Venetia (Opitergium), as well as ecclesiastical authorities, and, eventually, rich landowners of the plain found shelter in the

² *The Letters of Cassiodorus*, pp. 516-8. See also Gatto 2005.

newly built settlement. Nevertheless, Civitas Nova Heracliana -like Comacchio- soon became a point of reference for the lagoon itineraries and for the fluvial trade routes which linked the mainland to the sea. More important, traces of a dense networks of canalization and banks have been recently discovered. These were “signs linked to operations of controlling the waters for purposes of creating “reclaimed” areas free from water, most likely for agricultural purposes.” (Calaon 2006, p. 217; Gelichi et al. 2006b, pp. 80-2) Unlike Comacchio (where archaeology and material culture have been better analyzed and published), Civitas Nova Heracliana was also endowed with a cathedral and a baptistery and remained frequented until the early ninth century when Malamocco and later Rialto replaced it as the main commercial and administrative center of the Venetia. (Zanini 1993, pp. 126-8; 225-32)

Comacchio (and to a lesser extent) Civitas Nova Heracliana are, therefore, two clear examples of settlements that boasted (at least partially) urban functions framed by a vital economy based upon trade relationship between the western and Byzantine worlds. Although morphed into a landscape and fabric which reminds us of a typology of urbanism that developed and thrived in areas far away from the Mediterranean Sea, Comacchio and Civitas Nova Heracliana can be regarded as important trade and shipping hubs (Gelichi 2021, pp. 125-7).

A rather different role instead had Zadar on the opposite coast of the Adriatic. As already mentioned, the eastern Adriatic coast was the center of a revamped Byzantine imperial interest in the mid-to-late eighth century as triggered by the Fall of Ravenna in 751 and later by the Carolingian push against the Venetian lagoons in the early ninth century. (Prigent 2008, p. 400; Dzino 2018; Gelichi 2018; Gelichi 2021) As Goldstein concludes: “despite all ideological and political breakdowns, loss of interest and the reduced ability to control the Adriatic littoral [...] we can still talk of Byzantium on the eastern Adriatic.”(Goldstein 2005, p. 201) However, this was a peculiar version of Byzantium, one predicated upon local elites coopted for safeguarding the shipping routes from the upper Adriatic to Constantinople. (Curta 2006, p. 103) The appearance of the so-called *archon* of Dalmatia as replacing a local *dux* is

documented by both (later) documentary sources³ (Borri 2021, p. 89) and sigillographic evidence in the late eighth-early ninth century and stemmed from an alliance between local aristocracies and Byzantine *imperium*. (Vedriš 2021, p. 142; Papadopoulou 2021, pp. 225-6) Although this alliance was shaken during the revolt of the Sicilian *strategos* Euphemius (leading to the Aghlabid invasion of the island in 828)⁴, the socio-political, administrative, and military trajectories of Dalmatia exemplify what Shepard defines as “*un empire sans frontiers*, with a call upon the political allegiance, religious veneration or material collaboration of churchmen, elites and communities scattered far beyond its chief territorial holdings.” (Shepard 2017, p. 4)

If Shepard identifies a variety of possible settlements as ranging from open cities to fortified bunkers, Vedriš argues that Zadar fitted the latter definition rather than proper urban centers (Vedriš 2021, p. 141). However, some of these “bunkers” started to develop into “open cities” when the whole province of Dalmatia, neglected by the imperial administration during the early seventh century, re-emerged in the written sources in the second half of the eighth century (Dzino 2014, pp. 137–8). This was the time when Zadar was promoted to the main imperial administrative center of the region when the *archon* replaced the *dux* (Prigent 2008, pp. 411-16). It is important to notice that on the eve of his military push against the *Venetia Maritima*, Charlemagne summoned both the dukes of the Venetia as well as the *dux* and bishop of Zadar: the most important difference lay in the fact that although the two provinces were connected in the name of Byzantium, the Venetia did not have an urban center which could represent it, since the city of Venice did not yet exist. In fact, Dalmatia had a capital at Zadar. (Gasparri 2021, p. 105) Sigillographic evidence confirms this conclusion for the recent discovery of three seals in Zadar identifies it as the

³ In the tenth-century Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos’ *De Administrando Imperio*, the usage of the name *archon* (ἄρχων) in order to describe the rulers of the Adriatic Slavs is documented (*De Administrando Imperio*, pp. 29–30).

⁴ Theophanes Continuatus, II, p. 128.

administrative center of Dalmatia and a key point in the imperial reappropriation of the eastern Adriatic. (Vedriš 2021, p. 143)

This would add to its political importance (in a rather similar way as *Civitas Nova Heracliana*) and show its new colors as an urban hub with more pronounced political, religious, and administrative urban functions than Comacchio. In other words, we would be facing a diverse type of settlement in the palette of urban-like embodiments of Byzantine soft power in the Adriatic. (Brown 2021). This is enhanced by the building activities documented in Zadar, which included the construction of a governmental palace and, more important, the rotunda Church of Saint Donatus, whose elements “technical as well as functional were well above what is considered local architectural knowledge.” (Ančić 2017, p. 72; Vedriš 2021, pp. 150-53) One should not be surprised to learn that the church hosted the relics of Saint Anastasia for gifts (as also exemplified by the abovementioned Constantine V’s *solidi*), titles and relics were materializations of a special relationship between cities and the imperial capital across the Mediterranean coastal provinces. As Shepard concludes: “[we are confronted with] a club for which membership fee are not high and where benefits seem intangible to external observers but are the opposite to those who could yield all sort of advantages.” (Shepard 2017, p. 28)

Conclusions

It is not by chance that most of these “clubs” were part and parcel of the sea routes crisscrossing the Mediterranean. Byzantine control focused on politically important ports as well as privileged informal hubs. They could morph into diverse and expedient urban (or urban-like) structures and functions. They played different (and sometimes overlapping) economic, political, administrative, military, strategic, and cultural roles as simultaneously part of an eighth (and ninth century) frontier system connecting the Adriatic coast with the Ionian Sea and through it the Tyrrhenian with the Aegean and the Levant (Shepard 2018). As already mentioned, this rather diverse and resilient patchwork of settlements has been described as

a political, cultural, and social *koinè*, for they acknowledge -although loosely- the patronage or at least an economic relationship with Constantinople. In this light, the definition of Byzantine *koinè* should help us to partially dispel the notion of a compartmentalized Mediterranean as it builds a picture of diminished but uninterrupted connectivity in a period traditionally regarded as the Dark Ages of trade, communication, and urban life.

The selection of Adriatic coastal “urban” sites presented above as based on recent archaeological excavations and the analysis of material culture pointed to their continuous role in an economically and politically divided but still vital and coherent Mediterranean; a sea characterized by privileged sea connections between specific areas acting as nodes of interlocking economies and trading networks. From Constantinople one could easily sail to Sicily via the ancient trunk route and from the island, through Butrint, reach the Tyrrhenian Sea or the northern Adriatic (via Zadar) and from there via Comacchio (and Civitas Nova Heracliana) to central Europe. As McCormick has famously listed most of the faces who traveled across these shipping routes, one could think here of the ceremonious group of monks accompanying the body of the abovementioned Saint Elias the Younger as he was transported overland from Thessaloniki to Butrint (along a road branching out the Via Egnatia leading to Constantinople) and from there to Reggio aboard a ship. (Taibi Rossi 1962, pp. 180-1); or the Carolingian ambassador Amalarius of Metz, who stopped in Zadar and Butrint on his way to Constantinople in 813 (Vedris 2018)⁵; or, finally, those ninth-century Venetians who were supposed to be exiled to Constantinople and were simply sent to the “first town down the Adriatic shipping lane (Zadar) (McCormick 2001, p. 260).

If fortifications were often impressive markers for many of these settlements (like in the case of Butrint), they should, however, be regarded neither as hastily built nor as a military response to enemy raids nor, eventually, as shelters for the last figments of a vanishing urban life. Rather they were part of a deliberate strategy (directly or indirectly supported by the Imperial authority) to cope with the

⁵ On the details of Amalarius’s voyage as reported in a rather obscure poem he wrote (Versus Marini) see McCormick 2001, pp. 139-41.

difficulties of a more fragmented Mediterranean, for they often betrayed the availability of resources and planning. In other words, fortifications were only one of the characteristics of new types of urban settlements as the different trajectories of Byzantine urbanism could diverge in terms of size, function, and urban plan/fabric: from substantially fortified settlements (Butrint) overlooking still active harbors; from polyfocal quasi-urban sites (Comacchio and Civitas Nova Heracliana) to revived urban centers with an administrative and religious function (Zadar). These do not oppose but rather complement the surviving network of the heirs of the Roman/Mediterranean classical urbanism as some cities clearly retained a central political, military, and administrative role as part of the Byzantine government structures (one could think of thematic capital-like Syracuse or Antalya, which were not included in the present paper). Indeed, the sites included in this contribution should be regarded as new centers of social and economic organization based upon political and commercial opportunities offered by the regional communications and local as well as yet vital trans-Mediterranean shipping and trade routes.

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