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**Two hegemonies, one island:
Cyprus as a “Middle Ground” between the Byzantines and the Arabs
(650-850 A.D.)**

Reti Medievali Rivista, 14, 2 (2013)

<<http://rivista.retimedievali.it>>



Firenze University Press

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1. Prolegomenoi: Cyprus and the traps of the traditional historiography

A recently produced French drama, *Des hommes et des dieux*¹, narrates the story of trappist monks living a peaceful routine of prayer, medical assistance, and community interaction with the local Muslim population of a little Algerian village; although this idyllic situation was soon to be brutally interrupted by the threats of some Islamic fundamentalists, the Christian monks are regarded as of a piece with the rural Muslim society: they provide the population with medical assistance, trade the honey and fruits produced in the monastery orchards, take part in the local feasts and celebrations and are even consulted when important political decisions must be taken. The audience is therefore compelled to ask which of the two communities – if any – is really hegemonic? Either we define the concept of hegemony simply according to the rules of etymology (from the Greek ἡγεμονία, *hēgemonía*, meaning leadership, power) or if we prefer, we lean towards Gramsci's use of the term² to denote the cultural predominance of one social class over others, it is difficult for the audience to decide which

* This paper is dedicated to all those who have been trying to overcome the so-called Cypriot divide (in particular my friends and former colleagues Jim Kusch, Michael Walsh and Matthew Harpster) and to my daughter Sofia, who – I hope – will live in an island free from the ghosts of the past and full of hopes for a better future. The present article partially stems from the two papers the author delivered at the workshop “Excavating the Mediterranean past” hosted by the Mediterranean Studies Program at University of California Santa Barbara and at the University of Princeton in November 2012.

¹ <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1588337/>> retrieved on 1 September 2013.

² See A. Monasta, *Antonio Gramsci*, in «Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education», 23 (1993), 3-4, pp. 597-612 with further and detailed bibliography.

of the two communities pictured in the movie is exerting full control over the other. It seems that these coexist and mutually benefit from each other's influence and presence. An idea that seems to undermine the very concept of hegemony as, in fact, the suffix *monos* (single, unique) – as embedded in the root of the word “hegemony” – is here diluted into a double and reciprocal “dominance”.

Rather than regarding such an episode as a fashionable and politically-utopian exception, one can see the monolithic idea of hegemony challenged once again in fifteenth century Italy, when “Turceschi” raids repeatedly hit Friuli and Puglia (in the north- and south-eastern parts of the country) and an Ottoman expedition corps conquered the city of Otranto in 1480³. Even then, when the dominant Christian culture recommended showing no mercy in the face of devilish invaders and fighting the unbelievers to the last man (fantasizing about new possible crusades), the real dialectic was not that between two enemy powers but between the (supposed) «official collective hostility and the unofficial accords punctuating everyday life»⁴. The latter could morph into Christian (or Jewish) merchants traveling between the two sides, Christian missionaries who tried to convert the Ismaelites, Christian slaves who abandoned the cross to become Muslim, and eventually Christian women who – free of any constriction – chose to follow the Ottomans when they were eventually forced to leave Otranto in 1498⁵.

With these preliminary caveats in mind, a scholar dealing with the history of Cyprus in the passage from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages is led to ask if these interpretative categories could apply to the years the traditional historiography labeled as “condominium”. Supposedly, the period spanning the three hundred years separating the first Arab raids targeting the island in 649 A.D. and 653 A.D. from the Byzantine *re-conquista* in 965 A.D. was characterized by «the decline of urban life, (...) the lack of firm government *and the* reversion almost everywhere to a non-monetized economy»⁶. In fact, the historiography of medieval Cyprus has always regarded the period under consideration as an age of swift decline and impoverishment: a sort of parenthesis between the great prosperity of the fourth and fifth century and the gradual recovery following the return of the Byzantines to the island in the tenth century⁷. This idea, indeed, mirrors in the concept of “eastern Mediterranean Dark Ages” as introduced by Clive Foss in the 1990s as he concluded that since the

³ G. Ricci, *I Turchi alle porte*, Bologna 2008, pp. 34ff.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

⁶ A.G. Pitsillides and D.M. Metcalf, *Islamic and Byzantine coins in Cyprus during the Condominium centuries*, in «Episteiris tou Kentrou Epistemonikon Ereunon», 21 (1995), pp. 11-12.

⁷ D.M. Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus*, Nicosia 2009, pp. 31ff.; C.P. Kyrris, *History of Cyprus*, Nicosia 1985, pp. 284ff. I have dealt with the so-called traditional chronological tripartition of the History of Cyprus between the fourth and the twelfth century in my article entitled *At the Edge of two Empires: the economy of Cyprus between the Late Antiquity and the early Middle ages (650s-800 A.D.)*, in «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 65-66 (2011-2012), pp. 121-155.

seventh century universal desolation and desertion of coastal regions was brought by the attacks of the Persians and the Arabs⁸. In the very case of Cyprus this train of thoughts has brought about an almost obsessive impulse to prove the catastrophic impact of the Arab invasions⁹ and, more important, an almost endless debate on the nature and origins of the treaty between the Umayyads and the Byzantines¹⁰, which in 686-688 A.D. stated that «they would share in equal parts the tax revenue of Cyprus, Armenia and Iberia»¹¹.

Diverting the focus of the historiographic narrative is not the purpose of the present article, which, however, aims to re-appraise the role and extent of the Arab raids as a watershed in the history of early medieval Cyprus. As I have already hinted elsewhere, an "alternative approach" relying on a methodological critique of the Arab, Syriac and Byzantine literary and documentary sources, a re-elaboration and re-consideration of the archaeological material (seals, coins, and mainly ceramics) yielded by the past excavations on the (now inaccessible) northern half of the island¹², a more aware and scientific approach (in terms of chronological classification and identification) to the material culture (ceramics, buckles, glass¹³) revealed by the current excavations in the south-

⁸ See for instance C. Foss, *The Lycian Coast in the Byzantine Age*, in «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 48 (1994), pp. 1-52.

⁹ On the Arab invasions of Cyprus see mainly A. Beihammer, *Zypern und die Byzantinisch-Arabische Seepolitik vom 8. bis zum Beginn des 10. Jahrhunderts*, in *Aspects of Arab Seafaring. An attempt to fill the gaps of maritime history*, eds. Y. al-Hiji and V. Christides, Athens 2002, pp. 44-61; A. Papageorgiou, *Les premières incursions arabes à Chypre et leurs conséquences*, in *Aferoma eis ton Konstantinon Spyriadikin*, Nicosia 1964, pp. 152-159; R.-J. Lilie, *Zypern zwischen Byzantinern und Arabern (7.-10. Jahrhundert)*, in *Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte Zyperns von der Spätantike bis zur Neuzeit. Symposium, München 12.13. Juli 2002*, eds. J. Deckers, M.-E. Mitsou and S. Rogge, New York-Berlin 2005, pp. 65-88; A.I. Dikigoropoulos, *The Political Status of Cyprus. A.D. 648-965*, in «Report of the Department of Antiquities Cyprus», (1940-1948) [Nicosia 1958], pp. 94-114; R. Browning, *Byzantium and Islam in Cyprus in the Early Middle Ages*, in «Epeteiris tou Kentrou Epistemonikon Ereunon», 9 (1977-1979), pp. 101-116; A. Cameron, *Cyprus at the time of the Arab conquest*, in «Cyprus Historical Review», 1 (1992), pp. 27-49; A.H.S. Megaw, 'Betwixt Greeks and Saracens', in *Acts of the International Symposium 'Cyprus between the Orient and the Occident'*, Nicosia 1986, pp. 505-519; E. Chrysos, *Cyprus in the early Byzantine times*, in *'The Sweet Land of Cyprus'. Papers given at the Twenty-Fifth Jubilee Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 1991*, eds. A. Bryer and G. Gheorghallides, Nicosia 1993, pp. 3-14; C.P. Kyrris, *The nature of the Arab-Byzantine relations*, in «Graeco-Arabica», 3 (1984), pp. 149-175; and Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., pp. 395-418. The latter has further and updated bibliography on the *status quaestionis*.

¹⁰ A.I. Dikigoropoulos, 'Cyprus 'betwixt Greeks and Saracens' A.D. 647-965', (Ph.D. diss. Oxford University, 1961); Dikigoropoulos, *The Political Status of Cyprus* cit., p. 99; Beihammer, *Zypern* cit.; Lilie, *Zypern zwischen Byzantinern und Arabern* cit., pp. 68-69; C.P. Kyrris, *Cyprus, Byzantium and the Arabs from the mid-7th to the early 8th century*, in *Oriente ed Occidente fra medioevo ed età moderna. Studi in onore di Geo Pistarino*, a cura di L. Balletto, Genova 1997, pp. 625-674. See also M. Mansouri, *Chypre dans les sources arabes médiévales*, Nicosia 2002 and V. Christides, *The Image of Cyprus in the Arabic sources*, Nicosia 2006, pp. 20ff.

¹¹ Theophanes, *Chronicle*, ed. C. Mango and R. Scott, Oxford 1997, p. 506.

¹² Zavagno, *At the Edges of two Empires* cit., pp. 121-130.

¹³ E. Procopiou, *Buzantines porpes apo thn Amathounta kai thn Palaia Sullogh tou Kupriakou*

ern part of the island should allow us to propose a different interpretative scheme of the fate of Cyprus to the one traditionally adopted to interpret the declining fortunes of the island after the Muslim raids and the occupation of Syria and Palestine.

Indeed, as will be seen, a comparison of the trajectories of a “smooth transition” experienced by the latter in the period under consideration will help us to ascertain a degree of urban continuity, economic resilience and social vitality on the island, hinging on «its unique position between the Muslim and Christian worlds»¹⁴; a position which infers the maintenance of complex political and cultural relations between the Umayyads and the Byzantines and allows us to contextualize the events in Cyprus within the reshuffling of the balance of power in the seventh- and eighth-century Eastern Mediterranean.

Rather than becoming a sort of no man’s land, a barren victim of the conflict between powers, the island emerges, edging into and bridging two cultural spheres, pointing to the importance of considering the diversity and peculiarity of regional and sub-regional trajectories in the history of the Mediterranean¹⁵. In this sense, archaeology and a cautious and critical use of the primary sources will be used to help the reader move along micro-historical lines to determine the peculiar indigenous strategies of survival in the conflict between the Caliphate and the Empire, at the same time allowing us to intercept historical events on a larger scale¹⁶. Indeed, in Cyprus two hegemonies morphed into diverse, concurring and sometimes overlapping political, social and economic forms. However, as in the Algerian village portrayed in the movie, these seldom became exclusive or excluding. In truth, as will be seen, two powers developed peculiar and local solutions for coexisting like along the Italian frontier in the late fifteenth century.

Therefore, it seems to me possible to define early medieval Cyprus as a real “middle ground”: «a place in between: in between cultures, peoples»¹⁷ and in between (hegemonic) empires. Although originally used to explain how Euro-

Mouseiou, in *Cyprus and the Aegean in Antiquity. Proceedings of the International Conference from the Prehistoric period to the 7th Century. 8-10 December 1995*, Nicosia 1997, pp. 332-344; P. Armstrong, *Trade in the east Mediterranean in the 8th century*, in *Byzantine Trade 4th-12th centuries. The archaeology of local, regional and international exchange. Papers of the Thirty-eight Symposium of Byzantine Studies, St. John’s College, University of Oxford, March 2004*, ed. M.M. Mango, Oxford 2009, pp. 157-178; S. Young, *Glass, in Kourion. Excavations in the Episcopal Precinct*, ed. A.H.S. Megaw, Washington D.C. 2007, pp. 485-512. See also T. Papacostas, *Byzantine Cyprus. The testimony of its churches, 650-1200* (Ph.D. diss. Oxford University, 1999).

¹⁴ H. Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquest. How the Spread of Islam changed the world we live in*, Philadelphia 2007, p. 326.

¹⁵ L. Zavagno, *Cities in Transition. Urbanism in Byzantium between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford 2009, pp. 14-22.

¹⁶ *Giochi di scala. La microstoria alla prova dell’esperienza*, ed. J. Revel, Roma 2006.

¹⁷ R. White, *Middle Ground. Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge 2011, p. XXVI.

peans and Indians met in the so-called *pays d'en haut* (the region around the Great Lakes in North America), the concept of middle ground has since been adopted to describe both the process of accommodation (and creation of a common system of exchange) between two cultural groups and the historical space stemming from the process¹⁸. «On the middle ground diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstanding»¹⁹. This creative process resulted from attempts to follow normal conventions in new situations and could be unintelligible to "foreigners"; one could here think of the commonality a tenth-century pilgrim (st. Constantine the Jew²⁰) found so peculiar to Cyprus and – at the same time – so uncomfortable: «while he was performing prayer in one of the sanctuary of the island the Ismailites Saracens came upon the sanctuary for they had part in the government of Cyprus. This prompted the blessed man quickly to leave the island»²¹.

Moreover, as White describes the middle ground as a process replicable in space and time he also urges not to regard it as a peaceful one as force and violence are seldom foreign to building and maintaining a middle ground²². This allows us to re-appraise the impact of Arab naval raids hitting the island in the seventh and eighth century and the forced transfers of the local population staged by both the Byzantines and the Umayyads in 691-692 or 745 A.D.²³. Rather than regarding «subsequent alternate naval successes, strategic advances and retreats as the outcome of a desperate struggle to destroy enemy forces»²⁴ one is encouraged to focus on the inability of both sides to gain their ends through force. This in turn led to contextualize these confrontational episodes as they followed the ebb and flow of Eastern Mediterranean history: the political influence of the Caliphate looked stronger in the second half of the seventh century²⁵, the administrative and ecclesiastical sway of the Byzantine empire was held almost undisturbed from the beginning of the eighth to the twelfth century, whereas the island retained sound commercial ties with the Umayyad Levant in the seventh and eighth centuries²⁶, at the same time remaining part of the Byzantine sphere of economic influence.

¹⁸ R. White, *Creative Misunderstanding and New Understandings*, in «The William and Mary Quarterly», Third Series, 63 (2006), 2, pp. 8-14.

¹⁹ White, *Middle Ground* cit., p. XXVI.

²⁰ *Life of Constantine the Jew*, in *Acta sanctorum*, Nov. IV, pp. 635-638.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 638.

²² White, *Creative Misunderstanding* cit., p. 10.

²³ Theophanes, *Chronicle* cit., pp. 509, 585-586.

²⁴ T. Lounghis, *Byzantium in the Eastern Mediterranean: Safeguarding East Roman Identity (407-1204)*, Nicosia 2010, p. 11.

²⁵ Lilie, *Zypern zwischen Byzantinern und Arabern* cit., pp. 68-69; Beihammer, *Zypern* cit.

²⁶ Zavagno, *At the edge of two Empires* cit.; see also T. Papacostas, *The Economy of Late Antique Cyprus*, in *Economy and Exchange in the East Mediterranean during Late Antiquity*, in *Proceedings of the Conference of Somerville College. Oxford, 29th May 1991*, eds. S. Kingsley and M. Decker, Oxford 2001, pp. 107-128. Also G.W. Bowersock, *The International Role of Late Antique Cyprus*,

2. Two hegemonies, one island: society, politics and economy of early medieval Cyprus

According to the literary sources (written in Arab, Syriac and Greek)²⁷, Mu'awiya, the Arab governor of Syria – after having tried at least twice (in 643 and 645 A.D.) to persuade the Caliph ('Umar and then 'Uthmân) to invade the Cypriot outpost still under full Byzantine control – staged the first Arab naval raid against Cyprus in 649 A.D. Indeed, in 647 A.D. the threat represented by the strategic role of Cyprus was too big to be overlooked²⁸. Mu'awiya decided to summon the Syrian and Egyptian fleets and crossed from Acre to Cyprus²⁹ with a large number of ships³⁰, attacking and sacking Salamis-Constantia³¹. The Arab (and Byzantine) sources do not provide us with any details concerning the plunder of other main urban centers. In fact, the Arab fleet was forced to retreat once rumors of the imminent arrival of a Byzantine fleet lead by the admiral Kakorizos spread across the island³².

A second expedition dated four years later to 653-654 A.D.³³ apparently wrought havoc in many Cypriot urban sites (Amathos, Laptha, Salamis-Constantia, Soloi and Kition³⁴), some of which hastily erected walls to protect their population³⁵. The ninth-century Arab historian Balâdhurî, one of the main sources

(*The Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation, 14th Annual Lecture on the History and Archaeology of Cyprus*), Nicosia 2000.

²⁷ J. Wellhausen, *Arab wars with the Byzantines in the Umayyad period*, in *Arab-Byzantine relations in early Islamic times*, ed. M. Bonner, Aldershot 2004, pp. 35ff.

²⁸ On this see L. Zavagno, "Betwixt the Greek and the Saracens": coins and coinage in Cyprus in the seventh and eighth century, in «Byzantion», 81 (2011), pp. 462ff. with detailed bibliography; al-Tabarî, *Tarîkh al-Rasul wa'l-mulûk*, in *The History of Al-Tabarî*, a cura di E. Yar-Shater, Albany (New York) 1985-2000, IV, p. 258; Ibn Khurdâdhbeh, *Kitâb al-Masâlik wa'l Mamâlik*, in *Bibliotheca Geographorum arabicorum*, a cura di M.J. de Goeje, Leiden 1889, VI, p. 255; al-Balâdhurî, *Kitâb futûh al-buldân*, ed. and trans. P. K. Hitti, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, 2 vols., New York 1916, pp. 235-236; Theophanes, *Chronicle* cit., p. 344, p. 478; in truth according to al-Kufi (Ibn A'tham al-Kufi, *Kitâb al-Futûh*, ed. M. Khân, Hyderabad 1968-1975, XII, p. 352) Mu'awiya also emphasized the agricultural wealth and the mineral production of the island.

²⁹ al-Balâdhurî, *Kitâp* cit., XIII, p. 235; Agapius of Manbij, *Kitâb al-Unwan*, ed. A.A. Vasiliev, in «Patrologia Orientalis», 8 (1912), p. 480; Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, *Chronicle*, in Palmer, *The Seventh Century* cit., p. 93.

³⁰ Christides, *The Image* cit., p. 13; J. Pryor and E. Jeffreys, *The Age of Dromon. The Byzantine Navy ca. 500-1204*, Leiden 2006, pp. 24-25; Papacostas, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., pp. 208-211; Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., pp. 395-418. Also see all the contributions already listed above.

³¹ Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, *Chronicle* cit., 97; Theophanes, *Chronicle* cit., p. 344, p. 478.

³² Theophanes, *Chronicle* cit., p. 344, p. 478.

³³ al-Balâdhurî, *Kitâp* cit., XIII, p. 236; Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, *Chronicle* cit., p. 98.

³⁴ See on this Christides, *The Image* cit., pp. 21ff.

³⁵ A.H.S. Megaw, *Le fortificazioni bizantine a Cipro*, in «Corso di Cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina», 32 (1985), pp. 199-231; C. Balandier, *La défense des territoires à Chypre de l'époque archaïque aux invasions arabes (VIII^e s. av. n.è.-VII^e s. de. n.è.)*, in «Dialogues d'histoire ancienne», 28 (2002), 1, pp. 33ff.; Stewart, *Domes of Heaven* cit., pp. 73ff.

we have for the period³⁶, reports that Mu’awiya «sent to the island 12,000 men (...) and erected mosque in it. Moreover, Mu’awiya transplanted from Ba’labakk a group of men and *built* a city (...) whose inhabitants were assigned special stipends until his death»³⁷. Although this source is considerably late (more than two centuries separate our historian from the events) and – like all Arab sources – suffers from some limitations in scope, reliability, and party-prejudice and reveals itself to be a narrative made of multilayered composition³⁸, at least one Muslim outpost seemed to have existed in Cyprus. Archaeological excavations at Paphos (in the south-westernmost corner of the island) around the Limeniotissa Basilica (located in the area of the harbor and restored in the second half of the seventh century) have yielded a number of unpretentious buildings erected with *spolia*³⁹; among these is the floor of a rather showy but simple rectangular hall, revealed to be paved with polychrome marbles from the nave of the church and bearing Arabic inscriptions. These inscriptions, as Christides⁴⁰ has pointed out, all had funeral purposes and refer to three different chronological stages of the Arab presence, ranging from the late seventh to the late eighth century. It is also interesting to notice that these Arabic inscriptions pair with those found on post-LR 2 type amphorae traded into Paphos in the eighth century⁴¹.

The archaeological evidence from Paphos allows us to adjust the focus of Balâdhuri’s narrative: he reports that in 680 A.D. the Arab garrison was ordered back by Mu’awiya’s successor (his son Yazid), who also ordered the

³⁶ On al-Balâdhuri see Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquest* cit., p. 16; J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: historians and histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century*, Oxford 2010; and Mansouri, *Chypre dans les sources arabes* cit., pp. 124-125.

³⁷ al-Balâdhuri, *Kitâp* cit., XIII, p. 236.

³⁸ Unfortunately, there is no space here to propose a detailed discussion over the reliability of the different Arab traditions or selections and arrangements of *isnads* (chain of authoritative narratives) on the part of later Muslim historians like al-Balâdhuri and al-Tabarî (writing in the tenth century). It suffices here to note that it is essential to have a historiographic assessment of different available traditions and benefiting from their comparison: L. Conrad, *The Conquest of Arwâd: a source critical study of the historiography of the Early Medieval East*, in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, I, Problems in the Literary Source Material*, eds. A. Cameron and L. I. Conrad, Princeton 1992, pp. 317-401. See also A. Bourrout, *Entre mémoire et pouvoir. L’espace syrien sous les derniers Omayyades et les premiers Abbasides (v. 72-193/692-809)*, Leiden 2011; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses* cit., pp. 360ff.; Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquest*, 12ff.; A. Noth, *Isfahan-Nihawand. A source critical study of Early Islamic Historiography*, in *The Expansion of the Early Islamic State*, ed. F. Donner, Aldershot 2008, pp. 245-260; A. Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study*, London 1994 (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 3); and A. Cameron and L. I. Conrad, *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I. Problems in the Literary Source Material*, Princeton 1992.

³⁹ F. Maier and V. Karageorghis, *Paphos. History and Archaeology*, Nicosia 1984, pp. 300ff.

⁴⁰ Christides, *The Image* cit., pp. 51ff; also Papacostas, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., p. 212 and Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., pp. 262-264; A.H.S. Megaw, *A Muslim tombstone from Paphos*, in «Journal of Royal Asiatic Society», 82 (1950), pp. 108-109.

⁴¹ J. Vroom, *The other Dark Ages: early Medieval pottery finds in the Aegean as an archaeological challenge*, in R. Attoui, *When did Antiquity End? Archaeological Case Studies in Three Continents (BAR I.S. 2268)*, Oxford 2011, pp. 138.

city destroyed⁴². It is indeed possible that the (partial) Arab military occupation of Cyprus had a temporary character and hinged on its strategic position as the first of a chain of naval outposts on the route to Constantinople⁴³. In fact, after the failed siege of the capital of the Empire (674-678 A.D.) and the destruction of his fleet, Mu'awiyah had to come to terms with the Byzantines, who were now on the offensive through a series of counter-attacks targeting the coasts of Syria in which the maritime-corps of the Mardaites was involved⁴⁴; the thirty years as peace was signed by Constantine IV and Mu'awiyah in 679-680 A.D. did not mention Cyprus, which instead was included in the renewal of the treaty later ratified by Justinian II and Yazid (686-688 A.D.)⁴⁵. This treaty reflected the new political conditions of the late seventh century: the Muslim navy defeated and dispersed, local insurgency in the Levant triggered by a Byzantine raid against the Lebanese coasts and the Caliphate on the verge of a succession crisis⁴⁶. Therefore, in 685-686 A.D.: «Abimelech⁴⁷ sent emissaries to Justinian to ratify the peace which was concluded on these terms: that the Emperor should remove most of the Mardaites from Lebanon and prevent their incursions; that Abimelech would give the Romans 100 gold pieces, a horse and a slave a day and that both would share in equal parts the tax revenues of Cyprus, Armenia and Iberia»⁴⁸.

Leaving the complexities of the treaty⁴⁹ and its supposed early origins aside⁵⁰, one should, however, conclude that the withdrawal of the Muslim garrison did

⁴² al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb* cit., XIII, p. 236.

⁴³ Also Arados (off the Syriac coast), Rhodes and Kos were attacked in 654 A.D. (Conrad, *The Conquest* cit.; Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquest* cit., pp. 327-330); in 655 A.D. the naval engagement known as the "Battle of Mast" saw the Byzantine fleet defeated by an Arab naval contingent (see on this S. Cosentino, *Constantine II and the Byzantine Navy*, in «Byzantinische Zeitschrift», 100 (2008), pp. 577-602 with further bibliography).

⁴⁴ Theophanes, *Chronicle* cit., p. 506; Agapius, *Kitāb* cit., p. 497; Christides, *The Image* cit., p. 34, n. 97; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses* cit., pp. 226-7; Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., pp. 297, p. 416, p. 583; Pryor-Jeffreys, *The Age of Dromon* cit., pp. 190-192.

⁴⁵ Browning, *Byzantium and the Islam* cit., pp. 104-105.

⁴⁶ Christides, *The Image* cit., p. 34; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses* cit., pp. 227-8; Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquest* cit., p. 328.

⁴⁷ Abimelech is 'Abd al-Malik whose accession to the Caliphate took place in 684-685 C.E. See on this H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of Caliphates*, Edinburgh 2004, pp. 93-103.

⁴⁸ Theophanes, *Chronicle* cit., p. 506.

⁴⁹ See on this Christides, *The Image* cit., pp. 31-33 with further bibliography.

⁵⁰ According to the ninth century Arab sources (Ibn Sallam, Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim, *Kitāb al-Amwāl*, ed. M. Karas, Beirut 1988, p. 223; al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb* cit., XIII, p. 236; al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh* cit., IV, p. 258. See on them Mansouri, *Chypre dans les sources arabes* cit., p. 29; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses* cit., pp. 362-385) the treaty should hark back to the aftermath of the very first raid against Cyprus. Indeed, in 653-654 A.D. Mu'awiyah invaded again because, the Muslims claimed, the Cypriots had offered ships to help the Byzantines against them, so breaking the terms of the treaty. Neither the Byzantines nor the Syriac sources, however, mention an agreement before 679-680 A.D. or explicitly mention Cyprus as part of any treaty before 686-688 A.D. See Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquest*, 326 and Lilie, *Zypern zwischen Byzantinern und Arabern* cit., pp. 68-69 and Cameron, *Cyprus* cit., p. 32.

not cause the end of the Arab presence on the island. When in 691-692 A.D. «Justinian foolishly broke the peace with Abimelech and strove in his folly to move the population of the island of Cyprus»⁵¹ to found the city of Nea Justinianoupolis on the Hellespont⁵², among the Cypriots who were transplanted, were also some Arabs⁵³. Indeed, in most of the cities of the Syrian and Palestinian coast, Greek civilization was firmly established. The newcomers remained a cultural and social minority until the late eighth-century⁵⁴: in 717-718 A.D. when the Byzantines attacked and occupied Latakia, they deported its Muslim inhabitants who, once the Caliph's army won the city back, were reclaimed by the Caliph's emissary to Emperor Leo III⁵⁵. Turning the tables, a similar episode is referred to in Cyprus, when – as a reaction against the forced transplantation to Nea Justinianoupolis – the Caliph al-Walid transferred many Cypriots to Syria, only to have his successor Yazid return them home⁵⁶ as pledged by a delegation sent by the Emperor and including, together with an imperial agent, three Cypriot aristocrats (*illustrioi*) called *Phangoumeis*⁵⁷.

In particular, the latter assumed a paradigmatic importance as they seem to emerge as peculiar figures of cultural brokers who often «give a human focus to complex stories of intercultural contacts»⁵⁸. Cultural brokers are liminal figures inhabiting two worlds as their very existence addresses the issue of power since they are often caught in between two powerful streams. They often are simply identified with translators, but in truth they emerge as mediators between cultural and symbol systems not only by translating, explaining or enacting operative concepts but also from creative acts which reinvented cultures; and indeed, many brokers were drawn from the leadership ranks of their communities because «rules and expectations of a particular context must be

⁵¹ Theophanes, *Chronicle* cit., p. 509.

⁵² J.B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Patriarch Jacobite d'Antiochie 1166-1199*, 4 vols., Paris 1899-1910, II, p. 470 (thereafter Michael Syriani, *Chronicon*); on the episode see mainly B. Englezakis, *Cyprus, Nea Justinianoupolis*, Nicosia 1990; Stewart, *Domes of Heaven* cit., pp. 78-81; Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., pp. 450-55; Kyrris, *History of Cyprus* cit., pp. 165-166.

⁵³ However, as Dr. Matthew Harpster (to whom I am particularly grateful for his comment) has pointed out to me, this does not necessarily imply that those Arabs were Muslims: they may have been refugees or immigrants belonging to one of the Christian confessions so widespread in Syria-Palestine in the seventh and eighth century. See on this S. Griffiths, *The Church in the Shadow of a Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, Princeton 2008.

⁵⁴ Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquest* cit., p. 88; A. Hourani, *History of the Arab people*, London 1991, pp. 109ff.

⁵⁵ al-Balâdhurî, *Kitâp* cit., XIV, p. 304. See also I. Rochow, *Zu den diplomatischen Beziehungen zwischen Byzanz und dem Kalifat in der Zeit der syrischen Dynastie (717-802)*, in *Novum Millennium. Studies on Byzantine History and Culture. Dedicated to Paul Speck. 19 December 1999*, eds. C. Sode and S. Takács, Aldershot 2001, pp. 310-311.

⁵⁶ al-Balâdhurî, *Kitâp* cit., XIII, p. 238.

⁵⁷ *De Administrando Imperio*, eds. Gy. Moravcsik and R.J.H. Jenkins, Washington D.C. 1993, pp. 224-225.

⁵⁸ E. Hinderaker, *Translation and Cultural Brokerage*, in *A Companion to American Indian History*, eds. P.J. Deloria and N. Salisbury, Oxford 2004, p. 360.

clearly understood from the perspective of one culture and problematized from the perspective of the opposite one, to elucidate the challenges of brokerage». With this in mind, and going back to Cyprus, it is possible to interpret the role the *Phangoumeis* played as complementary with that embodied by more “traditional” and obvious cross-cultural travelers like the Cypriots pictured in the acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 A.D.) as sailing in two ships to and fro Cyprus and Gabala in Syria⁵⁹; for brokers were, indeed, not only responsible for facilitating commercial relationship but also for interpreting diplomatic and political concepts between cultures⁶⁰. By performing these functions they contributed to create the infrastructure of the “Cypriot middle ground” as an historical space, whose necessary elements were not only «a rough balance of power, a desire for what the “other” possesses, and the inability by either side to commandeer enough force to compel the other to change»⁶¹, but also a critical, creative and constant activity of mediation. In other words, brokers should be regarded as the main actors in the construction of the middle ground, which reveals in the material evidence (artistic, numismatic and ceramic evidence) as reflecting a peculiar and uninterrupted dialogue between the Umayyads as rulers of Syria, Palestine and Egypt and the Byzantines. Indeed, as will be seen wares were imported to Cyprus in the seventh and eighth century both from the Byzantine heartland and from Syria-Palestine, local kitchen wares were sold to Constantinople and Damascus, peculiar Arab-Byzantine coins (issued by the Umayyads following Byzantine prototypes) widely circulated in Cyprus, and Islamic decorative motifs found their way to the island. I will return to this point in the next few pages.

Indeed, most probably the Arabs and Byzantines even settled side by side (although possibly inhabiting different quarters) in some of the cities of the island after the Arab garrison was withdrawn following the failed siege of Constantinople and the treaty of 679-680 A.D. However, even at its height, the Arab military grip did not bring about a political or religious *de-Byzantinization* of the island: «a real reflourishing of religious architecture and painting can be traced through several preserved monuments also attesting to the continuity of artistic activity»⁶². Two inscriptions found in the atrium of the three-aisled Basilica of Soloi, which was sacked during the second Arab raid⁶³, prove that the building (together with the Episcopal palace) was restored in 655 A.D. probably by the Bishop John who is also recorded on six lead-seals dated to the same

⁵⁹ See on this Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., p. 445.

⁶⁰ Hinderaker, *Translation* cit., p. 370.

⁶¹ White, *Creative Misunderstandings* cit., p. 10

⁶² S. Sophocleus, *Icons of Cyprus. 7th-20th century*, Nicosia 1994, p. 23.

⁶³ J. Des Gagnier and T. Tram Tinh, *Soloi. Dix campagnes de fouilles (1964-1974)*, Sainte Foy 1985, pp. 116ff.; J. Noret, *L'expédition canadienne à Soloi et ses résultats pour l'intelligence et la datation de la vie de S. Auxibe*, in «*Analecta bollandiana*», 104 (1986), pp. 445-447. Also, F. Trombly, *Mediterranean Sea Culture between Byzantium and Islam*, in *The Dark Century of Byzantium (7th-9th century)*, Athens 2001, pp. 156ff.

year⁶⁴; in Polis-Arsinoe two churches were repaired⁶⁵; in Salamis-Constantia – the capital of the island – the church of St. Epiphanius was repaired in the mid-seventh century (an English pilgrim, Willibald, prayed in it during the feast of St. John the Baptist in 720s⁶⁶) and the Basilica of Campanopetra⁶⁷ was possibly still frequented in the late seventh - beginning of the eighth century: both churches retained their role as pilgrimage centers on the island; eventually the vaulted basilicas of the Karpas peninsula (Aphendrika, Asomatoi, Hagia Varvara and Sykai) could also be generically attributed to the so-called "condominium years"⁶⁸, as one of these (Hagia Varvara) even preserves fragments of fresco painting «consisting of a repeating geometrical pattern common in Umayyad mosaics of the eighth century»⁶⁹. Moreover, regular clergy and the upper echelons of church administration played an important continuous role on the island in the seventh and eighth centuries, as pointed out by the undiminished presence of twelve *episcoparum parochiae*⁷⁰ as well as the participation of Cypriot bishops in the Sixth and Seventh Ecumenical Councils (680-681 and 787 A.D.)⁷¹.

Moreover, the sigillographic evidence seems to confirm the social and political role the church played in the period under consideration. Indeed, both Metcalf and Lilie⁷² have proven beyond doubt that the number and chronological sequence of the seals found on the island infer the secular role of the local bishop played in the civic urban administration beginning in the second half of the seventh century. More often than not, however, the importance of the ecclesiastical hierarchy has been overstated as linked to a supposed preeminence of the iconophile party in Cyprus⁷³. Mainstream Cypriot historiography accepts

⁶⁴ D.S. Neal, *The Basilica at Soloi, Cyprus. A Survey of the Buildings and the Mosaics*, Nicosia 2009, p. 15.

⁶⁵ A. Papalexandrou and W. Caraher, *Arsinoe in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, in *City of Gold. The archaeology of Polis Chrysochous, Cyprus*, eds. W. Childs, J.M. Padgett, J.S. Smith, Princeton 2012, pp. 262-282.

⁶⁶ On Willibald see C.H. Talbot, *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany, Being the Lives of SS. Willibrord, Boniface, Leoba and Lebuin together with the Hodoepericon of St. Willibald and a selection from the correspondence of St. Boniface*, London and New York 1954, pp. 161, 1-2 (thereafter Hugelburc, *Vita Willibaldi*).

⁶⁷ Papacostas, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., p. 90; Stewart, *Domes of Heaven* cit., pp. 63-66.

⁶⁸ Kyrris, *Cyprus* cit., p. 648; Papacostas, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., p. 82 e p. 211ff.; Megaw, *Byzantine Architecture* cit., pp. 76ff.; A.H.S. Megaw, *Three Vaulted Basilicas in Cyprus*, in «Journal of Hellenic Studies», 66 (1946), pp. 46-56.

⁶⁹ C. Stewart, *The First vaulted Churches in Cyprus*, in «Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians», 69 (2010), 2, p. 171.

⁷⁰ Hugelburc, *Vita Willibaldi*, p. 161.

⁷¹ A.I. Dikigoropoulos, *The Church of Cyprus during the period of the Arab Wars, A.D. 649-965*, in «The Greek Orthodox Theological Review», 11 (1965-1966), pp. 237-279; Lilie, *Zypern zwischen Byzantinern und Arabern* cit., p. 71; Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquest* cit., p. 327.

⁷² D.M. Metcalf, *Byzantine Lead Seals from Cyprus*, Nicosia 2004, pp. 75-104; Lilie, *Zypern zwischen Byzantinern und Arabern* cit., pp. 76-83.

⁷³ For instance Dikigoropoulos, *The Church of Cyprus* cit., pp. 266-279; Cameron, *Cyprus* cit., pp. 32-36; Kyrris, *History* cit., p. 201.

that Cyprus had become a bulwark against iconoclasm, therefore linking the primacy of the local Autocephalous church⁷⁴ on the government of the island from the late seventh to the tenth century with its unshaken and firm orthodoxy⁷⁵. Such a deduction, in fact, relies on an unquestioned and unchallenged interpretation of some hagiographical sources (such as the *Life of St. Stephen the Younger*⁷⁶), a passage of the *Chronicle of Theophanes*⁷⁷ (mentioning the cruel treatment reserved for some iconodule monks and nuns on the part of the *strategos* of the *Trakesion* Theme, Michael Lachanodrakon, who then banished them to Cyprus) and the acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (787 A.D.)⁷⁸. As recent research has proved, however, these sources suffer from being vehemently anti-iconoclastic or worse filled with martyrological *topoi*⁷⁹, and therefore the hegemonic role of the Cypriot church upon local politics and society should not be exaggerated.

Instead, as I have recently stated elsewhere⁸⁰, attention should be focused on the economic power of the Church. This was limited in comparison to that reflected in the huge fifth and sixth-century basilicas⁸¹, but nevertheless still persisted in the seventh and eighth centuries (as enhanced by the number of restored rural and urban churches, art-works patronized by local clergy and the allure of local pilgrimage sites). The economic importance of the Church should be paired with the role and function of state elites. In other words, the bishoprics and (possibly the few monastic institutions existing on the island⁸²) seem to have impinged upon the local level of demand as well as interrelating and complementing the social, political and bureaucratic functions of the central administrators and local magnates.

The latter emerge when one again refers to the sigillographic evidence, which points to the maintenance of central fiscal and administrative structures on the part of the State often relying (if not only at its highest levels) on local wealthy families and their clients. «These structures carried with them in their new oc-

⁷⁴ The autocephalic status of the Cypriot church originated in the eighth canon of the Third Ecumenical Council (431 A.D.) and re-asserted in 488 A.D. with the discovery of the burial of the Apostle Barnabas in Salamis-Constantia; later the Autocephaly was confirmed at the Trullan Council in 692 A.D. (see Dikigoropoulos, *The Church of Cyprus* cit., pp. 253-263 with further bibliography).

⁷⁵ E. Malamut, *Les îles de l'Empire Byzantin*, Paris 1988, p. 70; S. Hadjisavvas, *Cyprus Crossroads of Civilizations*, Nicosia 2010, pp. 209-213; D. Papanikola-Bakirtzis and M. Iacovou, *Byzantine Medieval Cyprus*, Nicosia 1998, pp. 19-20.

⁷⁶ *Patrologia Graeca* 100, pp. 1117-1120.

⁷⁷ Theophanes, *Chronicle* cit., p. 614.

⁷⁸ G.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, XIII, *Praxis IV*, 77C-E. <<http://patristica.net/mansi>> retrieved 1.09.2013.

⁷⁹ See on this L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era. II, History*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 234-247.

⁸⁰ Zavagno, *At the Edges of two Empires* cit.

⁸¹ Megaw, *Byzantine Architecture* cit., pp. 57-75.

⁸² Papacostas, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., pp. 92-100.

cupations a range of socially and culturally determined values and ways of working impacting on how arrangements as a whole worked, *moreover* the role of provincial *officials* evolved not simply as a factor of the needs of imperial *army and* administration but also as a product of the ambitions and social and economic interests of the individual themselves (...) and the same applies to all the other officials of the state as well as to the clergy»⁸³. This development, indeed, reminds us of the trajectories of the social organization of Byzantine Italy, where from the seventh century onwards one can witness not only the substitution of the old ruling class (the senatorial landowning aristocracy⁸⁴) with a diverse and multifaceted social groups but also the establishment of a new hierarchical social model; a model based upon the rise of a new macro-class (the so-called *potentiores*) made of civic, military and religious authorities and characterized essentially by the ownership (at different and various levels) of locally-entrenched social and economic power⁸⁵.

If in Italy the archaeological visibility of the *potentiores* has been proved to rest on explicit and implicit markers like monumental iconography, evergetism and clothing, in Cyprus one should primarily refer to lead seals as shedding «some light on the activity of individuals or groups with a privileged social and political role»⁸⁶. In fact, specimens mentioning high court ranks such as *illustrioi* and *palatinoi* or functions such as *eparchs* or *dioketai* or *archontes* indicate that notables from local leading families played an important role in the government structures of the island⁸⁷. This political preeminence on the part of the local elites is in turn mirrored in both the archaeological evidence and the textual sources.

On the one hand, archaeological evidence reveals how these elites remained urban oriented. On the top of the evidence yielded at Soloi and Paphos (as mentioned above), excavations at Salamis-Constantia have revealed that during the late seventh to the beginning of the eighth centuries, the bath-gymnasium was repaired, the so-called Huilerie complex⁸⁸ was partitioned and encroached on by three separate two-story buildings with a possible artisanal function and the two main pilgrimage foci of the Campanopetra and St. Epiphani-

⁸³ Brubaker and Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era: History* cit., p. 666.

⁸⁴ P. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle. Wealth, the Fall of Rome and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 A.D.*, Princeton 2012.

⁸⁵ I am here paraphrasing a passage from E. Zanini, *Archeologia dello status sociale nell'Italia bizantina: tracce, segni e modelli interpretativi*, in *Archeologia e società tra tardo antico e alto medioevo*, eds. G.P. Brogiolo and A. Chavarria Arnau, Roma 2007, p. 27.

⁸⁶ Zanini, *Archeologia* cit., p. 27.

⁸⁷ Metcalf, *Byzantine Lead Seals* cit., pp. 238-242.

⁸⁸ The so-called *Huilerie* complex is large household dated to the fifth century, located a few meters to the west of the Basilica of Campanopetra and organized around a central court. Its fifth-sixth century facies is characterized by the rich decoration (stuccos). An inscription mentioning Epiphanius has been found possibly pointing to an ecclesiastical function (Episcopal palace?): see G. Argoud, O. Callot and B. Helly, *Une résidence byzantine, l'«Huilerie»*, Paris 1980.

⁸⁹ Zavagno, *Between the Greeks and the Saracens* cit., in «Byzantion», 81 (2011), pp. 467-468 with further bibliography.

ios were restored⁹⁰. Indeed, artisanal activities (as paired with the production of locally made ceramics and amphorae) and a continuous role along the maritime routes could be documented and used as an interpretative guideline to re-address the issue of the so-called de-monumentalization of the classic urban layout. Indeed, the demise of public buildings like theaters, amphitheaters and other amenities should be regarded as a functional change in the use of public areas, as still urban-oriented regional elites underpinned effective city-level economic infrastructures and local production (often encroaching onto the abovementioned buildings or the paved roads)⁹⁰. A good example could be offered by the recently published excavations at Polis-Arsinoe, which have shed light on an area of the city made of «workshops, roads and burials *encroaching onto the formerly square surrounding* one of the churches. Here a seventh-century pane of window glass proves that these artifacts were not only meant for churches but also produced in the local industrial spaces»⁹¹. Although blurred by not-so-detailed reports, similar evidence has emerged in Amathos, where excavations have proved that the basilica on the Acropolis was restored and refurbished in the late seventh century whereas *spolia* were used to build workshops and residential buildings yielded ceramic and coins provisionally dated to the end of the seventh century⁹².

On the other hand, the analysis of the Arab sources and legal practice allows us to conclude that Cyprus was regarded as a tributary, independent state by the Muslims once they left the island. Cyprus became a territory of the *dar al-Ahd* (the area of the pact), which included those countries that could enjoy peace by paying a tribute⁹³. However this notion was never accepted by the Byzantines, whose authority was seldom reinforced by the presence of the fleet and more often than not exerted day to day by local notables supervising the correct functioning of the fiscal apparatus and orienting the economy of the demographically diminished urban activities. This is reflected in later sources, such as the *De Administrando Imperio* written by Constantine Porphyrogenetos in the tenth century, which – as already seen – mentions the Byzantine imperial embassy to the Caliphal court in Damascus led by three members of the Cypriot aristocracy called *Phangoumeis*⁹⁴. The presence of the *Phangoumeis* as imperial ambassadors could point to the existence of a sort of adaptive strategies in the structures of governance common to those territories culturally and religiously integrated within the Empire but still, like Cyprus, located at its periphery. Here, once again, the concept of middle ground comes in handy as two

⁹⁰ Zavagno, *Cities in Transition* cit., pp. 132-151.

⁹¹ Papalexandrou and Caraher, *Arsinoe in Late Antiquity* cit., pp. 273-274.

⁹² S. Hadjisavvas, *Chronique des fouilles et découvertes archéologiques à Chypre en 1997*, in «Bulletin de correspondance hellénique», 122 (1998), 2, p. 672 also P. Aupert et al., *Amathonte*, in «Bulletin de correspondance hellénique», 128-129 (2003-2004), pp. 1042-1068.

⁹³ Christides, *The Image* cit., pp. 31-37; see also Mansouri, *Chypre dans les sources arabes* cit.

⁹⁴ DAI, *De Administrando Imperio* cit., pp. 224-225.

cultures contributed to «create an elaborate network of economic, political, cultural and social ties to meet the demands of a particular historical situation»⁹⁵; in Cyprus this network was characterized by variable-assets of loyalty in order to survive the difficulties of the hour (as embodied for instance by the Arab incursions or local revolts against the central power⁹⁶). In seventh and eighth century Cyprus, as in fifteenth century Friuli or Puglia, the distance between two hegemonic religious and political powers was not so great, either geographically or culturally, as to generate indifference; rather, it generated a sort of exotic curiosity and peculiar, almost utopian, paradigms of familiarity: «the comprehension for those who are distant and far (or worse living at our borders) does not stem from a spontaneous wisdom, but from proactive *political and cultural* constructions»⁹⁷.

Avoiding the consequences of a military standoff with the Muslims, retaining an administrative and religious proximity with the Byzantines, and asserting a degree of political independence, which might vary in space and time according to the ebb and flow of Eastern Mediterranean politics, seemed to be pragmatic tactics staged by the Cypriot elites. Additionally, these tactics benefitted from the position of the island at the intersection of three different economic zones: «Egypt, with its complex hierarchy of regional, sub-regional and micro-regional productions, underpinned by the high productive levels of Nilotic agriculture and, with Alexandria as a hub for luxury trade; Syria and Palestine with their localized economies, focused upon continuous demand of urban centres like Jerusalem, Pella, Jerash, Scythopolis, and Aleppo (...) and, eventually, the Aegean heartland of the Byzantine empire where localized and medium-distance exchange systems coexisted, as focused on Constantinople»⁹⁸. Indeed, the analysis of numismatic evidence and the (re-)assessment of ceramics⁹⁹ yielded by archaeological excavations has revealed that Cyprus, rather than experiencing an economic downturn as a consequence of the supposed devastating Arab raids, instead retained sound commercial and non-commercial ties with the Levant and the Anatolian coasts and Aegean basin¹⁰⁰.

A careful examination of seventh and eighth-century coins and coinage found on the island led to the reconsideration of the idea of a non-monetized economy as a consequence of the abandonment of coastal urban centers and a lack of central government¹⁰¹. In this sense, a comparison with contemporary Syr-

⁹⁵ P. Deloria, *What is the Middle Ground anyway?*, in «The William and Mary Quarterly», Third Series, 63 (2006), 2, p. 18.

⁹⁶ See for instance the revolt staged by the *strategos* Euphemios against Constantinople in 826 A.D.

⁹⁷ Ricci, *I turchi* cit., p. 89.

⁹⁸ Zavagno, *Betwixt the Greeks and the Saracens* cit., p. 450.

⁹⁹ Here I am referring to both the new material yielded by recent excavations in the Republic of Cyprus (in the southern half of the island) like those at Kourion (*Kourion. Excavations in the Episcopal Precinct*, ed. A.H.S. Megaw, Washington D.C 2007) and Paphos-Saranda Kolones and the reappraisal of old material found in the north (in Salamis-Constantia, Dhiorios, Kornos Cave, Soloi and Lambousa) before the events of 1974.

¹⁰⁰ Zavagno, *Betwixt the Greeks and the Saracens* cit., p. 475.

¹⁰¹ Metcalf and Pitsillides, *Islamic and Byzantine coins* cit.; Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., pp. 141-179.

ia-Palestine and Sicily allows us to grasp the continuities and slow transformations in the Cypriot economy in the transition from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages. On the one hand, as Walmsley recently pointed out¹⁰² for the Syrian and Palestinian region, an increasingly demonetized economy does not necessarily imply a decadence but might rather mean continuous levels of wealth, as sourced from and expressed within a different lifestyle¹⁰³. In other words, «alternative explanations can be sought in realigning and adaptive economic strategies by local communities as they came to rely increasingly upon their own abilities»¹⁰⁴. Evidence for what have been termed “ruralization” or abandonment of urban environment must be set against evidence of economic vitality of the urban fabric (as in the case of the artisanal re-functionalizing of the Huilerie complex in Salamis or the workshops in Paphos, Polis-Arsinoe and Amathos). On the other hand, the changes in the monetary circulation in Sicily from the late seventh century onwards (rarefaction of bronze emissions vis-à-vis metrological and ponderal adjustments¹⁰⁵) has been proven to owe less to an economic maelstrom than to the revised fiscal needs of the state¹⁰⁶.

With these caveats in mind, one could examine the numismatic evidence (so-called casual or stray-finds and the many hoards found on the island¹⁰⁷) as revealing a diminished mass of circulating coins but a still traceable degree of monetary economy. One can indeed identify Byzantine emissions (coins issued by Justinian II, Tiberios and Leontios have been found in Constantia and Kourion) and Arab specimens, both inferring the maintenance of political, commercial and cultural relations between the two empires as illustrated by the complex imagery and prototypes of all these coins. Moreover, one should also consider a group of coins (so-called pre-reform Arab Byzantine coinage already mentioned), almost completely overlooked until recent studies by Philips, Goodwin, Foss and Walmsey (among others)¹⁰⁸ proved their importance. An adequate treat-

¹⁰² A. Walmsley, *Coinage and Economy in Syria and Palestine in the Seventh and Eighth centuries A.D., Money, Power and Politics, in Early Islamic Syria. A review of current debate*, ed. J. Halldon, Farham-Burlington 2010, pp. 21-44.

¹⁰³ Walmsley, *Coinage and Economy* cit., pp. 39-40.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁵ Zavagno, *Betwixt the Greeks and the Saracens* cit., pp. 462-466.

¹⁰⁶ «Une telle réforme fiscale expliquerait d'ailleurs assez bien que l'empereur ait pu simultanément quadrupler le poids du *folles*, les exigences du système fiscal n'appelant plus d'émissions massives de bronze 204 pour “rendre la monnaie” aux contribuables» (V. Pringent, *Le rôle des provinces d'Occident dans l'approvisionnement de Constantinople (618-717). Témoignages numismatiques et sigillographiques*, in «Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Moyen Âge», 118 [2006], 2, p. 299).

¹⁰⁷ For a catalogue of hoards see Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., pp. 189-215 with further bibliography.

¹⁰⁸ «Serious study of Arab-Byzantine coinage began with the British Museum catalogue by John Walker published in 1956 listing around 200 coins (...) He concluded that the great-majority of Arab-Byzantine types were issued in relatively short time at the end of seventh century. But it was only when Tony Goodwin begun his pathbreaking work in 2002 that he identified and classified different types putting the studies of this important coinage on new basis» (C. Foss, *Arab-Byzantine*

ment of Islamic, and especially transitional coins has not always been the case in the past¹⁰⁹. With regard to these specimens in Cyprus we are facing the same puzzling dichotomy experienced in Syria-Palestine, where there is a «gap between many known types and frequencies of pre-reform transitional coins known through the antiquity market and the much lower numbers recovered through archaeological work»¹¹⁰. However, the analysis of the mint-provenance of the (few) Arab-Byzantine specimens¹¹¹ yielded by excavations at Kourion, Paphos-Saranda Kolones and Salamis-Constantia¹¹² points to the existence of a well-frequented shipping route linking Cyprus with the *Jund*¹¹³ of Damascus, whose coast was geographically closer to the island and whose territory included the capital of the Caliphate. Indeed, one should not overlook the fact that two of the six specimens came from Ba'albeek, a city located in the northern Beqaa' Valley on the main route from Damascus to Homs. This city was the second most important administrative focus of the Damascene *Jund*; the link between Ba'albeek and Cyprus shown by these coins is further enhanced by textual evidence, for in 653 A.D. – according to the Arab geographer al-Balādhurī – Mu'awiya settled a number of Syrian colonists from Ba'albeek in the city of Paphos¹¹⁴.

The Cypriot “Syrian-Palestinian-link” is further enhanced by ceramic evidence. Ceramics are, indeed, problematic to handle: «they are the normal possessions of every social stratum and cooking wares like the Cypriot “*Dhiorios*” type absolutely standard products (...) and they could be made according to the scale of the local economic system»¹¹⁵. In Cyprus, however, it is problematic to assess the scale of distribution and production of pottery. The type of analysis recently made for the Aegean¹¹⁶ or Syria and Palestine¹¹⁷ allowing us to grasp the artistic and technological developments of local ceramics in the seventh and eighth century is still in its infancy in Cyprus. Nevertheless, recent comparative studies have contributed to a quantitative and qualitative re-assessment of the material yielded both by the existing archaeological excavations and by

Coins. An Introduction, with a catalogue of the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington D.C. 2008, p. IX). See also T. Goodwin, *Arab-Byzantine coinage (Study in the Khalili Collection, IV)*, London 2004; T. Goodwin and M. Philips, *A Seventh Century Syrian Hoard of Byzantine and Imitative copper coins*, in «Numismatic Chronicle», 157 (1997), pp. 61-87.

¹⁰⁹ Walmsley, *Coinage and Economy* cit., p. 24.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

¹¹¹ Zavagno, *Betwixt the Greeks and the Saracens* cit., p. 470.

¹¹² For Salamis see O. Callot, *Salamine de Chypre, XVI, Les monnaies. Fouilles de la ville, 1964-1974*, Paris 2004, pp. 123-124ff.; for Saranda Kolones see D.M. Metcalf, *Byzantine, Islamic and Crusader Coins from Saranda Kolones, Paphos*, in «Numismatic Chronicle», 16 (2003), pp. 215-217 and Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., pp. 213-218; for Kourion, see H. Brown, *Islamic coins*, in A.H.S. Megaw, *Kourion* cit., pp. 422-423; Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus* cit., pp. 211-212.

¹¹³ In Arabic, a military and administrative province.

¹¹⁴ al-Balādhurī, *Kitāp* cit., XIII, pp. 235-236.

¹¹⁵ C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford 2005, pp. 703-704.

¹¹⁶ Vroom, *The other Dark Age* cit.

¹¹⁷ A. Walmsley, *Early Islamic Syria. An archaeological assessment*, London 2007, pp. 49-58.

the pre-1974 campaigns in the northern half of the island¹¹⁸. These point to the role of Cyprus at the crossroads of different regional economies at the edge of two empires.

In fact, Palestinian productions like the so-called Late Roman 5 or the Caesarea types amphorae¹¹⁹ have been documented in late seventh and eighth-century layers at Kourion, Paphos, Salamis-Constantia and Amathos¹²⁰. If amphorae allow us to gain an invaluable insight into commercial networks and intra-regional socio-economic processes, Cypriot ceramic manufactures shed light on the productive and distributive networks based upon local productions. Indeed, one should not regard the presence of «handmade wares coexisting with wheel-turned wares as a sign of shrinkage in demand for professionally produced ceramics»¹²¹. In fact, typical eighth-century Cypriot production of domestic and cooking wares (so-called Dhiorios cooking pots¹²²) have been found in Umayyad deposits in Beirut and in eighth-century layers in many Palestinian sites¹²³. These in turn couple with Red Slip wares imported to Cyprus from Syria and Palestine well into the eighth century¹²⁴. In other words, although a sign of more localized and simplified/localized distributive pattern, Cypriot locally produced wares were of a piece with the inter-regional distribution of ceramics (both fine and coarse wares) within the Eastern Mediterranean¹²⁵.

The existence of such an inter-regional network with the Umayyad and (later) Abbasid Levant is further bolstered when we turn our gaze towards Egypt. Cypriot pottery has been abundantly yielded in late seventh-century layers in

¹¹⁸ Armstrong, *Trade cit.*; J. Vroom, *New Light on 'Dark Age' pottery: a Note on finds in South-western Turkey*, in *Rei Cretariae Romanae fautorvm. acta 39. Congressus vicesimus quartus rei cretariae romanae fautorum Namuri et Duobus Lovaniis habitus MMIV*, Oxford 2005, pp. 249-57; R. Smadar Gabrieli, M.P. Jackson and A. Kaldeli, *Stumbling into the darkness: trade and life in post-Roman Cyprus*, in *Late Roman Coarse Wares. Cooking Wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean. Archaeology and Archeometry*, II, eds. M. Bonifay and J.C. Treglia, Oxford 2007, pp. 791-801.

¹¹⁹ Similar in typology with the exemplaries found at Khirbat-al Mafjar as most probably produced around Bet Shean-Scythopolis. See D.C. Baranky, *The pottery from Khirbat El Mafjer*, in «Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine», 10 (1940-1942), pp. 76-77.

¹²⁰ M. Touma, *Chypre. Céramique et problèmes*, in *The Dark Century of Byzantium (7th-9th century)*, Athens 2001, pp. 267-291; K. Winther Jacobsen, *Regional Distribution of Transport Amphorae in Cyprus in the Late Roman Period*, in *Transport Amphorae and Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean. Acts of the International Colloquium at the Danish Institute at Athens. September 26-29, 2002*, Athens 2004, pp. 143-149; J. Hayes, *Hellenistic and Roman Pottery Deposits from 'Saranda Kolones' Castle Site at Paphos*, in «The Annual of the British School at Athens», 98 (2003), pp. 487-489.

¹²¹ Vroom, *The other Dark Ages cit.*, p. 142.

¹²² H.W. Catling, *An early Byzantine pottery factory at Dhiorios in Cyprus*, in «Levant», 4 (1972), pp. 1-82; Armstrong, *Trade cit.*, pp. 165-166.

¹²³ Armstrong, *Trade cit.*, p. 165.

¹²⁴ J. Haldon, *Commerce and Exchange in Seventh and Eighth century regional trade and movement of goods*, in *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*, ed. C. Morrisson, Washington D.C. 2012, p. 108.

¹²⁵ Vroom, *The other Dark Ages cit.*, p. 14.

excavated sites of the northern Egyptian coast, central Delta and northern Sinai¹²⁶. Moreover, some deposits of Ostrakine (north of the Sinai desert) have revealed late seventh and so-called globular amphorae, which the petrographic analysis proved to be manufactured in Cyprus. The Egyptian link is also enhanced by the so-called Late Roman 7 Egyptian amphorae (labeled as the most common wine-container of the Mediterranean), documented in eighth-century layers stratigraphically excavated at Paphos¹²⁷. As a complement to this evidence, one should also consider the diffusion of Egyptian red slipware (type A) in many Cypriot sites (Salamis-Constantia, Limassol and Kourion) whose exportation continued in the eighth century¹²⁸.

The hegemonic economic pull of the Levant, in turn, tallied with the integration of the island within the distributive pattern across the Aegean and a peculiar Constantinopolitan link supported by the presence on the island of both lower and high rank civil and fiscal officials (often detached from the capital) as mirrored in the sigillographic evidence hinted at above. In this sense one should notice the presence of eighth-century Glazed White Wares – a typical Constantinopolitan production – as yielded by the excavations at Paphos-Saranda Kolones¹²⁹, Salamis-Constantia and Soloi¹³⁰. This class of ceramics proves both continuous exchange relations with the Byzantine capital and the importance of Cyprus within medium-distance communication patterns privileging the islands and major maritime centers of Byzantium (like Gortyn in Crete or Ephesos and Smyrna on the Aegean coast)¹³¹. This has been further enhanced by the diffusion of so-called globular amphorae (dated to the seventh and eighth century) produced in Cyprus and found in the excavations at Saraçhane in Constantinople/modern Istanbul¹³² and in the Aegean region¹³³.

The commercial and shipping network linking Cyprus with the coasts of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean (but also south Anatolia as pointed out by recent excavations at Lymira in Cilicia¹³⁴) as revealed by the analysis of the

¹²⁶ P. Ballet, *Relations céramiques entre l'Égypte et Chypre à l'époque gréco-romaine et byzantine*, in *Hellenistic and Roman Pottery in the Eastern Mediterranean Advances in Scientific Studies. Acts of the II Nieborow Pottery Workshop. Nieborow 18-20 December 1993*, eds. H. Meyza and Y. Mlynarczyk, Warsaw 1995, p. 17; J. Hayes, *Pottery*, in *Kourion cit.*, p. 436.

¹²⁷ Ballet, *Relations cit.*, p. 17.

¹²⁸ J. Hayes, *Problèmes de la céramique des VII^{ème}-IX^{ème} siècles à Salamine et à Chypre*, in *Salamine de Chypre. Histoire et archéologie. État des recherches. Lyon 13-17 mars 1978*, ed. M. Yon, Paris 1980, p. 377.

¹²⁹ J. Vroom, *After Antiquity. Ceramics and Society in the Aegean from the 7th to the 20th centuries A.C. A Case Study from Boeotia, Central Greece*, Leiden 2003, p. 55.

¹³⁰ Vroom, *The other Dark Ages cit.*, p. 139.

¹³¹ Zavagno, *Cities in Transition cit.*, with further bibliography.

¹³² J. Hayes, *Excavations at Saraçhane in Istanbul, II (The pottery)*, Princeton 1992, pp. 61-62.

¹³³ Vroom, *The other Dark Ages cit.*, p. 138.

¹³⁴ J. Vroom, *Tea and Ceramics. New perspectives on Byzantine pottery from Lymira*, in *40 Jahre Grabung Limira. Akten des internationalen Symposions, Wien, 3-5 Dezember 2009*, ed. M. Seyrer, Wien 2012, pp. 343-358.

ceramics and coinage, implies a continuous movement of goods and people to Islamic and Byzantine centers of production and markets. This flow is mirrored in the information provided to us by other sources, such as the accounts of pilgrimage travels and the (later) literary and geographical reports of Arab authors like al-Tabarī, al-Balādhurī and al-Muqaddasī¹³⁵. There is no space here to deal in detail with those accounts but one should infer from them the role of Cyprus at the edge of two narratives: the latter Arabic and Muslim, the former Byzantine.

For both, Cyprus seems at the same time a place-no-place: a nest of contradictions; an island of so much abundance that cannot be described¹³⁶ but at the same time almost neglected by contemporary witnesses (both Arab and Byzantine); a place at the junction of two imperial spheres of influence and politically overlooked by both (independent state for the Arabs and a Byzantine province with self-sufficient elites); a “condominium” where tax revenues were shared by both powers but also a place of occasional violence where local tax-payers were often removed and dragged away. In the blur of these sources, archaeology could help to adjust the interpretative focus offering a different interpretative key, which configures Cyprus in the transition between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages as a real “middle ground” between the Arabs and the Byzantines.

«The middle ground as a process is quite common, yet the construction of a historical space in which the process becomes the basis of relations between distinct peoples is less common as there are instances where the process can be evident but the space may fail to emerge»¹³⁷. Luckily, Cyprus should not be included among these. Indeed, as already mentioned, the inability of two powers to fully implement a politically and military grip at each other expenses (an event quite uncommon along the eastern Mediterranean region in the period under consideration) and the essential role the island played for both “empires” in interlocking and connecting different regional economies allow us to rebuff the traditional idea of Cyprus as a no man’s land in the wake of the Arab raids. On the contrary, the equivalence of power relations bred a fertile terrain of political, economic and cultural ambiguity, which allows us to propose «new theorizations of the working of powers in cross-social situations that would try to account not only for physical forces but also cultural and ideological ones»¹³⁸.

In fact, paradoxically as it may seem, no matter how much two conflicting hegemonies gnashed their teeth in face of one another, Cyprus remained a bridge

¹³⁵ Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses* cit., p. 372. See also L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (c. 650-850): The Sources. An annotated survey (Birmingham and Ottoman Monographs)*, Aldershot 2001, pp. 193-197. The Arab authors, indeed, relied, tried and rearranged the traditions lingering on in their days into a more coherent chronological framework.

¹³⁶ Ibn Hawqal, *Kitāb surat al-ard* (J.H. Kramers and G. Wiet, *Configuration de la terre*, Beirut-Paris 1964, p. 184).

¹³⁷ White, *Creative Misunderstandings* cit., p. 10.

¹³⁸ Deloria, *What is the Middle Ground* cit., p. 22.

between the two, a bridge that could be more often than not peacefully crossed by pilgrims, ambassadors and merchants even though it remained a disputed path; a place where two opposing hegemonies defined the cultural, political and economic peculiar coherence of a whole island. «This is to contrast the transience and insignificance of individual human life with the broader perspective of life as itself enduring a constant ebb and flow»¹³⁹. Like our Algerian village, seventh- and eighth-century Cyprus emerges so difficult to understand and describe that has been engulfed in the mass movements and the upheavals created by the rise and fall of two empires.

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¹³⁹ I. Andric, *The Bridge over the Drina*, London 1994, p. 2.

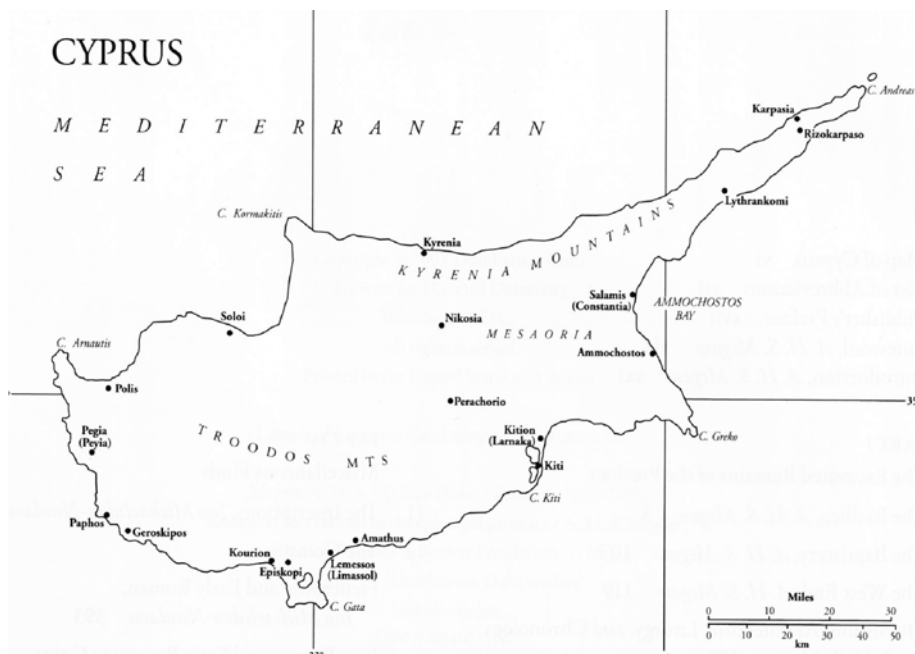


Fig. 1. Map of Cyprus with the main sites mentioned in the paper (from D.M. Metcalf, *Byzantine Cyprus*, Nicosia 2009)



Fig. 2. Salamis-Constantia: extension of the site (author's drawing)



Fig. 3. Salamis-Constantia: Basilica of Campanopetra (author's picture)



Fig. 4. The seventh-century walls cutting the Cardo Maximus (author's picture)

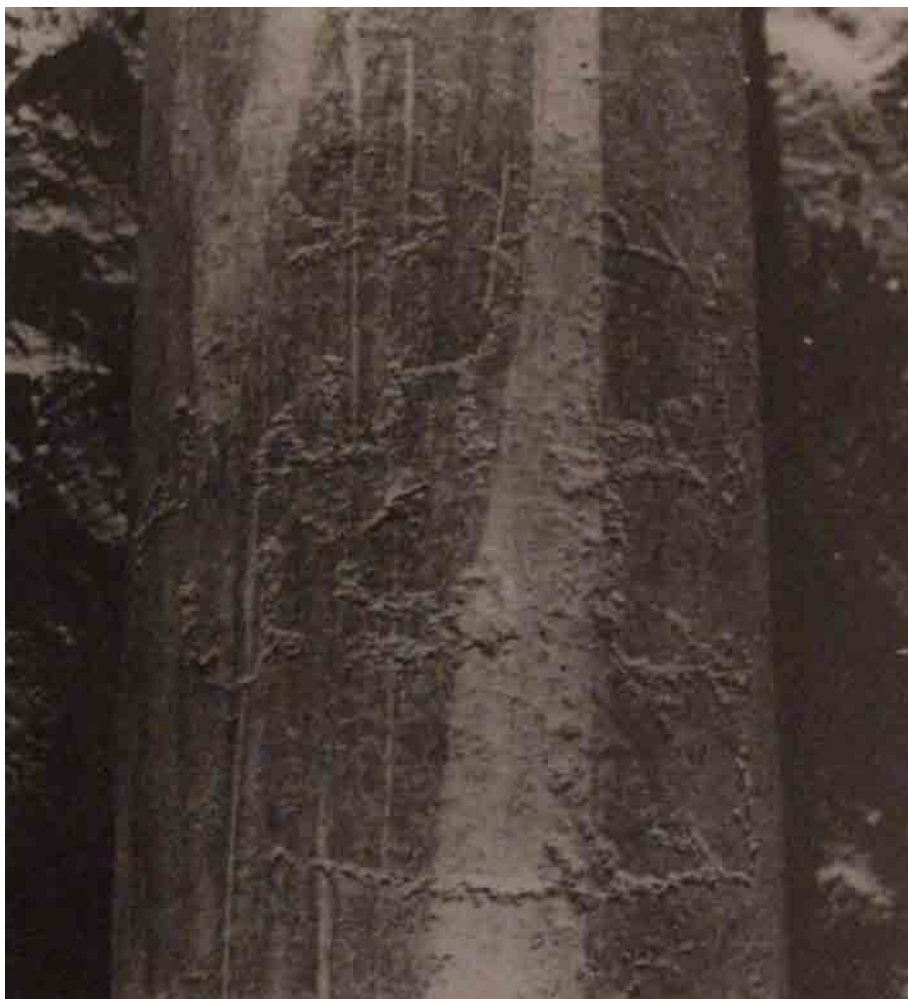


Fig. 5. Paphos Arab inscriptions on spolia (from V. Christides, *The Image of Cyprus in the Arabic sources*, Nicosia 2006)



Fig. 6. Church of Agia Varvara (Karpas Peninsula): eighth-century fresco showing Umayyad motives (C.A. Stewart, *Domes of Heaven: The Domed Basilicas of Cyprus*, Bloomington [Indiana] 2008)

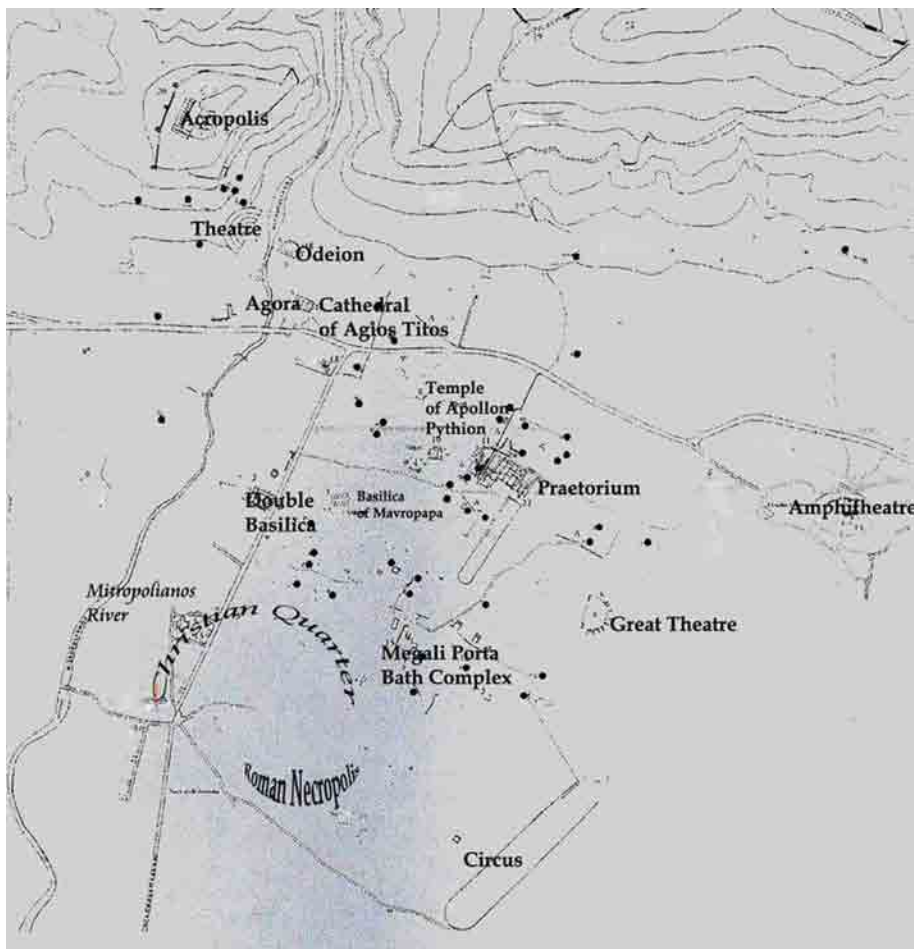


Fig. 7. Map of Gortyn (from L. Zavagno, *Cities in Transition. Urbanism in Byzantium between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford 2009)

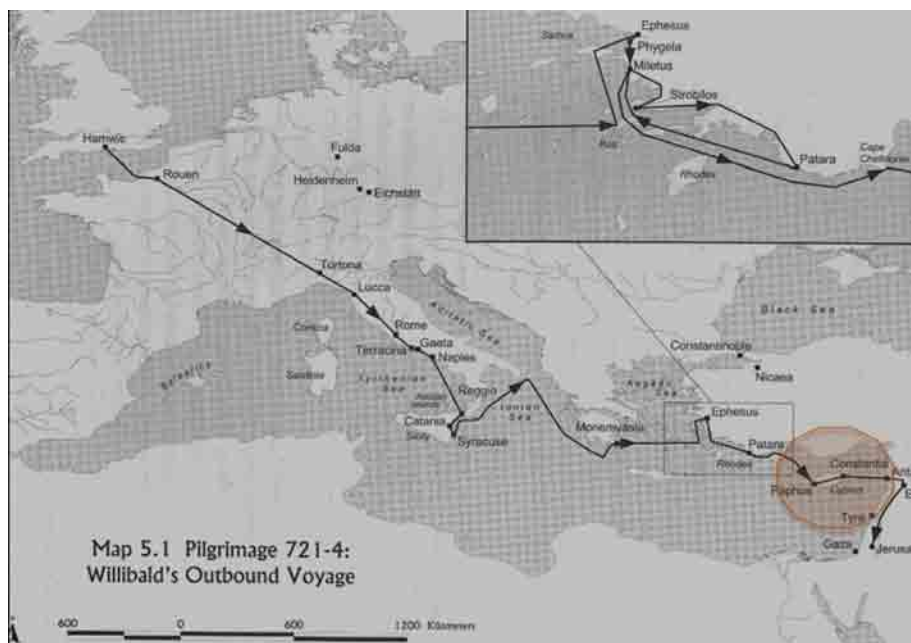


Fig. 8. Willibald's journey (M. McCormick, *The Origins of European Economy. Communication and Commerce. AD 300-900*, Cambridge Mass. 2001)

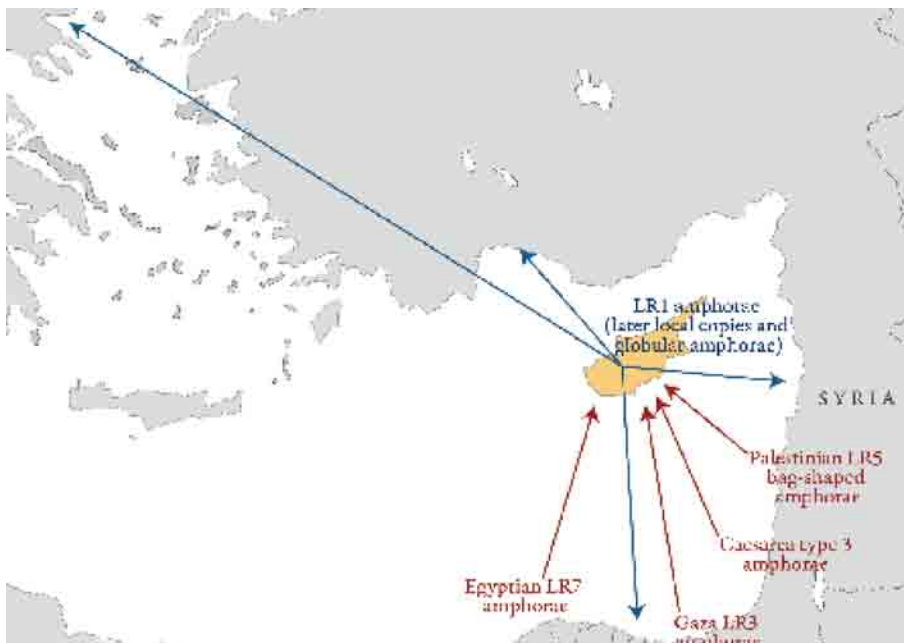


Fig. 9. Exchange pattern of amphorae to and from Cyprus in the seventh and eighth centuries (L. Zavagno, *At the Edge of two Empires: the economy of Cyprus between the Late Antiquity and the Early Middle ages (650s-800 A.D.)*, in «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 65-66 [2011-2012])



Fig. 10. Arab-Byzantine coinage (Bilingual Series, Mint of Baa'lbeek) (from *Mediterranean Worlds: Cultures Issue of Interpretation*. Proceedings of the I MedWorlds Conference, Famagusta 3-6 June 2009, «Journal of Intercultural Studies», 31 (2010), 3, eds. T. Khoo, V. Marotta, L. Zavagno, 2010)