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Contents

DUMBARTON OAKS PAPERS

VOLUME 76, 2022

MICHAEL MCCORMICK
Giles Constable (1929–2021) 1

RAVINDER S. BINNING
The Memory Prison:
Carceral and Sacred Space in an Ekphrasis by John Climacus 9

GRZEGORZ OCHAŁA
The Cathedral of Faras as a Monument of Medieval Nubian Memory 31

JAKUB KABALA
“Trampling the Old Laws”:
Traces of Papal Latinity in the Old Slavonic *Vita Methodii* 69

DANIEL OLTEAN
From the Monastery of the *Theotokos tou Roidiou* to Simanaklay?
Greek and Armenian Cilician Monks in a Changing World 101

ALEXANDRE M. ROBERTS
Heretics, Dissidents, and Society:
Narrating the Trial of John bar ‘Abdun 117

JAMES MORTON
Law and Orthodoxy under the Komnenoi:
The Appendix to Alexios Aristenos’s Canonical Commentary 145

TRISTAN SCHMIDT
Performing Military Leadership in Komnenian Byzantium:
Emperor Manuel I, His Generals, and the Hungarian Campaign of 1167 163

FOTEINI SPINGOU
Classicizing Visions of Constantinople after 1204:
Niketas Choniates’ *De signis* Reconsidered 181

KRYSTINA KUBINA
Poetry of Turmoil:
Stephanos Sgouropoulos to Alexios III Megas Komnenos 221

SALVATORE COSENTINO
Pillars of Empire:
The Economic Role of the Large Islands of the Mediterranean from
Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages 245

LUCA ZAVAGNO
A Lost World That Never Died:
Early Medieval Urbanism in the Byzantine Islands of the Western Mediterranean 281

ZAZA SKHIRTLDZE AND DAREJAN KLDIASHVILI
Georgian Manuscripts Produced in Eleventh-Century Constantinople 311



BYZANTINE MISSIONS: MEANING, NATURE, AND EXTENT
DUMBARTON OAKS SYMPOSIUM, 29–30 APRIL 2022 399

Abbreviations 401

Pillars of Empire

The Economic Role of the Large Islands of the Mediterranean from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages

SALVATORE COSENTINO

According to geographers, the peculiar nature of an “island” is the spatial discontinuity between land and sea.¹ The characteristics peculiar to an island—its size, demography, distance from the mainland, and environmental elements—and its manifestations are grouped together under the term “insularity.” Insularity, however, may also be considered a social construct if it is interpreted as a relationship between the island and the community living on it. In any case, it does not seem inappropriate to speak of an “insular world.” The concept of “island” is paradoxical, for it usually evokes the idea of “isolation”—a word etymologically derived from “island”—in contrast to the vastness and contiguity of the mainland,² though history tells us that islands have been intermediaries of knowledge and technology since protohistory.³ Indeed, however frightening and

unpredictable the sea may have appeared in ancient imagery,⁴ it was certainly easier to cross than thick forests, swamps, deserts, and mountain ranges. Therefore, “insularity” and “isolation” cannot be understood as synonyms at all.⁵ It is thanks to the maritime environment that a so-called *espace réticulaire*⁶ takes shape, framed by the islands. During antiquity and the Middle Ages, the maritime environment engendered a strong identity featuring both “regionalism” and “globalism,”

1 See Louis Brigand, “Insularité,” *Hypergéô*, accessed 23 January 2020, <http://www.hypergeo.eu/spip.php?article112>.

2 See E. Y. Kolodny, *La population des îles de la Grèce: Essai de géographie insulaire en Méditerranée orientale*, 3 vols. (Aix-en-Provence, 1974), 1:21.

3 For a discussion of the value and image of insularity in antiquity, see G. Traina, “Fra antico e medioevo: Il posto delle isole,” *Quaderni Catanesi di Studi Classici e Medievali* 8.15 (1986): 113–25; G. Amiotti, “Le Isole Fortunate: Mito, utopia, realtà geografica,” in *Geografia e storiografia nel mondo classico*, ed. M. Sordi, Contributi dell’Istituto di Storia Antica 14 (Milan, 1988), 166–77; E. Gabba, “L’insularità nella riflessione antica,” in *Geografia storica della Grecia antica*, ed. F. Prontera (Rome, 1991), 106–9; S. Vilatte, *L’insularité dans la pensée grecque* (Paris, 1991); P. Brun, “La faiblesse insulaire: Histoire d’un topos,” *ZPapEpig* 99 (1993): 165–83; P. Doukellis, “L’image des

îles et de la mer Égée dans la littérature du Haut Empire: Quelques réflexions,” *REA* 103 (2001): 49–59; F. Lättsch, “Insularität und Gesellschaft in der Antike: Untersuchungen zur Auswirkung der Insellage auf die Gesellschaftsentwicklung,” *Geographia Historica* 19 (2005): 21–47; C. Constantakopoulou, *The Dance of the Islands: Insularity, Networks, the Athenian Empire and the Aegean World* (Oxford, 2007), 1–10; C. Ampolo, “Isole di storia, storie di isole,” in *Immagine e immagini della Sicilia e di altre isole nel Mediterraneo antico*, ed. C. Ampolo, 2 vols. (Pisa, 2009), 1:3–11; A. Mastino and R. Zucca, “Identità insulare,” in *Insularity, Identity and Epigraphy in the Roman World*, ed. J. Velaza (Cambridge, 2017), 3–23; A. Kouremenos, “Introduction,” in *Insularity and Identity in the Roman Mediterranean*, ed. A. Kouremenos (Oxbow, 2018), 1–3.

4 For ancient imagery on the sea, see S. Cosentino, “Mentality, Technology and Commerce: Shipping amongst the Byzantine Islands in Late Antiquity and Beyond,” in *The Insular System of the Early Byzantine Mediterranean: Archaeology and History*, ed. D. Michailides, P. Pergola, and E. Zanini, BAR International Series 2523 (Oxford, 2013), 65–76, at 65–68.

5 Kolodny, *La population des îles de la Grèce* (n. 2), 22.

6 See S. Gombaud, “Îles, insularité et îléité: Le relativisme dans l’étude des espaces archipélagiques” (PhD diss., Université de la Réunion, 2007), 1001, <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00462505>.

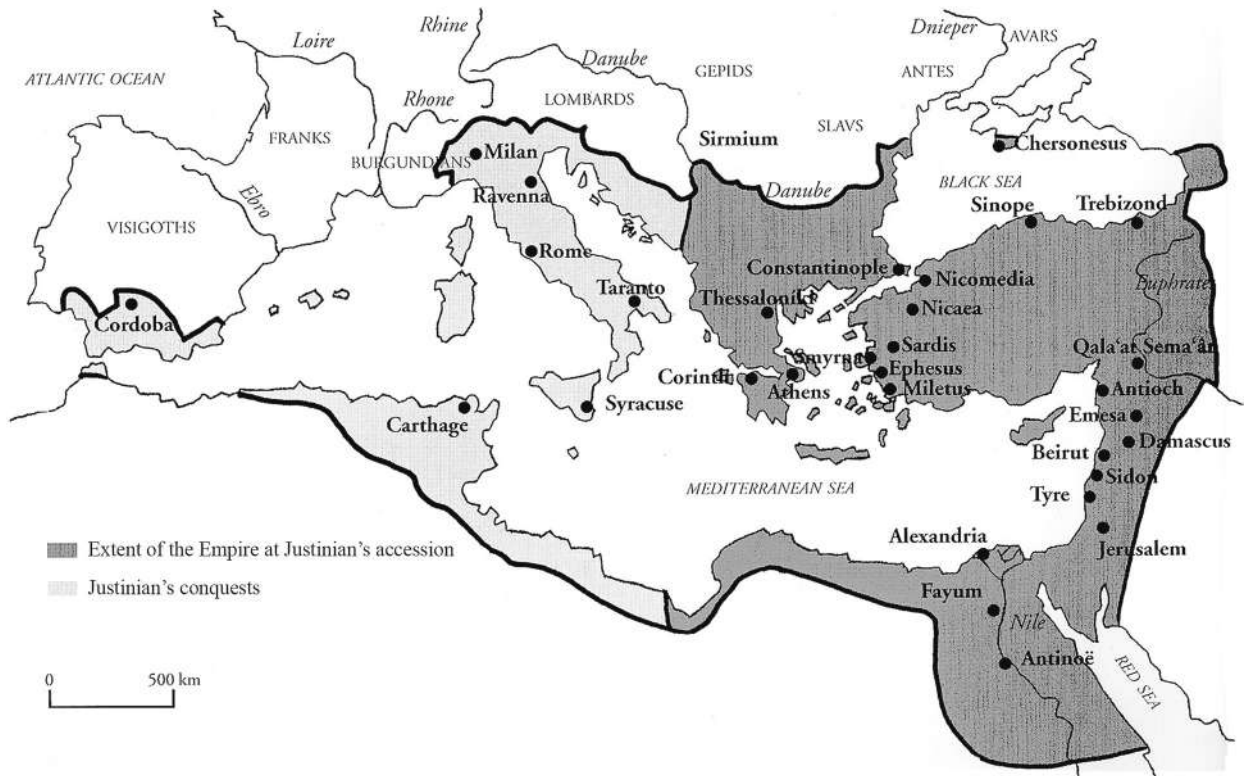


Fig. 1. Top: physical map of the Mediterranean; bottom: map of the Byzantine Empire under Justinian. Top map redrawn after D. Feher (freeworldmaps.net); bottom map by Claudia Lamanna.

which can be expressed by the neologism “glocal.”⁷ However, at the same time it is certainly true that the cultural and economic identity of the Mediterranean islands cannot be considered only in terms of their connective function between sea and land.⁸ The large islands above all have to be considered as productive areas in themselves. A variety of physical landscapes exist within them, which at times sharply demarcate coastal and inland settlements, just as on the mainland. This is particularly true for Sardinia and Cyprus—a bit less for Sicily, Crete, and Rhodes. In short, the concept of “island” is multifaceted and needs to be profoundly historicized in order to avoid anachronism. In ancient and medieval societies, on the whole, many islands were far from being depopulated places of remoteness that were difficult to reach. On the contrary, they were often areas marked by a much higher social vitality and economic complexity than mainland regions (fig. 1).

As a matter of fact, over the last twenty years a good number of studies have emphasized the wealth of many Mediterranean islands during late antiquity.⁹

7 As coined in Kouremenos, “Introduction” (n. 5), 3.

8 A point rightly stressed by E. Malamut, *Les îles de l’empire byzantine: VIII^e–XII^e siècles*, Byzantina Sorbonensia 8, 2 vols. (Paris, 1988), 2:598.

9 Historiography of 2010–2020, limited to monographs that have been useful to me (in chronological order): A. Di Vita, *Gortina di Creta: Quindici anni di vita urbana* (Rome, 2010); M. Mongiu, S. Modeo, and M. Arnone, eds., *La Sicilia bizantina: Storia, città e territorio* (Caltanissetta, 2010); A. Nef and V. Prigent, eds., *La Sicile de Byzance à l’Islam* (Paris, 2010); P. Tselekas, ed., *Τὸ νόμισμα στα νησιά του Αιγαίου: Νομισματοκοπεία, Κυκλοφορεία, Εικονογραφία, Ιστορία*, Οβολός 9 (Athens, 2010); I. Baldini and M. Livadiotti, eds., *Archeologia protobizantina a Kos: La basilica di S. Gabriele* (Bologna, 2011); *The Insular System of the Early Byzantine Mediterranean* (n. 4); S. Modeo, M. Congiu, and L. Santagati, eds., *La Sicilia del IX secolo tra Bizantini e Musulmani* (Caltanissetta, 2013); A. Nef and F. Ardizzone, eds., *Les dynamiques de l’islamisation en Méditerranée centrale et en Sicile: Nouvelles propositions et découvertes récentes (Le dinamiche dell’islamizzazione nel Mediterraneo centrale e in Sicilia: Nuove proposte e scoperte recenti)*, Collection de l’École Française de Rome 487 (Rome, 2014); I. Baldini and M. Livadiotti, eds., *Archeologia protobizantina a Kos: La città e il complesso episcopale*, DISCI, Archeologia 6 (Bologna, 2015); P. Karanastasi, A. Tzigounaki, and C. Tsigonaki, eds., *Αρχαιολογικό έργο Κρήτης: Πρακτικά της 3ης συνάντησης*, 2 vols. (Rethymno, 2015; previous volumes, from the first and second conference, were published in 2010 and 2012); M. Karambinis, *The Island of Skyros from Late Roman to Early Modern Times: An Archaeological Survey*, Archaeological Studies Leiden University 28 (Leiden, 2015); G. Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese and the Eastern Aegean Islands in Late Antiquity, AD 300–700*, Oxford

The prosperity of these islands depended on three key factors. First, in ancient and medieval society, ships provided the fastest and most economical method of transport and communication, and islands and their harbors were important connective points along maritime trade routes (although during winter, nonessential communications decreased).¹⁰ Second, the impact of the process of militarization on their social fabric was limited until the second half of the seventh century.¹¹ Third, their territorial organization was stable.¹² The major centers of the islands were more easily subjected to imperial authority than the impervious continental regions precisely because they were located along the Mediterranean waterways. It is surprising to note, for instance, that out of the eleven localities that have preserved censuses of taxpayers dating back

Monographs in Classical Archaeology (Oxford, 2016); C. Giuffrida and M. Cassia, eds., *Silenziose rivoluzioni: La Sicilia dalla Tarda antichità al primo medioevo* (Catania, 2016); *Proceedings of the 12th International Cretological Congress*, <https://12iccs.proceedings.gr/en/> (and former editions of the same congress held at Elounda in 2001 [9th congress], Chania 2006 [10th congress], Rethymno 2011 [11th congress]); K. Roussos, *Reconstructing the Settled Landscape of the Cyclades: The Islands of Paros and Naxos during the Late Antique and Early Byzantine Centuries*, Archaeological Studies Leiden University 40 (Leiden, 2017); L. Zavagno, *Cyprus between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (ca. 600–800): An Island in Transition*, Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies 21 (London, 2017); R. Martorelli, A. Piras, and P. G. Spanu, eds., *Isole e terraferma nel primo cristianesimo: Identità locale ed interscambi culturali, religiosi e produttivi*, Atti dell’XI Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Cristiana, 2 vols. (Cagliari, 2015); J. Crow and D. Hill, eds., *Naxos and the Byzantine Aegean: Insular Responses to Regional Change*, Papers and Monographs from the Norwegian Institute at Athens (Athens, 2018); F. D’Aiuto, M. L. Fobelli, A. Guiglia, A. Iacobini, S. Lucà, A. Luzzi, V. Ruggeri, eds., *Isole bizantine: Realtà e metafora*, RSBN, n.s., 55 (2018): 85–322; M. Á. Cau Ontiveros and C. Mas Florit, eds., *Change and Resilience: The Occupation of Mediterranean Islands in Late Antiquity*, Joukowsky Institute Publication 9 (Oxford, 2019); L. Zavagno, R. Darley, and J. Jarret, eds., *Not the Final Frontier: The World of Medieval Islands*, monograph section, *Al-Masāq* 31.2 (2019): 129–241, not limited to the Mediterranean islands; L. Arcifa and M. Sgarlata, eds., *From Polis to Madina: La trasformazione delle città siciliane tra Tardoantico e Alto Medioevo*, Themata: The Byzantine West/Bisanzio in Occidente 1 (Bari, 2020); A. Metcalfe and H. Fernández-Aceves, eds., *The Making of Medieval Sardinia*, The Medieval Mediterranean. Peoples, Economies and Cultures, 400–1500, 128 (Leiden, 2021).

10 Arguments are summarized in S. Cosentino, “Insularity, Economy, and Social Landscape in the Early Byzantine Period,” *RSBN*, n.s., 55 (2018): 89–92.

11 *Ibid.*, 92–94.

12 *Ibid.*, 95–96.



Fig. 2. Sicily, 27,710 km². Map redrawn after D. Feher (freeworldmaps.net).

to late antiquity (Chios, Astypalaia, Thera, Samos, Kos, Mytilene, Magnesia on the Meander, Miletus, Mylasa, Hypaipa, and Tralles), the majority are islands: Astypalaia, Chios, Kos, Mytilene, Samos, and Thera.¹³

13 Late antique censuses on the Aegean Islands: Astypalaia: *IG XII.3*, 180–82; Chios: A. Déleage, *La capitulation du Bas-Empire* (Macon, 1945), 183–84; Kos: M. Segre, *Iscrizioni di Cos*, Monografie SAIA 6, 2 vols. (Rome, 1993), 1: nos. ED 112, ED 151; Mytilene: *IG XII.2*, 76–80; S. Charitonides, *Αἱ ἐπιγραφαὶ τῆς Λέσβου: Συμπλήρωμα*, Βιβλιοθήκη τῆς ἐν Ἀθήναις Ἀρχαιολογικῆς Ἑταιρείας 60 (Athens, 1968), 17; Samos: *IG XII.6*, 2, 980; Thera: G. Kiourtzian, *Recueil des inscriptions grecques chrétiennes des Cyclades de la fin du III^e au VII^e siècle après J.-C.*, Travaux et Mémoires du Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, Monographies 12 (Paris, 2000) 217–40, no. 142a. From Thera, we also have an inventory of slaves: see E. Geroussi-Bendermacher, “Propriété foncière et inventaire d’esclaves: Un texte inédit de Perissa (Thera) tardo-antique,” in *Esclavage antique et discriminations socio-culturelles*, ed. V. I. Anastasiadis and P. N. Doukellis (Bern, 2005), 335–58. On late antique censuses in Asia Minor and the Aegean: A. H. M. Jones, “Census records of the Later Roman Empire,” *JRS* 43 (1953): 49–64; P. Thonemann, “Estates and the Land in Late Roman Asia Minor,” *Chiron* 37 (2007): 435–77; K. Harper, “The Greek Census Inscriptions of Late Antiquity,” *JRS* 98 (2008):

In my approach to the subject, I chose to focus on the largest islands of the Mediterranean for their comparable size, balancing the dual perception of insularity as previously mentioned (i.e., “insularity” as a definition encompassing a multiplicity of islands that are different from each other and “insularity” as a social construct referring to the way of life on islands regardless of their different morphology). Four parameters will be examined in order to determine whether, from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, socioeconomic development in Sardinia, Sicily, and Crete was different from that of the heartland of the Byzantine Empire and to establish any differences that exist between these three islands (figs. 2–4). The four parameters to be taken into consideration are as follows: (1) the system of land and maritime communications; (2) settlements and territorial

83–119; U. Huttner, “Pagane Relikte in der Spätantike: Griechische Katasterinschriften als religionsgeschichtliche Quellen,” in *Authority and Identity in Emerging Christianities in Asia Minor and Greece*, ed. C. Breytenbach and J. M. Ogereau (Leiden, 2018), 3–32.



Fig. 3. Sardinia, 24,100 km². Map redrawn after D. Feher (freeworldmaps.net).



Fig. 4. Crete, 8,336 km². Map redrawn after Eric Gaba (Wikimedia Commons).

organization; (3) rural economy and the structure of landed ownership; (4) the cycle of production, distribution, and demand. To be precise, Corsica is slightly larger than Crete in terms of area. However, I chose to examine the latter both because we have much more evidence about it and because Crete's geographical position permits us to deal more effectively with the interplay between the eastern and western Mediterranean.¹⁴

Land and Maritime Communications

The three islands' road systems are described in two surviving sources from Roman times: the *Itinerarium Antonini* in reference to Sardinia and Sicily¹⁵ and the *Tabula Peutingeriana* regarding Crete.¹⁶ The date of the first text has been hotly debated; several scholars now think that it was composed between the late third and mid-fourth centuries, probably on the basis of an archetype dating back to the Severan age.¹⁷ Its composition did not have a practical purpose; the anonymous author wished only to produce a literary work pertaining to the geographic genre. This might explain its numerous inconsistencies in relation to distances. The final revision of the *Tabula Peutingeriana* was probably also completed during the fourth century using a model possibly dating back to the first century CE.¹⁸

14 On Corsica in the period under scrutiny: D. Istria and P. Pergola, "La Corse byzantin (VI^e–VII^e siècles)," in *The Insular System of the Early Byzantine Mediterranean* (n. 4), 77–85; G. Castiglia and P. Pergola, "Between Change and Resilience: Urban and Rural Settlement Patterns in Late Antique Corsica," in *Change and Resilience: The Occupation of Mediterranean Islands* (n. 9), 25–49.

15 *Itineraria Antonini* 78.4–85.3 (for Sardinia), 82.6–98.1 (for Sicily) (*Itineraria Romana*, vol. 1, *Itineraria Antonini Augusti et Burdigalense*, ed. O. Cuntz [Leipzig, 1929], 11–12, 13–14, respectively).

16 *Itineraria Romana: Römische Reisewege an der Hand der Tabula Peutingeriana*, ed. K. Müller (Stuttgart, 1916), 607–10, map 197.

17 P. Arnaud, "L'itinéraire d'Antonin: Un témoin de la littérature itinéraire du Bas-Empire," *Geographia Antiqua* 2 (1993): 33–47, at 46–47; M. Calzolari, "Introduzione allo studio della rete stradale dell'Italia romana: L'*Itinerarium Antonini*," *AttLinc* 9.7.4 (1996): 380–82.

18 A. Levi and M. Levi, *Itineraria Picta: Contributo allo studio della Tabula Peutingeriana* (Rome, 1967), 21–22; O. A. W. Dilke, *Greek and Roman Maps* (London, 1985), 113–20; idem, "Itineraries and Geographical Maps in the Early and Late Roman Empires," *History of Cartography*, vol. 1, *Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*, ed. J. B. Harley and D. Woodward (Chicago, 1987), 238–42; L. Bosio, *La Tabula Peutingeriana: Una descrizione pittorica del mondo antico*, I Monumenti dell'Arte Classica 2

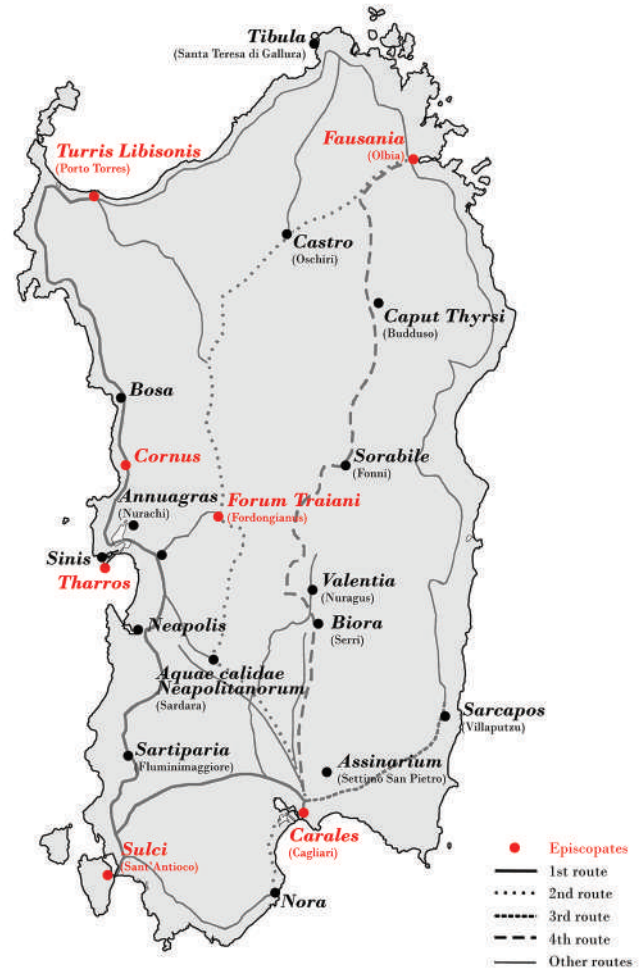


Fig. 5. Road system of Roman Sardinia and late antique episcopates. Map by Claudia Lamanna.

Some help is also provided by the so-called *Ravenna Cosmography*, written by an anonymous author during the second half of the seventh century, which seems to be based on later Roman *itineraria*.¹⁹ The structure of the road system was similar in Sardinia and Sicily (figs. 5–6). Both had important routes running around their coasts, along with axes that crossed their inland

(Rimini, 1983), 149–62; R. J. A. Talbert, in association with T. Elliott, assisted by N. Harris, G. Hubbard, D. O'Brien, G. Shepherd, with a contribution of M. Steinmann, *Rome's World: The Peutinger Map Reconsidered* (Cambridge, 2010), 133–36. The original map was produced between the second half of the second century CE and 324, although Talbert emphasizes that the most probable period for its composition was the age of Diocletian.

19 *Itineraria Romana*, vol. 1, *Ravennatis Anonymi Cosmographia et Guidonis Geographica*, ed. J. Schnez (Stuttgart, 1940), 4.23, 4.26.

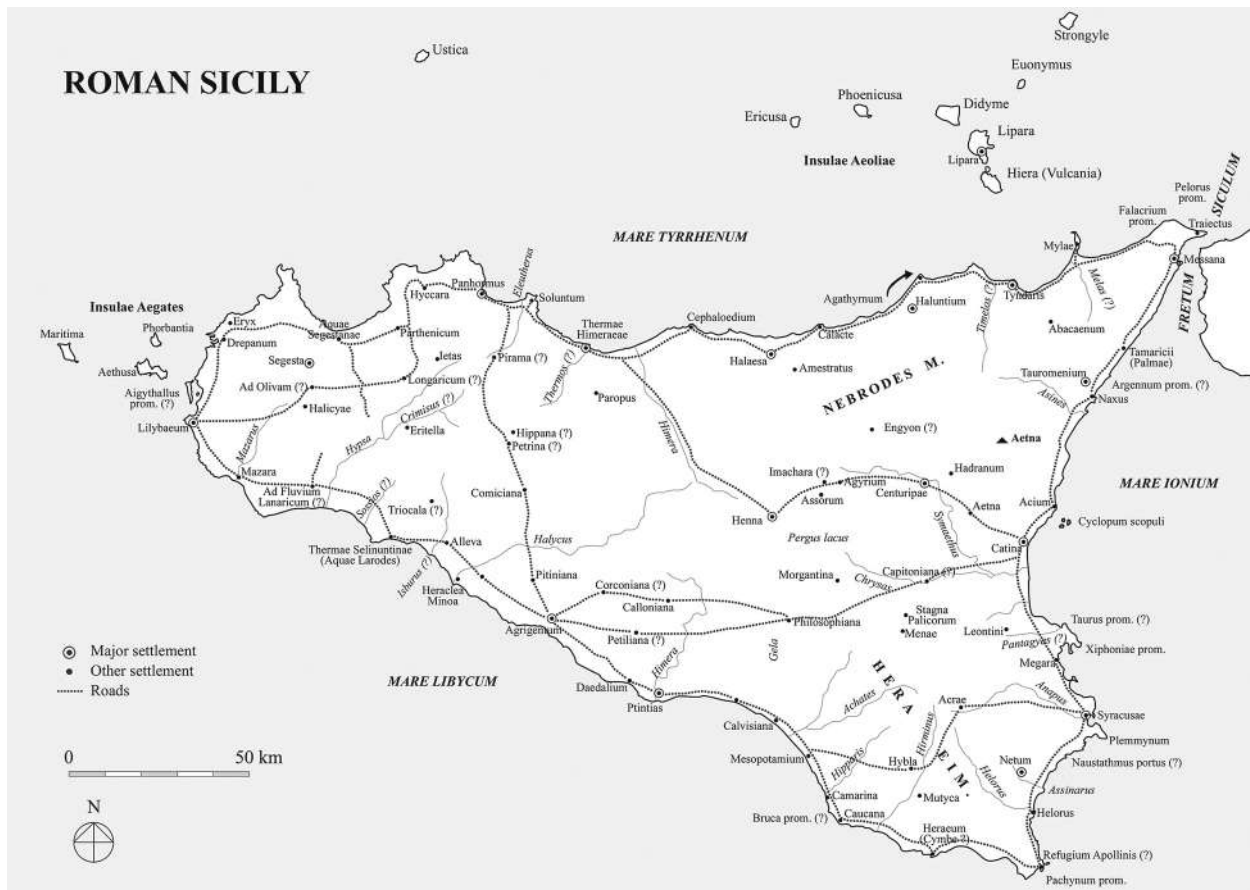


Fig 6. Road system of Roman Sicily. Map redrawn after Wilson, *Sicily under the Roman Empire*, 10, fig. 8.

territories. In Sardinia, inland routes had a north–south orientation, while in Sicily they had more of an east–west direction. Orography certainly played a role in determining the shape of communications, but this was by no means the sole factor. The historical trajectories of human mobility and, to some extent, the attraction that the most important towns exercised over inland settlements influenced the direction of Sicilian and Sardinian major routes. This is evident in Sardinia where the south–north grid followed the most important trend of mobility from Africa toward the island and up to Corsica and Tuscany or Gaul. This axis was the major route followed by human settlement on the island after the Phoenician-Punic age.²⁰ The same can

be said for Sicily, where in antiquity the major inland routes linked Syracuse and Catania, on the eastern coast, with Agrigento and Palermo.²¹ Crete displayed the same phenomenon, in which the system of roads during the Roman age seems to radiate from the capital city, Gortyn, both eastwards and westwards (fig. 7).²² But unlike Sardinia and Sicily, Crete was characterized by the presence of a tightly woven fabric of towns even

20 The best overview of the road system in Roman and late antique Sardinia is A. Mastino, *Storia della Sardegna antica* (Nuoro, 2005), 333–92; see also P. G. Spanu, *La Sardegna bizantina tra VI e VII secolo*, *Mediterraneo tardoantico e medievale: Scavi e ricerche* 12 (Oristano,

1998), 121–28; idem, “La viabilità e gli insediamenti rurali,” in *Ai confini dell’impero: Storia, arte e archeologia della Sardegna bizantina*, ed. P. Corrias and S. Cosentino (Cagliari, 2002), 115–25, at 115–17.

21 On the Sicilian road system as documented in the *Itinerarium Antonini* and *Tabula Peutingeriana*, see G. Uggeri, *La viabilità della Sicilia romana*, *Rivista di Topografia Antica*, supp. 2 (Galatina, 2004), 36–44.

22 *Römische Reisewege* (n. 16), maps 197, 610; see also the important article by M. Pazarli, E. Livieratos, and C. Boutoura, “Road Network of Crete in Tabula Peutingeriana,” *e-Perimetron* 2.4 (2007): 245–60, http://www.e-perimetron.org/Vol_2_4/Vol2_4.htm.



Fig. 7. Road system of Roman Crete and late antique episcopates. Map by Claudia Lamanna.

in its inland areas, such as Eleutherna, Sybrita, Lappa, or Gortyn, which was the legacy of its extremely ancient urban civilization. It is difficult to assess to what extent the network of communications that developed in late antiquity continued to function in the early Middle Ages due to lack of information. However, we may presume that it must have continued to exist in a reduced level of efficiency, even if some sections of the major roads might have been abandoned. The geography of episcopal sees was not upset on any of these islands in the transition from the fifth to the seventh century. As far as we know, Sardinian, Sicilian, and Cretan bishoprics of the late seventh century were unaltered and were located in the same places as those of the fifth century. Almost all episcopates in Sardinia (Carales; Turrus Libisonis; Fausania; Senafer, probably to be identified with Cornus; Tharros; Forum Traiani; Sulcis) (see fig. 5) and Sicily (Lilybaeum, Carini, Palermo, Termini, Tindari, Messina, Taormina, Catania, Lentini, Syracuse, Agrigento, Triocala) (fig. 8) were established on coastal towns with the sole exception of the Sardinian see of Forum Traiani/Fordongianus.²³ Crete also had epis-

23 Bishoprics in Sardinia between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages: R. Turtas, *Storia della chiesa in Sardegna: Dalle origini al Duemila* (Cagliari, 1999), 71–72; In regard to Sicily, see V. Prigent, “L’évolution du réseau épiscopal sicilien (VIII^e–X^e siècle),” in *Les dynamiques de l’islamisation en Méditerranée centrale et en Sicile* (n. 9), 89–102.

copal sees in inland towns, such as Eleutherna, Sybrita, and Lappa (its other bishoprics in late antiquity were Gortyn, Knossos, Hierapetra, Chersonesos, Kydonia, Kissamos, and Kantanos) (see fig. 7). Transformations in the ecclesiastical structure of late antique origin only occurred in the eighth century.²⁴ In Crete, this was not fostered by a change in its road system, but by the new strategic importance of the northern coast for access to Constantinople. This led to the birth of Heraklion as an episcopal see.²⁵

The major shipping lanes of the Roman Mediterranean are described in two works, the *Stadiasmus ētoi periplous tēs megalēs thalassēs* (Σταδιασμός ἤτοι περίπλους τῆς μεγάλης θαλάσσης, or Distances in stadia, or Guide for navigation in the Mediterranean, referred to here as the *Stadiasmus*) and the *Itinerarium Maritimum*.²⁶

24 See D. Tsougarakis, *Byzantine Crete: From the 5th Century to the Venetian Conquest* (Athens, 1988), 198–208, 386–88.

25 S. Cosentino, “From Gortyn to Heraklion? A Note on Cretan Urbanism during the 8th Century,” *Byzantina Symmeikta* 29 (2019): 73–89, in which, among other things, there is a discussion (at 81–84) of the important article by G. Kiourtzian, “L’incident de Knossos (fin Septembre/début Octobre 610),” *TM* 17 (2013): 173–96.

26 *Stadiasmus: Stadiasmus sive periplus maris magni*, in *GGM* 1:427–514; A. Bauer and D. Helm, eds., *Hippolytus Werke*, vol. 4, *Die Chronik*, *GCS* 46 (Leipzig, 1929), 95–139. The work has been transmitted to us by one manuscript only, the *Matritensis*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, 4071, compiled in Constantinople during the

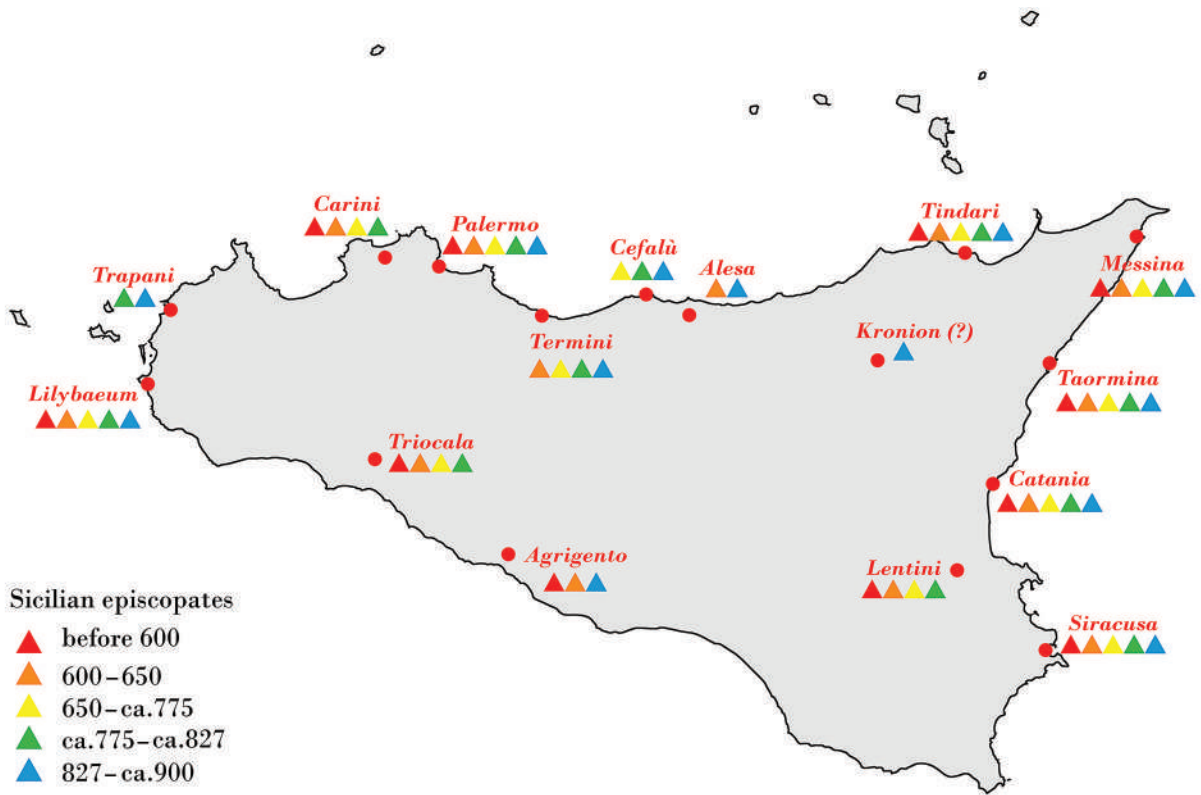


Fig. 8. Sicilian episcopates in the early and middle Byzantine period. Map redrawn after Prigent, “L'évolution du réseau épiscopal sicilien,” 90, fig. 1.

The former is a nautical text with more similarities to modern portolans than any other work handed down to us from Graeco-Roman antiquity. It is the work of an anonymous author, presenting a combination of at least four *periploi* that were assembled under the reign of Augustus at the latest, although its preface might have been written in the third century or later (fig. 9).²⁷ It is

tenth century; it preserves a *Chronographia syntomos* (wrongly identified with that by Patriarch Nicephorus) as well as a miscellany of materials attributed to Hippolytus, including the *Stadiasmus*. On the manuscript, see I. Pérez Martín, “Chronography and Geography in Tenth-Century Constantinople: The Manuscript of the *Stadiasmus* (Madrid, BN, Mss/4701),” *Geographia Antiqua* 25 (2016): 79–97. For the *Itinerarium Maritimum*, see *Itineraria Romana*, vol. 1 (n. 15), 76–85.

27 On the *Stadiasmus*, among the latest contributions, see G. Uggeri, “Portolani romani e carte nautiche: Problemi e incognite,” in *Porti, approdi e linee di rotta nel Mediterraneo antico*, ed. G. Laudizi and C. Marangio (Galatina, 1998), 31–78; D. Marcotte, ed., *Géographes Grecs*, vol. 1, *Ps.-Scymnos: Circuit de la terre* (Paris, 2000), 49–53; S. Medas, *De Rebus Nauticis: L'arte della navigazione nel mondo antico* (Rome, 2004), 114–27; J. Desanges, “La documentation africaine du

divided into two different sections: the first is a description of the African shores from Alexandria to Utica (near Carthage), while the second concerns the southern coasts of Asia Minor and also documents maritime itineraries around Cyprus and Crete as well as the distances between several Aegean islands or between the latter

Σταδιασμός τῆς μεγάλης θαλάσσης: Un problème de datation,” *Graeco-Arabica* 9–10 (2004): 105–20; P. Arnaud, “Notes sur le Stadiasme de la Grande Mer (1): La Lycie et la Carie,” *Geographia Antiqua* 18 (2009): 165–93, at 166–70; idem, “Notes sur le Stadiasme de la Grande Mer (2): Rose des vents, systèmes d’orientation et Quellenforschung,” *Geographia Antiqua* 10 (2010): 157–62; idem, “Playing Dominoes with the *Stadiasmus Maris Magni*. The Description of Syria: Sources, Compilation, Historical Topography,” in *Space, Landscapes and Settlements in Byzantium: Studies in the Historical Geography of the Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. A. Külzer and M. St. Popović (Vienna, 2017), 15–49, at 16–17; idem, “Un illustre inconnu: Le Stadiasme de la Grande Mer,” in *Académie des Inscriptions & Belles-Lettres: Comptes Rendus des Séances de l’Année 2017, Avril–Juin* (Paris, 2017): 701–27, at 714–20.



Fig. 9. Mediterranean winds. Map redrawn after Lionello et al., “Cyclones in the Mediterranean Region: Climatology and Effects on the Climate,” in *Mediterranean Climate Variability*, ed. P. Lionello, P. Malanotte-Rizzoli, and R. Boscolo, *Developments in Earth and Environmental Sciences* 4 (Amsterdam, 2006), 313–58, at 341, fig. 116.

and ports of Asia Minor.²⁸ The *Itinerarium Maritimum* has been transmitted in several manuscripts together with the above-mentioned *Itinerarium Antonini*, although the common authorship of the two texts is uncertain.²⁹ As for its date, several proposals have been suggested, among which the most convincing seems to be the period between Diocletian and Constantine, or just after the latter emperor.³⁰ It is possible that the section concerning the itinerary from Rome to Arles could date to a later period, perhaps the fifth or sixth century.³¹

In the *Itinerarium Maritimum*, Sicily, Sardinia, and the Balearic Islands play a pivotal role in connecting Italy, Greece, and Spain with North Africa (fig. 10). Following the same west to east orientation taken by our source, we may firstly mention the itinerary from Carthago Spartaria (Cartagena) to Ibizus (Ibiza) and

the Balears.³² Three sea routes departed from Caralis (Sardinia) to the Portus of Rome, Carthage, and Tabraca (Africa).³³ The same source also lists an itinerary from Sardinia to Tuscany which probably departed from Olbia, crossed the fretum Gallicum (the strait of Bonifacio between Sardinia and Corsica) and reached Populonia via the islands of Pianosa and Elba, or, as an alternative, via Cosa and Giglio Island.³⁴ The *Edictum de pretiis* documents four itineraries departing from Sardinia in the direction of Rome and Genoa, along with two other places whose names are corrupted in the text (possibly Gaul and Africa).³⁵ Ancient literature also shows an open-sea route from Carthago Nova (Cartagena), in the direction of the ports of Tharros and Sulcis, along which the Balearic Islands were an

28 First section: *Stadiasmus*, 297–317; second section: *Stadiasmus*, 318–55.

29 P. Arnaud, “Entre Antiquité et Moyen Âge: L’itinéraire Maritime d’Antonin,” in *Rotte e porti del Mediterraneo dopo la caduta dell’impero romano d’Occidente*, ed. L. De Maria and R. Turchetti (Soveria Mannelli, 2004), 3–19, at 4–5.

30 Calzolari, “Introduzione allo studio” (n. 17), 380–82.

31 Uggeri, “Portolani romani e carte nautiche” (n. 27), 53–57; Arnaud, “Entre Antiquité et Moyen Âge” (n. 29), 12–15.

32 *Itinerarium Maritimum* 511–12.2. From Sardinia to Africa, the Balears, and Rome, see also P. Arnaud, *Les routes de la navigation antique: Itinéraires en Méditerranée* (Paris, 2005), 158–60.

33 Respectively *Itinerarium Maritimum* 494.3–4, 495.4–6.

34 *Itinerarium Maritimum* 513.4–514.2.

35 *Edictum de pretiis* 35, 74–78 (M. Giaccherio, *Edictum Diocletiani et collegarum de pretiis rerum venalium*, 2 vols. [Genoa, 1974], 1:224); Giaccherio herself suggests that the other two places were Gaul and Africa in “Sardinia ditissima et valde splendidissima,” *Sandalion* 5 (1982): 223–32, at 230.

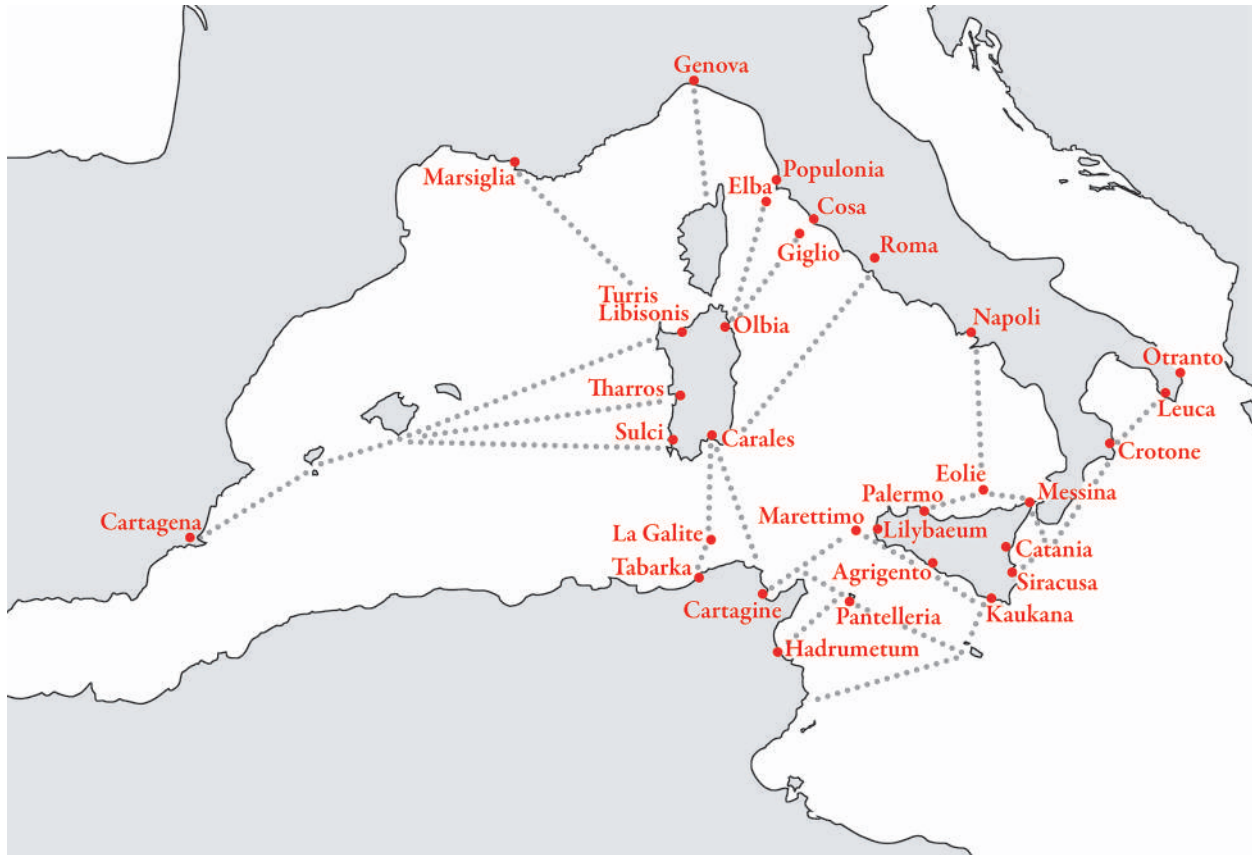


Fig. 10. Sardinian and Sicilian maritime routes. Map by Claudia Lamanna.

important stopover.³⁶ This route must have remained operative during late antiquity and the Middle Ages. As far as Sicily is concerned, the *Itinerarium Maritimum* documents the existence of three major shipping lanes connecting the island with Greece, Italy, and Africa. The first departed from Naupaktos and reached Messina, after calling at Nicopolis, Butrint, Valona, Otranto, Leuca, and Crotona.³⁷ The second started from Terracina and arrived in Messina, stopping over in Miseno, Pozzuoli, and the island of Stromboli.³⁸ The third itinerary took a southern route connecting Syracuse, Pachinus, Agrigento, Lilybaeum, the island

of Marettimo, Egimurus (the present-day island of Zembra, Tunisia), and Carthage. Moreover, three itineraries departed from Lilybaeum in the direction of North Africa, with an open-sea route directly to Carthage or indirectly via Pantelleria or Marettimo.³⁹ Malta was connected with Clipea (present-day Kelibya) in Tunisia.⁴⁰

As we have already said, the second section of the *Stadiasmus* regards the southern coasts of Asia Minor, and also preserves the *periploi* of Cyprus and Crete.⁴¹ From this text it can be inferred that one of the most important sea routes to reach Crete was from Rhodes

36 See A. Mastino and R. Zucca, "La Sardegna nelle rotte mediterranee di età romana," in *Idea e realtà del viaggio: Il viaggio nel mondo antico*, ed. G. Camassa and S. Fasce (Genoa, 1991), 216–17.

37 *Itinerarium Maritimum* 488.1–91.1. For routes from Sicily to Africa, see also Arnaud, *Le routes de la navigation antique* (n. 32), 160–61.

38 *Itinerarium Maritimum* 512.1–16.7.

39 Lilybaeum to Carthage, direct route: *Itinerarium Maritimum* 494.1; indirect route via Pantelleria: *Itinerarium Maritimum* 517.6–7; indirect route via Marettimo: *Itinerarium Maritimum* 492.9–14, 493.1–3, 493.4–5 (to Libya).

40 *Itinerarium Maritimum* 518.1–2. See also Arnaud, *Le routes de la navigation antique* (n. 32), 163–64.

41 *Stadiasmus* 154–355. On ancient routes in the eastern Mediterranean, see in general Arnaud, *Le routes de la navigation antique*, 207–30.



Fig. 11. Cretan maritime routes. Map by Claudia Lamanna.

via Karpathos (fig. 11).⁴² This itinerary connected Crete with the pathway of the *embolē*, the annual shipping of grain from Egypt to Constantinople.⁴³ Gortyn, the Cretan capital city, was served by three harbors in Roman times: Matala, Lasaia, and Lebena. It is likely that an open-sea route departed from these ports—especially from Matala—in the direction of Cyrenaica, to Apollonia and Ptolemais. No late antique source preserves evidence concerning a precise route from the Peloponnese to Crete. We may hypothesize that

42 *Stadiasmus* 297–320 (for Cyprus), 318–55 (for Crete); Arnaud, *Le routes de la navigation antique* (n. 32), 217. This route is re-echoed in one of the first examples of medieval portolans, namely, the *Liber de existencia riveriarum*, drafted in Pisa toward the end of the twelfth century: see P. Gautier Dalché, *Carte marine et portolan au XII^e siècle: Le Liber de existencia riveriarum et forma maris nostri Mediterranei*, Collection de l'École française de Rome 203 (Rome, 1995), 134.

43 C. Bakirtzis, "The Role of Cyprus in the Grain Supply of Constantinople in the Early Christian Period," in *Cyprus and the Sea*, ed. V. Karageorghis and D. Michailides (Nicosia, 1995), 247–52.

the most popular itinerary was from the northwestern ports of Crete to Kythira (Cerigus) and from there to Methone. With regard to the Aegean Islands, the *De cerimoniis* has transmitted a *stadiodromikon* (a journey calculated in miles), which was followed by the fleet led by the *cubicularius* Constantine Gongylos against Crete in 949. It provides a detailed maritime route between Constantinople and Crete (fig. 12): from Constantinople to Herakleia; from Herakleia to Prokonnesos; from Prokonnesos to Abydos; from Abydos to Ta Peukia; from Ta Peukia to Tenedos; from Tenedos to Mitylene; from Mitylene to Chios; from Chios to Samos; from Samos to Phournoi; from Phournoi to Naxios; from Naxios to Ios; from Ios to Thera and Therasia; from Thera and Therasia to Ta Christiana; from Ta Christiana to Dia; and from Dia to Crete.⁴⁴ In evaluating the logic of such an itinerary,

44 The *stadiodromikon* can be read in Constantinus Porphyrogenitus's *De ceremoniis aulae byzantinae*: see G. Dagron and B. Flusin, eds.,



Fig. 12.
Stadiodromikon of
Constantine
Porphyrogenitus. Map
by Claudia Lamanna.

one has to take into account that many stops were necessary for supplying military troops with food and water. Trading routes could have followed different paths with fewer stops.⁴⁵ For example, after sailing directly to Crete

Constantin VII Porphyrogénète: Le livre des cérémonies, CFHB 52, 5 vols. (Paris, 2020), 3:341; J. J. Reiske, ed., *Constantini Porphyrogeniti Imperatoris De ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae libri duo* (Bonn, 1829–1830), 678. For commentary, see G. Huxley, “A Porphyrogenitan Portulan,” *GRBS* 17 (1976): 295–300; J. H. Pryor, “The *Stadiodromikon* of the *De Cerimoniis* of Constantine VII, Byzantine Warships, and the Cretan Expedition of 949,” in *The Greek Islands and the Sea*, ed. J. Chrysostomides, C. Dendrinos, and J. Harris (London, 2004), 77–108.

⁴⁵ On maritime routes in the eastern Mediterranean from the seventh to the tenth century, see Malamut, *Les îles de l’empire byzantin* (n. 8), 536–42; see also M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, AD 300–900* (Cambridge, 2001), 852–972; A. Avramea, “Land and Sea Communications, Fourth–Fifteenth Century,” in *The Economic History of Byzantium*, ed. A. E. Laiou, 3 vols. (Washington, DC, 2002), 1:77–88; E. Kislinger, “Verkehrsrouten zur See im byzantinische Raum,” in *Handelsgüter*

from Alexandria in 685, the pilgrim Adomnan continued his journey in the direction of Constantinople.⁴⁶ However, he followed a more direct route than that documented in the *Stadiodromikon* because from Crete he went to Naxos, then to Tenedos, and from there he sailed directly to the imperial city.

Port cities and maritime villages mentioned in the *Stadiasmus* and the *Itinerarium Maritimum* were not the only places involved in sea communications. There were a huge number of landing places, anchoring and mooring points, that were used in cabotage navigation. It is necessary to emphasize a difference between Crete, Sicily, and Sardinia as far as the interplay between seaports, land communications, and settlements is concerned. Sardinia was almost devoid

und Verkehrswege. *Aspekte der Warenversorgung im östlichen Mittelmeerraum (4. bis 15. Jahrhundert)*, DenkWien 388 (Vienna, 2010), 149–74.

⁴⁶ Malamut, *Les îles de l’empire byzantin* (n. 8), 539.



Fig. 13.
Philosophiana and Kaukana.
Map by Claudia Lamanna.

of important port cities on its eastern shore, except Olbia, due to the unique physical conformation of its eastern coast, which is high and rocky for long tracts and unsuitable for major anchoring points.⁴⁷ In Sicily, international seaports were mostly distributed along its southern and eastern seaboard, while Crete seems to have had a more balanced presence of landing places all along its coasts. Another difference between the islands lies in the quality of their urbanism. Sardinia was characterized by few small cities, such as Cagliari, Nora (until the fifth century), Tharros, Porto Torres (Turrus Libisonis), and Olbia.⁴⁸ Sicily in late antiquity only had two very important urban centers, Catania and Syracuse, followed by Agrigento and Palermo.⁴⁹ Crete

had a large and important city, Gortyn (which in the second century CE covered about 400 hectares), and several towns spread across its territory.⁵⁰ At least in Sicily, however, there were a good number of large and densely populated rural settlements scattered throughout the region, such as Sofiana/Philosophiana and Kaukana, which have undergone archaeological investigation (fig. 13).⁵¹ Although less densely inhabited,

47 Olbia: R. D’Oriano, G. Pietra, and E. Riccardi, “Nuovi dati sull’attività portuale di Olbia tra VI e XI sec. d. C.,” in *Forme e caratteri della presenza bizantina nel Mediterraneo occidentale: La Sardegna (secoli VI–XI)*, ed. P. Corrias (Oristano, 2012), 129–62.

48 For an overview of Sardinian urbanism in late antiquity and early Byzantium, see P. G. Spanu, *La Sardegna bizantina tra VI e VII* (n. 20), 17–119; idem, “Iterum est insula quae dicitur Sardinia, in qua plurimas fuisse civitates legimus (Ravennatis Anonymi Cosmographia 5, 26): Note sulle città sarde tra la tarda antichità e l’alto medioevo,” in *Le città italiane tra la tarda antichità e l’alto medioevo*, ed. A. Augenti (Florence, 2006), 589–612; R. Martorelli, “Le città in Sardegna tra tarda antichità e altomedioevo,” in *La Sardegna romana e altomedievale*, ed. S. Angiolillo, R. Martorelli, M. Giuman, A. M. Corda, and D. Artizzu (Sassari, 2017), 265–78.

49 See D. Asheri, “Le città della Sicilia fra il III e IV secolo,” *Kokalos* 28–29 (1982–1983): 461–76; E. Caliri, “Città e campagna nella Sicilia tardoantica: *Massa fundorum* ed istituto civico,” *Mediterraneo antico* 9.1

(2006): 51–69; L. Arcifa, “Trasformazioni urbane nell’altomedioevo siciliano: Uno status quaestionis,” in *Paesaggi urbani tardoantichi: Casi a confronto*, ed. M. C. Parello and M. S. Rizzo (Bari, 2016), 31–40; eadem, “Per un nuovo approccio allo studio delle città siciliane nell’altomedioevo: Catania e Siracusa tra VIII e IX secolo,” in *Silenziöse rivoluzioni: La Sicilia dalla tarda antichità al primo medioevo* (n. 9), 415–39; Arcifa and Sgarlata, *From Polis to Madina* (n. 9).

50 I. F. Sanders, *Roman Crete: An Archaeological Survey and Gazetteer of Late Hellenistic, Roman and Early Byzantine Crete* (Warminster, 1982), 16–31; C. Tsigonaki, “Les villes crétoises aux VII^e et VIII^e siècles: L’apport des recherches archéologiques à Eleutherna,” *ASAtene* 85 (2007): 263–97; eadem, “Πόλεων ἀνεπίστοις μεταβολαῖς: Ιστορικές και αρχαιολογικές μαρτυρίες από την Γόρτυνα και την Ελεούθερνα της Κρήτης,” in *Οι βυζαντινές πόλεις, 8ος–15ος αιώνας: Προοπτικές της έρευνας και νέες ερμηνευτικές προσεγγίσεις*, ed. T. Kiousopoulou (Rethymno, 2012), 73–100.

51 Kaukana: P. Pelagatti and G. Di Stefano, *Kaukana: Il chorio bizantino* (Palermo, 1999); E. Kislinger, “Archeologia e storia: Ricostruire insieme la Sicilia bizantina,” in *Byzantino-Sicula* 4 (Palermo, 2002), 89–104, at 97–98, contests the identification of Kaukana with the site of Punta Secca/Capo Scalambri, proposing as an alternative the lagoon of Vendicari; but see also the reply by G. Di Stefano, “Il villaggio bizantino di Kaukana: Spazi urbani, monumenti pubblici ed edilizia privata,” in *Byzantino-Sicula* 4 (Palermo,

Sardinia also offers archaeological examples of villages that seem to function as economic units with a certain level of complexity and prosperity. One of these was the coastal settlement of Santa Filitica of Sorso, between Porto Torres and Castelsardo;⁵² another can perhaps be recognized in the archaeological remains and artifacts uncovered by archaeologists between the churches of Saint George and San Salvatore on the Sinis Peninsula, an area located west of Oristano (fig. 14).⁵³ As far as I know, no large villages have been identified in Crete so far, even though a minor coastal settlement like Priniatikos Pyrgos (fig. 15), located on a small limestone headland on the southwestern corner of the Gulf of Mirabello, or the small islet of Pseira—always in the Gulf of Mirabello—have provided us with important assemblages in stratigraphic sequences dating back to late antiquity and the early Byzantine period; at Loutros, located in the same coastal area in the northeastern part of Crete, two baths of the middle



Fig. 14. Tharros and S. Filitica di Sorso. Map by Claudia Lamanna.

Byzantine period can probably be referred to a rural settlement, which has not yet been investigated.⁵⁴ The

2002), 173–90. Sofiana (Philosophiana): G. F. La Torre, “Mazzarino (CL)—Contrada Sofiana: Scavi 1988–90,” *Kokalos* 39–40 (1993–1994): 765–70; idem, “Gela sive Philosophianis (It. Antonini, 88, 2): Contributo per la storia di un centro interno della Sicilia romana,” *Quaderni dell’Istituto di Archeologia della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell’Università di Messina* 9 (1994): 99–139; R. M. Bonacasa Carra, “Sofiana,” in *La Sicilia centro-meridionale tra il II e il VI sec. d. C.*, ed. R. M. Bonacasa Carra and R. Panvini (Caltanissetta, 2002), 105–13 (in the same volume, see also the contributions by M. Lauricella, “I materiali,” 117–218; S. Garraffo, “Il tesoretto di Sofiana,” 221–23; and M. Denaro, “La necropoli orientale—settore settentrionale,” 227–35); K. Bowes, M. Ghisleni, F. G. La Torre, and E. Vaccaro, “Preliminary Report on Sofiana/*mansio Philosophiana* in the Territory of Piazza Armerina,” *JRA* 24 (2011): 423–49; E. Vaccaro, “Re-evaluating a Forgotten Town Using Intra-site Surveys and the GIS Analysis of Surface Ceramics: Philosophiana-Sofiana (Sicily) in the Longue Durée,” in *Archaeological Survey and the City*, ed. P. Johnson and M. Millett (Oxford, 2013), 107–45; idem, “Sicily in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries AD: A Case of Persisting Economic Complexity?,” *Al-Masāq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 25.1 (2013): 34–69; E. Vaccaro et al., “La produzione ceramica a Philosophiana (Sicilia centrale) nella media età bizantina: Metodi di indagine ed implicazioni economiche,” *Archeologia Medievale* 42 (2015): 53–91.

52 D. Rovina, “Sorso: L’insediamento rurale di Santa Filitica,” in *Ai confini dell’impero* (n. 20), 183–86; D. Rovina, ed., *Santa Filitica di Sorso: Dalla villa romana al villaggio bizantino* (Viterbo, 2003); E. Garau, D. Rovina, L. Sanna, V. Testone, and V. Longo, “Il sito tardo romano-altomedievale di Santa Filitica (Sorso-SS): Nuove ricerche,” in *Isole e terraferma nel primo cristianesimo* (n. 9), 2:951–60.

53 See B. Panico, P. G. Spanu, and R. Zucca, “Ricerche archeologiche nell’ager Tharrens: Gli insediamenti tardoantichi,” in *Isole e terraferma nel primo cristianesimo* (n. 9), 1:457–64.

54 B. J. Hayden and M. Tsiopoulou, “The Priniatikos Pyrgos Project: Preliminary Report on the Rescue Excavation of 2005–2006,” *Hesperia* 81.4 (2012): 507–84, at 556–60; V. Klontza-Jaklova, “The Byzantine Sequences at Priniatikos Pyrgos: Preliminary Observations on Ceramic Chronology and Architectural Phasing,” in *A Cretan Landscape through Time: Priniatikos Pyrgos and Environs*, ed. B. P. C. Molloy and C. N. Duckworth, BAR International Series 2634 (Oxford, 2014), 135–42; E. Tzavella, “Πρινατικός Πύργος, ένα λιμάνι της Ανατολικής Κρήτης. Οι μαρτυρίες των αμφορέων της μεταβατικής περιόδου (7ος–9ος αι.): Μια πρώτη προσέγγιση,” in *Online Proceedings of the 12th International Congress of Cretan Studies*, 1–20, accessed 8 August 2020, <https://12iccs.proceedings.gr/el/proceedings/category/38/33/765>. The small settlement found on Pseira island has been interpreted as a monastery, abandoned around the ninth century; see J. Albani, “Das Kloster auf Pseira: Die Architektur,” in *Akten des XII.*

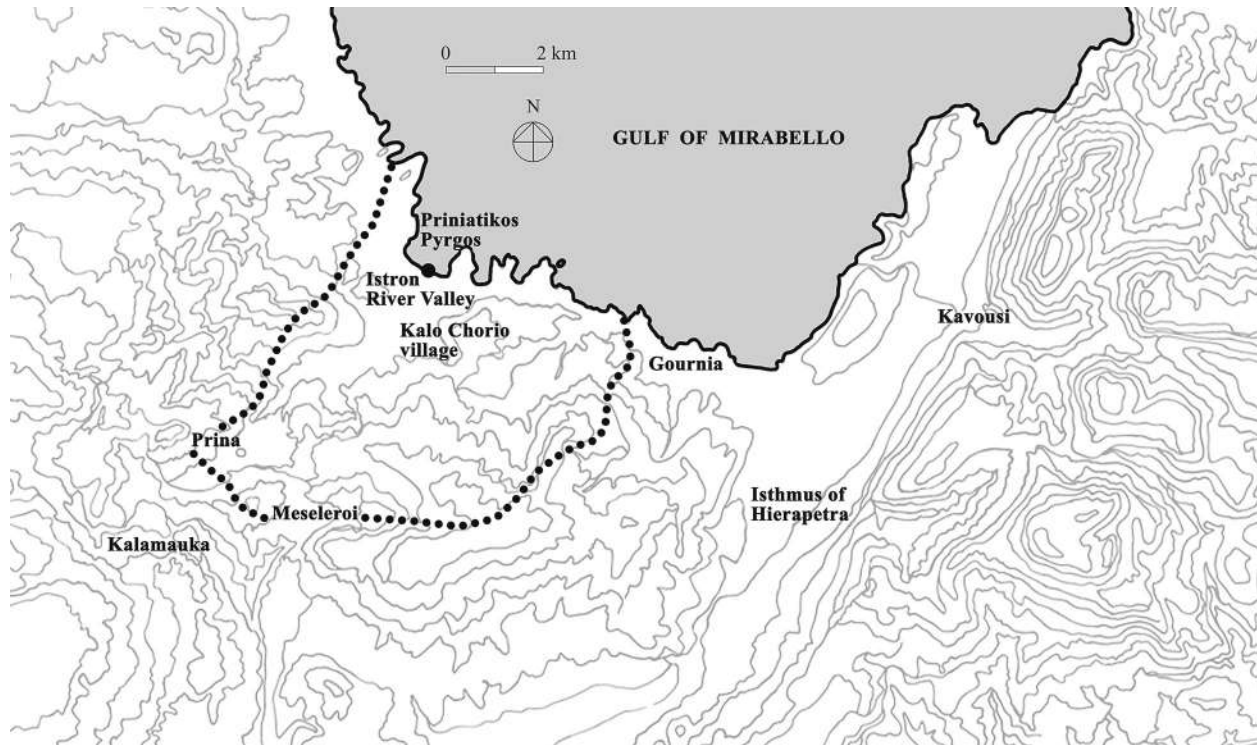


Fig. 15. Priniatikos Pyrgos. Map redrawn after Sanders, *Roman Crete*, 12, fig. 4.

Messara Plain was not simply the area in which Gortyn developed from the Graeco-Hellenistic age onwards; it was also a very densely inhabited region, though we do not yet know the shape of its rural organization. The living environment in Sicily and Crete, and to a lesser extent Sardinia, too, therefore included a plurality of

forms of communities, cities, small towns, and large villages. This statement may seem overly general but the dialectic between cities and large rural villages especially—a phenomenon not so widespread in other regional realities of the empire—will give the cycle of production, distribution, and demand a very peculiar character, as we will see later.

Internationalen Kongresses für Christliche Archäologie, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband 20, 2 vols. (Münster, 1995), 1:466–71; N. Poulou, “Le monastère byzantin à Pseira-Crète: La céramique,” in *Akten des XII. Internationalen Kongress für Christliche Archäologie* 2: 1119–31; N. Poulou-Papadimitriou and E. Nodarou, “La céramique protobyzantine de Pseira: La production locale et les importations, études typologique et pétrographique,” in *LRCW*, vol. 2, *Late Roman Coarse Wares, Cooking Wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean: Archaeology and Archaeometry*, ed. M. Bonifay and J.-C. Tréglia, BAR International Series 1662, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2007), 2:755–761. On the site of Loutros: N. Poulou and A. Tantsis, “From Town to Countryside: Middle-Byzantine Bath-houses in Eastern Crete and Their Changing Functions,” *Land* 7 (2018): 107, <https://doi.org/10.3390/land7030107>. For a small, rural settlement in the vicinity of ancient Phaistos (Messara Plain), the so-called Chalara farm, which developed probably between the seventh and the early ninth centuries, see V. La Rosa and E. Portale, “Per Festòs di età romana e protobizantina,” in *Creta romana e protobizantina*, ed. M. Livadiotti and I. Simiakaki, 3 vols. (Padua, 2004), 1:447–514.

Territorial Organization, Sixth to Eighth Century

Settlements and territorial organization on Sardinia, Sicily, and Crete were not characterized by precarious contingencies or social traumas from the fifth until the second half of the seventh century. This is especially true in comparison with the African, Balkan, and Anatolian provinces of the empire. It is not by chance, I believe, that all three major islands of the Mediterranean preserved traces of curial institutions, or a terminology connected to them, until the end of late antiquity or even later. As a matter of fact, individuals bearing curial titles are attested between the end of the sixth and the seventh centuries in Cagliari, Syracuse, Tindari, and

Gortyn.⁵⁵ In the case of Syracuse, the source consists of the seal of a certain Sergios, who styles himself as *πατήρ πόλεως Συρακούσης*. It has been dated by its editor, Vitalien Laurent, to the eighth century.⁵⁶ Although this obviously does not imply that at the beginning of the eighth century the curia was still functioning in Syracuse, it is nevertheless significant of a conservatism in institutional terminology. Such a circumstance does not reflect regional “isolation,” but bears testimony to a way of ruling local communities in a condition of social stability. The representatives of imperial power are documented continuously on the major Mediterranean islands during the sixth and seventh centuries, proving that Constantinople paid attention to their political and economic situation. This statement may seem obvious, but especially in the seventh century, it takes on a specific value in view of the progressive difficulties of the Constantinopolitan government in controlling the Anatolian and Balkan provinces. On the other hand, the imperial financial administration, as we shall see, had important interests at least on Sardinia and Sicily. Another reason for the social stability of the islands was the absence of enduring situations of conflict as well as the scarce militarization of their territories and a very limited presence of troops. In this respect, one difference between Sardinia on the one hand, and Sicily and Crete on the other, needs to be emphasized. In the former, the constitution issued by Justinian in 534 aimed to reconstruct the African praetorian prefecture, establishing the presence of a *praeses* in Cagliari and a military dux that scholars variously locate in Forum Traiani (present-day Fordongianus) and Cagliari.⁵⁷

55 See S. Cosentino, “Istituzioni curiali e amministrazione della città nell’Italia ostrogota e bizantina,” *AntTard* 26 (2018): 241–54, at 249–50; E. Caliri, “Frammenti di vita cittadina nella Sicilia di VI secolo,” *Mediterraneo antico* 23.1–2 (2020): 189–212. On curial institutions in the East, see F. Haarer, “Developments in the Governance of Late Antique Cities,” in *Governare e riformare l’impero al momento della sua divisione: Oriente, Occidente, Illirico*, ed. U. Roberto and C. Mecella, Collection de l’École française de Rome 507 (Rome, 2016), 125–57.

56 V. Laurent, “Une source peu étudiée de l’histoire de la Sicile au haut Moyen-Âge: La sigillographie byzantine,” in *Byzantino-Sicula*, vol. 1 (Palermo, 1966), 22–55, at 46, no. 3.

57 Justinianic constitution: *CJ* 1.27.1.12. *Dux* established at Fordongianus: P. G. Spanu, “Procopius’ *Barbarikinoi* and Gregory the Great’s *Barbaricini*: Mauri and Sardinians in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries A.D.,” in *Change and Resilience* (n. 9), 51–85, at 59–60 (with former bibliography); for an opposing argument, see P. B. Serra, “I *Barbaricini* di Gregorio Magno,” in *Per longa maris intervalla*:

Fortifications dating back to the Justinianic age have been identified in Sant’Antioco, Neapolis, Porto Torres, and Cagliari. The reasons for their construction have been attributed to the need to control possible incursions by the *Barbarikinoi* against the Romanized areas of the island.⁵⁸

Gregorio Magno e l’Occidente mediterraneo fra tardoantico e altomedioevo, ed. L. Casula, G. Mele, and A. Piras (Cagliari, 2006), 289–361, at 300–302.

58 We are told by Procopius in the *Bellum Vandalicum* that the Vandals had transferred a large group of rebellious Mauri to Sardinia and settled them in the mountains near Cagliari (Proc. *De bello vandalico* 2.13.44). This group of no less than 3,000 individuals proved to be very aggressive over time and began raiding the surrounding areas of the places where they had settled. The generic nature of Procopius’s description of the location in which they were accommodated—“in the mountains near Caranalis” (τὰ ὄρη κατάλαμβάνουσιν, ἢ Καρανάλεως ἐγγύς πού ἐστι), namely Cagliari—does not allow any certain conclusion about the location (see Proc. *De bello vandalico* 2.13.45–46). Several scholars agree in thinking that their settlement area was the territory of Barigadu, east of Fordongianus, an area very close to present-day Barbagia (see fig. 14): see R. Zucca, *Neoneli-Leunelli: Dalla civitas Barbariae all’età contemporanea* (Nuoro, 2003), 65; A. Ibba, “I Vandali in Sardegna,” in *Lingua et ingenium: Studi su Fulgenzio di Ruspe e il suo contesto*, ed. A. Piras (Ortacesus, 2010), 385–426, at 405, n. 53 (with bibliography); Spanu, “Procopius’ *Barbarikinoi*” (n. 9), 59–60. Personally, I would prefer to identify the zone of the Berber accommodation in the modern region of Gerrei, especially in the area around the village of Villasalto: on this point, see also Serra, “I *Barbaricini* di Gregorio Magno,” in *Per longa maris intervalla* (n. 57), 65. In 534 the African pretorian prefect and *magister militum* Salomon organized an expedition against them (Proc. *De bello vandalico* 2.14). We hear again about *Barbaricini* in the letters by Gregory the Great, from which we gather that before 594 some of their leaders had converted to Christianity, and a peace treaty had been reached between them and the empire around 594 (see *Ep.* 4.25, 4.27). I prefer to use P. Ewald and L. M. Hartmann’s edition (*Gregorii I Papae Registrum epistolarum*, MGH Ep. 1–2 [1887–1899]) to D. Norberg’s (*S. Gregorii Magni Registrum epistolarum*, CCL 140 [Turnhout, 1982]) because the commentary provided by Hartmann on the Gregorian letters is of great help to the reader. The so-called inscription of Donori, concerning taxes on the circulation of goods within the city district of Caralis, may have been drafted on the occasion of the peace concluded between the Byzantine authorities and the *Barbaricini*: see S. Cosentino, “Un tariffario di merci dell’età dell’imperatore Maurizio: Rileggendo l’iscrizione di Donori (Cagliari),” in *Ἀνατολή καὶ δύσις: Studi in memoria di Filippo Burgarella*, ed. G. Strano and C. Torre, Testi e Studi Bizantino-Neocellenici 21 (Rome, 2020), 109–18 (where a different text from that by J. Durliat, “Taxes sur l’entrée des marchandises dans la cité de Carales–Cagliari à l’époque byzantine, 582–602,” *DOP* 36 [1982]: 1–14, at 2–3, is proposed). Indeed, we are informed by the mentioned epigraph that the new regulation was certainly issued during the reign of Emperor Maurice. For recent commentaries on the inscription, see A. Ibba and A. Mastino, “La pastorizia nel Nord Africa e in Sardegna

While Sardinia experienced a certain degree of militarization already during the sixth century, Sicily and Crete suffered a different fate. In both, the militarization of the territory and the presence of sizeable military groups in the social fabric did not start before the late seventh century, or even later in Crete. Both the reasons for Constans II's expedition to Italy and his assassination in Syracuse have been debated by scholars, within a poor documentary framework that does not allow firm conclusions. While a discussion of the political, military, and even psychological aspects of the emperor's decision to move to Italy is beyond the scope of this article, we can at least attempt to highlight the economic context in which such a decision came about.⁵⁹ Firstly, whatever military situation Constans II left in the East,⁶⁰ he was moving from one geographical area, Anatolia, which was economically exhausted by sixty years of warfare, to another, Sicily, which was not. The siege of Benevento and the minor conflict with the Lombards should not suggest that the reconquest of the peninsula was one of Constans's targets. Admittedly, the emperor's presence in the West strengthened the military apparatuses of Italy, Sardinia, and Africa as a whole, as would become apparent after his assassination, when the troops stationed in these regions were among the forces that crushed the rebels. Sicily, in particular Syracuse, was where he was headed, probably with the aim, when the time was propitious, of going to Carthage and then attacking the Muslims. For the organization of a future expedition against the Arabs, Sicily was a perfect hinterland. In the seventh century,

the island had—along with Crete—a flourishing rural economy, as it had not been affected by the Lombard invasion. The incomes extracted by the Church of Ravenna from its Sicilian estates were comparable, even in that century, to those of a great landowner of late antiquity (31,000 solidi, plus 50,000 modii of wheat and an unspecified quantity of valuable vessels).⁶¹ In Syracuse, possibly already before the arrival of Constans II, a mint was active that minted both gold and bronze coins.⁶² Moreover, Sicily, as we have already seen, had a system of maritime communications that easily linked the island with Italy, North Africa, and the Aegean (and Constantinople, of course). In motivating Constans II's presence in Syracuse, the model of his grandfather, Heraclius, who had defeated the Persians by staying outside Constantinople for years and fighting them from a strategic position favorable to him, may have played a role.⁶³ His family's influence in targeting Africa from Sicily may also have been exerted by his mother Gregoria, who came from the African aristocracy. But Sicily, like Africa, was also of considerable economic importance to the imperial treasury, since its vast properties were located in these two regions. According to a figure highlighted by A. H. M. Jones and others, imperial lands at the beginning of the fifth century amounted to 18.5 percent of the province of Proconsularis and 15 percent of Byzacena.⁶⁴ It is unlikely that this percentage of landed property had decreased much in the seventh century, since the reconquest of Africa from the Vandals had resulted, as Procopius reports, in massive requisitions of land in

in età romana," in *Ex oppidis et mapalibus*, ed. A. Ibba (Ortacesus, 2012), 75–99, at 87–88; M. Muresu, *La moneta 'indicatore' dell'assetto insediativo della Sardegna bizantina (secoli VI–XI)* (Perugia, 2018), 311–14.

59 The best work on Constans II's Italian expedition remains that of P. Corsi, *La spedizione italiana di Costante II* (Bologna, 1983); see also D. Motta, "Politica dinastica e tensioni sociali nella Sicilia bizantina: Da Costante II a Costantino IV," *Mediterraneo antico* 1 (1998): 659–83; W. E. Kaegi, *Muslim Expansion and Byzantine Collapse in North Africa* (Cambridge, 2010), 166–95.

60 Constans II campaigned against the Slavs in 656–657 (see A. N. Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, vol. 3, 642–668, trans. H. T. Hionides [Amsterdam, 1975], 182–85) and in Transcaucasia in 660–661: as far as the latter campaign is concerned, while C. Zuckerman, "Learning from the Enemy and More: Studies in 'Dark Centuries' Byzantium," *Millennium* 2 (2005): 79–135, at 79, thinks it was successful, T. Greenwood, "A Corpus of Early Medieval Armenian Inscriptions," *DOP* 58 (2004): 27–91, at 73, no. 215, believes it was a failure.

61 See Andrea Agnellus, *Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis*, 111, in *MGH SS Langobardicarum et Italicarum*, ed. O. Holder Egger (Hannover, 1878), 350; ed. D. Deliyannis, *CCCM* 199 (Turnhout, 2006), 281–82.

62 At least, according to D. Castrizio, "La circolazione monetale nella Sicilia romea," in *La Sicile de Byzance à l'Islam* (n. 9), 77–94, at 87. But V. Prigent, "Mints, Coin Production and Circulation," in *A Companion to Byzantine Italy*, ed. S. Cosentino, Brill's Companions to the Byzantine World 8 (Leiden, 2021), 328–59, at 332, n. 17, thinks that the mint was relocated from Catania to Syracuse not before 693–94.

63 Kaegi, *Muslim Expansion and Byzantine Collapse* (n. 59), 171–74.

64 See *Cod. Theod.* 11.28, 13 (year 422) and the comment by A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, 3 vols. (Oxford 1964), 1:415–16; see also C. Lepellet, "Déclin ou stabilité de l'agriculture africaine au Bas-Empire? À propos d'une loi d'Honorius," *Antiquités Africaines* 1 (1967): 135–55 (reprinted in idem, *Aspects de l'Afrique romaine: Les cités, la vie rurale, le christianisme* [Bari, 2001], 217–32).

favor of the imperial crown.⁶⁵ Therefore, even after the death of the emperor, due to the confused events that followed,⁶⁶ the worsening situation in North Africa, and the threats against Sicily itself, Constantine IV and Justinian II could do nothing but confirm the presence of troops on the island.

It is impossible to establish the exact moment when the imperial government decided to constitute the new office of *stratēgos* in Sicily; but suitable dates appear to be either 694 or 698, namely the first or second capture of Carthage by the Muslims.⁶⁷ From an institutional point of view, the *stratēgia tēs Sikelias* is one of the first new regional commands that had no roots in the field armies of late antiquity (along with that of Hellas and the naval squadron of the Karabēsianoī). To what extent did this new office have an army of soldiers recruited in Sicily at its disposal? If I am not wrong, evidence does not point to any massive local recruitment. On the contrary, the available sources seem to suggest that the bulk of the Sicilian army in the eighth century consisted of regiments from Constantinople. Sigillography has demonstrated the presence of elite regiments on the island, such as the *basilikon Opsikion* (second half of the seventh century and later), *exkoubitoi*, *scholai*, and *Vigla*.⁶⁸ Some of these

regiments may have been quartered in the territory as a result of the coming of Constans II, but others certainly were not, as the later chronology of their seals shows. The increase in military forces across Sicilian territory inevitably led to the gradual major transformation of its rural and urban settlements. Unfortunately, archaeology has not yet been able to provide a clear picture of what happened in the course of the eighth century. Recent research tends to minimize early phenomena of “*incastellamento*” with an increase in settlements that moved onto hilltops (fig. 16).⁶⁹ Nevertheless, in some cases there are references to the construction of powerful fortified structures. This is the case, for instance, with Mount Kassar near Castronovo (in the midst of western Sicily), an enceinte that encloses an area of about ninety hectares within either its walls or natural defenses. The construction date has been suggested as somewhere between the late seventh and early eighth century.⁷⁰ Perhaps—but this is only my opinion—it was an *aplekton* conceived for collecting forces that came from the north and the east of the island to go southwest, namely toward the area of Sicily most exposed to an invasion from Africa. Sigillography in the eighth and ninth century documents military officials called *topotērētai* in Syracuse, Cefalù, Enna, Catania, and Tropea (a place which is in present-day Calabria, but in the eighth century depended on Sicily in administrative terms). It has been argued that this seems to imply the existence of urban garrisons.⁷¹

In Crete, archaeological investigations have indicated the existence of several sites that show

65 Proc. *De bello vandalico* 2.14.10.

66 According to V. Prigent, “La Sicile de Constant II: L’apport des sources sigillographiques,” in *La Sicile de Byzance à l’Islam* (n. 9), 157–85, at 175–85, and idem, “Des pères et des fils: Note de numismatique sicilienne pour servir à l’histoire du règne de Constantin IV,” in *Le saint, le moine et le paysan: Mélanges d’histoire offerts à Michel Kaplan*, ed. O. Delouis, S. Métivier, and P. Pagès (Paris, 2016), 589–616, at 594–97, there was actually not one, but two, rebellions: the first led by Mezezius, and a second led by his son John. This assumption is nuanced by W. E. Kaegi, “The Islamic Conquests and the Defense of Byzantine Africa: Reconsiderations on Campaigns, Conquests, and Contexts,” in *North Africa under Byzantium and Early Islam*, ed. S. T. Stevens and J. P. Conant (Washington, DC, 2016), 65–86, at 76, who while not denying the possibility that there may have been two rebellions, draws attention to another one of John’s seals (different from the one discussed by Prigent) produced before Mezezius’s insurrection.

67 According to N. Oikonomides, “Une liste arabe des stratèges byzantins du VII^e siècle et les origines du thème de Sicile,” *RSBN* 11 (1964): 121–30, the establishment of the *stratēgia* of Sicily took place between 687 and 695. Possibly its first stratēgos was a certain Salventios, documented by two Latin-Greek seals in which he is styled as *patricius* and as *patricius* and stratēgos: M. Nicheanian and V. Prigent, “Les stratèges de Sicile: De la naissance du thème au règne de Léon V,” *REB* 61 (2003): 97–141, at 98–99.

68 Evidence is quoted and analyzed by V. Prigent, “Byzantine Military Forces in Sicily: Some Sigillographic Evidence,” in *Byzantine and*

Rus’ Seals, ed. H. Ivakin, N. Khrapunov, and W. Seibt (Kyiv, 2015), 163–78.

69 See A. Molinari, “Sicily between the 5th and the 10th Century: Villae, Villages, Towns and Beyond: Stability, Expansion or Recession?,” in *The Insular System of the Early Byzantine Mediterranean* (n. 4), 97–114, at 105; eadem, “Fortified and Unfortified Settlements in Byzantine and Islamic Sicily: 6th to 11th Century,” in *Fortified Settlements in Early Medieval Europe: Defended Communities of the 8th–10th Centuries*, ed. N. Christie and H. Herold (Oxford, 2016), 320–32, at 324–27; Vaccaro, “Sicily in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries AD” (n. 51), 38–39.

70 Molinari, “Fortified and Unfortified Settlements in Byzantine and Islamic Sicily,” in *Fortified Settlements in Early Medieval Europe* (n. 69), 324–27; eadem, “Sicily from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages: Resilience and Disruption,” in *Change and Resilience* (n. 9), 87–110, at 93–100.

71 See V. Prigent, “Note sur les topotērētēs de cité en Italie méridionale durant les siècles obscurs,” in *SBS* 9, ed. J.-C. Cheynet and C. Sode (Munich, 2006), 145–59.

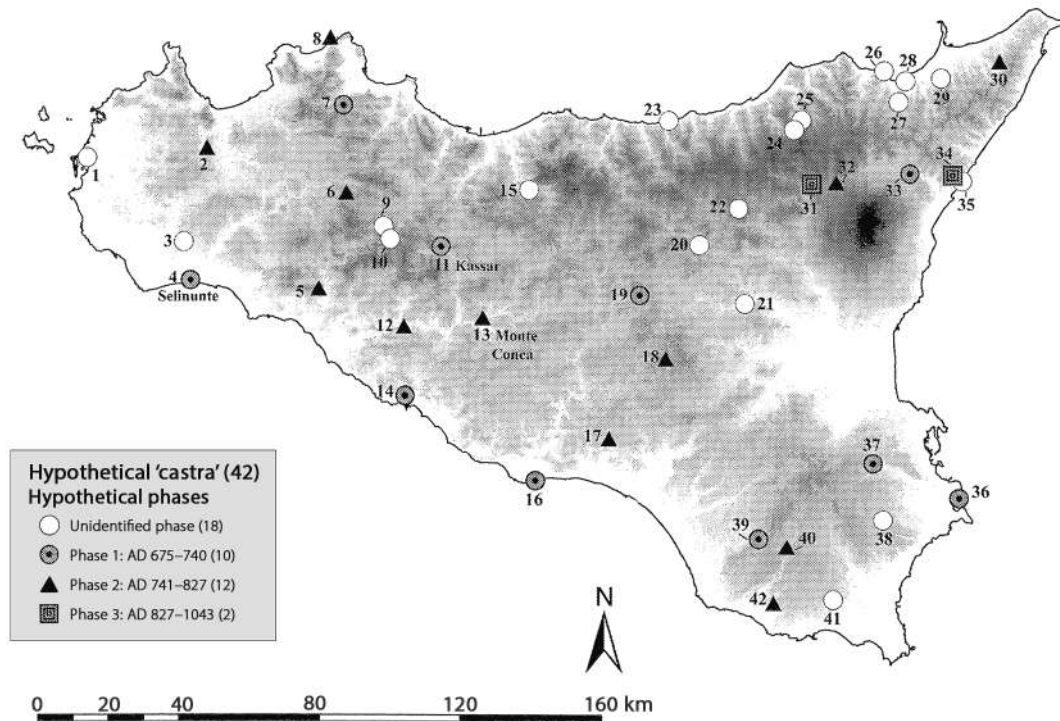


Fig. 16. Sicilian fortifications. Vaccaro, “Sicily in the Eighth and Ninth Century,” 37, fig. 1 (numbers refer to sites in Vaccaro’s study); courtesy of Emanuele Vaccaro.

structures of fortification usually dated to the seventh or early eighth century. This has been claimed for Gortyn, Eleutherna, Polyrrenhia, Matala, Lyttos, and Kydonia as well (fig. 17).⁷² For some of these, such as Polyrrenhia, the dating to the early Byzantine age is disputed; for others, such as Eleutherna, Matala, or Lyttos, it is more a matter of towers and small enclosures than of proper major fortifications. The only important early Byzantine acropolis documented archaeologically

is that of Gortyn. Its construction has been dated to the second half of the seventh century by G. Ortolani and to the first half of the eighth century by R. Perna.⁷³ Christina Tsigonaki is convinced that the Gortynian acropolis should be identified with the mysterious *ochyrōma tou Drimeōs* mentioned in the *Life* of Andrew of Crete written by the *patrikios* Niketas just after the death of the saint.⁷⁴ This identification could be entirely plausible, although our source presents some difficulties of interpretation in this respect (figs. 18–19). The relevant passage of *Life* regarding this episode is as follows:

72 C. Tsigonaki, “Recapturing the Dynamics of the Early Byzantine Settlements in Crete: Old Problems—New Interpretations through an Interdisciplinary Approach,” in *3rd International Landscape Archaeology Conference [LAC] 2014*, 1–11, at 6–8, <http://lac2014proceedings.nl/>. I cannot understand why the author writes on p. 6: “The historiographical *topos*, according to which the urban population had abandoned the cities of the island already in the second half of the seventh century so that Crete fell defenseless into the hands of the Arabs, is until now very powerful (for example, S. Cosentino, “A Longer Antiquity? Cyprus, Insularity and the Economic Transition,” *Cahiers du Centre d’Études Chypriotes* 43 [2013]: 93–102),” for I never wrote such a thing, as any reader can easily verify by reading the passage of my quoted article; C. Tsigonaki, “Crete, a Border at the Sea: Defensive Works and Landscape–Mindscape Changes (Seventh–Eighth Centuries A.D.),” in *Change and Resilience* (n. 9).

73 See G. Ortolani, “La fortificazione bizantina sull’acropoli di Gortina,” in *Creta romana e protobizantina* (n. 54), 3.1:801–12, at 802; but R. Perna, “L’acropoli di Gortina in età romana e protobizantina,” in *Creta romana e protobizantina* 2:545–56, at 552, and idem, *L’acropoli di Gortina: La tavola “A” della carta archeologica della città di Gortina*, *Ichnia* 6 (Macerata, 2012), 167, dates its construction to the first half of the eighth century. N. M. Gigourtakis, “Πρωτοβυζαντινής ακρόπολη της Γορτύνας,” in *Ἐν Γορτύνη καὶ Ἀρχαδιᾷ ἐγένετο*, ed. E. Psilaki and M. Drakakis (Iraklio, 2014), 153–68, at 164–66, seems to argue for construction in the age of Emperor Heraclius.

74 Tsigonaki, “Crete, a Border at the Sea” (n. 72), 180.

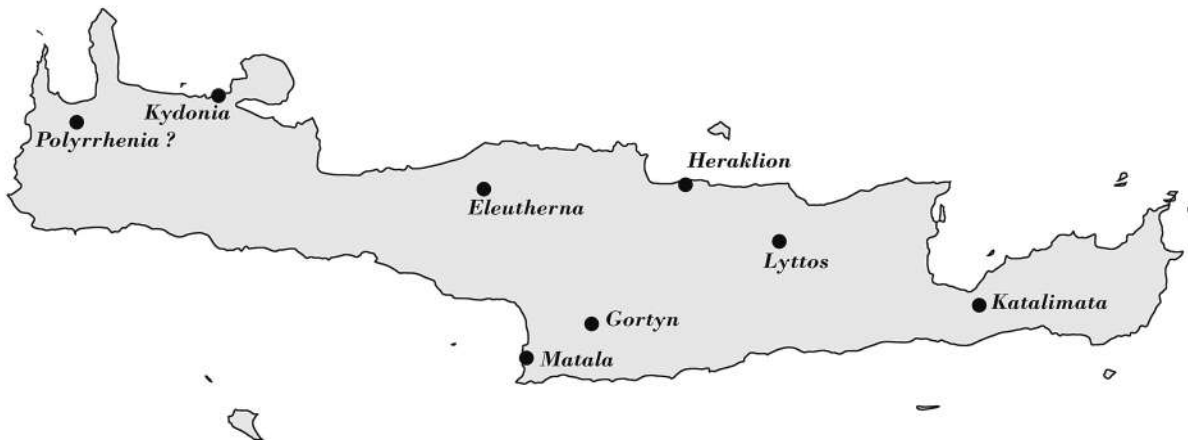


Fig. 17. Cretan fortifications. Map by Claudia Lamanna.

τί δὲ διὰ τὸν ἑαυτοῦ δούλον καὶ φίλον ὁ θεὸς τοῖς πολεμίοις ἐχθροῖς πεποιήκεν. οἱ γὰρ ἀλιτήριοι Ἀγαρηνοὶ ἐν θαλάσῃ τὸ ὄρμημα αὐτῶν θέμενοι, διὰ πλῆθους σκαφῶν ἐν τῇ φιλοχρίστῳ Κρητῶν νήσῳ ἐκμανῶς ἐπέστησαν, ὅπως αὐτοὺς ὡς κατακρίτους ἢ τοῦ θεοῦ κρίσις διὰ τὰς ἀδίκους αὐτῶν κατὰ τῶν χριστιανῶν ἐπιβάσεις καὶ ἐν Κρήτῃ καταδικάσῃ· τῷ γὰρ ὀχυρώματι τῷ προσαγορευομένῳ Τοῦ Δριμέως, ἐν ᾧ πρὸς τὸ σύννηθες ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος μετὰ τοῦ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ποιμαινομένου χριστιανικωτάτου λαοῦ διὰ τὰς ἐχθρικὰς ἐπιβάσεις εἰσήρχετο, οἱ βάρβαροι πρὸς πολιορκίαν παρακαθίσαντες καὶ πολλὰς μηχανὰς πρὸς παράταξιν πολέμων ἐν αὐτῷ ἐπιδειξάμενοι, τὸ ἄπρακτον ἑαυτοῖς περιποιήσαντο, ζημίαν τὴν ἰδίαν κατάλυσιν ἀντὶ κέρδους· τῆς αἰχμαλωσίας οἰκειωσάμενοι, ἐκ βελῶν τῶν εὐχῶν τοῦ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς τόξον τὸ ὄμμα τείνοντος ἱερέως πολέμηθέντες.⁷⁵

This is what God, on behalf of his servant and friend [sc. Andrew of Crete] made to the enemies. The ungodly Muslims, after preparing an attack by sea, had furiously fallen upon the island of Crete with many ships, so that the Divine judgment took the opportunity to punish them for their wicked raids against the Christians even in Crete. The man of God had

taken refuge, along with the Christian flock entrusted him, inside the so-called *ochyrōma* of Drimeos, as it was customary in case of enemy attacks. The barbarians had lined up to besiege them, by showing several machines in front of the battle order, but they got no results. Rather, their siege resulted in damage instead of advantage: as a matter of fact, instead of the booty they wanted to earn, they were fought by the arrows of the prayers that the gaze of the man of God cast like a bow.

At first sight, the mention of *mēchanai* in the quoted passage seems to suggest that the Muslims were about to assault a place encircled by walls, but the fact that they were defeated by the prayers of the holy man with no other details on the clash suggests that the author of the *Life* did not know much about where the attack had taken place and how it had developed. There is no mention of any military officer or garrison facing the siege, as if the organization of the defense had been entrusted directly to Andrew and the local population. The defensive place is not clearly defined as a *kastron*, but as an *ochyrōma*, a term that cannot be unambiguously interpreted as “castle.” On the contrary, several attestations in Byzantine texts prove that it often maintains the sense of “strong point,” “naturally defensible place.”⁷⁶ Moreover, the location in which

75 See *Vita Andreae Cretensis* 8 (in *Ἀνάλεκτα Ἱεροσολυμιτικῆς Σταχυολογίας*, vol. 5, ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus [Jerusalem, 1899], 169–79, at 177).

76 The *De velitatione bellica*, at 12.11, 12.29, 12.51, 14.71 (in G. Dennis, ed., *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, DOT 9 [Washington, DC,



Fig. 18. Acropolis of Gortyn, view from the west. Photo by author.



Fig. 19. Pyrgos, Eleutherna. Photo courtesy of Pampuco / Wikimedia Commons.

Bishop Andrew and his Christian flock took shelter is not expressly identified as the acropolis of Gortyn but styled as *ochyrōma tou Drimeōs*. I wonder if the latter term—του Δριμέως—may be derived from δρυμός, “oak forest,” and related to the cult of Apollo, ὁ Δρύμας. Apollo was an important pastoral deity whose cult was celebrated in Crete, and perhaps the fortification was nothing more than a hidden and protected place where rural cults were celebrated in ancient times. If so, a suitable identification for the *ochyrōma tou Drimeōs* might be the site called Labyrinthos (fig. 20). It is an ancient quarry located about 3.5 kilometers from Gortyn as the crow flies, believed in the Renaissance to be the palace of the Minotaur.⁷⁷ The location, now closed to the public, has 2.5 kilometers of corridors and 9,000 square meters largely navigable on foot.⁷⁸ As far as I know, no archaeological research has been undertaken in order to verify that the entrance to the cave was in some way protected by fortification works. Such underground shelters for the defense of civil populations are well documented

1985], 189, 194; numbered 12.9, 12.22, 12.41, and 14.56 in G. Dagron and H. Mihăescu, eds., *Le traité sur la guérilla [De velitatione] de l'empereur Nicéphore Phocas* [Paris, 1986], 77, 79, 85), clearly expresses a difference between κάστρα and ὀχυρώματα; see especially *De velitatione* 13.14–16 (Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 188; numbered 13.10–12 in Dagron and Mihăescu, *Le traité sur la guérilla*, 79); where the two structures are presented as different types of protected places: “καταστήσεις [sc. the commander] δὲ καὶ τὴν ἑτέραν ἐνέδραν μετὰ παντὸς τοῦ λαοῦ σου ἐν ἐπιτηδείῳ τόπῳ, ἔχοντι καὶ ὀχύρωμα εἰς ἀσφάλειαν αὐτοῦ. εἰ δὲ καὶ κάστρον πλησίον τύχη, ἐστὶ καὶ αὐτὸ εἰς περισσotέρην σου σωτηρίαν καὶ ὠφέλειαν”; Dennis translates: “You should set up another ambushade with all of your people in a suitable location that is protected by some fortifications. If there is also a fortress in the vicinity, this will be a big help and will greatly increase your security.” However, I would rather interpret the difference between *ochyrōma* and *kastron*, in the sense that the former is any kind of naturally protected location (not necessarily reinforced with works of fortification) and the latter is a place endowed with a wall enceinte. The same idea is expressed in the *Taktika* by Nicephoros Ouranos 64.99: E. McGeer, ed., *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century*, *Dumbarton Oaks Studies* 33 (Washington, DC, 1995), 152.

77 Mentioned by Cristoforo Buondelmonti, *Descriptio Insule Crete et Liber Insularum*, vol. 9, *Crete*, ed. M.-A. van Spitael (Iraklio, 1981), 173–76 (Gortyn), 176–78 (Labyrinth), 280–83 (commentary). See also A. Kotsonas, “A Cultural History of the Cretan Labyrinth: Monument and Memory from Prehistory to the Present,” *AJA* 122/3 (2018): 367–96, at 379–84.

78 See “The Cretan Labyrinth Cave,” Labyrinthos, accessed 30 October 2019, <http://www.labyrinthos.ch/Labyrinth-Hoehle.english.html>.

in Cappadocia and may be compared to some extent with the famous underground cities in that region like Derinkuyu. Even in the Aegean, civil populations sometimes took shelter inside not existing walled enceintes but other kinds of natural or artificial refuges. Such is the case, for instance, with the Eupalinian aqueduct, on Samos, which was used in the early Byzantine age as an underground tunnel in which people entrenched themselves.⁷⁹ Another case is Katalimata, a site near the present-day village of Monastiraki on Crete, located on the northern end of the Isthmus of Ierapetra. Here, a Bronze Age settlement, which extended over three terraces on the cliff face at the entrance to the Cha Gorge (φαράγγι Χά), was reoccupied in early Byzantine times, for archaeologists have found pottery, buckles, and glass coin weights dated to that period in Terrace C. Glass coin weights make it possible to argue the presence of a high-ranking officer. Two periods for the later occupation of this refuge-settlement have been suggested, 654–678, or 705–726.⁸⁰ It is also entirely possible that several cave settlements in southeastern Sicily may have protected civil populations, at least at points in their long history.

Regardless of the mysteries of *ochyrōma tou Drimeōs*, the most important clue regarding the scarce militarization of Cretan society during the early Byzantine period is the lack of attestations to military officers in the written sources. Sigillography provides very little information about commanders from the end of the seventh to the mid-eighth century, with no information at all from epigraphy.⁸¹ We have several seals of individuals with high social status, but none of them are characterized by a military rank. Even scholars who admit the establishment of a *stratēgia* in Crete during the eighth century agree that there is no evidence of the military activity of a *stratēgos* on the island for most

79 H. J. Kienast, *Die Wasserleitung des Eupalinos auf Samos*, *Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Samos* 19 (Bonn, 1995), 183–86.

80 See K. Nowicki, with a foreword by M. Tsipopoulou, *Monastiraki Katalimata: Excavations of a Cretan Refuge Site, 1993–2000* (Philadelphia, 2008), 66–67, 85–87; N. Poulou, “Η Ελευθέρινα και η Κρήτη στα θαλάσσια δίκτυα της ανατολικής Μεσογείου κατά την Βυζαντινή περίοδο,” in *Η Ελευθέρινα, η Κρήτη και ο Έξω Κόσμος*, ed. N. C. Stampolidis and M. M. Giannopoulou (Athens, 2020), 225–30, at 229.

81 An overview of sigillographic and epigraphic evidence is given by S. Cosentino in I. Baldini, S. Cosentino, E. Lippolis, G. Marsili, and E. Sgarzi, “Gortina, Mitropolis e il suo episcopato nel VII e VIII secolo,” *ASAtene* 90 (2012): 239–308, at 243–48.

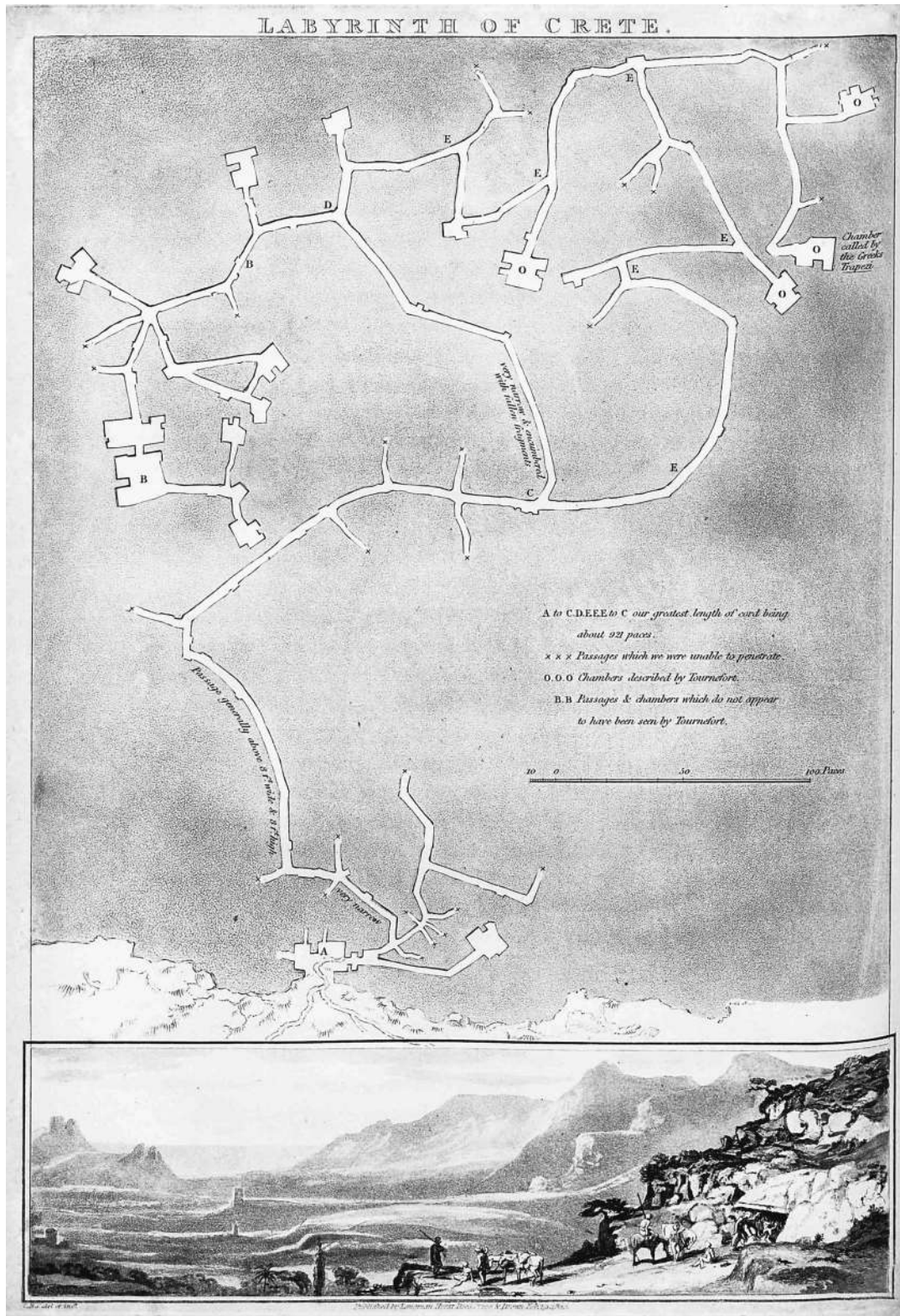


Fig. 20. Labyrinth of Crete, 1820. R. Walpole, *Travels in Various Countries of the East; Being a Continuation of Memoirs Relating to European and Asiatic Turkey, and &c.* (London, 1820), 404.

of the same century.⁸² The precise duties of the *archōn* of Crete, the dignitary heir to the functions of the late antique *anthypatos*, are unfortunately not known to us with precision; however, he does not seem to have exercised functions that were predominantly in the military sphere.⁸³ The only possible evidence found so far on the island of a high-ranking military officer during the seventh and eighth centuries might be the seal of Baanes, *patrikios*, *magistros*, and *komes* (of the Opsikion), found in the excavations at Priniatikos Pyrgos. The seal has been dated to the first half of the eighth century by its editors, but its reading seems compatible with an interpretation other than the one suggested, namely not “Βαάνη πατρικίω, μαγίστρω καὶ κόμιτι [τοῦ θεοφυλάκτου βασιλικῶ Ὀψικίου],” but “Βαάνη πατρικίω, μαγίστρω, καὶ κόμιτι [τοῦ Ἰεροῦ].”⁸⁴ The latter reading would seem preferable not only because the phrase “τοῦ Ἰεροῦ” fits better on the recto of the seal (which is too small to contain, albeit in abbreviated form, “τοῦ θεοφυλάκτου βασιλικῶ Ὀψικίου”), but also because the dignity of *magistros* is not part of the traditional titles of the counts of the Opsikion. If this proposal is accepted, Baanes would be a customs officer in Hieron (modern Anadolu kavak), a place located at the entrance to the Bosphorus from the Black Sea, where a permanent customs station had been established since Justinian (Proc. *SH* 25,3). Given the commercial vocation that several studies are assigning to Priniatikos Pyrgos, the fact that a seal on a shipment of goods from the Black Sea was found in its port is not surprising. Clear signs of social militarization on Crete only began in the late eighth or early ninth century, namely on the eve of the

Muslim invasion and during its early phases, and it was only during this period that the island possibly received troops from the Kibyrrhaiōtai theme; although the head of this latter military command had some regional *droungarioi* or *tourmarchoi* under his command, it is unlikely that one of them was stationed in Crete during the eighth century, as the sources make no mention of him.⁸⁵ The comparison between Sardinia and Sicily on the one hand, and Crete on the other, proves without any doubt that they experienced forms of militarization at different stages. Sardinia was the earliest among them, as it was already affected by fortified settlements and a limited presence of troops in the sixth century. Sicily experienced the first significant deployment of military units in the third quarter of the seventh century at the earliest, while the same thing happened in Crete only toward the second half of the eighth century.

Rural Economy and Imperial Properties

Crete seems to manifest contradictory trends during the Dark Ages as far as militarization is concerned. Indeed, while evidence for a slow increase in fortification works is attested, this is not matched by a corresponding strengthening of its military garrisons. One may try to explain why this happened by sketching out the characteristics of the rural economy and the structure of landed property in Sardinia, Sicily, and Crete in the period under investigation. The economies of all three major islands were based primarily on agriculture and stockbreeding. Sicily and, to a lesser extent, Sardinia, were large producers of cereals. Crete also provided some cereals, though their cultivation was limited to the Messara and the narrow coastal plains located south of Kydonia and north of Knossos. On the other hand, Cretan agriculture had been renowned since antiquity for its important viticulture and olive oil production.⁸⁶ Sicily, as is well known, featured the presence of major landowners in late antiquity. Evidence gives us little information about ownership by laymen,

82 See E. Kountoura-Galake, “Crete and the Formation of the Isaurian Naval Administration Network,” *Graeco-Arabica* 12 (2017): 95–126, at 121.

83 On documentation concerning the *archōn Krētēs*, see S. Cosentino, “Gortina dalla tarda antichità all’età bizantina,” in *Gortina*, vol. VIII.1, *L’isolato del Nifeo: La topografia, I monumenti e lo scavo (campagne 2003–2008)*, ed. E. Lippolis, L. Calì, and C. Giatti, with F. Giannella and C. Lamanna, *Monografie della Scuola Archeologica di Atene e delle Missioni Italiane in Oriente* 25 (Athens, 2019), 71–72.

84 Publication of the seal: Hayden and Tsipopoulou, “The Priniatikos Pyrgos Project” (n. 54), 578–79, no. 31. The reading and dating of it was suggested by W. Seibt. We also possess another seal of Baanes, *patrikios*, *magistros*, and *komes tou Hierou*, that is typologically very similar to the one found at Priniatikos Pyrgos: “Baanes patrikios, magistros and komes of Hieron (seventh/eighth century)” (with bibliography), *Dumbarton Oaks*, acc. no. BZS.1951.31.5.2341, <https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1951.31.5.2341>.

85 Cosentino, “From Gortyn to Heraklion?” (n. 25), 88, n. 60; theme of the Kibyrrhaiōtai and its subdivisions: H. Ahrweiler, *Byzance et la mer: La marine de guerre, la politique et les institutions maritimes de Byzance au VII^e–XV^e siècles* (Paris, 1966), 81–83.

86 See, for instance, in regard to Crete, J. Rougé, ed., *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, SC 124 (Paris, 1966), 64.1–3, a sort of geographic review of the empire, written in the fourth century CE, characterized by an unusual attention to regional productions.

especially senators, except to suggest that it must have consisted of very large conglomerates of estates.⁸⁷ We have more information about ecclesiastical property thanks to the letters (*Registrum epistularum*) of Gregory the Great. The estimates provided by scholars to determine its size vary consistently. According to a hypothesis made in 1980 by L. Cracco Ruggini—usually accepted in scholarship—it amounted to 800,000 hectares at the end of the sixth century.⁸⁸ C. Zuckerman believes that at the beginning of the eighth century the Roman Church owned about one third of all cultivable land on Sicily.⁸⁹ Recently, V. Prigent has suggested lower estimates, about 80,000 hectares for the Roman Church and about 54,000 hectares for the Church of Ravenna, figures which seem too low (while those provided by Cracco Ruggini are undoubtedly too high).⁹⁰ The Sardinian production of cereals cannot have been negligible either. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the twentieth century 1.5 million hectares of cereals were farmed in Sicily, while in Sardinia, in the same period, about 300,000 hectares were farmed.⁹¹ One may roughly hypothesize that in late antiquity Sardinia produced (at least) about a quarter of the cereals that Sicily produced. Furthermore, even in Sardinia senatorial ownership must have been quite significant. Recent archaeological research conducted in the territory of Tharros has assessed the existence of large estates pertaining to at least two different senatorial families, the Probi (of whom several brick stamps have been

discovered) and the Quietii.⁹² The Roman Church too possessed properties of some significance in Sardinia, although we do not know whether they were organized as an autonomous *patrimonium*.⁹³

The imperial crown had substantial possessions in both Sicily and Sardinia. The presence of a *rationalis* and a *procurator rei privatae* in Sicily is already mentioned in the *Notitia dignitatum*.⁹⁴ Several pieces of evidence prove that imperial power continued to have strong interests in both islands until the eighth/ninth centuries. We are informed by Gregory the Great's *Registrum* about the activity in Sicily of a certain Stephanus, styled as a *chartularius marinarum*.⁹⁵ Such a qualification probably refers to an administrator of the *oikos tōn Marinēs*, a branch of the *res privata* constituted between the late fourth and the early fifth century in order to serve the needs of Marina, one of the daughters of Emperor Arcadius.⁹⁶ This department was absorbed into the structure of the imperial treasury during the following centuries. Evidence concerning the activity of Marina's Domus is also attested in Sardinia. As a matter of fact, a seal uncovered from the area near the aforementioned Church of Saint George in the

87 E. Caliri, *Società ed economia della Sicilia di VI secolo attraverso il Registrum epistularum di Gregorio Magno* (Messina, 1997), 19–70.

88 L. Cracco Ruggini, "La Sicilia da Roma a Bisanzio," in *Storia della Sicilia*, vol. 3 (Naples, 1980), 12–13.

89 Zuckerman, "Learning from the Enemy" (n. 60), 103.

90 V. Prigent, "Le grand domaine sicilien à l'aube du Moyen Âge," in *L'héritage byzantin en Italie (VII^e–XII^e siècle)*, vol. 4, *Habitat et structure agraire*, ed. J.-M. Martin, A. Peters-Custot, and V. Prigent, Collection de l'École française de Rome 531 (Rome, 2017), 207–36, at 209–10; see A. Nef and V. Prigent, "Contrôle et exploitation des campagnes en Sicile: Le rôle du grand domaine et son évolution du VI^e siècle au XI^e siècle," in *Authority and Control in the Countryside: From Antiquity to Islam in the Mediterranean and Near East (Sixth–Tenth Century)*, ed. A. Delattre, M. Legendre, and P. M. Sijpesteijn (Leiden, 2019), 313–56, at 323, where it is estimated that the land ownership of the Church of Rome, together with that of the Church of Ravenna, reached 10 percent of all the cultivable land on the island.

91 See A. Terroso Asole, "I paesaggi di pianura e il mondo contadino," in *La Sardegna*, vol. 1, *La geografia, la storia, l'arte e la letteratura*, ed. M. Brigaglia (Cagliari, 1982), 61–72, at 64, for both figures.

92 Panico, Spanu, and Zucca, "Ricerche archeologiche nell'ager Tharrensis" (n. 9), 1:457–59; P. G. Spanu, "I clarissimi Probus e Venusta in un nuovo laterizio dall'ager Tharrensis," in *Studi in memoria di Fabiola Ardizzone*, vol. 1, *Epigrafia e Storia*, ed. R. M. Carra Bonacasa and E. Vitale, Quaderni Digitali di Archeologia Postclassica 10 (2018): 179–89, at 189.

93 In the letters of Gregory I concerning Sardinia, two *defensores*—Sabinus (*Ep.* 3.36) and Vitalis (9.2, 123, 203; 14.2)—are mentioned, but never a *rector*: see T. Pinna, *Gregorio Magno e la Sardegna* (Cagliari, 1989), 22.

94 *Notitia dignitatum* 12.10.17.

95 *Ep.* 5.38.

96 *Chartularius marinarum* is understood to be an officer serving in the Domus Marinae: V. Prigent, "La Sicile byzantine, entre papes et empereurs (6^{ème}–8^{ème} siècle)," in *Zwischen Ideal und Wirklichkeit: Herrschaft auf Sizilien von Antike bis zum Spätmittelalter*, ed. D. Engels, L. Geis, and M. Kleu (Stuttgart, 2009), 201–30, at 207–8. We know seven special *patrimonia* pertaining to the imperial house (the Domus Hormisdæ, Antiochi, Marinae, Arcadiae, Eudociae, Placidiae, Zenonis), on which, see R. Delmaire, *Largesses sacrées et res privata: L'aerarium impérial et son administration du IV^e au VI^e siècle*, Collection de l'École française de Rome 121 (Rome, 1989), 218–33; M. Kaplan, *Les hommes et la terre à Byzance du VI^e au XI^e siècle: Propriété et exploitation du sol*, Byzantina Sorbonensia 2 (Paris, 1992), 137–42; W. Brandes, *Finanzverwaltung in Krisenzeiten: Untersuchungen zur byzantinischen Administration im 6–9. Jahrhundert*, Forschungen zur byzantinischen Rechtsgeschichte 25 (Frankfurt, 2002), 39–48.

Sinis Peninsula (Cabras, Oristano) bears witness to a certain Theophylaktos, who, according to the editors, styled himself as (κουράτωρ) τῶν Μαρίνης.⁹⁷ Another interesting seal from the area of Saint George of Sinis concerns an officer named Georgios, given the title of *nipsistiarios*.⁹⁸ The treatise of court etiquette written by Philotheos at the end of the ninth century lists the office of νηπιστιάριος among the eight dignities (ἄξια) pertaining to eunuchs.⁹⁹ Its ceremonial functions consisted of bringing the emperor a gold cup in which the sovereign washed his hands before dining. We know from narrative sources that *nipsistiarioi* could occasionally be employed by emperors for missions outside their normal tasks.¹⁰⁰ This was certainly the case with our George, whose seal may be dated to the seventh or eighth century. Other evidence emphasizing the interests that the imperial treasury had in Sicily and Sardinia comes from the *meizoteroi*, whose seals have been discovered on both islands.¹⁰¹ The term *μειζότερος* refers to an office attested to since the seventh and eighth centuries whose functions are barely known. The *Klētorologion* by Philotheos mentions *meizoteroi tōn ergodosiōn*, who had to provide the imperial storehouses with raw wool.¹⁰² It

is likely that this same function was carried out by the Sicilian and Sardinian *meizoteroi*, considering the abundance of sheep on both islands.

Unfortunately, we do not have detailed information about farming and the structure of land ownership in late antique and early Byzantine Crete. Considering that the Messara covers an area of about 36,000 hectares,¹⁰³ we may estimate the total area of the Cretan territory suitable for agricultural use at about 150,000 hectares (at best) (fig. 21). Archaeology has focused so far on urban sites, and no important rural settlements have been carefully investigated. Written evidence, with the exception of seals, is equally meager. Large land ownership was present on the island, albeit on a lesser scale than in Sicily and Sardinia. It should be remembered that in the fourth century some important members of the Roman senate (Valerius Severus, Anicius Auchenius Bassus, Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, Anicius Paulinus, and others) are attested by a cycle of statues in the Praetorium of Gortina.¹⁰⁴ This leads one to believe that they also had landed properties on the island. One of the big proprietors was undoubtedly the church of Gortyn, whose assets were administered by an *oikonomos* and were substantial enough to require a *paktōtēs*.¹⁰⁵ The latter was the person in charge of the *pakta*, namely the leasing contracts through which ecclesiastical possessions were usually granted to private individuals. Another big proprietor was probably the *oikos* of *hagia Theodote*, at Knossos, of which three seals are preserved coming from different *boulloteriā*, a sign of the important economic activity carried out by the monastery.¹⁰⁶ A number of seals pertaining to individuals of high status have been handed down to us. Their bearers were styled either with their name alone or with their name and dignity, as in the case of Dionysios *apo hypatōn*, Sergios *apo eparchōn* and

97 See Spanu and R. Zucca, *I sigilli bizantini della ΣΑΡΔΗΝΙΑ* (Rome, 2004), 105–7; S. Cosentino, “A New Evidence of the *Oikos tōn Marinēs*: The Seal of Theophylaktos (*Kouratōr*),” in *Hypermachos: Festschrift für Werner Seibt zum 65 Geburtstag*, ed. C. Stavrakos, A.-K. Wassiliou, and M. K. Krikorian (Vienna, 2008), 23–28.

98 S. Cosentino, “Un sigillo di un *nipsistiarios* dalla Sardegna bizantina,” in *Per respirare a due polmoni: Studi in onore di Enrico Morini*, ed. M. Caroli, A. M. Mazzanti, and R. Savigni (Bologna, 2019), 279–84; the seal had previously been published in *I sigilli bizantini della ΣΑΡΔΗΝΙΑ* (n. 97), but wrongly attributed to a βεστιάριος.

99 N. Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IX^e et X^e siècles: Introduction, texte, traduction et commentaire* (Paris, 1972), 125, lines 22–26.

100 See B. Bury, *The Imperial Administrative System in the Ninth Century, with a Revised Text of the Kletorologion of Philotheos* (New York, 1911), 122; R. Guiland, *Recherches sur les institutions byzantines*, Berliner Byzantinische Arbeiten 35, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1967), 1:267–68; Oikonomides, *Listes de préséance* (n. 99), 301; *ODB* 2, 1488.

101 For Sicilian seals, see *PmbZ* 2, 328 (*mezas meizoteros*, seal coming from the Syracuse area); 6871 (dated to seventh–eighth century). For the specimen found in Sardinia, see P. G. Spanu and R. Zucca, “Nuovi documenti epigrafici della Sardegna bizantina,” in *Epigrafia romana in Sardegna*, ed. F. Cenerini and P. Ruggeri (Rome, 2008), 147–72, at 148–50.

102 See Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance* (n. 99), 123, lines 10 (*meizotoros tōn ergodosiōn*), 15 (*meizoteros tōn Eleutheriou*), 317–18 (commentary).

103 Sanders, *Roman Crete* (n. 50), 20.

104 See G. Vallarino, “I gruppi dirigenti fino al IV secolo,” in *Gortina* 8.1 (n. 83), 41–56; F. Bigi and I. Tantillo, eds., *Senatori romani nel Pretorio di Gortina: Le statue di Asclepiodotus e la politica di Graziano dopo Adrianopoli* (Pisa, 2020), 72–78.

105 For the quotation of sources, see S. Cosentino in Baldini et al., “Gortina, Mitropolis e il suo episcopato” (n. 81), 249.

106 I. Touratsoglou, I. Koltsida-Makre, and Y. Nikolaou, “New Lead Seals from Crete,” in *SBS* 9, 49–68, at 64–65. All seals are dated by the editors to the seventh and eighth centuries.

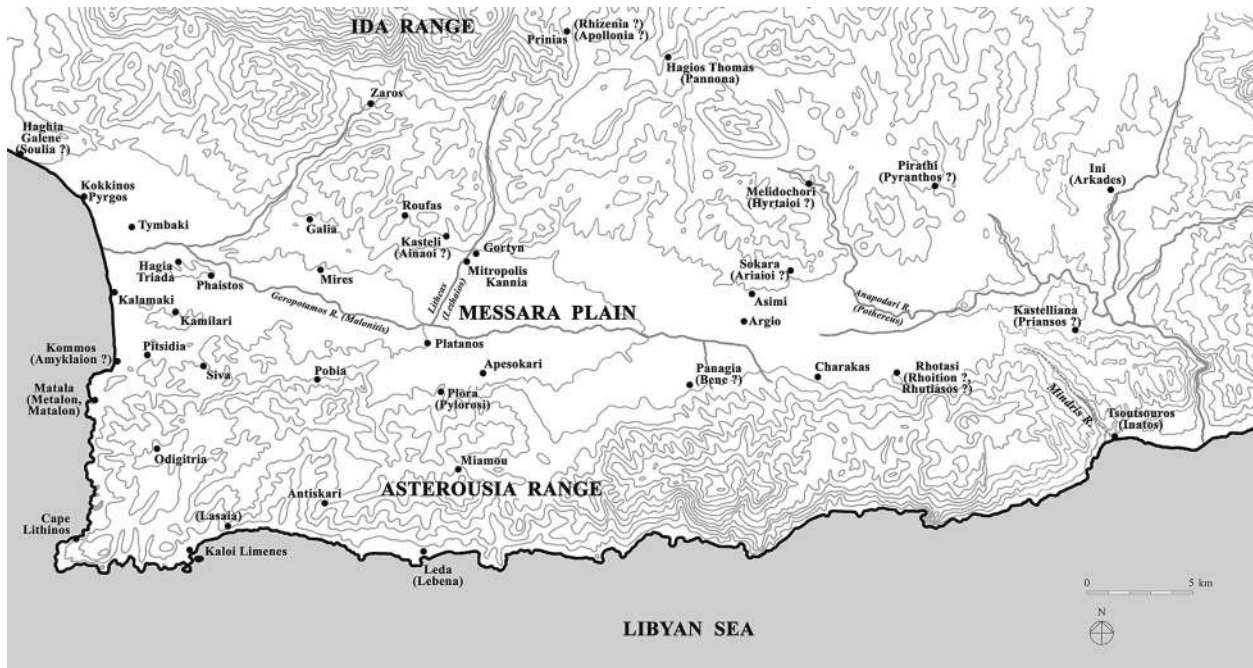


Fig. 21. Messara plain. Map redrawn after Sanders, *Roman Crete*, 20, fig. 5.

Konstantinos *patrikios*.¹⁰⁷ But while sigillography has brought to light several bullae of state officers, we do not have clear evidence in Crete concerning the activities of the imperial house until the early ninth century, when we have the seal of a certain Ioannes *bestitōr (kai) prōtonotarios tou basilikou sakelliou*.¹⁰⁸ It almost seems that there were consistently fewer imperial properties in Crete than in Sicily and Sardinia. If so, this might partially explain why the increase in defensive works from the late seventh century onward was not matched by the dispatch of troops by the central government. The absence of important assets of the imperial crown on Crete would have urged the court to limit the presence of forces quartered on the island until the late eighth century. The change in the military scenario in the Mediterranean beginning in the second half of the seventh century led insular communities to be more concerned for their security and, consequently, to build on their own small, fortified points or reuse old acropoleis.

However, we have to be careful when referring to generalized militarization of the Byzantine islands during the Dark Ages in order to face the Muslims. The maritime strategy of the latter throughout the period from the mid-seventh century to the first third of the eighth century aimed to conquer Constantinople, not practice piracy in the Mediterranean or sack the islands systematically. It is telling that the major raids against the Aegean insular world occurred concurrently with the attacks against Constantinople launched in 654–655, 668–674, and 717–718.¹⁰⁹ During these events, the islands were plundered or temporarily occupied in order to prevent them from supplying the Byzantine capital with provisions. Furthermore, contrary to what is often repeated in historiography, there is little evidence during this period of any massive abandonment of coastal sites in order to relocate inland. When it happened, this phenomenon was doubtless the exception rather than the rule.

107 Evidence is quoted by S. Cosentino in Baldini et al., “Gortina, Mitropolis e il suo episcopato” (n. 81), 244.

108 Published by A. Dunn, “A Byzantine Fiscal Official’s Seal from Knossos: Excavations and the Archaeology of the Dark-Age Cities,” in *Crete romana e protobizantina* (n. 54), 1:139–146.

109 S. Cosentino, “Muslim Presence and Economic Transformations on the Aegean Islands during the 7th and 8th Century: Is There an Insular Model of the ‘Dark Centuries’?” in *The 8th Century: Patterns of Transition in Economy and Trade throughout the Late Antique, Early Medieval and Islamicate Mediterranean*, ed. S. Esders, S. Polla, and T. S. Richter (forthcoming, Berlin, 2022).

Production, Consumption, and Demand: Sixth to Eighth Century

With regard to production, consumption, and demand, when evaluating the most important features of this process in late antique Sardinia, Sicily, and Crete, it may first be noted that these regions were all major producers of agricultural resources destined for export (cereals, wine, olive oil, cheese, raw wool, timber). However, at the same time they were also, to a great extent, consumer societies. This proves to be especially true for Sicily and Crete, slightly less for Sardinia, if we look at the evidence provided by the circulation of tableware and imported amphorae. Based on the huge number of studies produced on this argument, we can roughly sketch out the following picture: The powerful African ceramic industry distributed its products to Sicily and Sardinia in huge quantities throughout late antiquity.¹¹⁰ This happened in Crete, too, until the second half of the fifth century as far as tableware is concerned, when a drop occurred, followed by a modest recovery coinciding with the recapture of Africa by Justinian.¹¹¹ In Sicily, imported Tunisian amphorae were spread across the whole territory until the first half of the seventh century, while only in the eastern part was there an increase in products from the Aegean, Asia Minor, and Syro-Palestinian regions from the second half of the sixth century onward.¹¹² Sardinia experienced a

110 With reference to Sicily, see D. Malfitana and M. Bonifay, eds., *La ceramica africana nella Sicilia romana/La céramique africaine dans la Sicile romaine*, 2 vols. (Catania, 2016); A. Molinari, "Sicily from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages: Resilience and Disruption," in *The Occupation of Mediterranean Islands* (n. 9), 87–110, at 88–91 (and bibliography); as far as Sardinia is concerned, see R. Martorelli and D. Mureddu, eds., *Archeologia urbana a Cagliari: Scavi in Vico III Lanusei (1996–1997)* (Cagliari, 2006), 104–11, 123–30; D'Orlando, Pietra, and Riccardi, "Nuovi dati sull'attività portuale di Olbia" (n. 47), 132–34; G. Volpe, D. Leone, P. G. Spanu, and M. Turchiano, "Produzioni, merci e scambi tra isole e terraferma nel Mediterraneo occidentale tardoantico," in *Isole e terraferma nel primo cristianesimo* (n. 9), 1:417–33, at 422–23.

111 E. Zanini, "Crete in età bizantina: Un quadro di sintesi regionale," in *The Insular System of the Early Byzantine Mediterranean* (n. 4), 173–89, at 183–84.

112 G. Cacciaguerra, "Anfore altomedievali nell'area megarese: Primi dati e considerazioni," in *VI Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Medievale*, ed. F. Redi and A. Forgione (Florence, 2012), 613–17; L. Arcifa, "Contenitori da trasporto nella Sicilia bizantina (VIII–X secolo): Produzioni e circolazione," *Archeologia Medievale* 45 (2018): 123–48, at 124–25.

similar development to Sicily with regard to two different spheres of economic circulation. While its southern part was closely connected to the North African ceramic industry, its northern part also imported artifacts from northern Italy. Such is the case, for instance, with soapstone and forum ware which have been found in northern sites such as Santa Filittica of Sorso, Porto Torres, Sassari, and Olbia, but only very rarely in the southern zones.¹¹³ Crete, located at the crossroads of eastern Mediterranean routes, was part of an exchange network that was both interregional (the Aegean) and international (Africa, Asia Minor, Palestine, Syria, and Egypt).¹¹⁴ In this network, the presence of imported terra sigillata, a product of high cost and social prestige, remained substantial until the second half of the seventh century.¹¹⁵

The economic cycle in Sicily and Crete displays unusual features. During the sixth and seventh century, imported pottery on the two islands was not at all limited to coastal towns, but also reached inland settlements. This is proved for Sicily by sites such as Philosophiana, Gerace, and Rocchicella of Mineo¹¹⁶

113 See D. Rovina, "Importazioni minori in Sardegna tra VI e X secolo: Pietra ollare e ceramica a vetrina pesante," in *Forme e caratteri della presenza bizantina nel Mediterraneo orientale* (n. 47), 199–216, at 199.

114 See G. Marsili, in Baldini et al., "Gortina, Mitropolis e il suo episcopato" (n. 81), 280–90; E. C. Portale, "The Sunset of Gortyn: Amphorae in 7th–8th Centuries AD," in *LRCW*, vol. 4, *Late Roman Coarse Wares, Cooking Wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean: Archaeology and Archaeometry. The Mediterranean: A Market without Frontiers*, ed. N. Poulou-Papadimitriou, E. Nodarou, and V. Kilikoglou, 2 vols., BAR International Series 2616 (Oxford, 2014), 1:477–89.

115 A. C. Yangaki, *La céramique des IV^e–VIII^e siècles ap. J.-C. d'Eleutherna: Sa place en Crète et dans le bassin égéen* (Athens, 2005), 286–93; eadem, "Pottery of the 4th–Early 9th Centuries AD on Crete: The Current State of Research and New Directions," in *Roman Crete: New Perspectives*, ed. J. E. Francis and A. Kouremenos (Oxford, 2016), 199–234.

116 For the Sicilian evidence, see Sofiana/Philosophiana: M. Lauricella, "I materiali," in *La Sicilia centro-meridionale tra il II ed il VI* (n. 51), 117–218; E. Vaccaro, "Pattering the Late Antique Economies of Inland Sicily in a Mediterranean Context," in *Local Economies? Production and Exchange of Inland Regions in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. Lavan, *LAA* 10 (Leiden, 2013), 259–331, at 279–304; Vaccaro, "Sicily in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries" (n. 51), 44–46, 51–60; L. Arcifa, C. Cirelli, and L. Maniscalco, "Mineo (CT), Rocchicella," in *La ceramica africana nella Sicilia romana* (n. 110), 1:85–93.

and for Crete by Eleutherna, Knossos, and Gortyn.¹¹⁷ This leads us to consider who such imports were destined for, or, in other words, to wonder which social strata supported the economic demand. The idea that the state apparatus and the elites in late antiquity were the major consumers of imported wine, olive oil, or fine tableware is largely acknowledged by sectors of historiography supported by important books such as those by M. Hendy, M. McCormick, and C. Wickham.¹¹⁸ This is not the proper time to analyze this problem in depth. Let me just point out that especially for Sicily and Crete (Sardinia lacks major excavations of inland sites) such an assumption is far from being demonstrated. Contrary to other economies of inland regions of the empire, imports into Sicily and Crete seem to be spread throughout their territory. Nobody would deny that a certain degree of economic dirigisme or that the elites could have supported Sicilian and Cretan economic exchange during late antiquity. However, the level of economic performance of those islands from the fifth through the seventh century is too substantial to make us believe that it was supported only by the state or rich consumers. We cannot help but think that other factors played a role. Sicily and Crete were part of an exchange network that connected Italy, Africa, and the Levant as well. Their territorial organization was structured not so much in a clear socioeconomic distinction between city and countryside, as by the co-presence of production centers that could be located in both contexts. Finally, another crucial factor in the prosperity of the communities of Sicily, Crete, and

Sardinia was monetary circulation. Exchange and trade made conspicuous use of money within their economic circuits, especially copper coinage. Coins produced by the mint of Syracuse have been recovered in several parts of Europe, not only in the Mediterranean but also in Great Britain, France, Germany, Croatia, Sardinia, Carthage, Ravenna, Athens, Kos, and Cherson. Although the majority of these coins do not come from archaeological assemblages, the large area in which they have been found reveals the importance of the mint of Syracuse.¹¹⁹ It is widely believed that the progressive weakening of Byzantine positions in Africa coincided with the transfer of the mint to Cagliari.¹²⁰ According to some scholars, the first issues of the mint in Cagliari would date back to the age of Constantine IV,¹²¹ which would imply that it moved to the island well before the conquest of Carthage. Monetary findings from the nonextant Church of Saint George of Sinis (in the province of modern Oristano) consisted of seventy-two Byzantine coins, sixty-eight of which are copper

117 See above, nn. 113–114.

118 I refer respectively to: M. Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy, c. 300–1450* (Cambridge, 1985); McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy* (n. 45); C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, 2005). It is clear that both McCormick and Wickham think that trade was also carried out outside state-managed distribution channels; both think that late antique trade was more than just a mere epiphenomenon of taxation. However, the “tax spine” is indicated by Wickham as an element of stimulus and cohesion of a network of interregional trade in widely consumed goods (grain, clothing, and metals) from which only Anatolia and mainland Spain would remain on the fringes (Wickham, *Framing*, 717). McCormick believes that the space for free trade increased in the early Middle Ages; but, as far as late antiquity is concerned, the reasons for the existence of an important Mediterranean trade in commodities, even for him, seem to be based on the fundamental role played by the state apparatus (McCormick, *Origins*, 85–119).

119 There are many important studies on Sicilian coins, including: E. Kislinger, “Byzantinische Kupfermünzen aus Sizilien (7.–9. Jh.) im byzantinischen Kontext (mit einer Tafel),” *JÖB* 45 (1995): 25–36; C. Morriçon, “La Sicile byzantine: Une lueur dans les siècles obscurs,” *Quaderni di Numismatica e di Antichità Classiche* 27 (1998): 307–34; A. Cutroni Tusa, “Monetazione e circolazione monetaria nella Sicilia bizantina,” in *Byzantino-Sicula*, vol. 4, *Atti del I Congresso internazionale di archeologia della Sicilia bizantina*, ed. R. M. Carra Bonacasa (Palermo, 2002), 413–37; Castrizio “La circolazione monetale nella Sicilia romea,” in *La Sicile de Byzance à l’Islam* (n. 9), 77–94; V. Prigent, “La circulation monétaire en Sicile (VI^e–VII^e siècle),” in *The Insular System of the Early Byzantine Mediterranean* (n. 4), 139–60; idem, “Monnaie et circulation monétaire en Sicile du début du VIII^e siècle à l’avènement de la domination musulmane,” in *L’héritage byzantin en Italie (VIII^e–XII^e siècle)*, vol. 2, *Le cadres juridiques et sociaux et les institutions publiques*, ed. J.-M. Martin, A. Peters-Custot, and V. Prigent, Collection de l’École française de Rome 461 (Rome, 2012), 455–82.

120 For a thorough discussion concerning the mint of Sardinia, which was probably based in Cagliari and whose first issues date from the reign of Constantine IV, see Muresu, *La moneta ‘indicatore’ dell’assetto insediativo della Sardegna* (n. 58), 387–419.

121 Muresu, *La moneta ‘indicatore’ dell’assetto insediativo della Sardegna* (n. 58), 388; idem, “The Coinage of Byzantine Sardinia,” in *The Making of Medieval Sardinia* (n. 9), 170–203. G. A. Abis, “La guerra arabo-greca in Sardegna (VIII secolo): Il trasferimento della zecca bizantina da Cartagine alla Sardegna” (MA thesis, University of Sassari, 2018/2019), casts doubt on the real existence of a mint in Cagliari. I thank the author for letting me read his work.

and three that are silver.¹²² Of those in copper, eight date to the reign of Emperors Constantine IV and Leontius. The situation in Crete, in this respect, differs from that in Sicily and Sardinia, as there was no active mint on this large Aegean island. But judging by the monetary finds rescued from excavations, Crete experienced a certain degree of monetary circulation even in the seventh and eighth centuries. From excavations undertaken in Gortyn, twenty-one copper coins have been recovered from a period stretching from 668 to 824.¹²³ Numerous hoards have been signaled in all of our islands. Particularly important is the one found at Embaros, about fifty kilometers south of Heraklion, where 1,090 gold coins—most certainly nomismata—were discovered in 1588, although they are now dispersed.¹²⁴ Although one cannot equate the excavated finds with the monetary hoards (the latter may have been brought to the islands by emigrant groups), the overall picture of the monetary economy of the three islands is one of a certain vitality.

Important changes occurred in the eighth century, during which the structure of the economy of late antique origin disappeared across the entire insular world of Byzantium. Such changes were triggered in large part by two factors. The first was a long-running consequence of the wider political scenario that had deprived the empire of the Near East and Africa, which

had fallen to the Muslims. Both the Near East and Africa, which had been of paramount importance for the economies of Crete, Sicily, and Sardinia, were under a different political regime in the eighth century. The second factor concerned more directly the transformations that occurred within the social organization of the three islands and their geostrategic position. In Crete, the ancient capital city Gortyn lost importance in the eyes of Constantinople, which was more interested in strengthening its ties with the settlements of the northern coasts. However, the importance of the northern Cretan settlements increased also for purely economic reasons, as directions of traffic flow were now more oriented toward the Aegean basin than the Syro-Palestinian region. Heraklion grew in importance well before the arrival of the Muslims on the island because of a reorientation of the commercial axis of Crete towards the northern Aegean.¹²⁵ The fall of Africa to the Muslims had a negative effect on both Sicily and Sardinia during the long eighth century. Both began to be much more exposed to their incursions than in the previous century. Muslim authors record expeditions against Sicily in 705, 720–721, 727–728, 739, and 752 and against Sardinia in 703–704, 705–706, 707–708, 710–711, 732, 735, and 752.¹²⁶ Beginning in the second half of the eighth century, such strong military pressure decreased in view of the disintegration of the Umayyad Caliphate but started again during the first half of the ninth century. Sicily was also affected by the seizure of the Roman church's landed property by Leo III or Constantine V, which inevitably caused changes in farm management in several places on the island.¹²⁷ Archaeologists working on Sicily agree that a decline in the number of settlements and a demographic crisis occurred on the island during the second half of the eighth century, perhaps also as a consequence of the plague of 747, which may have caused a sharp decline in

122 Spanu and Zucca, *I sigilli bizantini della ΣΑΡΔΗΝΙΑ* (n. 97), 86–100. On Sardinia, see also Muresu, *La moneta 'indicatore' dell'assetto insediativo della Sardegna* (n. 58), passim.

123 S. Garraffo, "Problemi di circolazione monetaria a Gortyna in età romana e protobizantina," in *Creta romana e protobizantina* (n. 54), 1:181–92, at 187–88. For other studies on the monetary circulation on Crete, see idem, "Gli scavi di Gortina e i problemi della circolazione monetaria a Creta nella seconda Dark Age (668–824)," in *Ritrovamenti monetali nel mondo antico: Problemi e metodi*, ed. G. Gorini (Padua, 2002), 223–34; K. Sidiropoulos, "Münzfunde und Münzumlauft im spätrömischen und protobyzantinischen Kreta," in *Akten*, vol. 12, *Internationaler Numismatischer Kongress* (Berlin, 2000), 840–52; idem, "Νομισματική ιστορία της ρωμαϊκής και πρωτοβυζαντινής Κρήτης (67 π. Χ.–827 μ. Χ.): Testimonia et desiderata," in *Creta romana e protobizantina* (n. 54), 1:195–223.

124 See K. F. Tsiknakis, "Ἐύρεση ἑθισαυροῦ νομισμάτων στὴν Ἐμβαρο τὸ 1588," in *Λοιβὴ εἰς μνήμην Ἀνδρέα Γ. Καλοκαιρινοῦ* (Iraklio, 1994), 317–23. Most probably the coins were Byzantine nomismata because the report sent by the *capitano generale di Candia* to the doge, on 3 December 1588, it is stated that they "weighed about one zecchino and quarter each." As the weight of a Venetian zecchino was about 3.5 grams, it can be deduced that the average weight of the coins found in Embaros was about 4.37 grams.

125 Cosentino, "From Gortyn to Heraklion?" (n. 25), 85–88.

126 The chronology of Muslim raids against Sicily is based on M. Amari, *Biblioteca arabo-sicula*, 2 vols. (Turin, 1880–1882); and that concerning Sardinia on M. G. Stasolla, "La Sardegna nella fonti arabe," in *Ai confini dell'impero* (n. 20), 79–92, at 87–92; see now also A. Metcalfe, "Early Muslim Raids on Byzantine Sardinia," in *The Making of Medieval Sardinia* (n. 9), 126–59, at 127–31.

127 See V. Prigent, "Les empereurs isauriens et la confiscation des patrimoines pontificaux d'Italie du Sud," *MÉFRM* 116.2 (2004): 557–94.

the island's population.¹²⁸ Although public expenditure may have increased in Sicily, in view of the militarization of the island, the greater economic involvement on the part of the state does not seem to have compensated for the damage suffered by the rural economy. The analyses of pollen and isotopic sequences carried out by Laura Sadori and other scholars at the Pertusa Lake deposits (near Enna) have revealed a collapse of cultivated species (plants and cereals) in that area after 750.¹²⁹ Everywhere in the Byzantine world, the percentage of amphorae, tableware, and storage ware produced locally increased during this century, a phenomenon paralleled by the narrowing of the areas of trade exchanges.¹³⁰ In Sicily, imports of globular amphorae and various types of Late Roman Amphora type 1 imitations from the Aegean and Asia Minor seem to have affected only the eastern part of the island, while its northern and western sectors strengthened their ties with Campania and, to a lesser extent, Latium (fig. 22).¹³¹ The situation in Crete, however, unlike in the seventh century, seems to be slightly better than in Sicily in economic terms. The production of overpainted ware, which had started in the sixth century, only increased during the eighth century.¹³² It includes dishes, bowls, cups, jugs, and pots, whose distribution is spread across the whole island, but is not, so far, detected beyond the island.¹³³

128 Arcifa, "Contentitori da trasporto nella Sicilia bizantina" (n. 112), 123, 126; Molinari, "Sicily from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages" (n. 68), 90–91.

129 L. Sadori et al., "Climate, Environment and Society in Southern Italy during the Last 2,000 Years: A Review of the Environmental, Historical and Archaeological Evidence," *Quaternary Science Review* 136 (2016): 173–88, at 177.

130 Overviews by C. Abadie-Reynal, "Les échanges interregionaux de céramique en Méditerranée orientale entre le IV^e et le VIII^e siècles," in *Handelsgüter und Verkehrsrouten* (n. 45), 25–36; J. Haldon, "Commerce and Exchange in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries: Regional Trade and the Movement of Goods," in *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*, ed. C. Morrisson (Washington, DC, 2012), 99–124.

131 See L. Arcifa, "Nuove ipotesi a partire dalla rilettura dei dati archeologici: La Sicilia orientale," in *La Sicile de Byzance à l'Islam* (n. 9), 15–49, at 27–28; eadem, "Contentitori da trasporto nella Sicilia" (n. 112), 125–26; F. Ardizzone, "Nuove ipotesi a partire dalla rilettura dei dati archeologici: La Sicilia occidentale," in *La Sicile de Byzance à l'Islam* (n. 9), 51–76, at 58–60; Vaccaro, "Sicily in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries" (n. 51), 58.

132 Baldini et al., "Gortina, Mitropolis e il suo episcopato" (n. 81), 270 (E. Lippolis).

133 E. Vitale, *La ceramica sovradipinta bizantina di Gortina*, Studi di Archeologia Cretese 6 (Padua, 2008).

In the new political and economic milieu of the seventh century onward, characterized by an empire that was undoubtedly more fragmented than in the previous period, it is even possible that the state began to undertake a more active role as a player in exchanges in specific situations. Vivien Prigent argued that already in the first third of the seventh century the central government made recourse to old copper coins with the countermark of Heraclius to make massive purchases of grain in Sicily to supply Constantinople after the conquest of Egypt by the Persians.¹³⁴ Several LR amphorae of types 1 to 13 found in different places in the Eastern Mediterranean—such as Constantinople, Athens, Myndos (Turkey), Rhodes, Kardamaina (Kos), the islet of Yeronissos (Cyprus), Palestine (Rishon LeZion), Alexandria, Kellia (Egypt), and even Tocra (Libya)—were marked by inscribed stamps portraying the bust of two eparchs of Constantinople, Ptolemaios and Innokentios, who were active in the second third of the seventh century and were engaged in a large-scale search for commodities for the capital.¹³⁵ In the shift

134 V. Prigent, "Le rôle des provinces d'Occident dans l'approvisionnement de Constantinople (618–717): Témoignages numismatique et sigillographique," *MÉFRM* 118.2 (2006): 269–99, at 293; idem, "La Sicile de Constant II," in *La Sicile de Byzance à l'Islam* (n. 9), 157–85, at 159–66; idem, "La circulation monétaire en Sicile," in *The Insular System of the Early Byzantine Mediterranean* (n. 4), 139–60.

135 Evidence in: A. Bouchenino, "Ras Abu Dahud (North)," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot: Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 122 (2010): 5–14, <http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/>; C. Diamanti, *Εντόπια παραγωγή και εισαγωγή αμφορέων στην Αλάσαρνα της Κω (5ος–7ος αι.)* (Athens, 2010), passim; eadem, "Byzantine Emperors on Stamped Late Roman / Early Byzantine Amphorae," *Rei Cretariae Romanae Fautorum Acta* 42 (2012): 1–5; eadem, "Inscriptions on Byzantine Amphorae," in *Δάσκαλα: Απόδοση τιμής στην καθηγήτρια Μαίρη Παναγιωτίδη-Κεσίσογλου*, ed. P. Petridis and B. Phoskolou (Athens, 2014), 123–37; A. Opaίτ and C. Diamanti, "Imperial Stamps on Early Byzantine Amphorae: The Athenian Agora Examples," *Rei Cretariae Romanae Fautorum Acta* 43 (2014): 55–61; P. Papanikolaou, "Αποτυπώσεις της εξουσίας: Εικονογραφία και προσωπογραφία επάρχων σε ενσφράγιστους πρωτοβυζαντινούς αμφορείς," in *Σοφία ἄδολος: Τιμητικός Τόμος γιά τον Ιωάννη Χρ. Παπαχριστοδούλου*, ed. P. Triantaphyllidis (Rhodes, 2014), 1171–93; Ü. Kara, "Yenikapı Liamani'nda Ele Geçen Damgalı Amphoralar," in *Olive Oil and Wine Production in the Eastern Mediterranean during Antiquity*, ed. A. Diler, K. Şenol, and Ü. Aydınoglu (Izmir, 2015), 243–55; G. Gülsefa, "Myndos Kazılarında Bulunan Amphoralar ve Amphora Mühür Buluntuları," in *Myndos Kazı ve Arastirmaları/Myndos Excavations and Researches, 2004–2013*, ed. D. Şahin, Myndos Studies 1 (Bursa, 2016), 35–160. I share the opinion of Papanikolaou, according to whom the stamps refer to eparchs of Constantinople, not emperors.

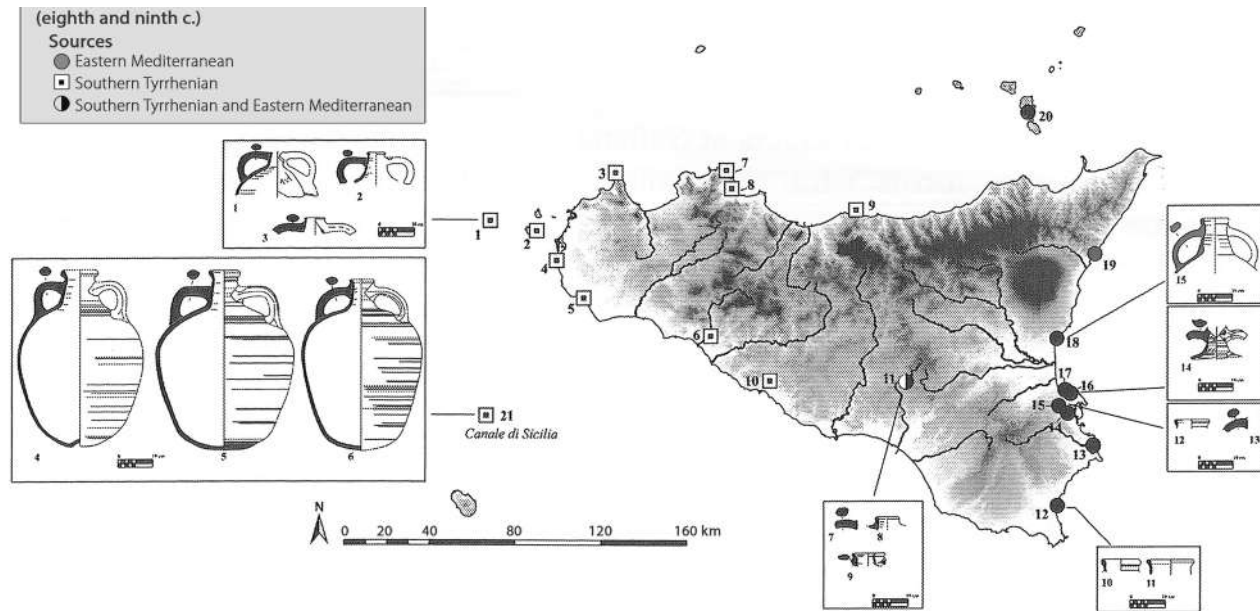


Fig. 22. Sicilian globular amphorae. Vaccaro, “Sicily in the Eighth and Ninth Century,” 58, fig. 11 (numbers refer to sites in Vaccaro’s study); courtesy of Emanuele Vaccaro.

from the seventh to the eighth century, the Byzantine government deployed a new system to supply the army, which is documented by the seals of the *kommerkiarioi*, although some scholars disagree about this assumption.¹³⁶ The islands were fully involved in the new organization. As matter of fact, *apothēkai* are mentioned with reference to the *Nēsioi* (*apothēkē tōn nēsion*: 687/688), the Cyclades (687/688), Crete (688/690), Rhodes (694/695), Chios and Lesbos (690/691), the Aigaion Pelagos (711/713; 713/714; 734/735), Andros (736/737), Mēlos, Thera, Anaphē, Ios, and Amorgos (738/739), Chios and Lesbos (690/691), and Sicily (696/697).¹³⁷ Sardinia does not seem to have been

involved in this new system, whatever it was. The conquest of Africa left the island deprived of its major route of communication with Constantinople. The only suitable alternative for reaching the Byzantine capital from Sardinia during the eighth century was via Naples and southern Italy, as a direct maritime route between Sardinia and Sicily is not documented in our sources. This implied an increase in relations between Sardinia, Rome, and Naples during the eighth and especially the ninth centuries.¹³⁸ As far as the *kommerkiarioi* system, some scholars believe that during the Dark Ages it represented a way by which the state exploited the agricultural resources of the islands (grain, olive oil, wine) for the supply of the army as well as Constantinople.¹³⁹ It has also been suggested that the wide diffusion of the globular amphorae across Byzantine territories was proof that their movement was controlled by state authorities, as the carrying capacity of such containers is similar in exemplars manufactured in different places

For a deeper analysis, see S. Cosentino, “Goods on the Move across the Late Antique Mediterranean: Some Remarks on Shipping, the Management of Ports and Trading Places,” in *LRCW*, vol. 6, *6th International Conference on Late Roman Coarse Ware, Cooking Ware and Amphorae in the Mediterranean*, ed. V. Caminacci, M. C. Parello, and M. S. Rizzo (Oxford, 2022), 1–12.

136 Critiques of the view that the *kommerkiarioi* were state officers have been summarized by F. Montinaro, “Les premiers commerçants byzantins,” *TM* 17 (2013): 351–38, at 365–418; idem, “Killing ‘Empire’: Goldilocks and the Three Byzantine *Kommerkiarioi*,” *The Journal of European Economic History* 46.2 (2017): 165–72.

137 See Brandes, *Finanzverwaltung in Krisenzeiten* (n. 96), appendix X, 601–10.

138 See below, nn. 148, 149.

139 N. Poulou, “Transport Amphoras and Trade in the Aegean from the 7th to the 9th Century AD: Containers for Wine or Oil?,” *Byzantina* 35 (2017): 195–216, at 206–7; eadem, “The Aegean during the ‘Transitional’ Period of Byzantium: The Archaeological Evidence,” in *Naxos and the Byzantine Aegean* (n. 9), 29–50, at 32.

of production, about twenty-five to thirty liters each.¹⁴⁰ Naturally, the state may have been one of the driving forces stimulating economic production and demand during this period, but not all exchange movements can be attributed to it. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that the *kommerkiarioi*'s seals bearing the image of the emperor along with the indictional cycle have a limited chronology from 672/673 to the first quarter of the eighth century. After 730 there is a considerable change in the legend of the stamps: the name of the owner and the reference to the *apothēkē* disappear, while the impersonal formula τῶν βασιλικῶν κομμερκίων appears.¹⁴¹ This seems to imply a transformation in the functioning of the *apothēkai* system (whatever it may have been) because an office that was previously entrusted to a recognizable rank-bearer, or rank-bearers, becomes now of an impersonal nature. Archaeological research in the last twenty years has considerably enriched the typology of containers and their map of distribution across the Mediterranean.¹⁴² As mentioned above, one of the most evident features of the circulation of commodities from the late seventh to the eighth century is its fragmentation and regional dimension. In such a model it is not clear why private or ecclesiastical trade could not have played an important role. With the opposite

perspective, namely that of long-distance commerce, the presence of globular amphorae of Aegean production at sites like Comacchio—which lacked a substantial troop presence or state structures—would be difficult to explain in the light of the “fiscal” paradigm.¹⁴³

Towards an Economic History of the Ninth Century

The conquest of Crete and Sicily opened up a different economic scenario from the ninth century onward. In Sicily, Muslim efforts to conquer the islands took much longer than in Crete. For this reason, two different economic systems seem to have been created during the ninth century, one based in Palermo and the other in Syracuse, along with the strongholds of the Ionian coast.¹⁴⁴ The former brought western Sicily into the orbit of Muslim Africa and Egypt, while the latter reinforced the traditional ties with the Aegean and Constantinople. New types of tableware, storage ware, cooking pots, and containers that began circulating in Byzantine Sicily, along with imported amphorae from the East, were produced in local ateliers. Such productions are still under investigation. Specialists believe that even in a contingency of strong military confrontation, exchanges and local productions increased, as exemplified by the site of Rocchicella of Mineo (near Pelagonia), a rural context dating to the early ninth century, located along the frontier between the Muslims and the Byzantines.¹⁴⁵ This site is also characterized by a remarkable presence of imported amphorae in comparison with local containers. The dynamics of exchanges

140 P. Arthur, “Byzantine ‘Globular Amphorae’ and the Early Middle Ages: Attempting to Shed Light on a Dark Age Enigma,” *Archeologia Medievale* 45 (2018): 281–87.

141 See N. Oikonomides, “Silk Trade and Production in Byzantium from the Sixth to the Ninth Century: The Seals of Kommerkiarioi,” *DOP* 40 (1986): 33–53, at 37–41; Brandes, *Finanzverwaltung in Krisenzeiten* (n. 96), 281–83.

142 Overviews concerning early medieval pottery productions: N. Poulou-Papadimitriou, “Βυζαντινή κεραμική από τον ελληνικό νησιωτικό χώρο και από την Πελοπόννησο (7ος–9ος αι.): Μία πρώτη προσέγγιση,” in *Οι σκοτεινοί αιώνες του Βυζαντίου (7ος–9ος αι.) / The Dark Centuries of Byzantium (7th–9th C.)*, ed. E. Kountoura-Galake, *Ιστοιούτο βυζαντινών Ερευνών, διεθνή συμπόσια* 9 (Athens, 2001), 231–66; J. Vroom, *Byzantine to Modern Pottery in the Aegean, 7th to 20th Century: An Introduction and Field Guide* (Bijleveld, 2005), 30–66; M. J. Decker, *The Byzantine Dark Ages*, *Debate in Archaeology* (London, 2016), 43–79; J. Vroom, “The Byzantine Web: Pottery and Connectivity between the Southern Adriatic and the Eastern Mediterranean,” in *Adriatico altomedievale (VI–XI secolo): Scambi, porti produzioni*, ed. S. Gelichi and C. Negrelli, *Studi e Ricerche* 4 (Venice, 2017), 285–310; Poulou, “Transport Amphoras and Trade in the Aegean from the 7th to the 9th Century AD” (n. 139); eadem, “The Aegean during the ‘Transitional’ Period of Byzantium,” in *Change and Resilience* (n. 9), 29–50; A. Molinari, “Le anfore medievali come proxy per la storia degli scambi mediterranei tra VIII e XIII secolo?,” *Archeologia Medievale* 45 (2018): 293–306, at 295–97.

143 S. Gelichi, “Local and Interregional Exchange in the Lower Po Valley, Eighth–Ninth Century,” in *Trade and Markets in Byzantium* (n. 130), 219–33, at 222–33.

144 Arcifa, “Contentitori da trasporto nella Sicilia bizantina” (n. 112), 127–38; G. Cacciaguerra, “Città e mercati in transizione nel mediterraneo altomedievale: Contentitori da trasporto, merci e scambi a Siracusa tra l’età bizantina e islamica,” *Archeologia Medievale* 45 (2018): 149–73; L. Arcifa, A. Nef, and V. Prigent, “Sicily in a Mediterranean Context: Imperiality, Mediterranean Polycentrism and Internal Diversity (6th–10th Century),” *MÉFRM* 133.2 (2021): 339–74, <https://doi.org/10.4000/mefrm.9925>, reject a vision of the island divided into an eastern (Byzantine) and a western (Muslim) part, on the grounds that it is oversimplified. However, the very data provided in their article (see distribution maps nos. 3 and 4) seem to unequivocally support the hypothesis of a bipartition of the island during this century.

145 Arcifa, “Contentitori da trasporto nella Sicilia bizantina” (n. 112), 127–31.

and the typologies of ceramic productions during the ninth and tenth centuries are still to be clearly defined by scholars, and no syntheses can be drawn with the current state of studies. What is emerging, in any case, is the vitality of the Sicilian economy in those centuries, because the island, as we have already said, was an intrinsic part of the major commercial circuits of the Islamic Mediterranean, Ifrīqiya, and later, Egypt.

We do not know much about Muslim Crete, given the scarcity of the surviving evidence regarding its internal history and lack of specific studies.¹⁴⁶ However, it seems that monetary circulation on the island remained substantial under the Emirate.¹⁴⁷ Beginning in the ninth century, Sardinia reoriented its commercial barycenter towards Latium and the papal court, starting a new trend of economic history. A letter written by Pope Leo IV to Leo *iudex* of Sardinia informs us that a precious cloth called *lana marina* or *pinninum* was produced on the island.¹⁴⁸ It can probably be identified as *bissum*, a filament even thinner than the finest silks, made from the shell of a mollusk called *pinna nobilis*. In the letter, the pope asked his addressee to buy as much of this cloth as he could find on the market at any price and ship it to the papal court. A missive by Pope John VIII written in 876 reveals that Sardinia had become one of the most important Mediterranean markets for trading slaves. From the letter we are told that Greek merchants (*graeci*), namely Hellenophones from Southern Italy—possibly coming from the Duchy of Naples, in which the eighth century marked a certain revival of Greek language,¹⁴⁹ or from Calabria—were used to sell Christian prisoners taken by the Muslims to Sardinian aristocrats.¹⁵⁰

However, from the second half of the ninth century onwards it is no longer possible to deal with the

economic history of Sardinia, Sicily, and Crete in a comparative way. The chance to compare their developments is nullified by the fact that they now belong to different political and economic systems. Sardinia tackled a new socioeconomic scenario in which ties with the Byzantine Empire were progressively managed by intermediaries and its ruling class opened up to Carolingian and Andalusian worlds.¹⁵¹ Sicily experienced, as we have seen, an interplay between two different economic areas that were oriented respectively toward North Africa and Constantinople. Muslim Crete presumably reinforced its socioeconomic ties with Egypt and al-Andalus. It had been different from the sixth through the early ninth century, when these islands were part of a single area governed by Byzantium, stretching from Rhodes to the Balearic Islands. Such a maritime space had guaranteed the Byzantine Empire a wide area within which a well-structured system of economic exchange could work, and through which dignitaries, troops, commercial operators, and goods could move. This was of paramount importance, when we think that territorial uniformity was becoming fragmented across the Balkans, the Near East, and Africa during the seventh century. Throughout the Byzantine “Dark Ages,” Sicily, Crete, and Sardinia, along with Rhodes, may be defined as “pillars of empire” because they supported the vitality of the Byzantine Empire with their economies and strategic positions. If Constantinople became the capital of an “empire that would not die,”¹⁵² this also depended on the fundamental role that the islands played in the entire Mediterranean economy between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

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146 See M. G. Randazzo, “Archaeological Approaches to the Islamic Emirate of Crete (820s–961 CE): A Starting Point,” *Journal of Greek Archaeology* 4 (2019): 311–36; idem, “Knossos and Heraklion in the Byzantine–Islamic Transition (Late 7th–Mid-10th Century): An Archaeological Perspective into Shifting Patterns of Settlement Ruralisation and Urbanisation on Medieval Crete,” *Journal of Greek Archaeology* 5 (2020): 448–67.

147 Randazzo, “Archaeological Approaches,” 334–35.

148 *Epistulae selectae Leonis IV*, ed. A. de Hirsch-Gereuth, MGH Ep. Karolini aevi 3 (Berlin, 1899), n. 17, 596.

149 See V. von Falkenhausen, “Greek and Latin in Byzantine Italy,” in *A Companion to Byzantine Italy* (n. 62), 541–81, at 552.

150 *Fragmenta registri Iohannis* 8, ed. E. Caspar, MGH Ep. Karolini aevi 5, 2nd ed. (Munich, 1978), 289, n. 27.

151 C. Zedda, “Bisanzio, l’Islam e i giudicati: La Sardegna e il mondo mediterraneo tra VII e XI secolo,” *Archivio Storico Giuridico Sardo di Sassari*, n.s., 10 (2006): 39–112.

152 J. Haldon, *The Empire That Would Not Die: The Paradox of Eastern Roman Survival, 640–740* (Cambridge, 2016).

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