

Times of Transition:

Socio-economic changes in the post-imperial Mediterranean (4th to 8th c. CE)

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organised by Katharina Rieger and Alexander Sarantis

Outline:

Between the 4th and the 8th century CE the various regions of the Mediterranean and neighbouring areas experienced major macro-political changes resulting from new military and political (as well as religious) elites and take-overs: the Vandal, Byzantine and later Muslim conquests of Africa; the impacts of nomadic groups from the Sahara on communities and polities in Africa, Cyrenaica and Egypt; the collapse of the Roman administration in Britain; the rise of the Visigothic kingdom in Spain; and conflicts in the Near East culminating in the occupation of eastern Roman provinces from northern Mesopotamia to Egypt by the Sassanian Persians and then the Muslim Arabs, to name but a few.

Due to the wide range and complexity of the changes taking place in regions of the Roman world which were so historically, socially, economically, and politically different, it is not yet clear how to grasp the socio-economic implications of these periods of transition both in terms of methodologies applied and in terms of broader historical conclusions that can be reached.

Our proposed workshop thus aims to discuss comparative perspectives on the phases of transition affecting different regions using historical and archaeological evidence. The focus will be on the socio-economic continuities and adaptations „on the ground”, adopting a micro-historical, micro-regional approach which can then be set against the macro-historical political changes mentioned above.

The contributions will be based on the assumption that at a smaller economic scale, there is more evidence for continuity, even when broader, region-wide changes were taking place concurrently. The potential ‘invisibility’ of both textual and material evidence will also be an important consideration of the papers. When power relations changed, alliances shifted, polities were destabilised and administration apparatuses re-organised, local economies were of course heavily impacted. However, even if consumption patterns and market networks changed in many areas, the idea that these changes often resulted in a total hiatus in productivity is not so likely according to recent research. A focus on factors such as elite integration, connectivity, alliances, and resource availability, as well as perpetuated societal bonds in times of transition in which people also faced conflict, destruction, depopulation, and migration, helps better understand the dynamics and continuing dynamism of local social and economic capital and action under new political powers.

The contributors will combine archaeological and historical sources to investigate economically (inter-)acting groups in areas as diverse as Late Antique Britain, Early Islamic Syria and Visigothic Spain. They will discuss the question of what remains at local levels when larger structures change rapidly or dwindle slowly, when patterns of industrial production and market networks shift or shrink; and will shed light on both transitions and stability during periods of broader political disintegration. The papers will explore the momentum that drove the transitions, taking into account the complex dynamics, the multifaceted impacts, and the local forms of the socio-economic adaptations.

Strategies, time spans, and intensities as well as the outcomes varied across regions depending on their pre-existing socio-economic conditions. Our hope is to identify patterns of socio-economic change, continuity, vulnerability, and resilience in regions affected by micro-political changes which might allow us to better understand their ground level impact.

Speakers

- Antonia Bosanquet, RomanIslam - Center for Comparative Empire and Transcultural Studies, University of Hamburg, Germany
- Angelo Castorao Barba, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology / Centre for Late Antique and Early Medieval Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Wrocław / Warsaw, Poland
- Corisande Fenwick, Institute of Archaeology, University College, London, United Kingdom
- Sabina Fiołna, Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena, Germany
- Gil Gambash, Maritime Civilizations Department, University of Haifa, Israel
- James Harland, Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies, University of Bonn, Germany
- Javier Martinez Jimenez, Department of Prehistory and Archaeology, University of Granada, Spain
- Marie-Odile Rousset, Archéorient, Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, Lyons, France
- Agnieszka Tomas, Faculty of Archeology, University of Warsaw, Poland

Abstracts

Antonia Bosanquet, University of Hamburg

Mediating Authority: Ifrīqiya and Caliphal Rule in al-Andalus

This presentation will examine Ifrīqiya's political influence in the relations between al-Andalus and Damascus in the period after the Islamic conquest of the peninsula until the uprising of 122/740. Although the rulers of Ifrīqiya regarded themselves as the mediators of political power between the centre of caliphal power in Damascus and al-Andalus, this role was often contested. The paper will highlight the competition for influence between the Caliph in Damascus, the Umayyad governor of Ifrīqiya and the Arab settler elite of al-Andalus who had arrived with the conquest. Even when resisting administrative subordination to Ifrīqiya, the settler elite of al-Andalus remained bound to the North African province by tribal loyalties. How did these loyalties, extending across the Strait of Gibraltar, affect the political formation of both provinces?

Angelo Castorao Barba, Polish Academy of Sciences, Wrocław / Warsaw

Rural settlement patterns and socio-economic changes in Late Antique, Byzantine and Islamic Sicily

The aim on this paper is to provide an overview on open questions about changes in landscape and settlement patterns in Late Antique, Byzantine and Islamic Sicily (5th-11th c. CE). Sicily due to its geopolitical centrality in the Mediterranean represents a proper palimpsest for understanding the dynamics of connectivity and interconnection between different political regimes, cultures and religions. From the 5th c. CE, processes of change began in the reuse and transformation of villas and in the long continuity and growth of importance of the secondary settlements. A first phase of the Byzantine in Sicily (6th-7th c. CE) was characterized by the resilience of the late Roman landscapes while the moment of crucial turning point occurred with the establishment of the Sicilian *thema* between the end

of the 7th and the beginning of the 8th c. CE. The impact of Islamic societies in the Sicilian countryside between the 9th and 11th c. CE is a very interesting phenomenon on which the archaeological data are providing new and illuminating contributions. In recent years, archaeological research has enormously increased the knowledge on Early Medieval Sicily through a new season of new excavations and new studies on material culture.

The scope of this paper is to develop new insights on the impact of the integration of Sicily in Byzantine and Islamic systems and to critically frame what transformations took place in terms of settlement patterns, material culture, economy and agrarian change in the countryside. New data from recent fieldworks (especially in the territory of Palermo) and a rereading of previous published research will be discussed in order to animate the debate in a comparative perspective among different areas.

Corisande Fenwick, University College London

Going local? Settlement and society in early medieval North Africa

Sabina Fiołna, Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena

The effects of the Roman globalisation in the Late Roman / Early Byzantine on the local landscapes inferred from the palynological, archaeological and numismatic evidence from the territory of Tripolis in Western Anatolia

The development of the Roman Empire created unprecedented conditions for the emergence and maintenance of a globalised socio-economic system and, consequently, the disintegration of the Empire was followed by a gradual disintegration of its underlying components. Recent palynological research coupled with archaeological and numismatic evidence reveals the impact of the macro-scale political and economic changes on the local landscapes of Western Anatolia. The high-resolution pollen core from the Buldan Lake, a small lake located in a highland valley on the territory of the city Tripolis, gives evidence on the intermittent transitional and plateau phases showing the dependency of a micro-region from wider changes and the limits of its adaptability. The first phase (Early Roman period) is interpreted as an energetic development of cash-crop plantations (olive groves) and is paralleled with high building activity in the city; the second phase (Late Roman) shows the reorientation towards production of staples (cereals), possibly aimed at satisfying the needs of Constantinople, and major changes in the city fabric; the last phase (from 7th cent AD) shows signs of the abrupt landscape rewilding (secondary forest, low anthropogenic indicators) corresponding with the abandonment of the site of Tripolis and the disintegration of the Roman globalised system. The evidence from Tripolis reflects the complex links between the micro- and macro history in Anatolia.

Gil Gambash, University of Haifa

Between Political Scylla and Environmental Charybdis: The Negev Economy in Late Antiquity

Between the 4th and 8th centuries, to which the workshop is dedicated, the Negev desert had first developed into a prosperous urbanized and industrial micro-region, only to then decline to the point of becoming deserted by all save monks and nomads. Recent scholarship has focused on studying environmental aspects in an attempt to explain these spectacular rise

and fall, and has managed to produce a detailed, high-resolution picture, which, however, leaves politics outside of the discussion. On this latter front, the approach remains general and simplistic, essentially ascribing every shift and transition to conquests, “good or bad”. This paper will map the state of the field and suggest paths towards a holistic view of the Byzantine Negev.

James Harland, University of Bonn

The *annona militaris*, the Rhine frontier, and the ‘End’ of Roman Britain

Recent burgeoning scholarship (such as Gerrard 2013, Halsall 2013, Fleming 2021, Harland 2021) has successfully reassessed both the economic nature of the transformation of Roman Britain and our ability to tie this transformation to transformative trends in ethnic or cultural identification, as well as the highlighted the methodological difficulty in demonstrating ethnic and cultural identification through archaeological means. Fleming 2021, in particular, has rightly highlighted the importance of the Roman military supply network to the maintenance of what we usually consider to be a typically ‘Roman’ way of life in Britain, and the role its removal played in the cessation of that way of life.

Fleming has highlighted that this collapse produced a substantial realignment of economic ties, with Britain’s focus shifting in the fifth century away from continental Europe west of the Rhine, toward the North Sea world and the traditional ‘Saxon’ homelands. What this discussion has lacked, however, is a causal explanation for why the removal of the *annona* should have resulted in such an alignment towards the latter. By demonstrating, through a reconsideration of both textual and archaeological material, that North Sea *barbaricum* was, too, a part of the ‘world that the *annona* built,’ I intend to offer a narrative for Britain’s involvement in the North Sea cultural world, and the gradual migration of people from that world into Britain, that at last resolves tiresome debates in fifth-century British studies regarding exogamous versus endogamous change, and shows that Britain followed, rather more than has been traditionally thought, processes that took place across much of the Western Roman Empire as part of the phenomenon now usually described as the ‘Transformation of the Roman World’.

Javier Martínez Jimenez, University of Granada

Municipal economies and civic investment in Visigothic Hispania

[abstract]

Marie-Odile Rousset, Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, Lyon

Rural settlement and agricultural development in the Hama region (Syria) from 4th to 10th c. CE

In a region of around 7000 km², East of Hama, the geoarchaeological survey of the mission "Arid Margins of Northern Syria" discovered more than one thousand sites. They were in a rather good condition, and for some of them in an exceptional state of preservation. All placed within their environmental context, they shed new light on the knowledge of the steppe area for all periods in the history of Syria and the Middle East.

In this area, for which we have no texts but only a few epigraphic studies, the survey has shown that there was a remarkable phase of expansion of land use and rural population in Byzantine period (more than 400 sites). This phenomenon resulted in a particularly ingenious development of this region, despite a very constraining climatic aridity, taking advantage of the particular conditions of each natural environment, playing on very variable natural resources in a context of great diversity of ecosystems.

These developments, which reflect changes in the economic strategies adopted by the populations and in interrelation of nomadic and sedentary lifestyles, indirectly provide indications of how the campaigns are appropriated and managed during the Late Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic times.

Agnieszka Tomas, University of Warsaw

Novae (Lower Moesia / Moesia II). From the Legionary Fortress to the Late Roman Town

The legionary fortress in Novae, founded in the middle of the 1st century AD, was manned by the 1st Italic Legion at least until the 30s of the 5th century. Buildings from the earliest phases of the fortress are only partly known. We know more about the solid structures that were built at the beginning of the 2nd and were developed until the middle of the 3rd century – the monumental headquarters, military hospital, baths and officers' houses. This typical layout of a Roman camp in the form of a "playing card" in Novae had an area of almost 18 hectares and probably survived until the 60s of the 3rd century. At one point, the military buildings were built over with new civilian facilities – both civil and private, including churches and private residences. The late Roman layout of Novae received also the so-called annex – an area surrounded by fortifications, which increased the surface of the former camp by an additional 8 ha.

The question of when exactly this happened raises many doubts. Both the excavations along the defensive walls and the excavations in the annex area indicate a change at the end of the 3rd century, after 260s. However, the plan of the towers is not typical for the Tetrarchy period. Even more interesting is the fact that the aforementioned annex was built on the site of the former necropolis, which was desacralized in the 260s.