Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies 48 (1) 22–41

'The sublime objects of liminality': the Byzantine insular-coastal *koine* and its administration in the passage from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages (*ca.* 600–*ca.* 850)*

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This paper focuses on the historical development and dynamics of political and administrative structures in regions of a fragmented empire that cannot be simply described as marginal 'mouseholes'. Rather, it should be acknowledged that these spaces were part and parcel of a wider area (the Byzantine insular and coastal koine*), which encompassed coastal areas as well as insular communities promoting socio-economic contact and cultural interchange. More importantly, they also boasted a peculiar set of material indicators suggesting a certain common cultural unity and identity. The* koine *coincided with liminal territories and the seas on which the Byzantine Empire retained political and naval rulership. Such liminal territories showed varied – yet coherent– administrative infrastructures and political practices on the part of local elites.*

Keywords: Byzantium; islands; gateway communities; liminality

The transformation of political, military, and administrative structures in the Byzantine empire in the transition from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages has long been at the centre of the Byzantine scholarly debate. It would be impossible to cite all the contributions that have dealt with the issue of the changes experienced by the 'form of the Byzantine state' in the crucial period spanning from the troubles of the

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[*] This contribution is dedicated to Leslie Brubaker, who welcomed me to the Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies when I was a green graduate student; her guidance and mentorship have been essential to me since then, and Leslie also became a constant presence in my professional and family life during my professional journey from Cyprus to Turkey. I would also like to thank Professor David Ricks for carefully going through my text and editing it.

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DOI: 10.1017/byz.2023.28

post-Justinianic r*econquista* to the invasions of Sicily and Crete by the Aghlabids and the Andalusian pirates.[1] This was a time marked by existential threats to the survival of the empire. Some were of human agency: the Last Great War of antiquity and the arrival of the army of the Caliphs, together with the so-called Iconoclast crisis as recently reassessed by Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon.[2] Meanwhile, natural events like the waves of the so-called Justinianic plague and the climatic crisis ushered by the end of the so-called Beyşehir Occupation Phase wrought havoc on social, economic, and governmental infrastructures.[3]

In this sense, during this crucial period, the economic, socio-political, cultural, and ecological outlook of the Great Sea was profoundly transformed: it turned into a more fragmented playing field (although not necessarily a level one) between competing powers such as the Caliphate, the Lombards, and later the Carolingians and the Byzantines; and this in comparison to its exceptionally unified political and economic Roman Imperial configuration.[4] However, the historiography on Byzantium has seldom given due weight to the role of islands and coastal hubs in this fragmentation: the exception is the case of Sicily (to which I will return later) because of its crucial role as a grain supplier for Constantinople from the early seventh century.[5] In other words, coastal spaces and large islands (as well as archipelagos like Malta and the Balearics) have tended to be seen as figments of a long-gone dream of the Justinianic *renovatio imperii.*[6] Marginal to the metropolis (for they were located far from the imperial centre)[7], they were, it has been thought, relevant to the political and military fate of the empire only as bulwarks along the southern Mediterranean frontier vis-à-vis the Arabs (Cyprus and Crete being seen in this light).[8]

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[1] I limit myself to the main contributions which have appeared in the last four decades (indeed, it would only be too obvious to start from G. Ostrogorsky, *The History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick 1969) 87–209). I mention here (and with no claim to being exhaustive) such general overviews as: M.F. Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy, c. 300–c. 1450* (Cambridge 1985); W. Treadgold, *The Byzantine State and Society* (Palo Alto 1988) 286–445; M. Whittow, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium, 600–1205* (Oxford 1996); W. Brandes, *Finanzerverwaltung in Krisenzeit. Unterschungen zur byzantinischen Administration im 6.-9. Jahrundert* (Frankfurt am Main 2002); C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages, Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford 2005) 124–44; C. Zuckerman, 'Learning from the enemy and more: studies in "Dark Centuries" Byzantium', *Millennium 2. Jahrbuch zu Kultur und Geschichte des ersten Jahrtausends n. Chr. Yearbook on the Culture and History of the First Millennium C.E.* (Berlin 2005) 79–136; M.F. Auzépy, 'State of emergency', in J. Shepard (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire c. 500–1492* (Cambridge 2010) 249–91; M. Angold, 'The Byzantine political process at crisis point', in P. Stephenson (ed.), *The Byzantine World* (London 2010) 5-21; J. Haldon, 'The end of Rome? The transformation of the Eastern empire in the seventh and eighth centuries CE.', in J.P. Arnason and K. Raaflaub (eds.), *The Roman Empire in Context: historical and comparative perspectives* (Oxford 2011) 199–228; P. Sarris, *Empires of Faith. The fall of Rome and the rise of Islam, 500–700* (Oxford 2011); A. Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic. People and power in New Rome* (Cambridge MA 2015); J. Haldon, *The Empire that would not Die: the paradox of Eastern Roman survival, 640–740* (Cambridge 2016); P. Stephenson, *New Rome. The Empire in the East* (Cambridge 2022) 236–329.

[2] J. Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity* (Oxford 2021); H. Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliph. Military and society in the early Islamic state* (London 2013) and *The Great Arab Conquests. How the spread of Islam changed the world we live in* (Philadelphia 2008). On Iconoclasm see L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclastic Era (ca. 680–850). A history* (Aldershot 2011) and Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* (London 2012).

[3] On the Justinianic plague and its socio-economic consequences see P. Sarris. 'Viewpoint: New approaches to the 'Plague of Justinian', *Past and Present* 254.1 (2022) 315–46 with detailed reference to the most recent contributions on the subject; on climatic and environmental changes in the medieval Mediterranean see P. Frankopan, *The Earth Transformed. An untold story* (London 2023) 207–56, and A. Izdbesky, *A Rural Economy in Transition: Asia Minor from Late Antiquity into the Early Middle Ages* (Warsaw 2013); J. Haldon et al., 'The climate and environment of Byzantine Anatolia: integrating science, history and archaeology', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 45.2 xlv (2) (2014) 113–61; and E. Xoplaki et al., 'The medieval climate anomaly and Byzantium: a review of the evidence on climatic fluctuations, economic performance and societal change', *Quaternary Science Reviews* 136 (2016) 229–52.

Arguing against this prevailing view, I will pair the existence of a Byzantine insular and coastal *koine* with what Chris Wickham has famously described as 'the uneasy coupling of two wildly different geographical zones: the Anatolian and the Aegean'.[9] Indeed, it was partly because of the differences and the crises of these liminal zones have made them more difficult to analyse that the Byzantine heartland became the gravitational centre of the empire's historiography in the passage from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages.[10]

One should exercise caution, though, especially when considering constitutive elements of such a *koine*. Large islands and coastal communities served as connective hubs along shipping routes, with the stability of their territorial organization rooted in the intricate network of connections linking production centres and maritime emporia.[11] With this in mind, and considering that the Byzantine empire never functioned as a single economic unit (while acknowledging the significant fiscal pull of the capital and buying power of the imperial elites, landowning and salaried, centred around the Constantinopolitan court)[12], analysing the economic trajectories of the Byzantine *koine* may help us bridge the gap between what Wickham famously described as the two economic cycles.[13] Indeed, Cosentino clearly highlights the economic strength, particularly of large Byzantine islands, well into the ninth century. He concludes:

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[4] D. Valérian, 'The medieval Mediterranean', in P. Horden and S. Kinoshita (eds.), *A Companion to Mediterranean History* (Chichester 2014) 77–90, esp. 77–80. See also J. Leidwanger, *Roman Seas. A maritime archaeology of Eastern Mediterranean economies* (Oxford 2021) and Wickham, *Framing*, 708–20. The term the Great Sea is from D. Abulafia, *The Great Sea. A human history of the Mediterranean* (London 2011).

[5] Haldon, *The Empire that would not Die*, 206–12; V. Prigent, 'La Sicile byzantine entre papes et empereurs (6éme-8ème siècle)', *MEFRM* 10.1 (2010) 226–30.

[6] See on this L. Zavagno, ' "Islands in the Stream": for a new history of the large islands of the Byzantine Mediterranean', *Mediterranean Historical Review* 33.2 (2018) 149–77.

[7] J. Herrin, *Margins and Metropolis. Authority across the Byzantine Empire* (Princeton 2013).

[8] E. Malamut, *Les îles de l'Empire byzantin. VIIIe-XIIe siècles* (Paris 1988).

[9] Wickham, *Framing*, 29–31, esp. 626.

[10] E. Zanini, 'Le Ragioni di un Libro', in D. Michaelides, P. Pergola, and E. Zanini (eds.), *The Insular System of the Early Byzantine Mediterranean. Archaeology and history* (Oxford 2013) 1-12.

[11] S. Cosentino, 'Insularity, economy and social landscape in the early Byzantine period.' *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e NeoEllenici* 55 (2018) 89–104, esp. 89–96.

> If the empire survived if it was not conquered, this also depended upon the fact that it remained in possession of a strip of islands that connected it from the Cypriot Levant to the Balearics [allowing] the Byzantine Empire to continue to operate large-scale movements of men, foodstuffs, and artifacts between. Constantinople and its insular ports until the reign of Michael II.[14]

In turn, this should help us grasp the idea that a multilayered crisis (with clear consequences in territorial and demographic terms as well as economies of scale) did not turn into a jolt pushing the empire over its critical threshold but rather bears witness to its adaptive resilience.

Cécile Morrisson has recently sought to explain the resilience of ‘an empire that would not die’ by stressing the continuity of fiscal practices and a monetary economy based on the adaptation of coin supply as well as the survival of the urban and trade network and large investment in the army and military installation.[15] Johannes Preiser-Kapeler and Alkiviadis Ginalis have recently stressed the robust endurance of maritime connections at the local level within the countless harbours, anchorages, and coastal landing spots of the Byzantine Mediterranean, as persisting even amidst political or economic turmoil that sometimes affected regional or trans-regional maritime trade.[16] As will be seen, material culture provides clear witness to the diminished but still coherent density of exchange across the insular-coastal *koine* as not exclusively depending on the fiscal distributive system.[17]

Finally, Morrisson identifies the emergence of a restructured and effective navy as essential to control the strategic Mediterranean sea routes. Here, she echoes the conclusion of scholars like Hélène Ahrweiler and more recently Elizabeth Jeffreys and John Prior, Telemachos Lounghis, and Salvatore Cosentino, who have pointed to the

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[12] C. Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat. Reinterpreting the Mediterranean economy 950–1180 (*Oxford 2023) 278–364.

[13] C. Wickham, ‘The Mediterranean around 800: on the brink of the second trade cycle’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004) 161–74.

[14] Cosentino, ‘Insularity’, 104.

[15] Morrisson referred to these issues in a paper at the conference *The 8th Century. Patterns of Transition in Economy and Trade Throughout the Late Antique, Early Medieval and Islamicate Mediterranean*, Berlin 4–7 October 2017. I am deeply grateful to her for allowing me access to a revised version of her paper.

[16] J. Preiser-Kapeller and A. Ginalis, ‘Introduction: Seasides of Byzantium and maritime dynamics in the Aegean Sea’, in J. Preiser-Kapeller, T. G. Kolias, and F. Daim (eds.), *Seasides of Byzantium: harbours and anchorages of a Mediterranean empire* (Mainz 2021) 17–18.

[17] Cosentino, ‘Insularity’, 97.

Byzantine fleets as playing a major role in confronting Arab raids and patrolling shipping routes (especially the so-called trunk route linking the Tyrrhenian and the Aegean) often using insular and coastal urban sites, gateway communities, and 'bunkers' as important bases.[18] Indeed, one may conclude that the control of islands (and strategic coastal choke-points) was essential to Byzantium in order to retain control of the 'confetti' of a *de facto* sea empire. This dispersed but resilient political, cultural, economic, and military 'thalassocracy' has often been neglected by a historiography which has given ~~giving the~~ pride of place to the so-called Byzantine heartland.[19]

This paper will focus on the historical development and dynamics of political and administrative structures in regions of a fragmented empire that cannot be simply described as marginal 'mouseholes' (as pointedly defined by Richard Hodges).[20] Rather, it should be acknowledged that these spaces were part and parcel of a wider area (the Byzantine *koine*), which encompassed coastal areas as well as insular communities promoting socio-economic contact and cultural interchange.[21] More importantly, they boasted a peculiar set of material indicators (such as lead seals, coins, and globular amphorae) suggesting a certain common cultural unity and identity.[22] The *koine* coincided with liminal territories and the seas on which the

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[18] H. Ahrweiler, *Byzance et la mer : La marine de guerre, la politique et les institutions Maritimes de Byzance aux VIIe-XVe siècles* (Paris 1966); S. Cosentino, 'Constans II and the Byzantine navy', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 100.2 (2008) 577–603, and 'Naval warfare: military, institutional and economic aspects', in Y. Stouraitis (ed.), *A Companion to the Byzantine Culture of War, ca. 300–1204* (Leiden 2018) 308–56; T.C. Lounghis, *Byzantium in the Eastern Mediterranean: safeguarding East Roman identity (407–1204)* (Nicosia 2010) and 'Byzantine war navy and the west, fifth to twelfth centuries', in G. Theotokis and A. Yildiz (eds.), *A Military History of the Mediterranean Sea* (Turnhout 2018) 21–34; E. Jeffreys and J. Prior, *The Age of the ΔΡΟΜΩΝ. The Byzantine navy ca 500–1204* (Leiden 2006); J. Shepard, 'Bunkers, open cities and boats in Byzantine diplomacy', in D. Dzino and K. Perry (eds.), *Byzantium, its Neighbours and its Cultures* (Leiden 2017) 11–44. Also: L. Sicking, 'The dichotomy of insularity: islands between isolation and connectivity in medieval and early modern Europe, and beyond', *The International Journal of Maritime History* 26.3 (2014) 494–511.

[19] A. Carile, 'La Talassocrazia Bizantina: VI-VIII sec.,' in A. Carile and S. Cosentino, *Storia della Marineria Bizantina*, (Bologna 2004) 7-32; D. Abulafia, 'Islands in context,' in M. Cau Ontiveros and C. Mas Florit (eds.), *Change and Resilience. The Occupation of Mediterranean islands in Late Antiquity* (Providence 2019) 285–96; C. Picard, *La Mer des Califes. Une histoire de la Méditerranée mjusulmane* (Paris 2012) 235; V. Prigent, 'Notes sur l'évolution de l'administration byzantine en Adriatique (VIIIe–IXe siècle),' *MEFRM* 120/2 (2008) 393–417

[20] R. Hodges, 'The Adriatic Sea 500–1100. A corrupted alterity?', in M. Skoblar (ed.), *Byzantium, Venice and the Medieval Adriatic. Spheres of maritime power and influence, c.700–1453* (Cambridge 2021) 35–6

[21] P. Delogu, 'Questioni di Mare e Costa,' in S. Gelichi and R. Hodges (eds.), *Da un mare all'altro. Luoghi di scambio nell'Alto Medioevo europeo e mediterraneo Atti del Seminario Internazionale Comacchio, 27–29 marzo 2009* (Turnhout 2012) 459–66; M. Veikou, 'Mediterranean Byzantine ports and harbors in the complex interplay between environment and society. Spatial, socio-economic and cultural considerations based on archeological evidence from Greece, Cyprus and Asia Minor' in J. Preiser-Kapeller and F. Daim (eds.), *Harbours and Maritime Networks as Complex Adaptive Systems* (Mainz 2015) 39–61, esp. 41–8.

[22] A. Vionis, 'Bridging the early Medieval 'ceramic gap' in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean (7th-9th c.): local and global phenomena', *HEROM. Journal on Hellenistic and Roman Material Culture*

Byzantine Empire retained political and naval rulership, for they showed varied – though coherent – administrative infrastructures and political practices on the part of local elites.[23]

Liminality

My use of the adjective 'liminal' to connotate the *koine* in conceptual and analytical terms is deliberate. Liminality has been described as an umbrella term whose ubiquity and vagueness has made it at once popular and problematic.[24] Its use has spanned across disciplines and methodologies, although its origins hark back to the work of anthropologists like Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner.[25] Van Gennep rooted liminality in rites of passage: liminality is therefore identified with an intermediate stage between a separation/detachment from and the final aggregation and reincorporation in a certain social structure and order.[26] Turner focused on 'understanding the human reactions to liminal experiences as they shape personality, suddenly foreground agency, and (sometimes dramatically) bind thoughts to experience (like in the case of Christian pilgrimage)'.[27] In particular, Turner's conceptualization of liminality has encouraged us to objectify moments and spaces when the distinction between structure and agency ceases to be resolved and understood in classical terms; in this light, spatial and temporary qualities have been highlighted as shared aspects positing the very ambivalence and ambiguity inherent to the idea of liminal.[28] Certain landscapes ~~that~~ are intrinsically liminal, islands (and coastal areas) as places where sea and land meet indubitably among them.[29]

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9 (2020) 291–397. Also J. Vroom, 'Dishing up history: early medieval ceramic finds from the Triconch Palace in Butrint,' *MEFRM* 120/2 (2008) 291–305, esp. 293–5.

[23] P. Arthur. 'From Italy to the Aegean and back again. Notes on the archaeology of Byzantine maritime trade', in Gelichi and R. Hodges, *Da un mare all'altro.* 337–52.

[24] Editors' introduction, 'Locating liminality: space, place, and the in-between', in D. Downey, I. Kinane, and E. Parker (eds.), *Landscapes of Liminality Between Space and Place* (London 2016) 1-26 (esp. 1).

[25] A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage (*Chicago 1961); V. Turner and E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York 1978).

[26] D. Cross et al, 'The liminality of liminality: a systematic review of organisationally liminal spaces,' https://researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/publications/the-liminality-of-liminality-a-systematic-review-of-organisationa Accessed 20 April 2023.

[27] B. Thomassen, 'Thinking with liminality. To the boundaries of an anthropological concept', in A. Horvath, B. Thomassen, and H. Wydra (eds.), *Breaking Boundaries: varieties of liminality* (New York 2015) 39–58.

[28] Downey, Kinane, and Parker, 'Locating liminality', 10.

[29] H. Andrews and L. Roberts, 'Re-mapping liminality', in H. Andrews and L. Roberts (eds.), *Liminal Landscapes Travel, experience and spaces in-between* (New York 2012) 1-18;.Giesen, 'Inbetweeness and ambivalence', in Horvath, Thomassen, and Wydra, *Breaking Boundaries,* 61–71. On the concept of threshold and the ambiguity of contact zones see N. Purcell, 'On the significance of East and West in today's 'Hellenistic' history: reflections on symmetrical worlds, reflecting through world symmetries', in

This should help us avoid regarding insular and coastal outposts as liminal spaces for their remoteness and peripherality in relation to centres: liminality does not imply marginality.[30] In this sense, my definition of liminal concerning the insular and coastal *koine* hinges on three foundational characteristics. The first is the notion of the transitional (between an inside and an outside) as intrinsic to the creation of spaces of hybridity in the Mediterranean compounded by frequent peddler/cabotage movements.[31] The second relates to the quintessential 'instability' (or, more accurately, temporariness) which dictates the tempo and the unique conceptualizations of cultural and social (and, as will be seen, political and administrative) life in liminal spaces.[32] This is clearly connected to the role of the sea, which acts both as a natural barrier and as a looming threat, serving as a perpetual reminder that (maritime) landscapes, whether symbolic or tangible, are subject to continual transformation.[33] As Matthew Harpster concludes: 'Considerations of the sea's relations with human activities are a reminder that the koine was not a human-centered world.'[34] My third and last characteristic relates to the concept of 'islandness' as opposed to that of insularity. Islandness is a linguistically neutral term that has socio-identitarian connotations (defining all that concerns islands) as well as spatial associations (for it may be regarded as a constitutive part of the triad of heterotopic spaces together with the sea and the ship).[35]

The islands of the Byzantine *koine* are to be considered geophysical, spatial, and human objects of the liminal and sometimes even pointing to the sublime. The sublime has its roots in the prefix *sub-* (up to) paired with *-limen*[36], and, therefore, it hints at moving up and above a threshold. In particular, islands can sublimate (or better elevate) the liminal. In fact, some islands have an 'increased liminality' as embodied by their geophysical characteristics, which often determine their sacred and otherworldly character.[37]

J.R.W. Prag and J. Crawley Quinn (eds.), *The Hellenistic West. Rethinking the ancient Mediterranean* (Cambridge 2013) 367–90.

[30] B. Thomassen, 'Revisiting liminality. The danger of empty spaces', in H. Andrews and L. Roberts (ed.), *Liminal Landscapes: travel, experience and spaces in-between* (New York 2012) 19–35.

[31] Abulafia, 'Islands in context', in Ontiveros and Florit, *Change and Resilience,* 292.

[32] Thomassen, 'Revisiting liminality', 20–3.

[33] Andrews and Roberts, 'Re-mapping liminality' in Andrews and Roberts, *Liminal Landscapes*, 2.

[34] M. Harpster, *Reconstructing a Maritime Past* (New York 2023) 225.

[35] L. Dierksmeier, 'Introduction. Interdisciplinary perspectives on island studies', in L. Dierksmeier, F. Schön, A. Kouremenos, A. Condit and V. Palmowski (eds.), *European Islands Between Isolated and Interconnected Life Worlds: interdisciplinary long-term perspectives* (Tübingen 2021) 17–32 (24); M. Veikou, 'One island, three capitals. Insularity and the successive relocations of the capital of Cyprus from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages,' in S. Rogge and M. Grünbart (eds.) *Medieval Cyprus. A place of cultural encounters* (Münster 2015) 353–63.

[36] P.G.W. Glare, *The Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford 2012) 1134.

[37] E. Heide, 'Holy islands and the otherworld. Places beyond water', in G. Jaritz (ed.), *Isolated Islands in Medieval Nature, Culture and Mind* (Budapest 2011) 57–80.

Both the constitutive spaces of the Byzantine *koine*, then – the insular and the coastal – lay at the interface of the two most sophisticated and coherent socio-economic systems (Caliphate and Empire). I will try to show that travellers, and indeed locals, were cultural actors who connotated the *koine* as organizational spaces of liminality as mirrored by the fluidity of administrative practices and political structures of governance.[38]

I shall focus mainly on archaeology and material culture (along with the scanty literary sources available for the period), for these will allow me to track the diverse trajectories of the local bureaucratic machinery. Byzantium did not apply a one-size-fits-all model of administration but rather showed the ability to adopt 'fluid' modes of government defined by its ability to withstand the diverse challenges or adversities of the hour in different geographical areas of the central and eastern Mediterranean.[39] I will examine how Byzantium 'shaped its waters'; or, better, how it moulded the structures of government on islands as various as Sicily, Sardinia, Malta, Crete, Cyprus, and the Balearics, using a coastal enclave like Butrint on the southern Ionian coast as a control test case. In this respect, the above-mentioned islands present us with different (and sometimes even contradictory) incarnations of a 'borderland' liminality in the equivocal political allegiances of local elites vis-à-vis temporary or permanent insular residents.[40] On the one hand, thematic *strategoi* based in Sicily played a central role in asserting the military might and political clout of Constantinople in the Tyrrhenian and southern Ionian Sea, as well as projecting the Byzantine soft power along central Mediterranean shipping routes.[41] On the other hand, we should weigh in the political ability of prominent figures (though less prominent than the *strategoi*) like the dukes and *archontes* in charge of both large insular spaces like Cyprus, Sardinia, or the Balearics and liminal gateway communities like Butrint.[42] Indeed, and as liminality pertains to individuals as well as spaces, these 'liminal' figures also contributed to producing creative and expedient socio-political arrangements at the edges of different political systems, economic networks, and religious worlds (the Carolingian, the Byzantine, and the Caliphal).

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[38] L. Zavagno, ' "Going to the extremes": the Balearics and Cyprus in the early medieval Byzantine insular system', *Al-Masāq* 31.2 (2019) 140–57.

[39] Shepard, 'Bunkers', 32.

[40] L. Darling, 'The Mediterranean as a borderland', *Review of Middle East Studies* 66.1 (2012) 54–63, esp. 58–9.

[41] S. Cosentino, 'Politics and Society', in S. Cosentino (ed.), *A Companion to Byzantine Italy* (Leiden 2021) 29–68, esp. 41–2; V. Prigent, 'Byzantine administration and the army,' in Cosentino, *A Companion,* 140–68, esp. 150–5.

[42] P. Papadopoulou, 'From one coast to another and beyond. Adriatic connections through the sigillographic evidence,' in Skoblar (ed.), *Byzantium* 203–44, esp. 235.

Sicily: at the heart of the Tyrrhenian sea

The centrality of Sicily to the Constantinopolitan administrative machinery is well illustrated by the story of the Byzantine official Herakleides, in the ninth-century life of Leo of Catania.[43] Herakleides traveled to Constantinople from Sicily by entering one bath in Catania and exiting another in the capital.[44] The mental proximity between the island and the capital showed by this account pairs with the numerous travels between Sicily and Constantinople documented by the literary and material sources, for the island lay astride the trunk route linking the Tyrrhenian with the Aegean and southern Anatolia.[45] But through Sicily, it was possible to reach the Byzantine possessions in the Adriatic and even – via Malta – Aghlabid in North Africa.[46] This is shown by pilgrims' travel logs (like that of Willibald, who in the early eighth century travelled to Jerusalem via Syracuse and Catania, or of Gregory Dekapolite in the ninth century); by the travels of diplomats (like Daniel reaching Sicily from Constantinople in 799); and by a string of Sicilian hagiographies.[47] The latter (in this period beyond) witnesses to the social, administrative, cultural, and religious links between the Byzantine Tyrrhenian and the eastern Mediterranean.[48]

Think, for instance, of the *naukleroi* who ferried St Pankration from Antioch to Taormina, as reported in the eponymous *Life* dated to the mid-eighth century: 'they took the journey to the island after they loaded their boat with Cretan oil and different sorts of [luxuries like] incense and sacred vestments from the weavers of Armenia.'[49] In a similar vein, we can mention the *Life of St Elias* the Younger (born in the Sicilian city of Enna), penned in the mid-tenth century but incorporating written and oral tradition harking back to the ninth (the period of the Aghlabid invasion of Sicily).

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[43] S. Efthymiades, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography. Vol. II: Genres and contexts* (Aldershot 2014) 168–9.

[44] A. G. Alexakis, *The Greek Life of St Leo Bishop of Catania (BHG 981b)* (Brussels 2011) 164–7; S. Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds Met: Sicily in the early medieval Mediterranean* (Ithaca NY 2017) 56–8.

[45] M. McCormick, *Origins of European Economy. Communications and commerce AD 300–900* (Cambridge MA 2001) 593.

[46] On Malta as a connective hub along the insular corridor funnelling the export of local agricultural production and imports of goods from other parts of the Byzantine world see B. Bruno and N. Cutajar, 'Malta between the ninth and the tenth century – two early medieval contexts', *Archeologia Medievale* XLV (2018) 111–22; B. Bruno and N. Cutajar, 'Imported amphoras as andicators of economic activity in early medieval alta', in Michaelides, Pergola, and Zanini, *The Insular System,* 15–30.

[47] Hygeburc, *The Hodeporicon of Saint Willibald* (circa 754 A.D.), ed. C. Brownlow (London 1891) 24, 9-10; F. Dvornik, *La Vie de saint Grégoire le Décapolite et les Slaves macédoniens au IXe siècle* (Paris 1926); on Daniel see *Annales Regni Francorum Inde Ab A. 741. Usque Ad A. 829. Qui Dicuntur: Annales Laurissenses Maiores Et Einhardi (Latin Edition)* (Neuilly-sur-Seine 2012) 799.

[48] M. Re, 'Italo-Greek Hagiography', in S. Efthymiades, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography. Volume I* (Aldershot 2011) 231–59.

[49] C. Stallman-Pacitti, *The Life of Saint Pankratios of Taormina. Byzantina Australiensia, 22* (Leiden 2018) 315.

Elias' travels (forced or voluntary) took him to North Africa (as a slave captured during a Saracen raid).[50] Upon working miracles to the benefit of local Christian and Muslim communities, he was set free and travelled back to Sicily via Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, sailing 'like a ship filled with all sorts of goods'. (A biblical metaphor for sure, but echoing another mercantile ship: the one the rebellious Byzantine commander Euphemius embarked on to flee to Aghlabid Ifriqya in 827.)[51] Oddly enough, when Elias' fame as a miracle worker had already been established, he was arrested by a local Byzantine *stratelates* in Butrint (on his way to Constantinople) with the accusation of being a spy for the Muslims.[52]

As I will return to Butrint shortly, it is important to stress that Sicily's centrality to the routes crisscrossing the Byzantine Mediterranean bolstered its economic resilience and its political importance for the Constantinopolitan governmental structure.[53] The analysis of ceramics and globular amphorae, one of the most important guide-fossils for the period under scrutiny (to which I will return), bespeaks a two-fold network of connectivity: Sicily's northwestern coast was oriented towards the Tyrrhenian, while whereas the south-eastern one gravitated towards the southern Adriatic, the Aegean, and Constantinople.[54] Moreover, the analysis of coinage's supply and circulation confirms the economic vitality of Sicily: it points to the high level of use of bronze and gold coins (though with a devaluation and ponderal reduction in the first half of the eighth century).[55]

When it comes to the political and administrative dimension, one should start from the famous journey of Constans II to Italy in the 660s, when he chose Syracuse as its provisional capital vis-à-vis the mounting Arab threat to the Byzantine possessions in the western Mediterranean.[56] After his tragic death, Byzantium started re-shaping its naval commands as a response to the Caliphate naval forces storming the

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[50] G. Rossi Taibi, *Vita di Sant Elia il* Giovane (Palermo 1962). See also S. Davis-Secord, *Migration in Medieval Mediterranean* (Leeds 2021) 29–35.

[51] On Euphemius see V. Prigent, 'La carrière du tourmarque Euphèmios, basileus des Romains', in A. Jacob, J.M. Martin, and G. Noyé (ed.), *Histoire et culture dans l'Italie byzantine: acquis et nouvelles recherches* (Rome 2006) 279–317.

[52] Rossi Taibi, *Vita di Sant Elia,* ch. 28 (p. 154).

[53] L. Arcifa, A. Nef, and V. Prigent, 'Sicily in a Mediterranean context: imperiality, Mediterranean polycentrism and internal diversity (6th-10th century)', *MEFRM* 133–2 (2021) 339–74; L. Arcifa, 'Byzantine Sicily', in Cosentino, *A Companion*, 472–94

[54] A. Molinari, 'Sicily from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages: resilience and disruption', in Ontiveros and Florit, *Change and Resilience*, 87–110; E. Vaccaro, 'Sicily in the eighth and ninth centuries AD: a case of persisting economic complexity?', *Al-Masāq* 25.1 (2013) 34–61.

[55] V. Prigent, 'Mints, coin production and circulation', in Cosentino, *A Companion*, 341 and ' La circulation monétaire en Sicile (Vie-VIIe siècle), in Michaelides, Pergola, and Zanini, *The Insular System*, 139–60; C. Morrisson, 'La Sicile byzantine: un lueur dans les siècle obscurs', *Numismatica e Antichità Classiche Quaderni Ticinesi* 27 (1998) 307–34.

[56] Zuckermann, 'Learning', 80–1.

Mediterranean and besieging Constantinople.[57] Since the commander of the fleet of the Karabisianoi mutinied at least twice and could not prevent the fall of Carthage to the Arabs in 698, regionalization of the navy commands ensued.[58] Sicily, *sui generis* within the Byzantine insular-costal *koine*, was elevated to the rank of a theme at the very end of the seventh century, when also the operation of a Sicilian *apotheke* is documented by sigillographic evidence.[59] The establishment of the Sicilian theme not only paired with the creation of the s*trategia* of Hellas and the *Kybirrhaiotai* theme as based in Attaleia but also entailed 'the acquisition of a new military organization on the part of Sicily between the 730s and the 780s, whose essential characteristic was a capacity for offensive warfare'.[60] This coincided with the seizure of the papal patrimony in Sicily (and Byzantine southern Italy) by Leo III and was enhanced by the establishment of a detachment of the Byzantine navy (*dromorum stolus Siciliae*) under the command of the Sicilian *strategoi* who led it into battle against the Arabs in 720 and 763.[61]

Sigillographic evidence shows that Sicilian *strategoi* were indeed often members of the Cubiculum, one of the most important offices of the central administration almost exclusively composed of eunuchs (an occurrence seldom documented elsewhere in the Byzantine empire) chosen for their peculiar diplomatic and financial abilities, for they could also broker peace treaties between Byzantium and the local armies of the Caliph (as at the beginning of the ninth century).[62] Although some of the Sicilian *strategoi* famously revolted against Constantinople (like the above-mentioned Euphemius) in the course of the eighth and ninth century, these mutinies were never meant to promote secession from the empire but rather called for more (political) attention on the part of Constantinople.[63] The *strategoi* were often rewarded with ~~a~~ promotion to the rank of Exarch and ended up in Ravenna as the capital of Byzantine Italy till its final fall to the Lombards in 751.[64] Moreover, and notwithstanding the confiscation of the ecclesiastical estates in southern Italy and Illyricum, Sicilian *strategoi* kept diplomatic back-channels with the Papacy open. They were also actively involved in the

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[57] Cosentino, 'Naval warfare', 323; Lounghis, *Byzantium*, 29; Prior and Jeffreys, *The Age of the ΔΡΟΜΩΝ*, 32.

[58] M. Ritter, 'Naval bases, arsenals, aplekta: logistics and commands of the Byzantine navy (7th-12th c.)', in Preiser-Kapeller, Kolias, and Daim, *Seasides of Byzantium,* 205–10; Zuckermann, 'Learning', 112–22.

[59] E. Ragia, 'The geography of the provincial administration of the Byzantine empire (ca. 600–1200): I.3. Apothekai of Africa and Sicily, final notes and conclusions', *Eoa kai Esperia* 8 (2008–2012) 113–44.

[60] Arcifa, Nef, and Prigent, 'Sicily', 367.

[61] Zuckerman, 'Learning', 112–22; Prigent, 'La Sicile byzantine; Kislinger, 'Dyrrhachion', 331–2; Lounghis, *Byzantium*, 190; Prigent, 'Byzantine administration', 154–5.

[62] M. Nichanian and V. Prigent, 'Les stratèges de Sicile: De la naissance du thème au règne de Léon V', *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* 61 (2003) 97–141, esp. 133–8.

[63] Ibid., 114–17.

[64] J. Herrin, *Ravenna. Capital of Empire, Crucible of Europe* (London, 2020) 575–674; Nichanian and Prigent, 'Les stratèges', 133.

Tyrrhenian politics with active links to Amalfi and Naples as both still nominally dependent on Byzantium.[65]

On the one hand, then, such examples of 'physical mobility' as sublimated by 'mental proximity' help us to characterize Sicily in terms of liminal relational space as 'made up of the entanglements and comings together of material, cultural, political [and] boundary-defying forces of through wide ranges of networks of relations; for islands are indeed laboratories for thinking through relationalities'.[66] On the other hand, one should stress how contemporary material evidence and archaeology help us to read Sicilian insular spaces as liminal; for liminality often embodies the possibility of cultural hybridity without an implicit or forced hierarchy.[67] Indeed, once relocated to Sicily, some Armenians brought with them both a new ceramic type (later exported across Tyrrhenian shipping routes) as well as new architectural traditions (circular or elliptical rural huts) not previously found on the island.[68] Sicily is paradigmatic of islands as landscapes of liminality, both for the sheer availability of material and literary evidence and for its centrality in the human geography of the Byzantine Mediterranean. We should, however, not lose sight of the importance of links rather than nodes (in relational terms) as characterizing the 'liminal centrality' of other insular spaces.[69] The boundary between Muslim and Christian spaces was in flux, and the Byzantine *koine*, as a borderland region, saw activity—both contestation and communication—both along and across the frontier.[70]

Malta: a liminal archipelago

One good example is Malta, at the crossroads linking the routes Sicily with Ifriqyia as well as those connecting Sardinia and the Balearics (to which I will return) to the eastern Mediterranean.[71] The Maltese archipelago acted as a useful stop-over, rather than being simply a distant outpost on the imperial frontier. Instead, Malta and Gozo showed both their relational dependence on Constantinople (via Sicily) and a 'degree of autonomous action in communal terms, managing to economically bridge the political divide existing between the Byzantines and the Arabs'.[72] This is shown both by the almost uninterrupted series of Byzantine coins yielded on the island (lasting well into the ninth century as minted in Sicily[73]) and a series of seals of Byzantine officials in charge of administering the archipelago.[74] Indeed – unlike Sicily, but in tune with other large Byzantine islands like Sardinia – the Maltese archipelago was ruled by a *dux* and later an *archon,* and the islands showed a strong political, military, and religious dependence on Sicily.[75] Lead seals of Maltese *archontes* have been found on the island, including an eighth-ninth century specimen issued by Niketas, *archon kai droungarios* of Malta; which, however, was not found on the archipelago or in a nearby region under Byzantine control but rather surprisingly in Tunisia.[76]

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[65] Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds,* 91; also S. Cosentino, *Storia dell'Italia Bizantina (VI-XI Secolo). Da Giustiniano ai Normanni* (Bologna 2008) 26.

[66] H. Dawson and J. Pugh, 'The lure of island studies. A cross-disciplinary conversation', in L. Dierksmeier et al., *The European Islands* 13–31, esp. 18.

[67] Thomassen, 'Revisiting liminality', 19–35, esp. 26–7.

[68] S. Cosentino, 'La Sicilia, l'Impero e il Mediterraneo (VII- IX secolo). Centralità politica, mobilità geografica e trasformazioni sociali', in M. Re, C. Rognoni, and F.P. Vuturo (eds.), *Byzantino-sicula 7 : Ritrovare Bisanzio : atti delle Giornate di studio sulla civiltà bizantina in Italia meridionale e nei Balcani dedicate alla memoria di André Guillou : Palermo 26–28 maggio 2016* (Palermo 2019) 71–91, esp. 84.

[69] D. Harrison, 'Boundaries and places of power: notions of liminality and centrality in the early Middle Ages', in W. Pohl, I. Wood, and H. Reimitz (eds.), *The Transformation of Frontiers. From Late Antiquity to the Carolingians* (Leiden 2001) 83–95.

[70] Davis-Secord, *Where Three Worlds,* 93.

[71] B. Bruno, *Roman and Byzantine Malta. Trade and economy* (Malta 2009) 9-22; F. Theuma, 'Motley lots on liminal islands of an Order', in T. Gambin (ed.), *The Maltese Islands and the Sea* (Malta 2015) 31–64.

The evidence provided by globular amphorae, as well as other Byzantine productions, also points to the role of the Maltese archipelago in redistributing goods to the western Byzantine outposts (Sardinia, the Balearics, and fortress of Septem/Ceuta (the latter falling to the Muslims on the verge of crossing to Iberia in 711).[77] In this connection, recent extensive surveys in urban (Mdina) and rural (Hl Safi) areas of Malta have yielded evidence of imports and trading networks centred on the archipelago in the eighth and ninth century (and even after its conquest of by the Aghlabids in 869/70).[78] As Matt King concludes: 'The presence of amphorae and fine ceramics indicates that areas of Malta, [also those] not located on the coast, were populated in a period of supposed desolation.'[79] Indeed, in the tenth century, archaeology confirms the arrival of Constantinopolitan Glazed White Wares II, matted wares (*ceramica a stuoia* as produced in Sicily in the area of Rocchicella of Mineo), as well as Otranto amphorae.[80] These finds complement locally made amphorae and cooking pots of Islamic tradition, bearing witness to the archipelago's role as a point of contact between the Islamic and Byzantine shipping and economic networks in the early Middle Ages.[81]

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[72] Bruno and Cutajar, 'Imported amphorae', 28.

[73] Morrisson, "La Sicile Byzantine', 312.

[74] Bruno, *Roman and Byzantine Malta*, 85–6; N. Cutajar, *Core and Periphery. Mdina and Hal Safi in the 9th and 10th centuries* (Valletta 2018) 7.

[75] *Op. Cit*., 9-22; also A. Pertusi, "Le Isole Maltesi dall'Epoca Bizantina al periodo Normanno e Svevo (secc. VI-XIII) e Descrizioni di esse dal sec. XII al sec. XVI', *Byzantinische Forschungen* 5 (1977) 262–8.

[76] S. Cosentino, 'Mentality, technology and commerce: shipping amongst the Mediterranean islands in Late Antiquity and beyond', in Michaelides, Pergola, and Zanini, *The Insular System*, 63–76, esp. 72.

[77] Bruno and Cutajar, 'Imported Amphorae,' 26–8; Bruno and Cutajar, 'Malta between,' 119–21; L. Arcifa, 'Contenitori da trasporto nella Sicilia bizantina (VIII-X secolo): produzioni e circolazione, con Appendice di Veronica Testolini.' *Archaeologia Medievale* XLV (2018) 123–48 (128).

[78] Bruno and Cutajar, 'Malta between' 119–21.

[79] M. King, 'Muslims in Medieval Malta. Epigraphic evidence from a Cemetery in Rabat,' in A. Castrorao Barba, D. Tanasi, and R. Miccicchè (ed.), *Archaeology of the Mediterranean during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Tallahassee 2023), 178–96, esp. 182–3

[80] Bruno and Cutajar, 'Malta between', 115–16.

It is important to note that the commercial (and fiscal) network, which hinged on Sicily with outreach in Malta, extended to the Byzantine Adriatic and the Ionian Sea, especially after the loss of Ravenna.[82] The end of the Byzantine exarchate brought about a drastic reshuffling of Byzantine administrative structures in the Byzantine southern Ionian and upper Adriatic. Sicily seems to have held a leadership role in the Adriatic after the fall of Ravenna (at least till the foundation of the Theme of Kephallenia around 765/70).[83] This is shown by coins minted in Syracuse under Constantine V's reign and increasingly appearing in Dalmatia and by the literary reference to the activity of the *stolus Siciliae* in the Adriatic in the second half of the eighth century.[84] The Byzantine military presence and diplomatic/religious soft power in both Dalmatia (a region which showed some dependence on Ravenna before 751) and the southern Ionian sea was an emanation of the Sicilian theme but predicated on local gateway communities whose socio-economic life and political legitimization had a clear Byzantine imprint.[85]

Butrint: a gateway community on the southern Ionian sea

A good example of such a community is represented by Butrint, one of the best excavated and published sites in the early Byzantine Mediterranean, located on the southern Ionian coast.[86] In particular, ceramics found in two collapsed towers of the walled enceinte (all dated to the seventh and eighth century) presents us with a complex picture.[87] They consisted mainly of coarse wares of local production and of imported globular amphorae. The latter have been cogently defined as a new family of transport vessels appearing in the seventh century and soon becoming the main form for trade all over the Empire and those regions maintaining contact with Byzantine heartlands.'[88] A marker of connectivity to which one should add GWW of Constantinopolitan provenance. GWW all point to a southern Adriatic commercially, socially, and culturally (as well as politically) connected with the Byzantine world with more interregional cabotage as well as tramping voyages in the eighth and even the ninth century (on small status ships similar to some of those found in Yenikapı).[89] Like Zadar, Butrint was then 'upgraded,' although only to an archontate in the ninth century (as shown by archaeological, sigillographic, and literary evidence).[90] As the local *archon* interceded for St Elias when he was imprisoned, he also presided over an active shipping network that reached out to Constantinople and the central Mediterranean via Otranto, Sicily, and Malta.[91] Although not an urban community (with a settlement and population in comparison to Late Antiquity), Butrint is revealed as one of those (fortified or unfortified) liminal communities poised to benefit from connectivity. Such connectivity until the mid-ninth century was predicated upon the funnelling of prestige goods exchange as well as the importance of naval stations acting as a trading hub: this is exemplified by the presence of several types of seventh-to-ninth century imported amphorae.[92] Butrint was a gateway community whose liminality is predicated on its abutment between different patterned connectivities: a special kind of settlement: an entrepot in a new sense, at the same time drawing its character from its position at the interface between different regional or sub-regional network systems (Tyrrhenian, south Ionian, Aegean).[93]

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[81] A. Molinari, and N. Cutajar, 'Of Greeks and Arabs and of feudal knights: a preliminary archaeological exposure of Malta's perplexing Middle Ages', *Malta Archaeological Review* 3 (1999) 9-15, esp. 12.

[82] R. Hodges, 'Adriatic sea trade in a European perspective' in Gelichi and Hodges (eds), *Da un mare all'altro*, 95–119, esp. 110.

[83] Prigent, 'Notes', 393–402; F. Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge 2006) 112–17.

[84] Kislinger, 'Dyrrhachion', 331.

[85] F. Budak, 'One more Renaissance? Dalmatia and the revival of the European Economy', in M. Ančić, J. Shepard and T. Vedriš (eds.), *Imperial Spheres and the Adriatic. Byzantium, the Carolingians and the Treaty of Aachen (812)* (New York 2018) 174–91, esp. 179; F. Borri, 'A Winter Sea? Exchange and power at the ebbing of the Adriatic Connection 600–800', in Skoblar (ed.), *Byzantium,* 83–97, esp. 86–8. On the definition of gateway community ('promoting social-contact and cultural interchange as the character of these coastal settlements whose inhabitants grabbed the opportunity for economic growth by simply taking advantage of their location astride major maritime routes; mid sized sites neither wholly urban nor wholly rural') see Veikou, 'Mediterranean', 51.

[86] S. Greenslade, *Butrint 6: Excavations on the Vrina Plain Volume 1: The Lost Roman and Byzantine Suburb* (Oxford 2021); S. Kamani, 'Butrint in the mid-Byzantine period: a new interpretation' *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 35.2 (2011), 115–33; R. Hodges and W. Bowden, 'Butrinto nell'Età Tardo Antica' in G.P. Brogiolo and P. Delogu (ed.), *L'Adriatico dalla Tarda Antichità all'Età Carolingia* (Florence 2005) 7-47.

[87] J. Vroom, 'The Byzantine web. Pottery and connectivity between the southern Adriatic and the eastern Mediterranean,' in S. Gelichi and C. Negrelli (eds.), *Adriatico altomedievale (VI-XI secolo) Scambi, porti,*

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produzioni (Roma 2017) 285–310, esp. 286–9; J. Vroom, 'Thinking of linking pottery connections: Southern Adriatic, Butrint and beyond', in Skoblar, *Byzantium*, 45–82.

[88] N. Poulou-Papadimitriou, 'The Aegean during the 'transitional' period of Byzantium: the archaeological evidence', in J. Crow and D. Hill (eds.), *Naxos and the Byzantine Aegean: insular responses to regional change* (Athens 2018) 29–50 (48); see also A.G. Yangaki, 'In search of standardization. The case of a globular amphora type from Crete,' in H. González Cesteros and J. Leidwanger (eds.), *Regional Economies in Action. Standardization of Transport Amphorae in the Roman and Byzantine Mediterranean. Proceedings of the International Conference at the Austrian Archaeological Institute and the Danish Institute at Athens, 16–18 October 2017* (Vienna 2023) 297–326.

[89] Vroom, 'The Byzantine web', 298.

[90] Hodges, 'The Adriatic Sea', 24–6; W. Bowden and R. Hodges, 'An "Ice Age settling on the Roman Empire": post-Roman Butrint between strategy and serendipity', in N. Christie and A. Augenti (eds.), *Vrbes Extinctae: Archaeologies of abandoned classical towns* (Aldershot 2012) 207–41, esp. 212.

[91] C. Wickham, 'Conclusion', in Skoblar, *Byzantium*, 382–90.

[92] Hodges, 'The Adriatic Sea', 36; Vroom, 'The Byzantine web'.

[93] Purcell, 'On the significance', 381.

Sardinia and Crete

For a better understanding of the function and importance of the above-mentioned coastal archontates as part and parcel of the Byzantine *koine,* we should, however, return to the insular worlds of Byzantium. In Sardinia and Crete in particular we can document a good degree of loyalty and quest for Constantinopolitan legitimization on the part of local elites who were invested with Byzantine dignities and titles and regarded as local military and imperial political representatives. On both islands, we are again confronted with the presence of *archontes*, although these appeared earlier in Crete and only much later in Sardinia.[94] *Archon* is a rather neutral title: it generally defines any officials possessing powers [and later] mainly governors. Scholars often conclude that *archontes* were mainly in charge of the most isolated enclaves of the empire, but this remains a rather general reading of the evidence, and it implies a lack of interest on the part of Constantinople towards its periphery.[95] Indeed, *archontes* could not only promote local political initiatives as stemming from the local elites, but, as we have seen, they also based their legitimacy, status, and political pre-eminence on the recognition received from Constantinople. [96]

In Crete, sigillographic evidence points to the existence of some *basiliko*[*i*] *spathari* [*oi*] *kai archon*[*tes*] *Kretes*, which were active in the capital Gortyn between the mid-eighth and the early ninth century.[97] Cretan *archontes* are also mentioned by the ninth-century *Taktikon Uspensky,* along with a *strategos* who remains elusive, as he is not elsewhere documented: the Kibyrrhaiotai theme did not include Crete.[98] Cretan *archontes* seem to have presided over a network of local imperial representatives, again documented by lead seals struck by local military officials and fiscal officers.[99] An elaborate urban defensive upgrade was implemented in the late seventh century across different Cretan sites, pointing to the direct involvement of imperial administration with an important economic and political role also played by local landowning elites and bishops.[100] In Byzantine Crete, then, we may surmise the existence of a persisting link between local secular and ecclesiastical elites and imperial representatives since the island was also part and parcel of the so-called Aegean economic system (as shown by ceramic evidence).[101] At the same time, material culture also points to the role of the island as a real threshold between different empires: Cretan harbours were central to naval traffic moving east-west and north-south.[102] The real watershed in the history of the island was indeed represented by the invasion by Andalusian pirates in the 820s (roughly the time of the Aghlabid invasion of Sicily).[103]

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[94] M. Muresu, *La Moneta "Indicatore" dell'assetto insediativo della Sardegna Bizantina* (Perugia 2018) 339–45; D. Tsougarakis, 'The Byzantine seals of Crete,' *Studies of Byzantine Sigillography* 2 (1990) 137–52, esp. 146.

[95] On the *archontes* and their political and military role see Ahrweiler, *Byzance*, 48; Prigent "Notes', 411;. E. Kislinger, 'Dyrrhachion und die Küsten von Epirus und Dalmatien im frühen Mittelalter Beobachtungen zur Entwicklung der byzantinischen Oberhoheit', in *Millennium. Jahrbuch zu Kultur und Geschichte des ersten Jahrtausends n.Chr. 8* (Berlin 2011) 313–52.

[96] S. Cosentino, 'A longer antiquity? Cyprus, insularity and the economic transition', *Cahiers du Centre d'Études Chypriotes* 43 (2013) 93–103 (97).

[97] .I. Baldini et al., 'Gortina, Mitropolis e il suo Episcopato nel VII e nell'VIII secolo. Ricerche Preliminari,' In *SAIA-Annuario della Scuola Archeologica di Atene e delle Missioni Italiane in Oriente* XC, Serie III, 12 (2012) 239–309 (245).

[98] Malamut, *Les îles de l'Empire byzantin*, 80–4; N. Oikonomidès, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IXe et Xe siecles* (Paris 1972) 57; also Prigent, 'Notes', 411.

[99] S. Cosentino 'From Gortyn to Heraklion? A note on Cretan urbanism during the 8th Century,' *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 29 (2019) 73–89, esp. 74–5.

A rather similar picture can be drawn for Sardinia, this time as part of the Tyrrhenian system of exchange. Here, and by contrast with Crete, we possess a rather larger variety of evidence, including inscriptions, architecture, coins, ceramics, and, of course, lead seals.[104] In Sardinia, eighth-ninth century globular amphorae, from several sites across the island, reveal an island connected with the outside world through long-range commercial traffic involving the entire Italian peninsula and linked to both the Byzantine and Arab long-range spheres.[105] This is confirmed by local coins minted in Cagliari after the fall of Carthage, which marry with Islamic ones, pointing to a transregional and transcultural acceptance of different monetary units.[106] This notwithstanding the collapse of Byzantine administrative and military structures in Africa, which led to their transfer to the island, then at the forefront of the Byzantine-Arab military confrontation until a peace treaty was signed in 752.[107] Evidence of the increased military importance of the Sardinian duke is shown by the presence of a Byzantine naval squadron in the Tyrrhenian, and it is boasted of in a mid-eighth-century inscription celebrating a great victory by the consul and *dux*

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[100] C. Tzigonaki, 'Crete. A border at the sea. Defensive works and landscape-nindscape changes, seventh-eighth Centuries A.D.,' in Ontiveros and Florit, *Change and Resilience*, 163–92, esp. 184–5.

[101] Wickham, *Framing*, 781–7.

[102] S. Gallimore, 'The transformation of Crete in Late Antiquity', in A. Castrorao Barba, D. Tanasi and D. Micicchè (eds), *Archaeology of the Mediterranean during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Gainesville 2023) 53–69 (66).

[103] Cosentino 'From Gortyn to Heraklion?', 84–5.

[104] A.Metcalfe, H. Fernández-Aceves, and M. Muresu, *The Making of Medieval Sardinia* (Leiden 2021); M. Hobart, *A Companion to Sardinian History* (London 2017).

[105] M. Perra, 'Anfore dall'Oriente e dalle regioni tirreniche,' in R. Martorelli (ed.), *Know the Sea to Live the Sea. Conoscere il mare per vivere il mare Atti del Convegno (Cagliari – Cittadella dei Musei, Aula Coroneo, 7-9 marzo 2019) (Perugia 2019),* 649–59; E. Sanna, 'Contenitori da Trasporto Anforici tra VIII e XI Secolo: Dati e Problemi,' in R. Martorelli (ed.), *Settecento-Millecento. Storia, archeologia e arte nei secoli bui del Mediterraneo. Dalle fonti scritte, archeologiche ed artistiche alla ricostruzione della vicenda storica: la Sardegna laboratorio di esperienze culturali. Atti I* (Cagliari 2013) 675–94.

[106] Muresu, *La Moneta,* 420–37.

[107] P. Fois, 'Omayyadi e Bizantini in Sardegna: concezioni e realtà di una lunga guerra (706–752/3)', in M.M. Aldón and M.Massaiu (ed.), *Entre Oriente y Occidente. Textos y espacios medievales* (Cordoba 2016) 51–72.

Constantinos over the Lombards and other barbarians who had attacked the island by land and sea.[108] In the ninth century, however, seals of Sardinian *archontes* started to appear on the island. It is not fully clear why and when the ducal title fell out of use and was replaced by that of an *archon* as the sole Byzantine authority on the island.[109] However, it is significant that this transition coincided with a booming of local church-building activities as sponsored by local aristocratic families in the late ninth-early tenth century (although they started to appear even earlier). These churches were embellished with sets of inscriptions in high-register Greek.[110] In other words, local elites seemed to have looked to Constantinople as the source of political legitimacy and status while, at the same time, they were able to perform acts of political expediency, betraying their capacity to bend to the military and political pressure of the hour. This is shown by the above-mentioned treaty signed by the local authorities with the Arabs and the *legati Sardorum* [...] *dona ferentes,* who visited the Frankish kingdom after Charlemagne's death in 815 to seek help against the Andalusian pirates.[111]

As a postscript to this picture, one may mention the islands lying at the extremes of the Byzantine Mediterranean: Cyprus and the Balearics. Both sigillographic and literary evidence point to the existence of local *archontes* as well as administrative or military authorities.[112] It is, however, interesting to notice that the Arabic sources define both islands as the land(s) of the truce (*Dār-al ʻAhd*), where locals were poised between the regions under the direct control of the Caliphate and those recognizing Byzantine sovereignty.[113] They should be considered spaces where material connectivity and political affiliation with Constantinople seem to have been molded by the strong and pulling gravity of two closer giant polities like the Umayyads-Abbasids and the Spanish Umayyads (and in Cyprus, this is even clearer due to the late-seventh century treaty attesting to the shared tax revenues 'betwixt Greeks and Saracens.')[114]

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[108] F. Fiori, *Costantino Hypatos e doux di Sardegna* (Bologna 2001)

[109] L.Gallinari, 'The Iudex Sardiniae and the Archon Sardanias between the sixth and eleventh Century', in A. Metcalfe, Fernández-Aceves and Muresu, *The Making*, 204–32.

[110] R. Cotroneo and R. Martorelli, 'Chiese e Culti di matrice bizantina in Sardegna,' in Michaelides, Pergola, and Zanini, *The Insular System*, 97–114.

[111] *Annales Einhardi*, ed. G. Pertz. MGH, Scriptores, I (Hannover 1826), 202: 815 A.D. l. The *Annales* are no longer considered to be by Einhard, but to be a revision of the Royal Frankish Annals by an unknown author: see R. Collins, 'The 'Reviser' revised: another look at the alternative version of the Annales regni Francorum', in A. Callander Murray (ed.), *After Rome's Fall: narrators and sources of early medieval history. Essays presented to Walter Goffart* (Toronto 1998) 191–213.

[112] D. Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus (492–1191 AD)* (Nicosia 2009) 69–140; M. Cau Ontiveros and C. Mas Florit, 'The Early Byzantine period in the Balearic islands', in Michaelides, Pergola, and Zanini, *The Insular System*, 31–45, esp. 41.

[113] R. Lynch, 'Cyprus and its legal and historiographical significance in early Islamic history', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136.3 (2016) 535–50.

[114] Zavagno,' "Going to the extremes" ', 155–7.

Conclusion

I have sought to offer a brief overview of the structures of political governance and administration that characterized some of the most important spaces of the Byzantine Mediterranean *koine* between the late seventh and the early tenth century.

First, I have sketched the character of the local ruling authorities, with Sicily being the only insular Byzantine theme; indeed, it retained direct communications and a strong political link with both Constantinople (as highlighted by the eunuchs of the Cubiculum) and the Adriatic, as exemplified by the political trajectories of Butrint, Malta, Crete, and Sardinia. If Butrint, Malta and Crete were ruled by *archontes*, Sardinia was a duchy which only later turned into an archontate as well; it also showed strong links with their regional economic and shipping system of reference. Crete benefitted more from the proximity to Constantinople via the Aegean, whereas Malta abutted into the Tyrrhenian Sea, where the gravitational pull of Sicily (and of Rome) was stronger. In a similar vein, the Balearics and Cyprus played a peculiar role: though ruled by Byzantine *archontes* they both experienced peculiar government-sharing policies involving local elites.

Second, it is clear that Constantinople did not turn its back on the western Mediterranean but retained a continuous and active interest even in the more distant territories like Sardinia and the Balearics into the tenth century, particular through trade involving as enhanced in particular by material culture (globular amphorae and luxury goods). Finally, this interest was modulated by the pressure exerted by other military and political actors and by the ebbs and flows of Byzantine naval power in the period. In other words, we are dealing with an empire whose local administrative structure adapted to the changing velocity of regional politics although retaining control of areas that remained nodal hubs as part and parcel of different economic systems. Finally, I showed such islands (and coastal gateway communities like Butrint) were less marginal military outposts than they were relational and connecting spaces of the liminal.

As I have included a rather general definition of the liminal as a transitory time and/or place of transition, I have also stressed the importance of approaching liminality in organizational terms: islands (and coastal enclaves) remain distinctive spaces ‘in-between’ both cognitively and geographically. As they remained connected and isolated, definite and self-existent worlds apart and part of a network, I have used the concept of threshold to sublimate the ambiguity of insular (and coastal) spaces, as this has allowed me to overcome differences in size, composition, and geo-morphology (archipelagos like Balearics and Malta vis-à-vis insular microcontinents like Cyprus or Sicily), and, finally, location (very distant or very close, mentally or physically, from what is often regarded as the only centre of the empire). I have also bound liminality to the concept of relational space. Indeed, although in different ways, Sicily, Cyprus, Malta, Sardinia, and the Balearics (as well as Butrint) were all central actors of a matrix of fiscal, commercial, administrative, and cultural interactions as interwoven with ‘local’ exchange maritime networks as well as more distant ‘centers’ like Constantinople or Damascus. I am perfectly aware that some islands (like Corsica, as it fell to the Lombards and later the Carolingians), as well as other coastal (urban or not) communities like Comacchio, Zadar, and Amalfi, have been left out of this picture. Nevertheless, I hope to have presented a model where large Byzantine islands (and coastal spaces) will emerge less as spaces on the periphery and more as infrastructures in a relational sense. Their peculiar administrative organization, economic structures, and sociocultural identity were often reflected in the creative refusal to accept political realities imposed by the centres and (consciously or not)[115] embraced expedient tactics of survival.

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[115] S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York 2009) 5.