

The Insular Worlds of Byzantium

Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Studies Colloquium



Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection

The Oak Room, Fellowship House

November 15, 2019



Colloquiarchs: Luca Zavagno and Nikolas Bakirtzis

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Byzantine islands have been largely considered marginal to the dramatic political, social, and economic changes the Byzantine heartland experienced in the seventh century and at the onset of Arab expansion in the eastern Mediterranean. Major islands, such as Sicily, Sardinia, Malta, and the Balearics, were lost forever. Others, like Crete and Cyprus, remained in flux until they were briefly reclaimed by Byzantium in the tenth century before coming under Latin control during the Crusades. Contrary to the perspectives offered by written sources (Byzantine, Arab, and Western), which for the most part dismiss them as marginal spaces, places of exile, or military outposts along maritime frontiers, islands constitute the best examples of the transformative adaptability of Byzantine society during periods of volatility and transition. Instead of decline and abandonment, archaeological work and results point to the existence of active communities, local and regional economic exchanges, and cultural continuities and interconnections during the period between the seventh century and the fall of Constantinople to the Crusaders in 1204.

Speakers will address the topic of Byzantine islands through case studies viewed in their broader Mediterranean and comparative contexts. The exploration of islands as hubs where Byzantine, Islamic, and Western European cultures encountered and influenced the local political, economic, and social structures will permit new insights into the networks of island societies and their legacies. Not only were islands located along commercial shipping routes, but, as spaces of adaptive economic activities and social strategies that were molded by military and political realities, they presented unique opportunities for cultural interconnections. In this context, the “Insular Worlds of Byzantium” will provide new and revised perspectives on the Byzantine Mediterranean and beyond.

Program

Friday, November 15

- 8:30am Morning registration and coffee
- 9:00 Welcome (Anna Stavrakopoulou, Dumbarton Oaks)
- 9:15 Introduction (Luca Zavagno and Nikolas Bakirtzis)

Chair: Luca Zavagno

- 9:30-10:00 **Salvatore Cosentino (Università di Bologna)**
Pillars of Empire: The Economic Role of the Big Mediterranean Islands from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages
- 10:00-10:30 **Sarah Davis-Secord (University of New Mexico)**
Encounters on the Edge of the Empire: Muslims and Christians in Byzantine Sicilian Hagiography
- 10:30-11:00 **Q&A Session**
- 11:00-11:15 **Coffee Break**
- 11:15-11:45 **Joanita Vroom (Leiden University)**
From Euboea to Cyprus: Byzantine Pottery in Context
- 11:45-12:15 **Nikolas Bakirtzis (The Cyprus Institute)**
Islands as Deserts: Monastic Practice, Patronage, and Control
- 12:15 – 12:45 **Q&A Session**
- 12:45 – 2:30 **Lunch Break**

Chair: Nikolas Bakirtzis

2:30 – 3:00 **William Caraher (University of North Dakota)**
An Island Archaeology of Early Byzantine Cyprus

3:00-3:30 **Luca Zavagno (Bilkent University)**
*“A Lost World That Never Died”: Urban Landscapes in the
Byzantine Tyrrhenian in the Passage from Late Antiquity to
the Middle Ages*

3:30-3:45 **Coffee Break**

3:45-4:15 **Jonathan Shea (Dumbarton Oaks)**
*Ruling the Islands of Byzantium: Evidence for Administration
and Government in the Sigillographic Material*

4:15-4:35 **Q&A Session**

4:35-5:00 Final discussion and concluding remarks

Abstracts

**Pillars of Empire: The Economic Role of the Big
Mediterranean Islands from Late Antiquity to the
Early Middle Ages**
Salvatore Cosentino (Università di Bologna)

In the thirty years since the appearance of Elisabeth Malamut's *Les îles de l'empire byzantin* (1988), scholarly research on the insular world has been considerably growing. Today, we have a better knowledge both of the development of each single island and what we could define as the Mediterranean "insular economic system." This is characterized by its own traits vis-à-vis the mainland economies of the Byzantine Empire. The present contribution aims at comparing the economies of Crete, Sicily, and Sardinia from the fifth to the early ninth century. Although the abovementioned islands present us with some differences in terms of extension, geo-strategic position, and natural environment, they shared many similarities: agricultural and artisanal production, towns controlling large rural settlements, importance of urban markets and rural communities in their economies, and prevalence of big estates. Since these islands were not greatly affected by military events, they developed strong economies, which resulted in significant accumulation of wealth. Their position at the center of the Mediterranean was of paramount importance for the movement of people and goods across the coastal regions of the empire; this fact, along with the solidity of Sardinian, Sicilian, and Cretan economies, greatly contributed to the survival of Constantinopolitan governmental structures during the tumultuous seventh and eighth centuries.

**Encounters on the Edge of the Empire:
Muslims and Christians in Byzantine Sicilian Hagiography**
Sarah Davis-Secord (University of New Mexico)

Sicily was a primary outpost of Byzantine power in the late antique and early medieval Mediterranean. From Justinian's conquest in 535 CE until the island came under Aghlabid Muslim control starting in 827 CE, Sicily was a bulwark of Byzantium's economic and military control of the eastern Mediterranean and served as a major connection point between Constantinople, Rome, and

North Africa. Analysis of intellectual and material connections demonstrates the centrality of the island for the Empire, despite its somewhat peripheral location at its far western edge. As Muslim forces removed the African coast from Greek control throughout the seventh century, Sicily took on an even greater importance, and Constantinople attempted regularly to defend and, later, to recover the island. Within this context, Sicily was the site of repeated incursions by Muslim raiders seeking first, booty, and later, conquest. The island thus provides a case study for historians to think carefully about the intersections of connectivity and conflict across a porous and contested maritime border.

One set of sources from the island is particularly useful for investigating these intersections. The surviving corpus of Greek *bioi* from early medieval Sicily illuminates both the monastic and civil cultures of the island and the Christian responses to the Muslim raids. Some scholars have noted, but have not fully explored, the multiple accounts within these *bioi* of personal interactions between the featured saint and the Muslims he encountered in the course of his monastic life and travels—both on the island and in travel to or from it. Such interpersonal relations include violence and the saints' miraculous responses, but also cross-cultural conversations and the opportunity for détente. This paper will analyze these encounters for what they can tell us about how Byzantines imagined it possible to interact with Muslims within the broader context of this contested space. This analysis will also illuminate western Byzantine conceptions of relations between Christians and Muslims, in comparison with accounts of similar encounters along the Byzantine-Muslim frontier in the East.

From Euboa to Cyprus: Byzantine Pottery in Context **Joanita Vroom (Leiden University)**

This paper aims to present a general overview of the distribution of Byzantine pottery finds (fine wares, amphorae, and coarse wares) throughout the Eastern Mediterranean from approximately the seventh to the thirteenth centuries. The focus will range from pottery finds unearthed on some islands once part of the Byzantine Empire, to wares excavated at sites in neighboring areas in the Near East and Egypt. Comparison of ceramics from these regions will shed new light on trade and exchange patterns of such commodities in this period.

The pottery of the Byzantine period in the Eastern Mediterranean, though omnipresent at most sites, has not yet been studied comprehensively. The capacity of the “later” wares to yield valuable information about patterns of production, trade, consumption, and cultural interaction remains partially unexplored. Nevertheless, studying pottery is of paramount importance, as it is the most mobile and ubiquitous material of the past, and serves as an indicator of broader patterns of economic and cultural exchanges and interactions.

Islands as Deserts: Monastic Practice, Patronage, and Control Nikolas Bakirtzis (The Cyprus Institute)

Monasteries helped to define the experience of the Byzantine island; they served a broad range of functions as they controlled strategic locations, monitored trade routes, provided economic development, and regulated access to sites of cult and pilgrimage. These complex roles for monastic institutions relied on important processes and strategies such as the symbolic and physical taming of the natural landscape through hardship and ascetic prayer, the timely establishment of a supporting network of patrons and benefactors, and the development of close economic and cultural relations with local communities. On the whole, monasteries helped the Byzantine state to control its insular possessions and to exert its influence over local populations, even during times when direct rule over its islands had ceased. Monastic life was an integral part of the cultural landscapes of Byzantine islands, and to a large extent, its surviving traditions constitute the best-preserved examples of the long-lasting influence of Byzantine culture.

This paper will address aspects of the development and role of monasticism on the islands of the Byzantine world. Monastic communities served diverse roles in these insular settings which appropriately served as the desired “deserts” of monastic practice. Solitary monks seeking seclusion withdrew into caves, mountainous peaks, or desolate islets effectively exploring the rural landscape as a prelude to the foundation of organized monastic complexes. Hagiographies and founding narratives offer valuable insight because they describe the steps taken by *ketetors* (founders) like Neophytos the Recluse in Cyprus, Nikitas, Ioannis, and Joseph in Chios, and Christodoulos in Patmos, to battle the wilderness in order to establish thriving monastic traditions in remote and unforgiving landscapes. The monasteries of the Virgin Hozoviotissa in Amorgos (eleventh century), St.

John the Theologian in Patmos, St. Hilarion in Cyprus, and the remains of monastic complexes on the small, rocky islets of the Princess Islands, provide some examples of the practice.

An Island Archaeology of Early Byzantine Cyprus **William Caraher (University of North Dakota)**

Over the past 20 years the work of historians and archaeologists has complicated our understanding of the sixth to eighth centuries on the island of Cyprus. The tidy narratives of devastating invasions, earthquakes, condominiums, and social dislocation have given way to more messy and nuanced understandings of these centuries. Some centers saw continued prosperity while others experienced decline; innovative architecture complemented more modest forms of ceramics; invasions created destruction and economic ties. The complexity of this era offers some insights into the character of Cypriot insularity.

This paper is grounded in recent work at the sites of Polis (ancient Arsinoe), modern Polis in western Cyprus, and the site of Pyla-Koutsopetria on the eastern side of the island. Both sites produced a substantial assemblage of late Roman to early Byzantine pottery and a basilica style church. Architecture and ceramics offer perspectives on how the Cypriot island landscape mediated distinctive economic relationships and forms of cultural and religious expression. The connection between these sites and other places on the island, across the region, and around the Mediterranean suggests the contours of an insular culture that is neither uniform nor consistent.

On the one hand, the difference in the character of assemblages and architecture across the island (and between Koutsopetria and Polis) makes defining a singular late Roman or early Byzantine Cypriot insular identity impossible. On the other hand, these differences reflect both historical trends that defined the island's political and social landscape for centuries and distinct pressures in the sixth through eighth centuries. In the case of Cyprus, an island archaeology informed as much by historical contingency as geography provides a context for a new understanding of the Early Byzantine era.

**“A Lost World That Never Died”:
Urban Landscapes in Byzantine Tyrrhenian in the Passage
from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages
Luca Zavagno (Bilkent University)**

Research on the trajectories of Byzantine urbanism in the so-called “Dark Ages” has seldom focused on the western Mediterranean. Indeed, the Tyrrhenian Sea has been regarded as a world soon lost to Byzantium as opposed to the Anatolian plateau or the Aegean Sea. This is even more striking since the last two decades have seen significant archaeological attention on the Adriatic Sea where cities like Butrint and Comacchio developed as two important centers commercially, linking the eastern Mediterranean with the Balkans and northern Europe in the eighth and early ninth century.

Indeed, the lack of historiographical focus had to do with both the dearth of material and documentary sources as well as with the idea that Constantinople simply showed a lack of interest or inherent inability to implement any real military and political grasp over its former western possessions. These were supposedly lost first to the repeated Arab incursions, and then to the Lombard expansion, and finally to the Carolingian imperial grand strategy. The result was the almost complete abandonment of the urban coastal sites and the transformation of regional settlement pattern, as only fortified settlements dotted a ruralized and increasingly autarchic landscape.

In fact, recently published archaeological scholarship on Sicily and Sardinia, as well as refined analysis of material fossil-guides like globular amphorae or painted wares, have helped to reverse the aforementioned historiographical trend. The aim of this paper is to propose a new reading of the available sigillographic, numismatic, ceramic, and archaeological evidence available for Tyrrhenian urban sites like Cagliari and Olbia in Sardinia, Agrigento, Palermo, Catania, and Taormina (as well as Syracuse and Amalfi). This should point to the resilience of urban economic structures and the continuous role they played in the administrative, fiscal, and political structures of the Empire.

**Ruling the Islands of Byzantium: Evidence for Administration
and Government in the Sigillographic Material**
Jonathan Shea (Dumbarton Oaks)

This paper will explore the administration of the islands of the eastern Mediterranean through the evidence of lead seals. Byzantium was a famously bureaucratic empire, and much of the evidence for this activity comes from the thousands of lead seals, which are often the only surviving testament to the generations of men who toiled in the capital and throughout the provinces to keep the empire running. The sigillographic record for the islands of Byzantium consists of material discovered on the islands and seals which record the names of insular provinces in their inscriptions. By focusing on Cyprus, Crete, and the Aegean Islands, this paper will address the challenges that governing islands presented to the Middle Byzantine government. Beginning by examining the officials present and at what dates on the islands, their jurisdictions and duties, the paper will construct a picture of the administration of these provinces. The second part of the paper will explore the administrative connection between the capital and its insular provinces; who was being sent to the islands and what positions had they held beforehand? Finally, the paper will present the administration of the islands in the wider context of Middle Byzantine provincial government by comparing the sigillographic data from them to that from mainland provinces.