Exploring the Economy of Byzantine Italy

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The sixth century CE was a period of intense – and at times dramatic – political transformation in Italy. While the political and military disruptions may have corresponded to a general economic decline, a number of recent studies have shed light on the specifics of the economic infrastructures and functions of single regions. These works have emphasized not just differences in levels of economic development or regression in areas like the exarchate, the Northern Adriatic region,[1] Liguria,[2] Abruzzo,[3] Apulia,[4] Calabria,[5] Sardinia,[6] and Sicily,[7] but a set of similarities that would appear to confirm the thesis of the coexistence of a plurality of Byzantine "Italies" under a single political and administrative label.[8] A recent collection of eight articles, presented at the 23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies in Sofia in 2011 and now published in *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* (2014 - 2, No. 28, Paris, 2015) under the supervision of Salvatore Cosentino, contributes to this lively scholarly debate. *L'Italia bizantina: una prospettiva economica* deals with the economic history of Byzantine Italy from the

[1] Gelichi (2008).
[2] Balzaretti (2013).
[3] Staffa (1995).
[4] Martin (1993).
[5] Noyé (2001).
[6] Cosentino (2004).
[7] Prigent (2006); Prigent-Nef (2010).
[8] Zanini (1998); Cosentino (2008).

sixth to the thirteenth century, overcoming the traditional constraints of political history to inquire into the economic development of Italian enclaves under Byzantine rule. Agrarian regimes, patterns of trade and monetary economy are analysed to gauge their complexity and resilience over time, in conjunction with or apart from political structures. In the present review a short historical survey of Byzantine Italy is followed by a description of the content of the collection and some concluding remarks.

In 554, after a war of almost twenty years against the Goths (535-554), the armies of the Emperor Justinian (527-565) conquered Italy. The imperial authority added the occupied territories to the Eastern Roman Empire. Extending imperial law to Italy, it sought to reorganize tax collection and military recruitment. By 568, the new administrative entity was severely curtailed by the invasion of the Lombards, who established a powerful kingdom in the territories north of the Po, Tuscany and the two outlying duchies of Spoleto and Benevento. In the subsequent centuries, just like the other Byzantine political bodies in the West (in North Africa and Spain), Byzantine Italy was confined to enclaves. Although geographically fragmented, these administrative islands, it has recently been argued, were political, economic, and cultural representatives of the authority of Constantinople in the Western Mediterranean.[9] In Northern Italy, the Byzantines were able to hold Istria, a few coastal areas of Venetia, and Liguria, up until the Lombard conquest of the latter province in 643.[10] The political and administrative center was established in the Exarchate of Ravenna, a territorial and administrative unit in being since the 580s and bounded by the neighbouring areas, called the Pentapolis, and consisting approximately of the territory of present-day Romagna and Marche. The city of Rome and its hinterland constituted the bulk of Byzantine territory in central Italy, while in the South the imperial authority controlled coastal Campania with the city of Naples, Apulia, Calabria, and the two

[9] Brown (2016).
[10] Balzaretti (2013, pp. 74-77).

major islands of Sardinia and Sicily. By the 680s, as a result of a process that had begun in the 620s and developed fully in the 660s, the Eastern empire had concentrated its military resources on preserving full political and financial control over the territories of Southern Italy. With the Arab conquest of Egypt in 642, and even more with that of all the rest of North Africa in 698, the southern Italian provinces, especially Sicily, were crucial to the survival of the imperial structure.[11] Organized around 700 CE as an autonomous administrative and fiscal entity (a *thema*) and put under the command of a high-ranking military official (the *strategos*), Sicily preserved this strategic function but fell progressively under Islamic domination after 827[12]. And on a smaller scale, the remnant provinces of Southern Italy performed a similar function from the ninth through the eleventh centuries. Organized as *themata* around 900 and converted into *cathepanate* of Italy in 960, Apulia, Lucania, and Calabria formed the last political and military stronghold of the Byzantines in the West. The Norman capture of Bari in 1071 definitively expelled them from Italy.[13]

Salvatore Cosentino's essay, *Banking in Early Byzantine Ravenna* (pp. 243-254), which opens the set of essays, draws attention to the role of bankers in late sixth-century Italy. Specifically, Cosentino emphasizes how these people, bearing different professional names and often involved in a plurality of functions at the same time, developed as representatives of the private sector rather than as agents strictly connected to the needs of the state or with its economic support, as has generally been assumed. Looking at the evidence, Cosentino observes that the majority of their attestations referred to cities such as Constantinople, Alexandria and Ravenna, suggesting that bankers were naturally attracted by places with a high concentration of administrative structures and trading activities. In this respect, the comparison between Rome and Ravenna is particularly

[11] Haldon (2016, p. 209).
[12] Chiarelli (2011, pp. 23-54).
[13] Brown (2008).

striking. Of the 17 extant attestations of bankers concerning Italy, 13 refer to Ravenna and just 4 to Rome, despite the fact that in the late sixth century there was still a significant difference in scale between the populations of Rome and Ravenna, estimated at 100,000 and 12,000 respectively.[14] Hence, the primacy of Ravenna in the financial sector was determined by two crucial factors: first, the presence of the administrative court with its fiscal apparatus; second, the port of Classe, then one of the most important centers of trade in the Mediterranean[15]. On this basis, it is reasonable to hypothesize that what acted as the focus of attraction and support for private banking activities was not population but the aggregate demand for money in connection with state infrastructures and specific segments of the market, both generated mainly by inter-regional trade.

With the second essay in this collection, *Ravenne: le decline d'un avant poste de Constantinople à la lumiere de son monnayage v. 540-751* (pp. 255-278) by Cècile Morrisson and Bruno Callegher, we move from the study of banking to that of minting and monetary circulation. After presenting the basic trimetallic Byzantine monetary system as evidence of the stratification of the Italian society, the authors draw attention to the relationship between gold and bronze coin circulation in the northern Adriatic. They argue on the basis of numismatic evidence that very early, starting in about 550, a regional monetary zone distinct from that of Constantinople was formed. The monetary economy of the exarchate was characterized by a stable ratio between gold and copper, which reflected close integration between the demand for money on the part of the local population and the purchasing power of the state representatives as traditional channels of distribution of the gold currency. Remarkably, notwithstanding the progressive devaluation of the gold – from 695 to around 750, between the first reign of Justinian II and that of Constantine V, the metal lost 46 to 56 per cent of its value – this stable ratio persisted, and only the intervention of the imperial authority, by means

[14] Cosentino (2006, pp. 411-413); Delogu (1993); Durliat (1991).
[15] Augenti (2011).

of taxation, altered it, as has been shown in respect of the reform of Leo III in Sicily and Calabria in the 720s, to which I shall return in a moment. In the light of all this, it is hard to speak of an economic crisis or demonetization for the period under examination. Rather, the authors' thesis is that there was a process of adaptation of the monetary system to the changing political, economic and demographic conditions of the area. There were three main factors of change: first, the emergence of the Lombard Kingdom with its demand for money from the Byzantine zones; second, the fragmentation of the imperial trade system into a series of economic enclaves increasingly dependent on their own rural areas; and finally, the contraction of population, if not in absolute terms certainly in the number of town and city dwellers.

Adding to the discussion on the monetary economy, Vivien Prigent presents another case that illustrates the technical and fiscal sophistication with which the Byzantine regime managed its coinage. Prigent's essay, *Un confesseur de mauvaise foi. Notes sur les exactions financières de l'empereur Léon III en Italie du Sud* (pp. 279-304), challenges the traditional interpretation of the familiar passage from Theophanes on Leo III's tax measure on Sicily and Calabria in the 720s. Writing from a hostile perspective in the early ninth century, Theophanes contended that the provision entailed a rise in taxes across the province and simply reflected Leo's iconoclastic impiety and avarice. Prigent demonstrates instead that the supposed increase in the tax was only a part of the monetary reform undertaken by Leo III, which primarily involved a recalculation of taxes following the introduction of a reformed precious metal coinage. The measure thus appeared to be a tax increase but in fact left the actual fiscal burden unchanged. At that juncture the government was able to intervene directly in its fiscal mechanism to adjust the structures of tax management as necessary.[16]

The second part of the collection begins with the article by Jean-Marie Martin, *L'économie du thème de Longobardie/Catépanat d'Italie*,

[16] Haldon (2016, p. 257).

IX^e-X^ie siècle (pp. 305-322). As noted above, in around 900, as part of the consolidation of the Byzantine dominions in southern Italy, Apulia was reorganized as a *thema* named Langobardia. In the 960s, during the reign of Nicephorus II Phocas (963-969), the *thema* was renamed Cathepanate of Italy. In his analysis of the economic history of these territories, Martin shows the clear difference between the phases that preceded and followed the two administrative reforms. In the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries Apulia and the adjacent areas underwent not only the dissolution of the nucleated town but also an apparent contraction of rural settlement – or at least of rural prosperity – particularly in the Capitanata in Northern Apulia and Lucania. By contrast, the period from the ninth to the eleventh century was characterized by political consolidation in conjuncture with rapid economic and demographic expansion.[17] Martin's survey records 45 towns, of which only 17 were of Roman origin and 28 were new urban settlements, presumably formed in the Byzantine period. It is worth noting that the renewal of urban settlement was not confined to the coasts and their immediate hinterland but extended to the areas that had been most severely affected by the previous demographic contraction and abandonment of land. Martin emphasizes the urban development in Capitanata, with the city of Troìa as an example. He also notes the increased number of bishops as a concomitant marker of population growth. In 968, four new bishops were named, in the towns of Acerenza, Gravina, Tricarico and Tursi, under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the *metropolis* of Otranto. Martin observes that while the distribution of coin findings fully reflects the presence of the Byzantine army in the provincial territories – and in fact with the Norman conquest Byzantine coins disappeared abruptly – the economic and demographic expansion actually continued even after the end of Byzantine rule. Agrarian expansion and development continued throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries with the foundation of new villages and many

[17] Martin (1994); Arthur (2006).

rural and urban churches, somehow facilitating the consolidation of the Norman authority. As elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin, Martin concludes, economic revival appears to have depended on demographic growth.

The next essays shift from Apulia to Calabria. In her comprehensive survey of the fiscal and economic history of Calabria between the sixth and the eighth centuries (*L'èconomie de la Calabre de la fin du VI au VIII siècle*, pp. 323-388), Ghislaine Noyé points out that by the beginning of the sixth century this area, formed by Bruttium and Lucania, had become a major producer of cereals as well as a source of horses and produce. In the following century, neither the fortification of the region as a consequence of the constant warfare with the Lombards nor the military activities of Constans II in 660s, supported by fiscal measures whose nature is still uncertain,[18] stopped the specialization of crops and their commercialization. Although military disruption and fiscal pressure contributed to the transformation of the region's demography and settlement pattern,[19] the substantial part of it that remained in imperial hands saw state and church operating closely together to reinforce legal power as well as ecclesiastical moral authority and Roman identity.[20] Subsequent imperial interventions to the advantage of the church consolidated this common interest. In 685-686, the emperor granted to John V, a former envoy of Pope Agatho (678-81) in Constantinople, a revision of the tax on the church's assets in Sicily and Southern Apulia, complemented in 686-687 by the modification of the tax assessment of the patrimony in Calabria and Lucania. Noyé finds that even when state demand from the other Byzantine enclaves faded, Calabria continued to export produce beyond its immediate hinterland; at least the evidence from ceramics suggests so.[21]

Annick Peters-Custot's paper (*Les plateae calabraises d'époque nor-*

[18] Zuckerman (2005); Cosentino (2008).
[19] Raimondo (2006).
[20] Haldon (2016, p. 211).
[21] Di Gangi, Lebole (2006).

mande. Une source pour l'histoire économique et sociale de la Calabre byzantine?, pp. 389-408) discusses Byzantine Calabria in the tenth and eleventh centuries. A detailed comparison between the agrarian regimes in Sicily and Calabria demonstrates convincingly how the predominance of a given property structure affected the tax mechanisms. In Sicily, the dominance of small and middle landholding enabled the Normans to retain the census system based on poll tax (*jarâ'id*) established by the Arabs in the ninth and tenth centuries.[22] Under Norman rule, the poll tax was levied on Muslims and Jews and hence still depended on the personal status of the taxpayer. In Calabria, by contrast, the supremacy of large landowners and the fact that their estates were cultivated mostly by dependent peasants of local origin (*paroikoi*) made this arrangement redundant. Here, Peters-Custot observes, what changed was the means by which the population was bound to public obligation. In the eleventh century Byzantine taxation relied on land cadastre and census. The basic fiscal unit was the village (*chorion*), and the peasants recorded in the village register paid their taxes collectively. Whereas in this system the peasant's status determined his bond to the land and the way the tax had to be paid, under the Normans the fiscal obligation, specifically corvées of various kinds, was simply bound up with the nature of land, whatever the taxpayer's legal status.

Following up on Peters-Custot's conclusions, Cristina Rognoni, in *Pratique juridique grecque et èconomie de la Calabre post-byzantine, XII^{e}-XIII^{e} siècle* (pp. 409-430), deals with changes in the agrarian regime in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Calabria. Through a minute examination of the archival materials from the Medinaceli Foundation in Toledo, she sheds light on the transformations in the Tuccio Valley (Reggio Calabria) during the transition from Byzantine to Norman rule. In particular, she draws attention to new terminology that reflected changing practices in the acquisition and exploitation of land and transformations in the legal status of the peasants and their relationship with the institutions and owners of the means

[22] Nef (2010, pp. 148-150).

of production. Enrico Zanini's chapter, *Economia dell'Italia bizantina e indicatori archeologici* (pp. 431-458), is a fitting conclusion to the volume. Starting with a critical reconsideration of his earlier work on Byzantine Italies, Zanini develops three main propositions. First, the Greco-Gothic war (535-554) and the Byzantine conquest of Italy re-established the province's connection with the Mediterranean system. A larger amount of resources was exported from Italy to the center of the empire in exchange for coined money. Sicily in particular, and to a lesser extent Sardinia, acquired a new function within the imperial organization, starting to supply produce to Constantinople instead of Rome. Second, unlike the lands under Lombard control, the Byzantine territories benefitted from the political and economic integration of the empire, developing a pattern of production and distribution with the capacity to supply not only the demand of state apparatuses but also to meet the requests of local elites and the emerging middle class, as is clearly demonstrated by the availability of ceramics, luxury commodities and small-denomination coins. Third, and lastly, Zanini stresses the resilience of this commercial pattern in the face of the disruption of the state channels of extraction and distribution at the end of the seventh century. Although the synergy between state networks and trade had been crucial in the immediate aftermath of the conquest as well as in specific circumstances later on, as in the 620s under Heraclius or during the expedition of Constance II in the 660s, the evidence from Marseille, S. Antonino of Perti, Castrum of Loppio, and Crypta Balbi demonstrates that local elites developed infrastructures that were autonomous with respect to the state, so that even when the state-ruled mechanism of supply and demand disappeared, those channels continued to work.[23] This conclusive observation of Zanini's consolidates at provincial level what Callegher and Morrisson, Prigent, and Noyé found for the north Adriatic area, Sicily, and Calabria respectively. From the end of the seventh century, the specialization of production, the export of the surplus and the monetization of the

[23] Loseby (2000); Mannoni-Murialdo (2001); Maurina-Capelli (2005); Saguì (2002).

economy proceeded, albeit at different levels and with distinct purposes in different enclaves.

The first part of the collection suggests that trade and financial transactions were not rigorously associated with the political administration. Although fiscal transfers marked the period from the fourth to the seventh century, private sector activities like banking played an important role in making economic transactions possible – even those connected with the administrative machinery of the imperial bureaucracy and the army. By the same token, the monetization of the economy in Italy did not depend mainly on state apparatuses. The evidence of coinage further supports this thesis: the province developed a monetary economy characterized by a ratio between gold and bronze coins that was much more stable than it was in Constantinople or elsewhere in the empire, which permitted a higher degree of monetization than in other imperial provinces. On the other hand, this framework did not deprive the imperial authority of its right to intervene in fiscal matters whenever necessary to protect imperial interests, as Leo III's tax reform clearly demonstrates. This corroborates the thesis that under certain circumstances and conditions the state apparatus, especially fiscal mechanisms, remained an influential factor.

The papers of the second section suggest a similar pattern: between the eighth and thirteenth centuries economic and social infrastructures continued to operate despite the transformations produced by the disconnection from Byzantine political institutions. In a general context of demographic expansion, the settlement of new land fostered the growth of the agrarian economy. Here, however, things may be more complicated than the volume suggests. Although it would seem that the population was growing, there is no indication that the demographic expansion, especially in the tenth century, had shifted the balance between land and population enough to endanger the peasants' subsistence.[24] Put in another way,

[24] Harvey (1989, p. 165); Shanin (1973).

at least at that time population growth was not the only cause of the occupation of new land. Migration too can explain new settlement, particularly in previously underpopulated regions (such as Lucania). In a few cases, population transfers may actually have been deliberate, although the evidence for this relates mainly to the reign of Leo VI (886-912), who is known to have sent settlers from the Peloponnesus to Southern Italy.[25] In other circumstances, the transfer from coastal to internal areas was dictated by the need to escape from the raids that victimized the coastal settlements (Apulia and Calabria).

Further incidental evidence suggests that from around 900 to 1050 the fiscal organization remained complex and continued to be based on a series of distinct taxes, on which Byzantine military and administrative structures depended. Schematically, under Byzantine rule, in addition to the basic land tax, there was a hearth tax and numerous supplementary obligations, all related in one way or another with cadastre or census.[26] On this basis, it is not hard to see the occupation of new land as a government policy designed to expand the cultivated areas and with them tax revenues. At the end of the ninth century, in fact, the Byzantine administration can be seen in full operation, redrawing boundaries to create the basic fiscal units (*choria*), where the inhabitants were registered and made collectively responsible for the total tax due. Monasteries were often the focal point of land clearance and settlement, especially in the previously under-exploited region of Lucania, and the villages that developed around them were then officially incorporated as new tax units. Furthermore, since ready cash was undoubtedly needed to cover the expenditures of the imperial bodies, it is presumably no coincidence that the circulation of coins began to increase in concomitance with the first large-scale commutation of taxes in cash under Leo VI (886-912). Coins had begun to circulate again starting in the late ninth

[25] Loud (2008, p. 633).
[26] Von Falkenhausen (2012); Harvey (1989, pp. 103-109).

century, with small quantities of bronze *folles* under Theophilus (829-842) and Basil I and associates (867-879), but the real upsurge in the circulation of the *follis* came under Leo VI. A tax payment in cash was required of those in the western *themata* who chose not to perform military service, allowing payment for the troops from the central and eastern *themata* of Opsikion, Anatholikon and Thrakesion.[27]

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the state's role in the economic process underwent significant changes.[28] Again, as Martin clearly states, population growth appears to have been an important factor in the expansion of large landholdings. In contrast with the tenth century, however, there is no indication of state intervention in moving people from one region to another. There was a change in the dynamic of population growth, furthering the economic expansion and thus increasing the resources available to the state as well as the wealth of large landowners. In this context the means whereby taxes were extracted changed according to the agrarian regime and the organization of the rural workforce; this contrasts with the formation of colonate in the fourth century, when the tax mechanism itself was the prime mover. Furthermore, as a result of the increase in the labour force – a variable strictly dependent on population growth – independent peasant farmers gradually became a less important social group than in the seventh and eighth centuries. Large estates, both lay and ecclesiastical, benefitting from imperial privileges (another indication of the retreat of the state) expanded more rapidly and produced a larger farm surplus that could be sold on the market.[29] As a consequence, the proportion of independent peasants in the rural population was reduced as *paroikoi* of the state and private large landowners became more numerous.[30]

The final question that the collection raises – for further investigation – concerns the nature of demographic growth. The question,

[27] Harvey (1989, p. 110); Arthur (2006).
[28] Laiou-Morrisson (2007, p. 155).
[29] Banaji (2010, pp. 72-79); Kula (1976, pp. 62-75).
[30] Harvey (1989, p. 262).

that is, can be articulated as follows. Was there an increase in fertility or a reduction in mortality? Why did population growth take place at that particular juncture? And what factors triggered it? This collection is an excellent point of departure for further exploration of these questions, and for a reconsideration of economic transformation as the effect of a complex interaction between various factors rather than as the product of a single independent variable.

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