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From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*

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# Byzantium and the Mediterranean Agrarian Civilization

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The history of the agrarian economies and rural societies of the Middle Ages has been acknowledged for some time as one of the most promising fields of comparative history.<sup>1</sup> However, one must admit that in this respect the Mediterranean world appears very backward in relation to the other two great agricultural civilizations of the medieval West: those of the open field regions of northern Europe and of the hedgerow-enclosed fields (*bocage*) of the north Atlantic regions of western Europe. So it is fortunate that this economic history of Byzantium gives the opportunity to a specialist in agrarian questions of the Latin West to outline a comparative approach to the agrarian structures and rural societies of the Greek and Latin areas of the Mediterranean basin.<sup>2</sup>

## *Introduction*

Certain preliminary remarks are called for, before embarking on the essence of the subject at hand. It should be noted that over the last twenty years or so a whole series of parallel developments has facilitated an improved comparison between the rural reality of the Byzantine world and that of the Latin West.

First, every now and then, a more demanding critical approach has informed the examination of certain types of source material, which lend themselves better to being submitted to comparable methods of treatment and investigation. This is particularly the case of all those documents that, under different designations and diplomatic formulas and for different juridical purposes (polyptychs, rent-rolls, and rent-roll charters in the West; fiscal registers and *praktika* in Byzantium), have a common substance

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, numerous works by Marc Bloch and, in particular, the less well known texts assembled under the section “Histoire comparée et Europe” in M. Bloch, *Histoire et historiens* (Paris, 1995), 85–144.

<sup>2</sup> However, there are a number of contributions to a comparative approach to agrarian structures and population structures of the (Greek, Latin, and Muslim) countries of the Mediterranean basin in the Middle Ages in the series of contributions to the *Castrum* colloquia—from *Castrum* 1 (1982) to *Castrum* 7 (in press)—which are published jointly by L’Ecole française de Rome and Casa de Velázquez, Madrid.

in that they list rural dependents, often including an inventory of their holdings, of their family units, and of all the various kinds of services and dues that encumber them. Documents such as these give precious insights into the demography, the condition of the peasantry, the manner of landholding, and the administrative policy of the main economic agents.

A second element that favors a clearer comparative overview is the development—something recent in the Mediterranean world as a whole—of the agrarian archaeology of the Middle Ages in all its forms. “Extensive” archaeology, as it is called, is carried out by the systematic surface exploration of zones, which are themselves delimited on the basis of predetermined historical criteria, which in turn are usually based on surviving written documentation. This type of archaeology has resulted in some remarkable progress being made in Italy, for example, in Catalonia and in Macedonia. Inhabited sites and, in particular, abandoned villages and hamlets, as well as infrastructural installations (mills, irrigation or drainage systems in coastal areas), together with military control installations (watch towers, isolated fortifications, etc.), have all been the subject of stratigraphical archaeology. Everywhere, the finds have opened new perspectives in a number of fields (building techniques, archaeo-technologies, material culture, types and presence of processing industries in the rural environment). On the other hand, the study of the paleoenvironment, thanks to the use of techniques originating in geology—particularly sedimentology—and the study of paleobotany—particularly pollenology, anthracology, and carpology—have only just been applied to the Byzantine world. But this form of study, as is the case with the Latin world, is already a source rich in promise for research into land occupation, movements of population, and the evolution of agrarian landscapes and natural landscapes that have been shaped to a greater or lesser extent by man. What is common to these latter types of research everywhere is their local or regional character. But they supply the historian with a wealth of significant data in the form of case studies. The fact that one is obliged to adopt a critical approach to the scope of the validity of this research helps, in itself, in the elaboration of common or similar types of questions and investigation procedures.

Beyond these particular areas of convergence, it is mainly the widespread attention focused on certain crucial questions which is generating improved conditions for a sound comparative approach. Anxious to delineate more clearly the specificities of medieval agrarian economies, specialists are increasingly concerned with, for example, the role played by towns—large cities certainly, but also, and perhaps preponderantly, minor urban centers—in the strengthening and vitalization of the agrarian economy of the hinterland.<sup>3</sup> By the same token, the related problems of monetary circulation and the function of money in rural environments, the redefinition of the very concepts of rural trade,<sup>4</sup> the establishment of agricultural prices, and the costs and wages (in

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, H. K. Schulze, ed., *Städtisches Um- und Hinterland in vorindustrieller Zeit* (Cologne-Vienna, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> See, in the last instance, the extremely useful recapitulation by A. Verhulst, “Marchés, marchands et commerce au haut Moyen Age dans l’historiographie récente,” in *Mercati e mercanti nell’alto medioevo: L’area euroasiatica e l’area mediterranea* (Spoleto, 1993), 23–50.

particular of agricultural laborers) in the precapitalist economy have for too long been dominated by an implicit and anachronistic reference to the categories formulated by modern-day economic thinking. The advantages presented by an enhanced assimilation of the achievements of economic anthropology are being appreciated everywhere. These achievements appear to be of particular relevance to two privileged fields: that of the structure and principles of the regulation of exchange (K. Polanyi et al.) and that of the concept of the tributary state (S. Amin, P. Chalmers, P. Guichard, et al.).<sup>5</sup> It is in the context of this new climate of convergence of the objectives, methods, and problems of historical study that the following discussion must be seen.

*Genesis of a Common Agrarian Civilization in the Mediterranean*

The study of the parts of this volume devoted to agrarian economy and rural life in the Byzantine world leaves one with a very strong first impression: the Byzantine world belongs to a Mediterranean “agrarian civilization” whose structural elements came into being under fairly similar conditions in both East and West.<sup>6</sup> Comments on this subject that are useful for the student of the West and, conversely, ideas that might throw additional light on the questions raised for the Byzantine world spring, so to speak, from each page. I mention here the most striking characteristics regarding the constants of agricultural production, to use the phrase coined by Jacques Lefort.

One can ascertain, first of all, that Byzantium did not experience an “agricultural revolution” in the Middle Ages, in the true sense of the term, any more than did the Latin West.<sup>7</sup> But, no more than in the case of the West, should one be drawn to the conclusion that the techniques and economic conditions of agricultural production suffered a prolonged period of stagnation. One can go further and draw up a brief inventory of the areas where parallel series of sectoral improvements appear, in the East and in the West, in the same general context of the rational development of a Mediterranean agrosystem, on which, in 1971, John Teall had already touched, in terms of “growing into the environment.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See below, note 28.

<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that they make constant use of the term, neither Bloch nor his successors have ever given a definition to the concept of “agrarian civilization.” For the sake of clarity in what follows, I should like to specify that this term implies that three types of phenomenon have been taken into account: (1) systems of cultivation in the broadest sense, i.e., agricultural methods, types of crops and technology, types of connection between agriculture and animal husbandry, etc.; (2) the organization of fields, their layout in parcels and their rational organization within a total cultivated area; and (3) the relationships between an agrosystem such as this and a particular kind of settlement, both as the focal point of a rural area and as the context for rural social intercourse. In my view it is the coordination of these three categories of information that gives “agrarian civilization,” in the true sense, its defining features.

<sup>7</sup> For a proper appreciation of just how “agrarian revolution” in precapitalist times must be understood, see A. Veerhulst, “Agrarian Revolutions: Myth or Reality?” *Sartoriana* 2 (1989): 71–95.

<sup>8</sup> J. L. Teall, “The Byzantine Agricultural Tradition,” *DOP* 25 (1971): 33–59; see the quotation (and reference to the work of R. J. Braidwood on the concept of “growing into the environment”) in *ibid.*, 36. In any case, one can but subscribe to the views developed by the author on the agricultural conquest in the Mediterranean world, which he defines in terms of “prudent aggression of natural surroundings.”

The principal elements of such a growth can be summed up in the development (completed everywhere by the 12th to 13th century) of agricultural joint plots and their usage, according to a common typological range: (1) *huerta* and orchard tracts based on intensive polyculture, associated or not with fruit-bearing trees, close to either rural communities or urban centers of consumption, and based on the triple accumulation of manual labor, irrigation resources, and the limited availability of manure characteristic of a production system that is all but unaware of the stabling of larger animals; (2) specialized fields having a high relative yield (vineyards, hemp fields, fields devoted to forage crops, etc.); and (3) lands of dry cereal cultivation linked to, or bordering on, extensive tree plantations such as olive groves.

A consistently favorable demographic trend from the eighth to the fourteenth century (see below) did not result only in a simple quantitative increase of arable area and of the overall volume of production. It also led, everywhere, to three consequences that were decisive in qualitative terms: (1) an improvement in yields linked, admittedly, to the expansion of area under cultivation, but connected also with the development of agricultural practices that themselves arose from the greater availability of labor and from various technological improvements; (2) a more pronounced specialization and differentiation of the agricultural land that can sometimes be seen in the setting up of typical parcel layouts; and (3) a more logical organization of the lands of different usage making up a given agricultural area, whether they belonged to a rural commune, or to an estate.

Without repeating here each point of the analysis of this developmental process of a common Mediterranean agrosystem, one can point out that, as regards the fields with high productivity, the improvement in irrigation techniques, as witnessed by numerous archaeological investigations, ensured the expansion of irrigated areas allocated to vegetable production.<sup>9</sup> With regard to cereal crops, in appearance less dynamic,<sup>10</sup> it has now also been established that tangible progress contributed to an increase in available provisions. This increase was arrived at, in a manner both empirical and subtle, by making better use of what the environment had to offer. The Mediterranean world, in Byzantium as in the western Mediterranean, was unable, owing to the identical con-

<sup>9</sup> In all the countries of the Mediterranean basin, this extension of the *huerta* is confirmed from the 11th–12th centuries on, on the one hand, in the fields that were closest to the rural settlements and, on the other hand, in the irrigated vegetable- and fruit-growing zones most closely linked to the urban centers of consumption, from Valencia to Constantinople. The archaeological identification of the medieval “hydraulic area” and their historical interpretation represent one of the strong points of current research in Spain. Among the best recent works (with detailed bibliographies), one should mention M. Barceló et al., *Arqueología medieval en las afueras del “medievalismo”* (Barcelona, 1988); M. Barceló, “El diseño de espacios irrigados en al-Andalus: Un enunciado de principios generales,” in *El agua en zonas áridas: Arqueología e historia* (Almería, 1989), 1: xiii–xlvi, as well as H. Kirchner and C. Navarro, “Objetivos, métodos y práctica de la arqueología hidráulica,” *Archeologia medievale* 20 (1993): 121–51, repr. in *Arqueología y territorio medieval* (Jaén) 1 (1994): 159–82.

<sup>10</sup> The apparent—but deceptive—character of this perceived sluggishness in medieval cereal production arises mainly from the fact that the treatises on the agronomy of the Byzantine, Arab, and Latin worlds focus their attention on market crops and on the intensive methods from which their yields could benefit.

straints imposed by these surroundings, to develop, as was the case in northwestern Europe, new cereal production systems based on rotation practices more productive than the biannual wheat crop/fallow rotation inherited from ancient agronomy. However, significant advances in productivity, discernible everywhere, were achieved through the application of various technical improvements: for example, the development, on fallow land, of catch crops of leguminous plants, which both fertilize and are of a high nutritional value; the sowing of better-selected and more robust winter cereals, denser sowing, the improvement of plowing teams and of animal pulling power thanks to the use of leguminous fodder as feed.

It is striking to note that these converging evaluations of medieval Mediterranean cereal production as neither revolutionary nor stagnating lead to very comparable conclusions regarding the Latin West and the Byzantine East on two points that are crucial because they are indicative. First on the question of wheat yields, a subject on which western historiography used to be overly pessimistic,<sup>11</sup> the figures considered today to be the most reliable are identical to those recorded for good cereal fields in the Byzantine world and indicate yields of at least 4–5:1. On the related and equally revealing question of the “minimum essential” cultivated area, necessary to sustain a standard peasant family (i.e., a nuclear family of four to six people), the figures put forward in both cases (between 5 and 8 ha) point to equivalent yield factors, according to a uniformity of actual cases, which is confirmed by an identical distribution of the land parcels that make up each holding, according to the various types of agricultural land enumerated above.

In other more specific domains, such as the technologies for the processing of agricultural produce, the fragmentary nature of surviving written documentation, combined with the less advanced state of agrarian archaeological study of the Byzantine world, explains why parallel developments, suspected to have been under way in the high Middle Ages, can only be confirmed in the late medieval period, when the Byzantine sources become more abundant. This is the case of, among others, the water mill, in whose propagation in the high Middle Ages the large landowners seem to have been the principal economic agents,<sup>12</sup> in both the East and the West. But here again, and contrary to the theses once made known in the famous article on this subject by Marc

<sup>11</sup> The opinions on the question of cereal yields, which were prevalent in the 1960s, are summed up in G. Duby, *L'économie rurale et la vie des campagnes dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1962), 1:85–87 and 184–91. Duby reached the conclusion that “the ratio of grain harvested to grain sown does not appear to have been much higher than 2:1 in the Frankish period” (p. 189). For successive, but not very conclusive, discussions, see M. Montanari, “Technice e rapporti di produzione: Le rese agricole dal IX al XV secolo,” in *Le campagne italiane prima e dopo il mille*, ed. B. Andreolli and M. Montanari (Bologna, n.d. [1986]), with a useful bibliography covering 1960 to 1985. But, in the spirit of the minimalist tradition, Montanari's estimates remain excessively low—around 4:1 in northern Italy at the end of the Middle Ages. A yield of 4:1 is also considered “normal” by R. Delatouche, “Regards sur l'agriculture aux temps carolingiens,” *JSav* (April–June 1977): 73–100, cited in *Le campagne italiane*, n. 19.

<sup>12</sup> See, most recently, together with a complete list of previous bibliography, E. Champion, *Moulin et meuniers carolingiens* (Paris, 1996).

Bloch,<sup>13</sup> recent well-founded work confirms the widespread presence of the water mill throughout the western part of the Romania<sup>14</sup> as early as late antiquity. This newly acquired knowledge relegates to the realm of historical myth the hitherto accepted ideas of a technological divide between East and West and of an independent and relatively recent development of the water mill in the West, as a result of a so-called “hydraulic revolution of the eleventh century.” Equally indicative of the parallel nature of developments in this field is that the spread of the water mill from the twelfth to the thirteenth century on, in both Byzantium and the Mediterranean West, reflects more and more clearly the vigor of agrarian communities and their ability to build and maintain technical installations—be it mills or irrigated areas—for communal use, if not for collective use in the real sense.

One could easily extend this list of the resemblances that have been observed at the level of the constants of agricultural production. But this is not where the main interest lies. What is of greater interest is that, in both the East and the Mediterranean West, the progressive establishment, between the eighth to ninth century and the twelfth to thirteenth century, of an agrosystem based on a clear differentiation between agricultural lands of varied cultivation was matched by a corresponding development or strengthening of the structures of rural habitation, grouped into villages or into hamlets created by the landlord. This concentration of the peasantry was the only way to ensure the rational management of an agrarian area that was being so knowledgeably diversified. We know how, in the West, this trend found its most perfected, often predominant, form in the *castrum*: a grouped and fortified hill village. It would be pointless to try to identify in Byzantium a movement corresponding to the *incastellamento* of rural communities that, in the West, went hand in hand with the fragmentation of power and its strong territorialization, and with the establishment of those original forms of political control, both economic and social, that, to be brief, can be termed feudal. Nonetheless, in a totally different institutional and social context, the Byzantine world also rested on the same pedestal of agrarian civilization formed by the structural association of a clustered settlement with well-defined village lands—the Byzantine *chorion* or Latin *tenimentum*—the lands divided into tracts of different usage that correspond, in both cases, to a common range of types. The unity of this agrarian civilization is best expressed, in the end, by the structural similarities that characterize the typical peasant holding: the peasant holder resides in the village and simultaneously exploits a number of scattered plots devoted to different land uses; this very dispersion ensures the productive equilibrium of a holding whose purpose is to provide the subsistence of a familial unit of farmers engaged in direct exploitation of their holding.

Finally, the last major characteristic of this agrosystem lies in the disjunction between the agricultural and pastoral sectors, which can be seen everywhere to varying degrees.

<sup>13</sup> M. Bloch, “Avènement et conquêtes du moulin à eau,” in *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* 7 (1935): 538–63, repr. in idem, *Mélanges historiques* (Paris, 1963), 2:800–821.

<sup>14</sup> See the numerous works of Örjan Wikander, esp. “Vattenmölor och möllare i det romerska riket” (doctoral thesis, Lund, 1980), and his more recent update, “Archaeological Evidence for Early Water-Mills, An Interim Report,” *History of Technology* 10 (1985): 151–79.

It is shown first at the level of agrarian realities themselves. The ever present juxtaposition of an agricultural “in-field” with a pastoral “out-field” is emphasized by the use, in the Mediterranean West and in Byzantium, of equivalent expressions. For example, the *tenimentum de intus* and *tenimentum de foris* of Italian charters correspond quite well to the distinction made in the Byzantine *Fiscal Treatise* between *exothyra* or *exochoria* on the one hand and *esothyria* or *enthyria perivolia* on the other. Everywhere, the autonomous character of the advances that left their stamp on the pastoral sector, in the shape of the progressive organization of the movement of flocks from summer pastures in the mountains to winter pastures in the lowlands and coastal regions, were, at the economic level, the result of a very low level of integration of the pastoral sector into agricultural life. Mentioned occasionally in Byzantium from the end of the eleventh century on, for example in the *typikon* of Gregory Pakourianos, these practices, which were still only very experimental until the thirteenth century, run parallel with the creation of coherent village landholdings in the intermediary zone between permanent settlements and agricultural lands. But these practices did not really establish themselves in the West until the twelfth century or even later. They were then strengthened, in both East and West, following the well-considered economic decisions taken by the landed aristocracy (monastic or secular), and as a result of an increase in demand, mainly urban, for products and raw materials of pastoral origin (wool, cheeses). Thus everywhere such choices predated the major demographic crises of the decades following 1340. Far from constituting a response to the problem of a diminishing agricultural labor force, these choices are indicative of an older concern of the great landowners: to optimize their profits from the vast tracts of land unsuitable for more intensive agricultural reclamation. Pastoral nomadism and the development of seasonal grazing made the shepherds’ world a closed society, with its primitive temporary settlements, migration routes, and unwritten laws. At this time, pastoral banditry and, in particular, cattle rustling constituted the common characteristic of a Mediterranean rural society marked everywhere by a great divide between shepherds and peasants.

### *The Synchronicity of Events*

A first convergence is obvious and comes as no surprise: economic history and, in particular, the agrarian history of the Byzantine world, is set against the background of a fluctuating curve of demographic movements quite identical to those that characterize the West of this period. However, the studies on the agrarian economy in the present volume allow one to go further than this commonplace on several important points. It has been known for some time that the overall curve shows a continuous increase, without demographic catastrophes, between the two great epidemics that, in a sense, frame the Middle Ages: the “Justinianic” plague of the sixth century and the Black Death of the end of the 1340s. These two major events signal, in East and West, the two great reversals of the long-term demographic conjuncture.<sup>15</sup> Suffice it to note,

<sup>15</sup> The fundamental work on the “Justinianic” plague is still J.-N. Biraben and J. Le Goff, “La peste dans le haut Moyen Age,” *Annales ESC* 6 (1969): 1484–1508. I discount the works aimed at limiting

on this subject, that we now have precise indicators for the important phenomenon of the recurrence of the plague, in both East and West, from 541–542 to the first half of the eighth century and from 1347–48 to the 1420s, affecting both areas in what would appear to be a very similar fashion.<sup>16</sup> The end of these recurrences, which has been confirmed from the 740s on, together with the sustained growth in population whose cumulative effects were felt for the next six centuries, constitute not an explanation for, but a major contributing factor to, the agrarian growth that is everywhere apparent between the middle of the eighth century and the middle of the fourteenth.

However, in the East as in the West, this major trend was not exempt from occasional crises. Shortages, famines, even local or regional incidences of “mortalities,” had their effect in the short term, without ever reversing the underlying tendency. It is worth noting that, of themselves, these occasional crises display interesting similarities. Thus the famine witnessed in Byzantium in the winter of 927–928, which brought about the successive imperial legislation of Romanos Lekapenos and Constantine VII, is altogether reminiscent, for the Western medievalist, of the great famines that affected the Frankish Empire in 792–793 and 805–806, with the ensuing legislation of Charlemagne’s Capitularies.<sup>17</sup> In both these cases, the public authority appears to have been concerned with establishing corrective mechanisms through state intervention: in the West, by setting the price of provisions and attempting to regulate the market by the establishment of public granaries; in the East, by controlling peasant indebtedness and upheavals in land prices. The common aim of Charlemagne and the Byzantine emperors appears to have been to protect those strata of free peasantry—*liberi pauperes homines* in the Frankish Capitularies, the *penetes* and *ptochoi* of the “social” novels of the Byzantine emperors—that were hardest hit by the crisis, against the same threats from the landed aristocracy: the appropriation of land and the exploitation of the critical increase in agricultural prices for excessive profit. These crises, which are relatively well documented as regards their results, all have a common pattern of causality that, in effect, always starts as a grain crisis brought on mainly by climatic conditions. This leads to a drastic reduction in the volume of available stocks, the breakdown of normal market mechanisms, soaring grain prices orchestrated by the great landowners, and the ensuing popular unrest. As with all comparisons, this one has its limits. In the long series of subsistence crises witnessed between the ninth and thirteenth centuries,<sup>18</sup> any

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the scope (or even denying the existence) of the epidemic of 541 and succeeding years. This essay had already been completed when Michael McCormick kindly brought to my attention the important dissertation of L. I. Conrad, “The Plague in the Medieval Near East” (Ph.D., Princeton University, 1981). I am grateful to Professor McCormick for this information.

<sup>16</sup> J.-N. Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1975), is an important work of collection and interpretation of information.

<sup>17</sup> See A. Verhulst, *Karolingische Agrarpolitik: Das Capitulare de villis und die Hungersnöte von 792/93 und 805/06* (Ghent, 1965).

<sup>18</sup> A first inventory, with an interesting analysis, can be found in F. Curschmann, *Hungersnöte im Mittelalter* (Leipzig, 1900). A complete list of the crises of meteorological origin, based on an almost exhaustive reading of narrative sources, can be found in P. Alexandre, *Le climat en Europe au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1987).

parallels drawn between East and West are only valid for the ninth to tenth centuries, at which time the state, in the West, still retained some capacity for intervention. Even at this time, the state's role seems to have been directed toward the control of the distribution and price of provisions, while in the East legislation was aimed, primarily but not exclusively, at protecting the interests of smallholders and the tributary peasantry.<sup>19</sup> With the return of a degree of state interventionism in economic matters in the West, as for example in the Italian communes of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, the state always directed its actions toward price regulation mechanisms in times of shortage and not, as in Byzantium, toward the regulation of the land market.

Quite apart from this improved understanding of the role played by cyclical crises in a context of long-term growth, the benefits of a comparative approach are most fully revealed with regard to the important question of the economic takeoff of the high Middle Ages. The view of Byzantium presented here, set against the most recent advances in western historiography,<sup>20</sup> brings to light a convergence of views that is all the more remarkable for having evolved without any collaboration. It is, however, clear that, in both the West and the East, the idea of an "economic Renaissance of the eleventh to twelfth centuries," that was prevalent for a long time, has been abandoned in favor of a much earlier date for the onset of economic expansion. A closer examination of written sources, made distinctly easier in the case of the West by recent archaeological contributions, leaves no doubt that agrarian redevelopment in all countries of the Mediterranean basin—both Greek and Latin—got under way as early as the eighth to ninth century. At certain exceptionally well documented sites, in Italy and in the south of France, the information provided by polynology and anthracology facilitates the task of defining this revival and measuring its impact on the environment, which reveals human encroachment as early as the ninth century, perhaps even the latter half of the eighth. While the social context of this first agrarian reconquest has yet to be defined—and, in particular, the respective roles of the great estates and of the small peasant communities of settlers clearing land—its reality is no longer in question, either in the case of the West or in that of the East. Also the idea of a gradual process of redevelopment—modest as yet in the ninth century, more pronounced from the middle of the tenth—is gaining ground over that of an abrupt takeoff. The acceleration of this process in the eleventh and twelfth centuries can only be grasped in the light of those same cumulative effects on expansion exercised by the population increase, which was of a sustained nature from the middle of the eighth century on.

<sup>19</sup> In fact, it also happened that the Byzantine emperor, like Charlemagne, intervened in order to regulate the price of cereals in the capital in times of shortage by selling wheat from the imperial warehouses, as happened, for example, in the 9th century, under Basil I; cf. *Hommes et richesses dans l'Empire byzantin*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1989–91), 2:360–61. For other attempts along these lines, see *ibid.*, 361–62. I would like to thank Jacques Lefort for this information. See also A. E. Laiou, "Exchange and Trade, Seventh–Twelfth Centuries," *EHB* 705.

<sup>20</sup> For the state of the question (and bibliography), see P. Toubert, "La part du grand domaine dans le décollage économique de l'Occident (VIIIe–Xe siècles)," in *La croissance agricole du haut Moyen Age*, ed. Ch. Higounet (Auch, 1990), 53–86.

Finally, an examination of the crises of the later centuries of the Middle Ages, and of their effect on the peopling and development of the countryside, leads one, here again, to emphasize the similarities, but also to highlight their limits. For both Byzantium and the West, the thirteenth century conveys a clear impression of a “saturated world” at the breaking point of the rural ecosystem that had been in place since the ninth to tenth century. In the case of Byzantium, this impression is borne out by several conclusions drawn from a documentation that is henceforth more plentiful in certain regions, first and foremost, Macedonia. As in the Latin West, although doubtless less clearly visible in the Byzantine sources, the social consequences of this saturation of a rural environment at the limits of its technical capacity for expansion, are the impoverishment of the poorest, the proliferation of exiguous peasant holdings deficient in proper farming equipment, and the disturbance of the land market, to the benefit of the great landowners. In both East and West also, one can discern a new concern for the protection of the environment and for the conservation of what was left of the forest. Similarly, the increasingly disappointing nature of the most recent land clearing operations accounts in part for both the large scale and the premature nature of failures and of land abandonment. This abandonment of land has been detected in both East and West in the first half of the fourteenth century, even as early as the thirteenth century, that is, before the onset of the great epidemics. We have here synchronicities that deserve attention and force us to review our argumentation regarding the abandonment of the countryside in the later Middle Ages.<sup>21</sup>

As for the evacuations following the Black Death of 1348 and its recurrences, the main types of questions are remarkably similar. Nearly all the aspects of this phenomenon recorded in the case of the West also seem to be detectable in the case studies provided by the Greek documentation from the period 1340–1420: total or partial evacuations; final or temporary evacuations; the abandonment of certain marginal lands with the survival of the place of habitation, accompanied by the restructuring of the agrarian community around a reduced number of holdings or, conversely, the complete desertification of the village which may go together with the assimilation of its best lands within the boundaries of a neighboring village that survives. In the most favorable cases, from the historian’s point of view, those revealed by the documentation of Mount Athos, the combined resources of the texts and the examination of the sites allow a precise approach to be made. But everywhere today, the decidedly complex nature of the local situations is turning the attention of historians away from the simple objectives that were those of the first German *Wüstungsforschung*. In particular, one hardly believes anymore in the possibility of defining a region by establishing an index of the characteristics of the evacuations that affected it. Based on the types and rates of evacuations, more than on their imputed quantitative incidence, comparative research does not, for all that, give any the less an impression of considerable similarity in the amplitude and long-term effects of the agrarian flight of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

<sup>21</sup> See P. Toubert, “Problèmes actuels de la *Wüstungsforschung*,” *Francia* 5 (1977): 672–85.

*Byzantine Specificities*

This summary list of the areas useful in a comparison between the Greek and Latin rural situation of the Middle Ages leaves wide open the field of Byzantine particularities. The most striking of these arise from the enduring nature of the Byzantine state and from the continuity of its interventions at the level of the rural economy and society. One may note, in this connection, that through a sort of rebound effect or, one might say, through a process of Byzantinization, western historiography nowadays tends to attach more importance to the tenacity of the influence of public fiscal regulations on the agrarian economy of the high Middle Ages; indeed certain scholars overestimate this influence to an absurd degree.<sup>22</sup> It must be admitted that these “fiscalist” concepts do in fact contribute some useful corrections to our understanding of the “barbaric” sixth and seventh centuries. Conversely they cease to be of relevance from the eighth to ninth century on, when the collapse of public structures and the expansion of private lordship led to the fragmentation of power and the establishment, in the tenth to eleventh century, of the rural *seigneurie* as the basis for the organization and control of all aspects of life in the countryside. It would, therefore, be idle to insist on the original traits conferred in so many ways on the Byzantine rural community, by the presence of a public system of taxation, whether direct or assigned to private beneficiaries. The persistence of public fiscality affected the statutory classification of the various categories of dependents and holdings and the very conditions governing the mobility of land and men. Compared to the Latin West, it is appropriate to note the relatively high rate of monetization of the rural economy, which is in part attributable to the paying of tax and its effect on the vigor of the local economy. This was so in a period when, by a sort of inverse symmetry, the erosion and fragility of the mechanisms of the so-called feudal coinage obliged the landlords, in the West, to favor rents in kind and sharecropping contracts.

Another element that reveals the monetary vigor peculiar to the Byzantine agrarian economy was the importance of the agricultural workforce, far greater than in the West at any rate until the thirteenth century, and of salaried labor in the rural economy generally. The existence of this salaried labor is attested by a specific terminology that has no counterpart in the West, and that designated all the kinds of paid rural labor, whether that of peasants whose holding was insufficient to provide them with a livelihood and who thus belonged to the lowest level of poor and ill-paid laborers, or, on the contrary, that of workers assigned to specialized tasks (millers, shepherds, mule-drivers, etc.) as part of the direct exploitation of the domanial reserve. Their appearance in the documentation points to a real absorption of this workforce into the good management of the estates, in the context of a rural economy that, in the case of the eleventh century, Paul Lemerle did not hesitate to qualify as “essentially monetary.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For an excellent critical analysis of the aberrations of the “fiscalist” theses, see Ch. Wickham, “La chute de Rome n’aura pas lieu,” *Le Moyen Age* 99 (1993): 107–26.

<sup>23</sup> P. Lemerle, *Cinq études sur le XIe siècle byzantin* (Paris, 1977). The reference to an economy that was “essentiellement monétaire” may be found on p. 189 (commentary on the *typikon* of Gregory

Here again, this is in clear contrast with the *ministeriales* of the western estates who belonged to, or came from, the servile class, even if this latter category is not entirely absent from contemporary Byzantine documentation.<sup>24</sup>

The enduring capacity of the Byzantine state to intervene, in a way that was both regulatory and practical, in the agrarian economy is all the more striking in that several of the fields of intervention were precisely those that, in the West, were most hostage to the arbitrary behavior of the great private landowners. As an example one may mention the Byzantine state's power to administer or reassign untenanted properties and the role of clasmatic lands, different from that of the *absae* or *vacantes* lands of the great western estates of the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>25</sup>

More generally, the tributary nature of the Byzantine state meant that its officials measured the surface of fields and orchards, indeed of space; described holdings or listed their tenants; and defined and periodically adjusted the basis of the land tax. In short, the employee of the fisc became a familiar figure in rural society. The use of computers to process the quantitative data supplied by the fiscal registers or by the accompanying *praktika* has enabled us to grasp the principles and formal rules followed by the public officials. For the student of the medieval West, there is a twofold lesson to be drawn from the range of research that, in this field, has enriched Byzantine studies. First, the absence of this type of document, or even of any mention of it, in the West, from the eighth to ninth century on, and the private nature of those western documents whose content is most comparable—polyptychs and rent-rolls—is in itself indicative of the disappearance of the fiscal yoke from the Carolingian period on.<sup>26</sup> From then, and until the thirteenth century, the demarcation of cultivated land and the measurement of parcels of land became, in the West, the business of notaries or scribes acting exclusively on behalf of private individuals. But a second conclusion is of greater interest: the rebirth of the state and, thereby, of its tributary domination, observable in Europe since the thirteenth century, had the effect of bringing about the establishment of detailed fiscal registers, first of all in the large Italian communes. The oldest surviving fiscal cadasters, such as the great cadaster of Orvieto of 1292, have been analyzed with the help of the computer. The analysis shows clearly that they, like the equivalent Byzantine documents, followed principles of bureaucratic formalization that, in themselves, were responses to the needs of the state and to social conditions.<sup>27</sup>

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Pakourianos). The author also notes that the *typikon* presents us with “une image valable pour un très grand nombre de cas semblables” (p. 181).

<sup>24</sup> As, for example, the will of Eustathios Boilas, commented on in Lemerle, *Cinq études*, 15–63. For the western equivalents of these “poches d'esclavage rural” in the world of estate *ministeriales*, one can find all useful references in A. Verhulst, “The Decline of Slavery and the Economic Expansion of the Early Middle Ages,” *Past and Present* 133 (1991): 195–203.

<sup>25</sup> See J.-P. Devroey, “*Mansi absi*: Indices de crise ou de croissance de l'économie rurale du haut Moyen Age?” *Le Moyen Age* 82 (1976): 421–51.

<sup>26</sup> In addition to the study by Wickham, quoted above, note 22, see also J.-P. Devroey, “Polyptyques et fiscalité à l'époque carolingienne: Une nouvelle approche,” *RBPH* (1985): 783–94.

<sup>27</sup> On the subject of the cadaster of Orvieto, which names more than 6,300 taxpayers and, it should be borne in mind, lists more than 18,500 parcels, see E. Carpentier, *Orvieto et son contado à la fin du*

A more thorough comparison of the measuring and registering practices of the Byzantine fisc with the registration practices of the *extimatores* of thirteenth- to fifteenth-century Italian communes would be most enlightening. This is a subject for the future.

It is also well known that the forms of intervention of the tributary state are not limited to the levying of taxes. It is apparent that the Byzantine state played a motive role in numerous areas of the life of the countryside. Without being exhaustive, one could mention the weighty role of the state in the definition of the juridical status of the various categories of tenants, in the mobility of rural populations, and in important transfers of property. The state also established population policies to meet local or regional military needs and influenced the organization of regional or interregional exchange structures through the preferential treatment of urban demand. In all these fields, recent historiography shows clearly how the particularities of the tributary state, as defined by historical anthropologists, make a comparison with Islam more pertinent than a reference to the feudal West.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, I would like to raise a question, central to Byzantine rural history, that is very revealing, from the western point of view, of its particularities: the variable or permanent coexistence of two apparently distinct structures, the village and the estate. As a form of settlement and of the organization of cultivated space, and also as a social unit, the village is certainly the primary agrarian structure. However unequal and socially differentiated it may be internally, the village is a community. It distills the forms peculiar to peasant society, rich perhaps in internal conflict but also in its ability to soothe these antagonisms and to create local custom. Until the eleventh century the state, in contrast with the West, was committed to the protection of the village. From the eleventh century on, however, this structure, always vulnerable, became more clearly prey to the estates and to the greed of the landed aristocracy. The latter, however, is seen to have been quite different from the contemporaneous aristocracies of the West, clearly because of its links with the state. But this was also because of the particular nature of its family networks, its mobility and firm establishment within the empire, and its ability, at least until the period of the Palaiologoi, to absorb new men. The great estates paralleled these developments and were directly affected by them. Until the eleventh century, the structure of the estate is in fact quite reminiscent of that of the western *curtis* or *villa*; it engendered similar forms of settlement: isolated farms and scattered hamlets with dependent settlers. It was run along similar lines of economic management and social structure: the division into lots of the areas reclaimed by agriculture, the strong presence of the estates' steward whose image, as

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*XIIIe siècle: Ville et campagne dans le cadastre de 1292* (Paris, 1986). Also some very useful contributions in the work of J.-L. Biget, J.-C. Hervé, and Y. Thébert, eds., *Les cadastres anciens des villes et leur traitement informatique* (Rome, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> Some of the most stimulating works on this subject are S. Amin, *Sobre el desarrollo desigual de las formaciones sociales* (Barcelona, 1974); P. Chalmeta, "Al-Andalus: Société 'féodale'?" in *Le cuisinier et le philosophe: Hommage à Maxime Rodinson* (Paris, 1982), 179–90; and above all the exceptional text by P. Guichard, *Les Musulmans de Valence et la reconquête, XIe–XIIIe siècles* (Damascus, 1990–1991, esp. 2:247ff.

portrayed by the *epitropos* of the *Geoponika*, mirrors on all points that of the *villicus* of the great Frankish estates, described in Charlemagne's *Capitulare de villis*. The occasional presence of elements of fortification designed to protect—really or symbolically—the estate and the preferential investment in certain activities (e.g., mills, vineyards, and olive orchards) are all elements of similarity.

Thus there is no fundamental difference between the structure of the great estate of Byzantium and that of a type of large estate that is easy to find in the ninth to tenth centuries in the Mediterranean Latin West,<sup>29</sup> even if this statement cannot be extended to include the great Frankish estates in general. But from the eleventh century on, in conditions that there is no reason to repeat here, the system underwent a series of profound transformations. As a result, what had been a vigorous and quite clearly defined economic unit became a more complex management structure by virtue of the absorption, into the sphere of economic control of the estates, of rural communities henceforth submitted to the hybrid demands of subordination to the state and the domanial context. This development reveals new distinguishing features. The establishment, from the twelfth century on, of a real culture of estate management and accounting afforded the Byzantine landlord a clearer picture of his interests. The documentation clearly reveals a concern for reinvestment of part of the land revenues in the agricultural sector, a form of economic behavior unknown at that time in the feudal West. There can be no doubt that the smallholding allocated mainly (but not exclusively) to a nuclear peasant family continued to be the rule. However, the forms of integration of the rural communities into estate control, known from case studies permitted by the documentation, for example, the studies on the villages of Mamitzon and Radolibos, point to situations entirely irreconcilable with the patterns of western agrarian history of the same period. For example, the well-known case study of the village of Mamitzon in the 1320s presents the picture of a structure that combines a considerable domanial reserve given over to grain cultivated through the tenants' corvée labor, together with revenues of fiscal origin levied on the peasants and their plots. It would be fruitless to search for a system of economic organization so complex, and based on such a level of institutional synthesis, in the western seigneurial structure.

These final observations point to a conclusion. For the student of western medieval Europe who is fond of comparative history, the possibilities raised by Byzantine agrarian history are rich in content and full of potential, but on one condition. We must always be careful, if we are to make valid comments on the similarities and differences, to examine the rural realities of the East from two different perspectives. The first allows one to describe the conditions (be they environmental, technical, demographic, and also social, in part) that created a sophisticated agrosystem and one that, in many respects, was developed at the same time and at the same pace as in the western Mediterranean. The second should, on the other hand, point up the factors proper to By-

<sup>29</sup> See P. Toubert, "L'Italie rurale aux VIII<sup>e</sup>–IX<sup>e</sup> siècles: Essai de typologie domaniale," in *I problemi comuni dell'Europa nel secolo VIII* (Spoleto, 1973), 95–132 and 187–206. Here I refer to the great estates belonging to Type I of the typology mentioned.

zantium: political (in the broad sense), institutional, social, and cultural. These two perspectives, as I have attempted to demonstrate briefly, should be complementary. Only a proper awareness of this complementarity allows a healthy comparative approach that would follow the principles and wishes once expressed by Marc Bloch in a fine programmatic essay that has lost nothing of its relevance.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> M. Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes," *Revue de synthèse historique* 46 (1928): 15–50, repr. in idem, *Histoire et historiens*, 94–123.