

# The “Empire That Would Not Die” Looks West

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The theme of John Haldon’s volume concerns the reasons why the Eastern Roman Empire did not fall during the 7<sup>th</sup> century despite the substantial territorial losses it suffered with the Muslim expansion. In posing this question – why did the Empire survive? – the author revisits the history of the entire 7<sup>th</sup> century, in substantial continuity with his 1990 monograph,<sup>1</sup> but enriching it with new ideas (climatology, palynology, more attention to the Byzantine West) and sometimes proposing different approaches than in the past to some very problematic issues (as in the case of the *kommerkiarioi*). Overall, this new work is another important contribution by Haldon to our understanding of the “transitional period”, when the Empire changed from a society organized on the cultural, social and economic models of late Antiquity into what was essentially, at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a medieval state. The author organizes his exposition and interpretation around five fundamental questions (p. 57):

1. Did the Empire have an ideology that helped to cement its social solidarity and facilitated its survival?
2. What structure did elites have and what role did they play during the period in question?
3. Was the geo-political form that the Empire took after the loss of the Near East, centred on Anatolia and the Balkans, an advantage in the struggle against the Muslims?

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<sup>1</sup> Haldon, 1990.

4. Were there important climatic or environmental factors affecting the economy of the 7<sup>th</sup> century?
5. Did the Roman Empire have an organizational structure that fostered its survival?

Haldon is perfectly aware that one of the factors behind the resilience of the Eastern Roman Empire was the impregnability of Constantinople (p. 17), the target between 654-655 and 717-718 of three attacks by the Umayyads: had the capital fallen, the rest of the Empire would probably have been easier to conquer. However, he chooses not to include this element in the “questions to be answered”, perhaps because he finds it less “structural” than the other aspects taken into consideration. The five issues central to his analysis could all be easily raised in connection with the history of the western regions of the Eastern Roman Empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In his analysis, the geo-strategic advantages are discussed especially in relation to Anatolia, and this also goes for his treatment of palynological data (nor could it have been otherwise, the data being obtained from southern-western Asia, Bithynia, Pontus and Cappadocia (p. 226). For this reason, I believe it is appropriate to concentrate my discussion only on these three points:

1. the political ideology and function of secular elites;
2. the role of episcopates;
3. the geo-strategic reconfiguration of the Empire, as well as some of its organizational aspects.

The cultural history of the 7<sup>th</sup> century revolved around the clarification of very important notions for the creation of a shared moral universe among the inhabitants of the Empire and a redefinition of the Eastern Roman identity. The cornerstone of the Byzantine political theology – a Haldonian definition (p. 16 and *passim*) in keeping with recent works on the Eastern Roman political thought<sup>2</sup> – namely, the key role of the emperor chosen by God in the salvific function of the Empire was emphasized by Byzantine intellectuals in the diffi-

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<sup>2</sup> Carile, 2008.

cult military context of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Texts such as the introductory speech of the acts of the Quinisext Council addressed to Justinian II transferred the Jewish idea of the "chosen people" to the Romans (pp. 120, 127), making them a special civic body in the inhabited world (*oikoumenē*). Under this definition, the Romans comprised all those living in the God-protected empire and were progressively differentiated from Christians living in the Muslim-occupied territories.<sup>3</sup> Cooperation between State and Church constituted the ideological axis around which a heritage of shared values revolved. These cultural features, which cemented loyalty to the emperor on the part of the secular eastern elites, were certainly ideologically adopted by their western counterparts. The social structure of the latter, both in Italy and in Africa, basically comprised two parts: a small group of high dignitaries, mostly Greek-speakers, formed by the exarchs, their retinues and a few commanders, who came from the Anatolian and Balkan areas; and a much larger group consisting of provincial aristocracies. Their structure remained rather fluid throughout the 7<sup>th</sup> century, but in general terms they consisted of army officers recruited from local society, low-level members of the civil administration and landowners awarded dignities by the court of Constantinople. The Italian and African aristocracies had a role in supporting the emperor either because they were involved in the management of local government or because they served in the army and in the civil administration. Their inclusion in the imperial hierarchy guaranteed them a hegemonic position in local communities and gave them the distinctive signs of social eminence. The picture Haldon outlines is accepted by the majority of historians.

The author emphasizes that a conflicting element between provincial ruling classes, both secular and ecclesiastical, with Constantinople, arose during the 7<sup>th</sup> century from the emperor's tax policy, deemed to be heavy and vexatious. There are also direct

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<sup>3</sup> In his approach to the Byzantine ideology and identity, Haldon's arguments (with which I am in complete agreement) consistently differ from the views put forward by Kaldellis, 2015.

references in the sources (especially for Italy) to the distress of the provincials in regard to tax officials, as in the letter sent in 595 by Gregory the Great to Empress Constantine, Mauricius's wife (Greg. *Reg.* V, 38); or the well-known passage of the *Vita* of Vitalianus in the Roman *Liber Pontificalis*, in which the biographer describes in apocalyptic terms the impositions of Constans II upon the Italian population (*Lib. Pont.* I, p. 344). Paradoxically, however, comparative studies on the agrarian regime concerning *Romania* and *Langobardia* in the Po Valley, based on documents from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, have shown that the average land rent in use in the former area was less burdensome than in latter.<sup>4</sup> This confronts us with a dichotomy in evaluating tax evasion: on the one hand, it prompts us to question the real limits of the economic sustainability of taxation for the productive capacities of a given community, but on the other it obliges us to take into account the forms in which tax protest is expressed, as well as the interests of the actors who promote it.<sup>5</sup> The history of taxation consists in more than a reconstruction of mechanisms and percentages of tax levy; it is also a political discourse insofar as the choices made by those in power about "whom" to tax and "how" to tax are not indifferent in building consensus for regimes. The collapse of the state apparatus in 5<sup>th</sup>-century Italy had taken place in the context of widespread tax avoidance or evasion by the most affluent sectors of the senatorial class. The Greek-Gothic war, and then the Lombard invasion, may have had a particularly negative effect on the preservation of the municipal archives (*gesta municipalia*), which kept the records of property transfers within a city district (the basis for taxation). We also know that during the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century the praetorian prefecture ceased to function, in concomitance with the radical territorial amputations that the Empire suffered. No doubt this made it difficult for the central government to have administra-

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<sup>4</sup> See the seminal study by Fumagalli, 1969, p. 438; Andreolli and Montanari, 1983; Andreolli and Montanari, 1983; Fumagalli, 1985, pp. 95-107; Montanari, 1989, pp. 597-607. For the importance that in Haldon's historiography assumes the tributary mode of exploitation see Tedesco, 2017, p. 125 in this issue.

<sup>5</sup> Cosentino, 2006, pp. 37-53.

tive records permitting it to exercise more effective control over land tax collection. A later chronicler, probably Theodore Skutariotes, informs us that one of the treasurers of Heraclius, at the end of his reign, promoted a new census all across the Empire.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the action of Constans II in Syracuse, characterized by a fine-meshed imposition of taxation over the Italian communities, was less arbitrary than the sources would have us believe and involved a greater effort to recover shares of revenues that had been increasingly evaded. Voices of protest were raised by the Church of Rome, undoubtedly the holder of the largest shares of land and workforce in 7<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, especially in Sicily. It is therefore not easy to quantify the "oppressive tax demands" (pp. 203, 211) that, according to Haldon, were imposed on the Italian and African provinces after 663. Nor is it easy to understand to what extent fiscal policy was a real divide in preserving consensus for the Constantinopolitan regime among the western upper classes in comparison with the eastern ones. Mezezios's revolt (or perhaps that of his son John) was subdued by the joint troops of Italy, Africa and Sardinia. Since many members of these units presumably had been recruited from local society, this suggests that Constans II's action may not have been a factor eroding political consensus with the Empire in Italian and African public opinion. More generally, I find that the author's idea of a strong oppression exercised on rural producers by all kinds of public officials (military, civilian and tax officials) across the Empire – a *topos* of the late Antique political literature – does not find cogent confirmation in the sources of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. We have no reports, for instance, of peasant revolts in the evidence at our disposal.

But the outcome of Constans II's expedition in Italy, along with his religious policy, must have provoked acute tension between the Empire and the Roman church. Otherwise, we would have no way to understand Constantine IV's decision to sacrifice the traditional support for the Ravenna church by allowing it to return under the

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<sup>6</sup> Kaegi, 1992, p. 256, f. 54.

Roman jurisdiction, as well as his conduct in order to overcome the crisis caused by monothelism and the grant of new tax reliefs to the same Roman church. The overturning of the policy of his father by Constantine IV finds its deepest motivation in one of the most convincing “structural” points highlighted by Haldon: the fundamental role played by the Church in the survival of the Empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century (p. 59). Whereas imperial officials’ control of the imperial territory was possibly discontinuous, or sometimes entirely evanescent, few areas of the Empire escaped the pastoral care of the ecclesiastical structures. Hence the importance for the emperors of having good relations with the Church and, conversely, the latter’s attitude toward the imperial power, which the ecclesiastical intellectuals – apart from a few thinkers such as Sophronios of Jerusalem or Maxime the Confessor – considered the only authority entitled to rule over the Christian world (p. 120). The emperors’ awareness that acquiring the support of their subjects depended first and foremost on the action of bishops is clear in relation to Italy. Since the Justinianic age, the church of Ravenna was constantly supported by Constantinople. But the same can be said, all in all, with regard to the popes, who received special attention from the Byzantine emperors owing to their prestige among the great patriarchal sees of the Mediterranean.

An important point elucidated by the Italian evidence in comparison with the East is the special relationship between the bishops and the secular aristocracy. The latter fully participated in exploiting the wealth of the most important churches of the peninsula, such as that of Rome, Ravenna, and Milan (for its small Sicilian patrimony), thanks to the acquisition of ecclesiastical lands by means of emphyteusis contracts. Consequently, between the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> and the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, the aristocratic groups of Byzantine Italy were linked to the Empire, since many of them had been co-opted into the imperial hierarchy through the assumption of dignities or the exercise of military functions; yet, this same class had also tightened its ties of solidarity with the wealthiest churches whose landed patrimonies it exploited. It is hard to believe that aristocratic estates could

have been formed only through purchases of land on the free market. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, portions of these estates – the precise percentage cannot be determined – came from ecclesiastical holdings, other portions were the result of buying and selling, and still others had to come from public lands (pertaining to the endowment of castles or assigned to the collective exploitation of military units, as evidenced by the situation of Rome),<sup>7</sup> which were legally or illegally acquired by individual aristocrats. Iconoclasm and the fiscal policy of the Constantinopolitan government were perhaps less important than some authors contend in the weakening the Italo-Byzantine elites' sense of solidarity with the Empire beginning in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Other factors were chiefly responsible, of which at least three are obvious to me. First, Constantinople's inability to organize an effective military defense in the face of the renewed pressure of the Longobards starting in the 720s. Second, the more or less legal process through which the northern-Italian ruling class had absorbed immovable goods of public origin into its own private patrimony. Third, the sharing of economic interests bound the Ravennate, Pentapolitan, and Roman elites to the churches of Ravenna and Rome, part of whose landed property those aristocracies managed. This last point is, I believe, the most telling. It is significant that in Calabria and Sardinia, where, at least in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, there were no economically and socially dominant episcopates, the 8<sup>th</sup>-century fracture between the elites and the Empire did not occur; and it is even more significant that the political fault for the break between Byzantium and the Church of Rome arose in Sicily. Sicily accounted for perhaps one-third of the papacy's total landed wealth in Italy and Africa. However, the island's social structure was very different from that of central and northern Byzantine Italy. In the latter, as we have seen, during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries an aristocracy acquired the distinctive signs of its eminence by obtaining dignities and ranks from Constantinople or by serving in the

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<sup>7</sup> Castles: Cosentino, 2010, pp. 58-59; Rome: T. Di Carpegna and Falconieri, 2012, pp. 559-583.

army. In Sicily, by contrast, there was an eminent class of senatorial origin with strong ties to the same imperial capital and possessing vast estates acquired via its connections with the Church of Rome. The island, during the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, had been scene of Constans II's expedition, which, regardless of its aims and the reasons for its failure, had made the region the political pillar in the Mediterranean in the fight against Muslims.

This last observation introduces us to the third perspective from which Haldon's book can be discussed with regard to the Byzantine West in the 7<sup>th</sup> century; and this perspective also starts from Sicily. Over the past decade, the Byzantine period of Sicilian history has received ever more attention from historians and archaeologists, who have stressed the island's vital role in supplying Constantinople and its centrality in the political and economic developments of Mediterranean history from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> The expansion of the Umayyads in North Africa enhanced its strategic importance, motivating the expedition of Constans II, whatever the true goals – still not fully clear – that he had in mind. The emperor's assassination did not diminish the importance of Sicily for the Constantinopolitan government. From the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, there was a field army command on the island; Sicily began to undergo a process of militarization that gradually changed its social structure from that of Antiquity. The Byzantine authorities initiated far-sighted planning of territorial defense that involved the building of military structures to house and supply troops along the main routes of communication on the island, such as the Kassar of Castronuovo, perhaps an *aplēkton*, currently being excavated by an Italian-British team.<sup>9</sup> After the conquest of Byzantine Africa, Sicily, along with Malta, Sardinia and the Balearic Islands, became the Empire's maritime frontier in the western Mediterranean. No wonder that, in this geo-strategic sce-

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<sup>8</sup> Some recent works on political and socio-economic questions that contain bibliographical references: Gentile Messina, 2016, pp. 161-189; Molinari, 2016, pp. 220-232; Arcifa, 2017, pp. 237-267; Prigent, 2017, pp. 207-236.

<sup>9</sup> Molinari, 2016, pp. 324-327.

nario, eighth-century Sicily – and probably Sardinia, an island less reachable by Constantinople but for which there is evidence of the same process of militarization – became the focus of the emperors' attention. Bearing this picture in mind, Haldon's fundamental observation concerning the key role played by ecclesiastical structures for the survival of the Empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century again comes to the fore. Much more than the civil administration, they had widespread territorial pervasiveness; therefore, a capacity to convey forms of consensus (or dissent) to the regime even in the most peripheral regions of the empire. This remark must be kept in mind when considering the broader meaning of the event that during the 8<sup>th</sup> century strongly influenced the relationship between Byzantium and the Church of Rome: the seizure of the Roman patrimonies in Sicily and Calabria, accompanied, more or less simultaneously, by the assignment to the patriarchate of Constantinople of the papal jurisdiction over southern Italy and Eastern Illyricum. Historians have offered differing interpretations of these two events. There is no need here to recall this historiography. Let us note, however, that it may have been because the troubled events of the 7<sup>th</sup> century had convinced the imperial power of the importance of having the support of the ecclesiastical hierarchy that the Isaurians decided that direct economic exploitation of Sicily and Calabria should be accompanied by the strengthening on the island of a clergy faithful to Constantinople. While the papacy, since the pontificate of Stephen II, sought an alternative to its military protection against the Longobards by forming an alliance with the Carolingians, the Exarchate and the Pentapolis became strategically marginal for Byzantium, which during the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century steadily reduced its investment of men and resources to protect them. Here, too, as in the Roman duchy, the elites' economic base tied them to the episcopate. In a non-traumatic manner, between the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> and the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, they gradually ended their solidarity with the government of Constantinople by supporting the archbishop of Ravenna in his ambitions to create an extensive territorial state across Emilia, Romagna and Marche.

Turning to the chapter in which Haldon considers whether the survival of the Empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century was due to its organizational advantages (p. 249), at least two aspects merit discussion here: first, the problem of the decrease of copper coins in the archaeological records of the Anatolian and Balkan sites over the period stretching from the 670s to the early 9<sup>th</sup> century; second, the question of the *kommerkiarioi*. Concerning the first point, it is interesting to note that, contrary to the “heartland” of the Empire, Italy (with four mints in activity, at Ravenna, Rome, Syracuse and, from the late 7<sup>th</sup> century, Cagliari) was less affected by the diminution of copper coinage during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. As in his earlier studies, in the volume under discussion Haldon tends to trace the (scarce) presence of copper coins in Anatolia and the Balkans from the reign of Constantine IV to the activity of the public apparatus (pp. 253, 257), arguing that coinage was produced more for fiscal or administrative purposes – to pay the army or for taxation – than for true economic necessities, i.e. to support transactions on the free market. This certainly may have been the case for some situations, but not for all. Italy, for instance, appears to contradict Haldon’s assumption because, apart from the expedition of Constans II, which may have involved a major concentration of troops, it was less militarized than Anatolia and the Balkans but nevertheless witnessed a larger circulation of copper coins during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. Conversely, while seals regarding *kommerkia* and *kommerkiarioi* are found for seventh-century Sicily and Africa, they are completely lacking, to date, from the peninsula. But it is with regard to the *kommerkiarioi* that Haldon’s arguments in his new book differ most significantly from his conclusions in *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*. In that earlier work, he interpreted them as officials in charge of assigning weapons and uniforms to troops, and receiving taxes on sales as well, in an economy dominated by a system of taxes levied mostly in kind.<sup>10</sup> In *The Empire That Would Not Die*, he asserts instead that the *kommerkiarioi*, officials

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<sup>10</sup> Haldon, 1990, pp. 232-241.

responsible for controlling trade in silk and luxury products, while not completely giving up this activity, added to their original function the fundamental task of supplying Constantinople with grain after the loss of Egypt. On specific occasions, they may have also engaged in this activity to the benefit of the army (p. 261). In arguing that seventh-century *kommerkiarioi* may have continued to partially perform their original function, Haldon does not completely reject the conclusions of Federico Montinaro, according to whom the increase in the seals of those officers was due essentially to the attempt of the Byzantine government to extract more resources from indirect taxes on the circulation of luxury goods.<sup>11</sup> Haldon does not reject this position, but he radically resizes it, arguing convincingly that it is unlikely that, when trade was declining across the Mediterranean, the trade in silk and luxury products could have generated so many benefits for the state as to provoke a significant increase in the *kommerkiarioi* (and, conversely, in their seals) (p. 263). On the other hand, he is inclined to accept the idea that they may have been responsible for the management of the *synōnē* (Lat. *coemptio*). But, contrary to the late antique practice, in which the compulsory purchases were made directly by the taxpayers, now – in the 7<sup>th</sup> century – the Constantinopolitan treasury provided the *kommerkiarioi* with state funds with which to directly purchase foodstuffs in the provinces (p. 262).<sup>12</sup> This mechanism is plausible, and I myself proposed such a hypothesis in an article published in 2011.<sup>13</sup> However, I must add that this argument no longer convinces me. In fact, if the imperial treasury had actually provided the *kommerkiarioi* with funds for managing the *synōnē* in the eastern provinces, we would expect a greater presence of copper coins in the archaeological sites of Anatolia and the Balkans, given the wide distribution of their seals throughout those regions. Indeed, it is unlikely that the imperial treasury would have

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<sup>11</sup> Montinaro, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> In reaching this conclusion, Haldon is influenced by Prigent, 2014, pp. 182-229, esp. 195-198.

<sup>13</sup> Cosentino, 2011, pp. 59-72, esp. pp. 69-70.

funded the *kommerkiarioi* with gold, instead of copper coins, in order to make purchases of grain and other foodstuffs all across the Empire. In brief, Haldon proposes a multi-functional interpretation of the duties of these obscure officers of the early Byzantine administration, who were simultaneously responsible for the grain supply of Constantinople, managers, when necessary, of the *synōnē*, and controllers of the trade in silk and luxury goods. That they played an important role in the grain supply of Constantinople, apart from the first evidence of seals concerning the *basilika kommerkia* during the reign of Heraclius, is, however, very uncertain. In fact, it is unlikely that, in the stormy period stretching from the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, the supply of Constantinople could have been assured by imports of products from areas very distant from the capital. Moreover, if their functions involved the control of luxury products, it would be necessary to explain why from the 640s no seal of *kommerkiarioi* has been found in Africa; and why no such seal has been found to date in Ravenna and Rome, cities whose elites certainly could have supported the demand for such products. In my view, the hypothesis of their involvement in the management of the *synōnē* for the supplying of the army remains the most valid. The institutional change compared to late Antiquity appears to have consisted in the fact that the eastern Roman administration, faced with the collapse of the praetorian prefecture, directly appointed officers responsible for carrying out the supply of the troops in state grain deposits (*apothēkai*).

These are very problematic issues, to be solved considering the extant evidence, and my remarks in no way reflect on the quality of Haldon's book. *The Empire That Would Not Die* seeks to explain to the modern reader why the Roman empire did not fall amidst the destructive military events following the Muslim expansion. In answering this question, the author produces a remarkable, fresh synthesis of the scholarly research of the last fifteen years. In it, he also makes a much greater effort than in the important monograph published in 1990 to bring into the discussion the dynamics of the western territories of the Byzantine empire. This effort is fully suc-

cessful. Haldon's new book, given its scope and content, should be read not only by Byzantinists, but by every student of the history of the post-Roman Mediterranean.