

Brief Notes on The Byzantine Insular Urbanism in The Eastern Mediterranean Between Late Antiquity and The Early Middle Ages (Ca. 650 – Ca. 800 CE)

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Abstract

This paper aims at reassessing the concept of peripherality of the Byzantine insular world. It is suggested that Sicily, Crete and Cyprus (and to a lesser extent Malta, Sardinia and the Balearics) acted as a third political and economic pole between the Anatolian plateau and the Aegean Sea in the Byzantine Mediterranean. This will shed "archeological" light on some parallel economic and political trajectories of the urban centers located on two of the above-mentioned islands: Salamis-Constantia on Cyprus and Gortyn in Crete during the transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages.

Keywords

Byzantium; Mediterranean; Islands; Archaeology; Medieval

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Doęu Akdeniz’de Ge Antik aę ile Erken Orta aęlar Arasında Bizans İzolatif Kentilięi Üzerine Kısa Notlar (Yaklaşık 650 - Yaklaşık 800 CE)

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Özet

Bu makale, Bizans İmparatorluğu Adalar Sistemi içinde periferi ve periferik alan konseptini yeniden deęerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Makalede, Girit, Sicilya ve Kıbrıs merkezde olmak üzere destekleyici dięer örnekler olarak Malta, Sardunya ve Balear Adaları kullanılacak ve bu adaların Bizans Akdenizi’nin kalbi olarak kabul edilen Anadolu platosu ve Ege Denizi evresinde hem politik hem de ekonomik aılardan üçüncü bir kutup olarak fonksiyonları tartiřılacaktır. Bu argüman Ge Antikaę’dan Erken Ortaaę’a geiř döneminde Salamis-Constantia (Kıbrıs) ve Gortyn (Girit) řehir merkezlerinin sunduęu arkeolojik kanıtlar ve iki merkezin paralel ekonomik ve politik yörüngeleri ile desteklenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Bizans; Akdeniz; Adalar; Arkeoloji; Ortaaę

Islands have represented a challenge for Byzantine historiography. The biggest of them, like Crete (Tzougarakis, 1998; Zanini, 2009, 2013), Cyprus (Metcalf, 2009; Zavagno, 2017), and Sicily (NefPringent, 2006; Molinari, 2013) have attracted a good deal of attention, although the latter has often been regarded as a sort of black hole in Byzantine archaeology till few decades ago; the smallest like Malta (Bruno, 2009), or those perceived as too distant from the Constantinopolitan center, like Sardinia (Corrias, 2012; Cosentino, 2004) or the Balearics (Signes-Codoñer, 2005) have often been neglected.

Indeed, and for the most part we must admit that the islands of Byzantine Mediterranean have been regarded as mere peripheral additions to the Byzantine heartland, which in fact Wickham defined as the “uneasy coupling of two wildly different geographical zones: the Anatolian plateau and the Aegean” (Wickham, 2005: pp. 29-32; also Haldon, 2005; Jeffreys & Haldon & Cormack 2009). In this light, it comes as no surprise that insular cities are not mentioned in the recent seminal work of Michael Decker on the Byzantine Dark Ages (Decker, 2016); none of the five key-studies Decker mentions to explain the fate and development of Byzantine cities in the seventh-to-ninth century period is located on an island. This notwithstanding the fact that one of the best excavated and stratigraphically documented Byzantine cities is Gortyn, the Byzantine capital of the island of Crete.

By glossing over islands, Decker, although unintentionally, embraces the traditional historiographical approach regards islands simply as marginal to the political, social and economic changes the Byzantine heartland was experiencing, from the seventh century until they were recaptured by the gravity of an expanding Empire in the tenth century (Crete and Cyprus) or were lost forever (Sicily, together with Sardinia Malta and the Balearics).

Therefore, it seems possible to assert that Byzantine historiography has not fully moved away from the interpretative framework proposed in the only existing systematic account on the history of the Byzantine insular world, that is the volume written by Elizabeth Malamut in 1988 entitled *Les Iles de l'Empire Byzantine, VIIIème- XIIème siècle* (Malamut, 1988). This does not imply that islands haven't attracted the interest of Byzantine archaeologists or historians. Nevertheless, Byzantine historiography has not yet produced an all-encompassing alternative to the only existing systematic account on the history of the Byzantine insular world, that is the volume written by Malamut. In her book –as Zanini commented– we are presented with a refined concept of insularity as Malamut writes from a “Braudelian” standpoint. For the Byzantines an island was defined by the intercourse between the land and the sea: “for the former the sea is important but nevertheless accessory, for the latter it is essential and more so if the island is small and far from the continent” (Zanini, 2013b: 3). In particular Malamut distinguishes between the Western and Eastern Mediterranean basin where islands are too pulverized and close to the continent to have any real political or economic role in the historical trajectories of the Constantinopolitan empire. Cyprus and Crete, however, remained the exception to this rule owing to their strategic relevance along the frontier with the Muslim world (Malamut, 1988: 32-55).

As Malamut, indeed, focuses on the two biggest islands of the Eastern

Mediterranean, she also examines the trajectories of the Cretan and Cypriot cities, although her interpretation remained caught in the traditional historiographical debate framed within the opposition between 'continuists' and 'discontinuists' (Curta, 2016; Zavagno, 2009: 1-30). The former convinced that the Classical city survived physically; that, while they may have shrunk and often have been confined to their citadels as a result of constant enemy harassment, they nevertheless retained their role as centers of commercial activity, petty commodity production and administration. The latter, instead, argued for a total collapse of the antique urban organization. This opinion shared by Malamut herself for –although recognizing that some insular cities retained an important role as seat of Christian bishoprics– she clearly stated that in Crete and Cyprus urban fabric, social structure and economic importance were similar to those of rural fortified villages.

Of course, one should admit that Malamut had simply not enough archaeology at her disposal to propose a more refined picture of Byzantine urbanism on what after all were regarded as liminal and peripheral territories of the empire (Cosentino, 2013). Islands, as Bulgarella hastily concluded, were indeed part of the Byzantine perceived or imaginary space as well of their daily life; nevertheless, they were at most lands of exile or outposts along the frontier with the Muslim world (Bulgarella, 2012: 35- 39). They remained essential to the connectivity of the Empire as they dotted the most important shipping and maritime routes across the Mediterranean but they revealed in the literary and documentary sources mainly if not entirely as military bulwarks, hosting harbors or bases for the Byzantine fleet patrolling a sort of "liquid" continuation of the Anatolian Arab-Byzantine frontier crisscrossing the Taurus and anti-Taurus mountains (Lounghis, 2010; Eger, 2015). In this interpretative framework, cities did not inhabit the insular geographical space anymore. At best they moved away from the coasts (like Salamis-Constantia or Paphos in Cyprus or in Sicily) or they simply turned into depopulated fortified settlement governed by military authorities and the local clergy with the bishop or archbishop at its head.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper will be to approach the structural and morphological changes experienced in the urban settlements as seen in an archaeologically comparative perspective –that is including areas beyond the realm of Constantinopolitan rule by benefitting from the results of the archaeological surveys and excavations conducted on different islands since Malamut conducted her research. In particular, the concepts of spaces and the spatial practices will be tackled as they emerged in the passage between Late Antiquity and the early Middle ages, having in mind the parallel development of the human, social, economic and cultural structures (Zanini, 2017: 131-7). Indeed, as Veikou states: "both texts and archaeology reveal specific Byzantine strategies for the construction of settled spaces, ranging from the selection of location based on practical or symbolic concerns to the architecture and decoration of the buildings" (Veikou, 2017: 146). Reconciling literary and documentary sources with material culture and archaeology is not the only reason why we should embrace and assess the forms and ideas of "spatialities" in transitional period such as the one under scrutiny here. A further implication of this choice is indeed to try and intercept

the trajectories and dynamics of urban changes by using the Lefebvian category of “lived space” which is essential to reconstruct human spatial practices (Veikou, 2017: 146). Every process stems from a tripartite dialectic “between everyday spatial practices (which can be perceived), representations of space or theories of space (which can be conceived) and spatial representations which are the spatial imaginary of the time (and cannot be anything but lived)” (Veikou, 2017: 148). Therefore, like any society, Byzantium cannot be fully grasped if not as collection of people and object in space: a social body creating its own spatial practices and forging and owning its own space.

It is important to consider that the material culture and archaeology are part of the perceived space whereas literary sources show us the conceived space we remain in the dark when it comes to lived space and spatial experiences particularly in urban contexts. Therefore, one cannot but recognize that we can outbid the invisibility of the urban population and, in particular, its elites by embracing an “archaeology of people and their everyday life instead of an archaeology of monuments” (Horden-Purcell, 2000: 88-122). In this light, it will be possible to pair phenomena like the encroachment of colonnaded streets or public spaces by residential (or commercial) structures with the less obvious but nevertheless essential role played by the infrastructures related to the supply water (and bread) (Giorgi, 2017). As Zanini indeed asserts, following the flow of urban waters (aqueducts, fountains and pipelines) is a formidable tool to understand how the way urban spaces were structured and organized; investigating the traces of bread production instead helps us to fathom the ways in which those spaces functioned on daily basis (Zanini, 2015: 373).

All the above mentioned issues will be addressed by proposing a comparative overview including two “cities on islands” (Gortyn in Crete and Salamis-Constantia in Cyprus), and one located at the very heart of the Byzantine Anatolian plateau (Amorium) using a few examples (like Scythopolis, Bosra and Jerash) located in Muslim Syria-Palestine as they provide a comparative backdrop. Indeed, one should admit that “most of the understanding comes from getting a sense of difference, from testing one’s explanatory assertions against parallel situations with different results, or different situations with the same result” (Wickham, 2016: 16). More important, these cities have been singled out because they have been well excavated and therefore, they could help to better address differences, categories and problems as they emerge in the archaeological record (Quiroga, 2016). Part of this paper will be therefore structured around the identification of functional spaces of life and work as they will allow me to propose an overview of the changing socio-economic conditions of urban life as well as to identify the role played by urban-oriented elites. They should indeed be regarded as the engine of economic demand, and to better understand the resilience or maintenance of certain buildings and public areas as centers of religious and/or secular urban life.

There are obviously some immediate problems or better possible objections arising from this selection of urban sites. The first stems from their geographical location. Gortyn and Salamis-Constantia are indeed coastal sites and located on islands, which in the seventh-to-early ninth century seem to have remained an

economic (and urban) space relatively more developed than the Balkans or Asia Minor (Cosentino, 2013). And this seems to remain partially true even in areas of the Byzantine empire (like the Anatolian plateau) where the gap between the material culture of the Late Antiquity and that of the Middle Ages was regarded as unbridgeable. One could think here for instance of Amorium where archaeological excavations suggest a variety of trends which included adaptation, renovation and dismantling of buildings, extensive reuse of spolia as well as occupation of part of the urban fabric by artisanal and commercial activities which seemed to have included local potters (Decker, 2016: 91-98; Ivison, 2008: 54-5; Lightfoot, 2007; Lightfoot-Lightfoot, 2007). Indeed, here I do not dispute the fact that the Mediterranean became more fragmented in economic terms as regional and sub-regional productive and distributive networks replaced the Roman fiscal unity (Wickham, 2005: 693-824); also I do not ignore that Byzantine cities evolved by reflecting a "greater diversity on a regional basis [as] markedly different in their monumental scenery and every-day life places".. I would however be more cautious when it comes to a generalized picture of complete lack of urban vitality resulting from the dismantling of urban monumental building (Quiroga, 2016: 92). Quiroga and Zanini have recently stressed that more rigorous methodologies in recording archaeological data and extensive use of stratigraphic methods help to identify and define complex varieties of urban occupation forms. Indeed, urban configurations may be only partially related to the geographical positioning (coastal-insular vs. inland) or their role along the frontier ((Quiroga, 2016; Zanini, 2016).

As I will return to the latter point in few moments, I want to move now to a second possible objection which has to do with the peculiar political, administrative and religious nature of the abovementioned cities. Here, I should admit that I will focus on the seat of the strategos of the Anatolikon theme and two insular capitals (although never elevated to the rank of theme as ruled by archontes, a title conferred to the members of local aristocratic families acting as governmental representatives on other Byzantine islands like Sardinia, the Balearics, and Malta) (Lilie, 2005; Ahrweiler, 1966: 48). In fact, Amorium, Gortyn and Salamis-Constantia may be regarded as exceptional for –as Haldon concludes- they survived because they fulfill a function as administrative base for the State and its military apparatus or as integral to the Church institution (and even as pilgrimage centers) (Brubaker & Haldon, 2011: 504-5). However, they look less so if compared with contemporary cities of Syria and Palestine (like Jerash or Scythopolis) where –as Avni has recently pointed out- a different economic system from the Byzantine one led commerce and industry to become a key factor in urban economy and brought about a more liberal approach to planning and spatial development within cities (Avni, 2011: 327). Similarly, in both Amorium as well as Salamis-Constantia and Gortyn the urban space was restructured in order to accommodate the installation of artisanal or commercial infrastructure. As it will be seen, these turned into foci of residential quarters blurring the separation between public and private and witnessing to the development of less monumental urban landscape with the concentration of different functions in same areas (Avni, 2011: 328).

In light of this comparison, a third objection to my choice of cities may be

proposed; this has to do with the positioning of the abovementioned urban sites along the frontier of the Byzantine Empire (or –as Lounghis has proposed– along its maritime continuation) (Lounghis, 2010). On the one hand, urban archaeology, rural surveys, a more punctual and comparative analysis of pottery and coins have led to conclude that islands possibly acted as a third political and economic pole between the Anatolian plateau and the Aegean Sea in the Byzantine Mediterranean, rather than as a marginal area at the border of two conflicting polities (the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic Caliphate) (Zanini & Pergola & Michaeilides, 2013). On the other hand, in Amorium, thirty-years of urban archaeology have showed that the city was more than a simply military bulwark where religious and administrative authorities hastily sheltered behind walls in the face of the raids conducted by the Arabs across the frontier. If it is clear that the military acted as a stimulus for the local economy and it established a secure and fortified presence on the so-called Upper City, it can hardly be stated that “the Byzantine high command withdrew from the site completely to seek a more defensible location” (Lightfoot, 1998: 65). Indeed, a large bathhouse complex (in use until early ninth century), the abovementioned artisanal installations (with two different phases of occupation), evidence of locally-made pottery and the presence of at least four churches (one of which –the Lower city church– was continuously frequented until the Arab sack of the city in 838 CE.) all enclosed by an extensive set of walls (the so-called Lower City walls) may serve as a model for the development of other Byzantine cities in Anatolia like Ankara, Ephesos or Amastris (Lightfoot, 1998: 65).

Having addressed some possible objections, from here onwards I confront some of the connections between these sites with the questions I have previously sketched in mind (Lightfoot, 1998: 65). The first is methodological but it frames some of the answers I am proposing here; I am referring to the role of coins, seals and above all pottery as essential tools in interpreting the dynamics of changes of social and economic urban fabric and the process of spatial transformation. Indeed, one should admit that continuous levels of wealth could stem from and expressed within a different lifestyle on the part of the local inhabitants and, in particular, urban elites (Walmsley, 2010: 39-40). The resilience of urban socio-economic fabric is particularly evident in early Islamic Syria and Palestine but can be documented in at least some Byzantine cities as well. One could think here of the recent identification of different types of locally-produced pottery for –as Vroom has proposed– we should move beyond a simple quantitative assessment to embrace a more qualitative analytical approach of local ceramic production (Vroom, 2012: 343). Being those globular amphorae, painted common-wares (like those found in Gortyn and other areas of the Mediterranean including Cyprus, Syria and Jordan) or imitations of metal originals (like in the case of Amorium), the diffuse presence and commercialization at regional level of locally made pottery should pair with evidence of a monetized urban economy and diffuse presence of lead seals of local and Constantinopolitan authorities (Vroom, 2012: 343). This should point to the resilience of local elites –both secular and ecclesiastic– which contributed to the maintenance of good level of local demand and engineered different concept of managing the urban landscape; in other words, through material culture we could

give archaeological visibility to the multiform power of new urban elites, the so-called *potentiores*. These have been defined as a new-macro class made of civic, military and religious authorities and characterized essentially by the ownership of locally entrenched social and economic power mainly based on extra-urban landed properties (Zanini, 2007: 27; 2017: 137-9). The importance of the *potentiores* as main socio-political and economic urban actors allows me to stress a second connection.

These elites remained (at least partially) urban-oriented. They acted as the engine of urban economic resilience and the activity of urban population who lived and worked in a smaller and more fragmented, although economically lively, urban housing units (Zanini, 2017: 138). These units have been discovered in Gortyn and Salamis-Constantia. In the Cretan capital, artisanal workshops and commercial activities (the so-called Byzantine houses complex) encroached on a Justinian public building close to the former Pretorium bringing about a deliberate re-organization and privatization of former public spaces (Zavagno, 2009:61-94; Zanini, 2013). Further evidence of late seventh-early eighth century industrial activity has been also documented both by the large restoration of the local church of Saint Titos and kilns of ceramics and tiles also producing local painted wares (Curta, 2015: 96). Indeed, we can shed light on a similar trend in Cyprus for in Salamis-Constantia some late seventh/early eighth century artisanal workshops encroached on the so-called 'Huilerie' complex, a former urban Roman villa. Local kilns have not been documented, but Vroom and Armstrong have shown that there is clear evidence of production of domestic wares from 650 onwards on the island (Vroom, 2003: 53; Armstrong, 2006). A typical Cypriot product was the thin-walled, wheel ridged cooking pot made possibly at Dhiorios along the northern-western coast of the island (Catling & Dikigoropoulos, 1970). In both cases these structures bear striking resemblance with those excavated in Syria-Palestine- at Pella and Scythopolis- and they often became agglutinative reference points of the urban "lived space" (Avni, 2011; Walmlsey, 2007).

Even when walled-enceintes were built they did not always and simply cut off a large part of the classic landscape but seemed instead to have been carefully and deliberately planned to retain part of the ancient street-grid. Curta has indeed convincingly argued that the continuity of the classic street plan is indeed a practice evident in both, Jerash (where a congregational mosque was accommodated in the Byzantine city center and adjusted to its main arteries) and Pella in Syria-Palestine as well as in Naples, Cherson, Amorium and Gortyn (Curta, 2015). In Gortyn for instance one can notice that a portion of the city (the Acropolis) was enclosed by a new set of walls in the mid-seventh century and experienced widespread building activity with a military and administrative penchant. Similarly, in the case of Salamis-Constantia a monumental gate recently discovered at the former intersection of the Roman *Cardo* and *Decumanus* allows us to reassess the role and function of the fortifications which endowed the capital of the island as well as other Cypriot urban centers, in particular the coastal ones, *de facto* countermanding the traditional narrative which speak of their abandonment in the face of the Arabs (Öztaner, 2007).

Indeed, on the one hand, one can realize how the walls were not hastily built but rather carefully planned and erected in order to accommodate part of the pre-existing network of roads (in particular, maintaining the function of the Decumanus as main thoroughfare leading to the harbor); on the other hand, the punctual analysis of building techniques and composition of masonry has led Stewart to conclude that the erection of the city walls was contemporary to the rebuilding of the Basilica of Saint Epiphanius as both were erected in the last quarter of the seventh century (Stewart, 2008: 73). As I will return to the importance of the Basilica both as pilgrimage center and as seat of the Cypriot archbishopric, it is important to stress here that –like for instance in the case of Amastris on the Black Sea coast- the construction of walls should not be regarded as tantamount to the militarization of urban life (Zavagno, 2012). This is not to state that coastal sites did not suffer from the raids (conclusive evidence has dated the fortifications of cities like Amathos and Paphos to the mid to-late seventh century) or to doubt the very fact that the entire island of Cyprus acquired a new military and strategic importance in face of the Arab incursions as reflected by the distribution pattern of copper coins found on the island; but rather to avoid the conclusion that both urban fabric and social structures were heavily militarized or reduced, and therefore limited to the intra-moenia area (Zavagno, 2017: 113- 154).

A third connection comes to mind as I am trying to address the relationship between the partial maintenance of urban fabric, spaces and planning, and/or socio-economic vitalities of their religious and secular elites as indicators of the presence of daily-life activities. This refers to the too-often neglected role and presence within urban landscape of the structures meant to satisfy one of the most basic needs of urban population: water. It is indeed possible to weave its structural elements (mainly aqueducts) into the city regarded as a “complex organism [...] a place built on relationships: between humans and space, monuments and men, between men and necessity, between men and other men” (Giorgi, 2017: 7) The importance of aqueducts and their structures as indicators of population levels, density and occupation of urban landscape and the political status and power of new “powerful” individuals presiding over the management and location of the distributive outlets have been proposed for Gortyn. This led to an analysis of the ecological and economic significance of the availability of water in relation not only to the city (and the artisanal and commercial spaces encroaching onto its former public areas) but also to its agricultural hinterland.

Tracing the archaeological signs of water as innervating the urban body is also possible in other regions within and outside the Byzantine empire: in Amorium, for instance, no aqueduct was built; nevertheless, the city and its sixth-century bathhouse as well as the artisanal and commercial installations around it relied on the abundant groundwater and cistern supply: “it seems highly probable that [part of the bathhouse] and its various rooms retained their original function until mid-ninth century” (Lightfoot-Lightfoot, 2007: 133). This evidence pairs well with a type of settlement pattern which seemed not entirely concentrated on the Upper city as showed by the continuous frequentation of the so-called Lower city church and its baptistery. In Hierapolis, although the complex public water supply broke down,

drinking water points located along the surviving road-system and a series of open water channels continued to supply the local population and, in all evidence, supported a level of artisanal vitality as pointed out both by stone cutting activity and locally-made glass and metal-work objects (Arthur, 2006: 48-50; 64-5; 159). Finally, in Bosra, outside the Constantinopolitan rule, the water supply systems were repaired and maintained well into the eighth century and even new pipes were built (Braemer & al., 2009).

The archaeology of water (like the one of bread for which however we have even less evidence) also allows us to sketch an image of the seventh and eighth century urban landscape and social fabric. Indeed, in Gortyn and Salamis-Constantia the transformation of the water-supply system reveals in a set of cisterns dotting the urban-landscape and partially replacing the sixth-century aqueduct. Water was collected, stored and redistributed within single parceled properties, providing us with an image of a city of islands where urban communities relied less on the Roman and Byzantine monumental structures or infrastructural networks as water availability was more localized and/or privatized (Giorgi, 2017: 95-110). Although fragmented, this urban landscape adapted prior buildings to new socio-political and ideological contexts and retained a less dense but nevertheless coherent spatial fabric for multifaceted foci of settlements co-existed along diverse functional lines (Quiroga, 2016: 93). As transitional "lived spaces" may be regarded as "swimming" into the former classical landscape, they could also be interpreted as reflecting the abovementioned changing facies of the urban ruling-class with religious, administrative and military functions. So, we could see religious, bishopric and pilgrimage centers retaining their vitality as revolving around important Christian monuments like the Basilica of Saint Epiphanius in Salamis-Constantia, the Lower Church in Amorium and the Church of Hagios Titos in Gortyn; these paired with areas (walled or not) lodging administrative and fiscal functions as well as military officials, artisanal and commercial installations encroaching onto or squatting into former public spaces and including residential quarters. In this light, the continuous existence of structures built to supply the local population with water constituted one of the most important indicators of the resilience of urban organizational structure in the transitional period. It is indeed interesting to realize that the changing facies of Byzantine cities in the passage from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages might after all be reflected in water.

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