

Killing “Empire”: Goldilocks and the Three Byzantine *Kommerkiarioi*

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The much-debated middle Byzantine officials called *kommerkiarioi* play a central role in John Haldon’s reconstruction of the vicissitudes of “the Empire that would not die”. They are in reality the main subject of chapter 7 and are ubiquitous throughout the book, and crucially in its conclusions, from which a quote in particular deserves to be reported *in extenso*:

“[The empire] was endowed with remarkably flexible and effective fiscal arrangements and mechanisms for the appropriation and redistribution of essential military resources in men and provisions. The best example is the ways in which the efforts of the *kommerkiarioi* and their network of warehouses and the infrastructure that supported them were redirected to bail the government out in the period ca. 673-732” (p. 292).

The way in which this “bail-out” worked is best summarized in the author’s own words found a little earlier in the conclusions:

“So from the late 630s, and in a situation of relatively unfavourable climatic and demographic conditions, the government had to deal with a massively reduced income, and one result seems to have been [...] the expansion of the activities of the *kommerkiarioi*, which henceforth seem to have been involved with managing both the supply of the capital and of the armies with grain and perhaps other goods, alongside their traditional functions” (p. 285).

Thus, the *kommerkiarioi* were for Haldon one of the (not many) “advantages” that allowed the empire to survive the trials of the

7th century, war, plague and, it is shown, (minor) climate change. This contention is neither entirely new nor surprising, but, rather, represents a natural development not only in Haldon's own view of the Byzantine Empire of the time, but also, in the *longue durée* of scholarship, in the more general historiography of the Byzantine "Dark Age" from which Haldon programmatically claims to emancipate himself and the reader (p. 3 f.). The main argument of the present contribution is that Haldon in fact does not achieve either goal, while still producing a fantastically stimulating book in the process. But first things first: What *do* we know about the *kommerkiarioi*?

Kommerkiarioi (an obvious construct based on Latin *commercium*, originally a customs site on the frontier) first pop up in Justinianic times and are almost exclusively documented since then by the hundreds of lead seals they left behind in the exercise of their duties. These seals are somewhat exceptional in that they bear an imperial portrait similar to that found on contemporary coins and are from 673/4 explicitly dated by indiction. Also, some seals bear an imprint of burlap on the reverse side evocative of Roman commercial seals. The legend on the seals attributes to the *kommerkiarioi* the highest state dignities and, more consistently after ca. 650, sets them, sometimes in colleges, in relation to a number of "warehouses" (*apothêkai*) distributed across the provinces of the Byzantine Empire. From 730 to the beginning of the ninth century, an obviously related institution, called "imperial *kommerkia*," using similar seals, superseded the *kommerkiarioi*. Further evidence is admittedly circumstantial, with, ironically, no written sources mentioning the officials in the period under scrutiny, that of their most intense activity. What the written sources do make abundantly clear before and after, however, and is to my knowledge undisputed, is:

1. that they evolved from the late Antique post of *comes commerciorum*, an official in charge of customs in the Eastern dioceses;
2. that, like the earlier *comites*, they dealt in state supplies of raw silk and dyes in the 6th and early 7th centuries;
3. that they were, from the 10th century on, that is at a time when no more "exceptional" (dated) seals of either *kommerkiarioi* or *kommerkia* are attested, in charge of levying duties on trade.

As my readers may have guessed by now, scholars have basically struggled to fill the gap (what we *do not* know) with more or less educated speculation, largely based on assumptions of continuity.

Thus, for example, in 1963, H  l  ne Antoniadis-Bibicou proposed tracing the origin of the functions attested for the 10th-century *kommerkiarioi* back to the 6th century. Conversely, Nicholas Oikonomides, in a famous 1984 article, set out to extend the late Antique capacities of the *comites commerciorum* as dealers in raw silk into the 7th and 8th centuries, interpreting their being in office collegially as an indication that the office was in fact farmed out to private companies. It should be stressed that radical progress in quantitative analysis of the seals was only made possible by the systematic classification and publication of the Zacos collection of Byzantine lead seals in 1972. At the same time as Oikonomides, Michael Hendy developed a refreshing hypothesis to the effect that there existed a specific link between the issue of seals of *kommerkiarioi* in the provinces and the presence of the Byzantine army as attested by the chronicles and isolated coin finds. This hypothesis was mainly based on a small number of dated seals mentioning "slaves" or, occasionally, "Slavs", which Hendy sought to link with known, roughly contemporary transfers of such armed peoples to Asia Minor by the emperor Justinian II. Besides, Hendy saw the *kommerkiarioi* as engaged in selling "arms and equipment" to the soldiers and "charging [...] some unknown degree of taxation on the transaction". Be that as it may, the core of Hendy's hypothesis – the existence of a link between the *kommerkiarioi* and the army – was accepted, revised, and expanded by Wolfram Brandes, John Haldon himself, and Vivien Prigent in several respects in a number of articles and books published in the 1990s-2010s and is essentially what is now being repropounded in Haldon's latest book, as seen above.¹ The basic claim now is, however, that the *kommerkiarioi* were the state officials in charge of feeding the Byzantine army.

¹ Montinaro, 2013, p. 351-538, for a survey of the sources (p. 382-95) and literature (p. 354-64), and the works cited below.

Before finally commenting on this new work, there is, however, a more important preliminary observation to be made for the non-specialist, which I partly anticipated above. To a varying extent, all the above-mentioned hypotheses pay a toll to longstanding generalizations concerning a Byzantine “Dark Age” lasting roughly from 600 to 800, as a time of economic depression, demonetization, and more or less severe reversion to a barter economy, similar to the 3rd-century crisis of the Roman Empire of old. Thus already in the 19th century, the first scholar to combine the study of the seals of *kommerkiarioi* and texts, Andreas Mordtmann, believed them to have been officials in charge of customs and duties in a peculiar situation in which “vu la circulation restreinte de numéraire, les paysans s’aquittent de la dîme en nature.”² The commercial levy supposedly collected by the 7th- and 8th-century *kommerkiarioi*, according to Antoniadis-Bibicou was, again, a levy in kind.³ Hendy could not imagine that the Byzantine state would have bothered about “fancy goods [...] at a time of great crisis.”⁴ Finally, one of the major premises of Brandes and Haldon’s analyses is an alleged contraction of monetary circulation.⁵ While containing, as we shall see, bits of historical truth, this scenario ends up committing to the “darkness” discourse in no milder way than the notion of “survival” itself.

What, then, is new in Haldon’s treatment of the *kommerkiarioi* in *The Empire That Would Not Die*? The most noticeable switch concerns the way Haldon envisages the provisioning supposedly performed by the *kommerkiarioi*. Haldon has come a long way from believing that the scarcely attested middle Byzantine *coemptio* (Gr. *synônê*) had by the mid-7th century already evolved from the earlier compulsory purchases intended to supplement standard annual provisions into a “basic land-tax,” or “levy in kind,” in fact comparable to the *annona (militaris)* of old (as he proposed in 1997 and, with

² Mordtmann, 1877, pp. 289-297.

³ Antoniadis-Bibicou, 1963.

⁴ Hendy, 1985, p. 633.

⁵ Haldon, 1997; Brandes-Haldon, 2000, pp. 141-72; Brandes, 2002.

W. Brandes, in 2000)⁶ and even from simply recognizing that the pattern of the seals suggests that the *kommerkiarioi* carried out activities of an "ad hoc nature" (as he did in 2011, with L. Brubaker).⁷ While still wavering between "compulsory purchase" and "direct taxation" as regards the way 7th- and 8th-century *kommerkiarioi* raised "various types of resource," he now finally appears to prefer the former (p. 262 f.). This is important, for it represents a response to one recent criticism of Haldon's work. This is when I should disclose that I do have a horse in the race.

In 2013, in revisiting the seals in question, I proposed an alternative interpretation of the evidence, basically arguing, much on the lines of Antoniadis-Bibicou, that the later-7th-century "warehouses" were a commercial institution inheriting mainly the attributions of the Late Antique *commercia*. Paraphrasing the French of my own conclusions, what I tried to do was first to build a plausible context for the rise in importance of indirect taxation in the Byzantine Empire in the late 6th and early 7th centuries as opposed to direct taxation. The thrust of my critique of Brandes and Haldon consisted in:

1. pointing out the lack of clear evidence connecting the *kommerkiarioi* and the army (or the supply of the capital for that matter), this boiling down to one seal of the *kommerkiarios* Stephen, also bearing the title of military logothete, from the years 659-663;
2. pointing out the persistent connection between *kommerkiarioi* and silk workshops, evidenced by numerous seals of *kommerkiarioi* who also bore the title of *archontes tou blattiou* from the years 673-730;
3. casting doubt on the ability of the empire to keep on extracting a regular and reasonable amount of direct tax at a time of possibly severe depopulation following war and the plague, let alone the ability to do so in kind.

"Then even declining commerce," I wrote more or less, "be-

⁶ As in the preceding note.

⁷ Brubaker-Haldon, 2011.

comes more visible than a declining rural economy, and the seals of the *kommerkiarioi* represent this growing visibility." In accordance with widely acknowledged trends in the early medieval economy, part of this trade (in fact much, as I now believe) must have been of a diplomatic nature, or linked to the court in Constantinople.⁸

Haldon now maintains that the involvement of the *kommerkiarioi* in trade at any level, which he has in fact never completely excluded, was at best minor. This may or may not be a primarily rhetorical concession, at least it does not affect Haldon's further reasoning in any perceivable way, and it is, after all, on a similar note that I myself had admitted that the activity of the warehouses as evidenced by the seals may at times have been boosted by the presence of the troops! Haldon continues: "the suggestion that internal trade could generate the sort of resources from luxury goods that the state required seems inherently unlikely; indeed, it flies in the face of everything else that we know, from archaeology or texts, for the period" (p. 263). As should now be clear, this is in fact a slight misrepresentation of my point, which, however, only shows to me that I was not as clear in 2013 as I wished I was. Now I simply ignore whether trade could "generate the sort of resources" needed by the empire, but I must confess that, perhaps heretically, I do not see why not, or how and where the empire would, in admittedly tough conditions, set the bar of what exactly was "needed". Too, Haldon overlooks completely my argument concerning the seals of workshop managers.

There is so much more in Haldon's restructuring of the issues related to the *kommerkiarioi* that would deserve a book-length reply: for instance, the question of monetary circulation ca. 650, for which the author both decries contraction and invokes the notion of "residuality" (circulating stock of older coins). It must, however, have been one or the other. Regarding still other elements of Haldon's reshuffle, I simply am not competent to address them: his arguments concern-

⁸ See footnote 1.

ing climate change, for example, are apparently beyond me. Yet while I totally take on board the criticism concerning the lack of a full discussion of the archaeological evidence in my study, I must again declare my suspicion that presenting even more admittedly circumstantial evidence telling us once more what we all agree upon, namely that the empire was facing a deep economic and human crisis, would in fact do very little to clear up the debate. More importantly, I cannot refrain from seeing a real paradox here, namely that all the caveats that Haldon would like to oppose to my analysis apply just as well, perhaps primarily, to his own. Running a functioning system of direct taxation in the difficult situation Haldon has so convincingly illustrated is, to my mind, the true impossibility. Degrading "direct taxation" to "compulsory purchases" makes things a bit easier for Haldon's *kommerkiarioi*. But not quite easy yet.

What is at stake is of course more than winning a contest in guesswork and finding as Goldilocks, to use Haldon's own metaphor, the one *kommerkarios* out of three that is "just right" for each one of us. It is about a vision of Byzantium in the 7th and 8th centuries. For Haldon, it was an empire that survived, if paradoxically; that much is clear. The means of this survival were essentially the exceptional longevity and adaptability of pre-existing structures, best exemplified in Haldon's earlier books by the praetorian Prefecture, a horrendous, unashamedly unsustainable administrative monster designed by the Late Roman government to overcome the 3rd-century crisis by moving provisions across the empire, but already substantially deceased by the 6th century. It is not clear whether Haldon still believes, as he once did, that branches of the prefecture survived to host, for example, the *kommerkiarioi*; he no longer makes this link explicit. He seems instead to accept the possibility of a link with the imperial fisc (Gr. *sakellê*), the private side of the Byzantine state economy and the only certainly growing area, to which I attempted, in the above-mentioned study, to reattach the new financial departments that emerged at the very end of the 7th century. This was, I would argue further, pure reinvention rather than a mere act of survival. In my reconstruction, one more defining

principle of Late Roman statehood was reinvented as taxation shifted, during the deepest crisis, from direct to indirect, thus turning to more easily realizable assets. One will still ask whether the *kommerkiarioi* contributed at some point to feeding the Byzantine army or the capital. One will mainly wonder, however, whether it is only by letting "empire", as we know it, *die* once and for all and be born again in the period covered by Haldon's book that we will shed some light on the darkness in which the medieval Byzantines still appear to be cloaked.