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METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS REGARDING THE ECONOMIC HISTORY OF BYZANTIUM*

“The Economic History of Byzantium”, now in press, has been discussed on the basis of new archaeological data, a broader historiographical environment and on the economic ideology. The methodological problems concern chronology, the role of the state, the relationship between ideology and reality, the significance of smallholdings, the usefulness of modern economic theory. The economy was a mixed one, providing some of the important needs of the people.

First, allow me to express my very great pleasure at being here today. Belgrade was, is and remains one of the most important centers of Byzantine studies in the world, continuing the tradition of the great George Ostrogorsky. And, of course, the ties between Serbian and Greek Byzantinists have always been close, based on mutual esteem and affection. We hope that our collaboration will remain productive in years to come.

The project I should like to discuss, on the economic history of Byzantium, is one which has been in preparation for some years. I thought that it might be appropriate to give the first presentation of this work in Belgrade, the home of George Ostrogorsky, whose studies of the Byzantine peasantry and Byzantine agrarian relations or feudal relations have informed scholarship for such a long time.

Seven years ago, I thought that the time was ripe for attempting to write the economic history of Byzantium. To implement that thought, a committee of advisors was selected, consisting of C. Morrisson, Ch. Bouras, N. Oikonomides, K. Pitsakis and myself. The committee set up the structure of the work, and solicited contributions from about 30 scholars. This, then became a collective enterprise. The project is now completed, the English edition, published by Dumbarton Oaks, is being printed, and the Greek edition, to be published by the Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece, will follow. The project turned out to be immense: the edition

* The lecture pronounced at the Institute on December 18th, 2000, at the time the Economic History of Byzantium was expected to be published.
will take up two or three volumes in English and certainly three volumes in Greek since Greek is a more expansive language.

The need for an economic history of Byzantium seems to me to be evident. There have been many good studies of various aspects of the Byzantine economy. The Russian school of Byzantinists, working in a long tradition that goes back to the 19th century, has done systematic and extensive work on the agrarian economy, especially focusing on the peasantry, while Michel Kaplan’s massive study *Les hommes et la terre à Byzance, du VIe au XIe siècle* (Paris 1992), is based on an exhaustive survey of the sources. Indeed, the agrarian economy, as well as relations between the state and the economy are the best studied; among the works on the second topic, I include the recent book of our lamented colleague, N. Oikonomides, *Fiscalité et exemption fiscale à Byzance, IXe–XIe siècles* (Athens, 1996). There is no reason to detail here the bibliography on other specific issues. It has been excellent, but nevertheless, there no synthetic work has been attempted to date. Two efforts have come closest to this desideratum: Michael Hendy’s *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c 300–1450* (1985), and the two volumes of *Hommes et Richesses*, published in Paris between 1989 and 1991. A. Harvey’s work, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire*, 900–1200, published in 1989, deals only with the central period. All are very considerable pieces of scholarship, but none is inclusive. And yet, there are developments, which make the attempt at a synthetic work not only possible, but also imperative.

First, the very existence of sporadic publications, including archaeological ones, since archaeology has suffered a welcome shift that places emphasis on the economic meaning of archaeological data, begs for large interpretations. Secondly, there is a broader historiographical environment, which we ignore at our peril. The historiography of western medieval Europe in particular has undergone great transformation, starting with Duby’s seminal contributions. The chronology, the evolution, the structures of the medieval economy have been rethought and re-interpreted. Scholars like Pierre Toubert and his school, and those who contributed to one of the most recent synthetic works, that is, the *L’économie médiévale* by Ph. Contamine, M. Bompaire, St. Lebeck, Jean-Luc Sarrazin (Paris, 1993) have provided us with new ways of thinking.1 Equally stimulating has been the inquiry into economic and non-economic modes of exchange, which has introduced sophisticated debate, particularly on the economic history of the late antique and the early medieval periods. Finally, extremely useful work has been done on economic ideology, primarily with regard to Western Europe.2 Byzantine studies cannot remain alien to such developments. This is, in part, the justification for undertaking what is undoubtedly an ambitious and difficult project.

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1 See, for example, *P. Tolbert*, La part du grand domaine dans le décollage économique de l’occident (VIIIe–Xe siècles), in Ch. Higounet, ed., La croissance agricole du haut Moyen Age, Auch 1990, 53–86.

2 See, for example the various works by O. Langholm, as well as J. Kaye, *Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century* (1998), and *S. Todd Lowry, Barry Gordon* edd., *Ancient and Medieval Economic Ideas* (Leiden 1998).
Let me turn to some of the methodological problems we encountered in this project — problems that any scholar would have to address in writing the economic history of Byzantium.

The first, and obvious one, is chronology. Where should such an inquiry begin, and where should it end? We ended our in-depth investigation rather conventionally in the mid-15th century. We chose as our starting point the seventh century, although there is a lengthy chapter on the sixth century. While the reasons for this decision are self-evident, it will, undoubtedly, be criticized by, among others, “Byzantine nationalists”, who do not want to be deprived of the glories of the Late Roman or Early Byzantine period. And, indeed, such an objection or criticism would have some foundation. However, ours is conceived as a history of a MEDIEVAL society, and therefore the seventh century seems more appropriate. In this connection, I should like to make my second and last point on chronology. A recent synthetic work on the economy of western medieval Europe also differentiates the 5th to 7th centuries from the 7th to 9th centuries, in terms of structure and development: that is, it considers the seventh century a break of sorts, which is an interesting chronological coincidence between developments in East and West, a coincidence which is far from being the only one.

The structure and organization of the work, as presented first in the overall plan and now in the table of contents, led to some unexpected disagreements. The original plan began with chapters on the natural environment, the human resources, communications and production techniques. It then proceeded to examine the structures, organization and development of production, with chapters on the rural economy, the urban economy trade and markets. The contribution of archaeologists is very significant here and we included case studies of a number of Byzantine cities. This was followed, in the plan, by a discussion of money and the role of the state; there are chapters on the legal aspects of the economic thought and ideology. This plan was discussed in the committee, where some members held the view that, since the Byzantine state was a very important factor in the economic process, indeed, it was arguably the motor factor in the economy during the central Byzantine period, one should start by examining state institutions and their role, and then proceed to discuss the other issues I have mentioned, issues of production and exchange.

What was being debated was not simply a matter of rearranging the table of contents, but, rather, a matter of substance. By placing the discussion of state institutions and their role at the beginning of a history of the economy, one would be making a number of conceptual statements: first, boldly, \textit{ab initio}, and incontrovertibly, that the state was, in fact, the motor factor of the economy. Secondly, since the power of the Byzantine state both generally, and in economy matters specifically, was, for most of the medieval period, greater than that of the state in western Europe, one would start the discussion of the Byzantine economy by making the point of Byzantine specificity. Of course, no one will deny Byzantine specificity, to which I shall return. After all, the state retained the power to issue coinage, whereas in western medieval Europe that right was appropriated by major and minor feudal lords as well as by cities. It always exercised formal control over interest rates, and
thus created institutional conditions, which could provide advantages or disadvan-
tages to particular social or economic groups, or to particular activities. Most impor-
tantly, the state played a major role in the collection of the surplus through the fiscal
system, and in its redistribution through salaries to the army or to state officials, or
through investment of various kinds, for example public works of art. But the direct
intervention of the state in the economy was not as great as we sometimes think, and
there were many others players in the economic field.

The thought that the discussion should progress from the productive forces and
resources to the form and organization of production and eventually to the role of
the state is based on the concept that the forces operating in the Byzantine economy
were not in their ESSENCE different from those active in other economies; rather, it
was the COMBINATION OF FACTORS that was different, to some extent, from that in
other medieval states. In the end, we kept to the original conceptualization.

A second methodological question is entirely to be expected. It has to do with
the relationship between ideology and reality, in our case between ideological state-
ment and production or exchange behavior.\textsuperscript{3} Many years ago, Paul Lemerle warned
us all not to fall into the traps that the Byzantines have laid for us, i. e., not to mis-
take normative statements for historical reality. One would have thought that we
would have learned this lesson. Yet historians sometimes do still fall into traps, per-
haps most easily in economic history, since here the documentation is often sparse
and always recalcitrant, whereas normative statements are clear and powerful. The
problem is, that the Byzantines were much more conservative in their ideological
pronouncements than they were in practice. It is true, attested, and capable of being
proven that sometimes ideological posturing can become a factor of production, for
example, when it is embraced by the state in the exercise of its regulatory and legis-
lative functions. But at other times, the distance between them is great.

The question is not academic, for it is often ideological positions — such as the
aristocracy’s disdain of trade, the insistence, for a long time, on justice in exchange,
the emotional and ideological as well as the economic value placed on land — that
have been credited with what is considered to be the failure of the Byzantine eco-
nomy, namely, the fact that it did not develop into a western-style capitalism.

Ideological positions which place a negative value on the pursuit of profit, and
consider economic activity morally correct only when its purpose is the reproduction
and maintenance of life begin with powerful statements by the church fathers, and
can be found in most periods of Byzantine history.\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{3} For a summary of scholarly positions, see K.-P. Matschke, Bemerkungen zu ‘Stadtbürgertum’
Among those who think ideology had a very real role in the development of the economy may now be
added A. Giardina, Modi di scambio e valori sociali nel mondo bizantino (IV–XII secolo), in Mercati e
mercanti nell’ alto medioevo: L’ area euroasiatica e l’ area mediterranea (Spoleto 1992), 523–84.
\textsuperscript{4} See for example St. John Chrysostom, in PG 58, col. 591, and St. Basil of Caesarea, PG 31, col.
272.
In its extreme form, this ideology would place the highest value on a life with no productive activity and no economic concerns. The life of the ascetic is clearly the one which reflects patristic ideology. But since this is not an existence that could be held up as a workable model for the rest of society, the consequence, as far as society as a whole is concerned, was an insistence on the virtues of self-sufficiency.

As an ideological norm, autarky, or self-sufficiency, has its origins in classical times, and was subsequently reinforced by the moral teachings of Christianity. Saints’ Lives frequently insist on the family’s self-sufficiency: to come from a family of moderate means, and a self-sufficient household, was considered a virtue. On the other hand, interestingly enough, so were aristocratic origins, for a high social and economic status is also praised in Saints’ Lives. The quintessential aristocratic and wealthy saint is St. Michael Maleinos, scion of a great family, and a very wealthy man, who gave part of his property to the church. In the Palaiologan period, while some saints came from „self sufficient“ households, most came from richer families. In terms of imagery, the ideal of self-sufficiency is expressed by the image of the man reposing under his own olive and fig tree, a picture that goes back to the Old Testament. The concept safeguards to self-sufficiency of the productive unit, and conforms to the middle-Byzantine idea of justice, which included the concern that a proper and orderly society should not be disturbed by encroachment on the rights and possessions of others.

The proof text, used by modern scholars to show the Byzantine view of self-sufficiency is the Strategikon of Kekaumenos. Kekaumenos follows Xenophon, presents what, according to him, is good household management, and praises autarky. Good management means „an abundance of wheat, wine, and everything else, seed and livestock, edible and moveable“. A good landlord is self-sufficient in all respects, and thus has only sporadic need of the market, and no need at all of credit. So far, so good. But it is a far cry from this to positing that the Byzantines PRACTICED self-sufficiency; that neither peasants nor landlords invested in agriculture sufficiently to make a quantitative and structural jump that would bring it out of stagnation, or that at least peasants did not do so. The economic statements of Kekaumenos have for too long been considered to reflect reality. Why this choleric

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7 See, for example, Theophanes Continuatus (Bonn ed.), 258, elaborating on Micah 4:4.
general should be taken as the voice of the Byzantine economy is a marvel—thought it is explicable by the dearth of succinct ideological statements regarding the economy. In fact, ideological/moral texts which praise the pursuit of profit do exist (for example, the Vita of Neilos of Rossano), but somehow they are not quite seductive, perhaps because they are diffuse and not deliberate, or because they conflict with our preconceived ideas.

In any case, an important task in our endeavor was to try to disentangle the normative texts, and find out what the Byzantines really thought about economic activity, money, profit, mercantile enterprise, profit to money, that is, interest. It is a task that has been really been undertaken before, partly because very few people thought there was something to discover. A notable exception is the great economist Joseph Schumpeter, who understood intuitively that the most successful and interesting administrative bureaucracy in the world was bound to have had concepts of economics and to have philosophized about the monetary, commercial, agrarian and fiscal problems with which it dealt.\(^\text{10}\) The recovery of economic thought and ideology is difficult indeed, taking us from saints’ lives to sermons, to legal texts, to legal commentaries to the few surviving philosophical commentaries that are concerned with economic matters. It is difficult, but well worth the effort, since at the end of the inquiry one finds out that there was, indeed, an economic ideology far more complex than we allow for, and no less coherent for being dispersed. That is, whereas there are, in Byzantium, no great treatises in the way of western Europe, clear ideas on economic matters do emerge, and, of course, they evolve over time.

As in most societies, and certainly as in all advanced medieval societies, so in Byzantium there was a constant search for equilibrium between the idea of freedom in exchange (which includes profits) and the need for social justice. The fundamental problems of the formation of value and of the function of money became an object of reflection in Byzantium before they were elaborated upon in western medieval Europe. And the concept of interest as profit that accrues to money was enunciated in the 11th and 12th centuries, long before western Europeans were ready to accept it.\(^\text{11}\) Since such statements do not conform to the received ideology of autarky and go counter to religious ideas, they should be given greater weight.

To return to autarky, which I have brought forth as an example of the interplay between ideology and reality: there are certainly texts that praise it, as there are others that discuss profitable economic enterprise. But insofar as the real role of autarky in the Byzantine economy is concerned, the answer is to be found less in normative statements and more in the painstaking study of the documentation. Almost all of the authors of the Economic History of Byzantium, fortunately, are in broad agreement in their evaluation of what the evidence shows. We are in board agreement both as to the importance of practice, and in the judgment that self-sufficiency was an ideal to which people paid lip-service, but which they did not put into practice. Polyculture,

\(^{10}\) J. A. Schumpeter, History of Economic Analysis (Oxford 1954), 73.

\(^{11}\) See A. Laiou, Nummus parit nummos: L’usurier, le juriste et le philosophe à Byzance, Académie des inscriptions et belles letters (Paris 1999), 585–604.
which the Byzantine peasantry practiced, is something which can lead both to self-sufficiency and to the marketplace, through the production of marketable crops. Polyculture in Byzantium always included marketable crops, such as oil, wine, silk. As markets opened up, both peasants and landlords participated in them, in varying degrees to be sure, depending both on chronology and on relative wealth.\textsuperscript{12} The documentation shows both that people were, indeed, involved in the marketplace and that the agriculture sector invested in land-clearance and other forms of investment. Certainly, the Byzantine economy did not have specialized agriculture, which modern economists consider to be the only efficient use of resources.\textsuperscript{13} But specialization is a phenomenon of the industrial period, and cannot easily be expected of pre-industrial societies. Within the limits of the times, the market played an important role in the diversified agriculture of Byzantium.

Perhaps the most interesting example of the relative role of ideology in the reality is to be found in the case of monasteries, where the ideology of self-sufficiency, i. e., non-profitable agricultural activity, might have been expected to have had its clearest application. However, the development of the monastic communities of Mt. Athos, to bring only one example, shows the difference between ideology and reality. In the early documents of Mt. Athos, such as the \textit{Typikon} issued by St. Athanasios (in 973–75), ideas of self-sufficiency are strongly emphasized. Trading for profit is forbidden. However, after little more than two generations, the monks were selling products both from their own lands and from those of others. The economic activities of the monasteries in subsequent centuries show a very real interest in profit-making.

In the end, the factor that most influenced the development of Byzantine agriculture was the prevalence of the smallholding in the exploitation of the land, whether that occurred in independent peasant holdings or on large estates where the peasants worked as tenants or share-croppers. This, however, is a broader Mediterranean phenomenon, whose relationship with ideals of self-sufficiency may be the reverse of what is commonly thought to have been the case. It may be the prevalence of this form of land exploitation that gave rise to and sustained ideals of self-sufficiency, rather than the reverse. Small-scale exploitations certainly result in different forms of accumulation than in western Europe. But that is another story.

Strong ideological statements on the one hand; practice that shows a much more complicated situation on the other. Here is a nice problem of methodology.

Another one is connected to a long, and some think overly drawn-out debate regarding the usefulness of modern economic theory as a tool for understanding economic facts, structures and developments of the past, broadly speaking of pre-capitalist societies.\textsuperscript{14} The debate has been most lively with regard to the ancient world, the late antique period, and the Middle Ages. It is, basically, the debate between the

\textsuperscript{12} On this, see \textit{L. De Ligt}, Fairs and Markets in the Roman Empire (Amsterdam 1993), 149–54.

\textsuperscript{13} Finley, \textit{Ancient Economy}, 106–7.

so-called “primitivists” or “substantivists”, that is, mostly economic anthropologists, such as Polanyi and his school, but also historians, on the one hand; and, on the other, the so-called “modernists”, primarily economic historians of all schools. The debate encompasses all economic phenomena, but is mostly centered on trade or exchange, and on monetary phenomena. It is too long, elaborate and variegated to attempt to summaries here. I refer the reader to a special chapter devoted to it, in the Economic History of Byzantium. If one were to simplify the argument and reduce it to its essentials, it would point to one basic difference. The “primitivist” school would argue that economic phenomena in pre-capitalist societies are embedded in political and religious systems, and therefore have no independent existence. What may look to us like relations of economic exchange, for instance, is not subject to the laws of supply and demand, or to the economic pursuit of profit maximization, but rather, it reflects other needs, the need to preserve one’s status being primary. In such systems, among other distinguishing characteristics, exchange is not in the hands of professional merchants, motivated by economic profit. Rather, it is heavily administered by the state or by state officials, who have other interests at heart, and can accommodate non-profitable exchange. Therefore, modern economic theories regarding the behavior of prices or that of individuals cannot be applied.

The „modernist“ school, on the other hand, dominated heavily by economic historians, would argue that, once one has paid all due respect to the particularities of various pre-capitalist societies, nevertheless, it is not a priori excluded that there was trade for profit, that there were economic activities which were not administered by the state, that money did function as it does today. The corollary is that, once one accepts the existence of markets, the role of supply and demand in the formation of prices as well as in monetary phenomena is no different than in modern societies. To put it brutally, where there are markets, market forces operate (although they may not be the only forces in operation). In my view, the debate has been extraordinarily fruitful when it is undertaken by knowledgeable historians who recognize both the role of the state, of redistributive mechanisms and non-economic exchange, and also the existence of economic exchange that follows the rules of the market. The question engages not only the role of the state, but also the role of self-sufficiency; we are back to this central concept. Self-sufficiency enters the discussion in the case, for example, of the manufacturing and agricultural activity of large estates. If such activity was intended for consumption by the members of the household, then neither the entrance of grain in Constantinople nor the recovery of large numbers of amphoras in shipwrecks need be an indication of active exchange: they could signal transfers between various parts of large estates, imperial or private. The resulting view of the economy of exchange is very different depending on which of the above possibilities one follows to its logical conclusion.

Byzantinists have entered the debate in recent decades. Of course, the role of the state in economic activity has always been a matter for discussion, since it is clear that the state was, indeed, a major factor in the economy. But at the moment the debate has become more detailed. As an example, I bring the discussion between the late N. Oikonomides and John Haldon and others, regarding the role of the
APOTHEKE — which for Oikonomides was an institution with basically economic aspects to it, combining state activity and individual entrepreneurship in supplying the market with silk, while for Haldon and others it is a non-economic institution, connected only with the army, and deriving from the re-distributive role of the state.

Older and sharper is the debate between Cécile Morrisson and Michael Hendy regarding the use of modern economic theory to explain monetary phenomena in the Middle Ages. Morrisson does use modern economics to discuss the supply, demand and circulation of money in the 11th century, while Hendy considers such an exercise anachronistic. Byzantinists of the primitivism or substantive school tend to see politics as the primary explanatory factor of the economy. Those who might be called members of the modernist school, although I am certain they would reject any such board characterization, argue that, depending always on time and place, commerce and monetary exchanges played an important role, and that in the monetised part of the economy economic laws do apply.

This is probably the methodological question with the most far-reaching implications, for it touches upon almost all parts of the economy. A number of the authors of our *Economic History of Byzantium* faced this question, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly. Due weight has been give to non-economic factors: not only to the role of the state, which intervened in the economy but whose intervention was also often subject to supply and demand, but also to the much-discussed issue of gift exchange. It should perhaps be mentioned here that one could plausibly argue that gift-exchange played an economic role as well, for example, by opening the routes to commercial exchange, but surely this was secondary. So, non-economic phenomena have been addressed and discussed. At the same time, we all agree that economic and non-economic phenomena co-existed, and that the task is to define each of them, weigh its importance, and try to see whether it played a major role in the integration of the economy. Here, many of us think that there are areas of the Byzantine economy, where the laws of economics have high explanatory value. We even dared to produce a “national accounting model” for the 12th c., which describes the monetised and non-monetised parts of the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, and draws implications for monetary circulation.15

The first problem I raised in this essay is the problem of the table of contents. There is a connection between that seemingly petty point and what has been discussed above. An underlying conceptualization is that the Byzantine economy is not something exotic, which can best be understood by auto-reference, by reference to itself, but that it is comprehensible with the use of tools that describe other societies and other economies as well.

This brings me to the last point, which has to do with the overall interpretation of the structures and the development of the Byzantine economy. Inevitably, the question arises as to the place of Byzantium in the economic evolution of Europe and the Near East. Was the Byzantine economy strange, unique, or did it follow patterns...
terns that are similar to those of other medieval, and especially Mediterranean economies? Was it a failed economy, since it visibly did not evolve into the capitalist pattern that Western Europe eventually developed? Is it even appropriate to look at its development under such a light?

To find the answers, there are various ways one can follow. It is possible to look at the Byzantine economy in virtual isolation, as if it were a closed and unique system. One could then try to see what factors were in operation, how they interrelated, what kind of structures they resulted in, and what the inner logic of this dynamic might be. Theoretically, such an approach is possible, but it is not one which scholars usually follow. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we try to understand the dynamics of a society in comparison with, or within the framework of other societies that are known to us. When Ostrogorsky wrote the history of Byzantine feudalism, he was looking at the Byzantine situation with reference to the much better studied and much better known system of western medieval feudalism. Scholars have argued with the application of the term “feudalism” to Byzantium, but in so doing they were still comparing it to western feudalism, and finding sufficient dissimilarities to allow them to conclude that the two societies were, in this respect, fundamentally unlike each other.

As I just mentioned, I firmly believe that at some level the historian very frequently uses comparison. Comparison is useful, for it allows the historian to argue with some degree of probability even when the documentary base has holes, which can be filled to some extent by looking at similar patterns elsewhere; a risky business, rarely to be indulged in. It also allows one to pose intelligently the question whether a given society follows general rules of evolution, and therefore fits into a more general system. I have argued elsewhere that the comparative approach has traps and pitfalls. One might think there is a solid model against which to draw comparisons, whereas in fact that presumed model may be evanescent. One might choose the wrong society or group to compare. Or one might, making an a priori comparison, gear one’s investigation toward it, and reach the unsurprising conclusion that similarities between the two do exit. All of these are traps that have to be avoided.

In the particular case of Byzantine economic history, we profit from a number of developments, and for the same reason we have to be careful. Western economic history is much better documented and much more closely analyzed than that of the Byzantine Empire. It is, of course, not a monolithic science; different interpretations and heated debates exist among students of western economic history. But it remains true that it is better documented. A careless response to, the seduction of this more highly developed science would be to fall into the last trap I mentioned: to assume that because some pattern is visible in western economies, the same pattern is visible in Byzantium. A more careful and thoughtful response is to study patterns and dialectics, not with a view to adopting them wholesale, but rather because they provide a gamut of possible responses, or even a primary re-

sponse, after which permutations are possible. One example that comes to mind is
the effects of the plague on the economy. Plague epidemics have certain universal
characteristics. The plague strikes, in the first instance, populations which are con-
centrated and which live along lines of communication, primarily along the water.
It is highly destructive to populations, although the degree of its destructiveness
has been disputed. If repeated, it influences the demographic development of gen-
erations. And other diseases, namely tuberculosis, follow in its wake. Therefore, if
it can be established, as I think it has been, that the plague of the sixth century
struck much of Europe as well as the Near East, certain similar responses can be
expected. The most important of these is the population decline, which in societies
that were labor-intensive, as medieval socio-
ties were, has highly negative eco-

conomic effects. These lasted, in both east and west, until the end of the periodic epi-
demics, sometime in the 8th century. The effects of the end of the epidemics were
also similar: population increase, which in most cases leads to land-clearance, or to
more intensive cultivation of already cultivated holdings, or to colonization. Eco-

nomic growth follows upon the increase of population, but after a certain point the
response becomes differentiated. Similarly, there are long-term phenomena which
produce roughly similar structures: the prevalence of the small exploitation, a phe-
nomenon common to the Mediterranean, results in some similar forms of produc-
tion, based on tenancy, share-cropping or wage labor, even though the political su-
perstructure may be different.17

Thus, similar responses to similar conditions are not only to be expected, but
are also observable. On the other hand, there are expectations raised by comparisons,
which are misleading. Such is a fallacy that has sometimes been presented with re-
gard to the development of the agrarian economy in Byzantium. It has sometimes
been argued that its “stagnation”, which is a concept I do not accept, but which is
used, is due to the fact that the Byzantines never developed or used the heavy plow.
The thought process must be as follows. The agricultural revolution in Western Eu-

trope is due in part to the spread of the use of the heavy plow. The heavy plow was
not used in Byzantium; ergo, no technological advance, no agricultural revolution,
stagnation. It has already been recognized that the heavy plough, necessary to turn
over heavy northern soils, was not of much use in Byzantine lands, were the soil
tends to be light and dry. Yet the stereotype persists. Such is sometimes the force of
preconceptions and false analogies.

As to whether the Byzantine economy followed patterns similar to those of
other medieval societies, we contend that the answer is yes, as long as we keep in
mind the considerable specificities of Byzantium — as one must keep in mind the
specificities of other medieval societies, even within Western Europe. Both the chro-
nology and the general traits of economic development, for example, show an over-

17 See J. Lefort, The Rural Economy, Seventh–Twelfth Centuries, B. Geyer, Physical Factors in
the Evolution of the Landscape and Land Use, and P. Toubert, Byzantium and the Mediterranean Agrar-
ian Civilization; all in the Economic History of Byzantium.
all similarity, especially with Italy, but, if one really looks at general trends, with continental Western Europe generally or at least with France and Italy. Until the late 12th century, changes in terms of the growth and diversification of the economy tend to come earlier in the Byzantine Empire, at least as far as the limited documentation allows us to perceive. Thus, the recovery after the disasters of the seventh century seems to have begun sometime in the second half of the 8th century. In the west, depending on the area, signs of growth are evident in the mid-9th to mid-10th century. In any case, fifty years or so are not very significant. What is significant is patterns: the pattern of population growth, expansion of the rural population, land clearance, revival of trade and towns, and, in the case of the Byzantine Empire, first an economy characterized by a sustained and restrained growth in the 9th–10th centuries, and then a take-off, in the 11th–12th centuries.

Another structural element that is similar in east and west is the dynamic role of trade, even though trade was never primary in terms of the GNP, if I may put it that way. The growth of exchange and trade led to a certain amount of specialization in agriculture; influenced the circulation of money; permitted increased urbanization; and allowed cities to develop manufactures whose products were diffused both within the Byzantine Empire and in the rest of the Mediterranean. As in the west, then, aggregate productivity rose because of the increase in trading activities, which in turn elicited some institutional reforms, such as a certain institutionalization of fairs and markets.

If structures and chronology exhibit a degree of similarity, the specificities of the Byzantine economy are what give it its special characteristics. The continuation of urban life on one form or another though the dark period; the continued monetisation of part at least of the economy in the same period; the existence of a large landholding segment of the rural population; the persistence of exchange, small-scale though it might have been.

The most important Byzantine specificities derive from the existence, through most of the history of the Empire, of a powerful state, which had the ability and the desire to intervene in the economic process. The fact that accumulation of land and capital was slow through the tenth century is in great part due to this; as are the persistence of exchange and the relatively high level of monetisation.

But the precise effect of state mechanisms and state action upon the economy, as well as our evaluation of it has been and remains a matter of debate. This is the case not only in Byzantine studies, but also within the science of economics, particularly, but not only, development economics. Here the problem of methodology merges into questions of policy, insofar as the modern world is concerned. The historian is well advised to become acquainted with the economic literature. Not that he or she will find the ultimate truth in it. For economists are split: some still take a dim view of government intervention in any but the most minimalist form. The majority of development and growth theorists today, however, recognize essential functions both to the state and to market forces in the development of the
economy. Even the World Bank recognizes an important role for the state in the development of underdeveloped countries. Such theories also discuss the other side of the coin: market failure and state failure, that is, the limitations of the market as well as of state intervention.

All this is of interest to Byzantinists, since it provides a useful background against which our empirical data can be tested and evaluated. When one is faced with an economy hard to interpret, such as the Byzantine one, it gives one a certain degree of assurance to know that its traits are not outside the realm of what economists find plausible and indeed observable. So, it is with an assurance which neither fully statist nor purely free-market economics can provide, that we turn to look at an economy which has both state intervention and free-market aspects; and where one may indeed talk of both the positive and the negative aspects of both these structuring mechanisms.

For I think it is observable that the Byzantine economy was a mixed one, and also that it had a very considerable degree of flexibility and ability to change. In that respect, it is one of the most successful historical cases of a mixed economy. For example, throughout the period of slow and sustained growth, through the 10th century, the state supported those institutions that promoted stability. In a still fragile economic system, stability has a positive value: the small producer is helped and supported by it, while ideas of just profit and just rewards to labor allow for a measured growth that does not result in social upheaval or great economic inequality. But there is also a downside; the politics of stability limits accumulation and the size of enterprises. By keeping profits low, one encourages low capital investment in trade, and discourages investment in land. So the system has failures and tensions. These did not stymie it or render it static. On the contrary, eventually there was dynamic growth, in which market forces became more important. The state itself adapted to the new era, and the productive forces of society responded well to a more general Mediterranean economic climate, which created opportunities for profit.

These phenomena are observable. The fact that modern economic theory allows for them gives us historians the ability to inscribe what we observe into a system that makes sense.

One other lesson I think can be learned if historians look into the science of economics for some insights. There was a time when economists looked only at economic indices to measure the success of an economy and a society: rates of growth, GNP per capita, rates of inflation and so on. This is no longer the case. It has been argued that purely economic indices may measure growth, but they do not measure development: that is measured by a combination of economic and non-economic indices: the level of inequality; access of the population to the infrastructures; access to education and health services; levels of life-expectancy; protection against risks; quality of life. If we adopt such criteria, the Byzantine economy, far from being a failed economy, compares very well those of Western Europe. Not only was it a
flexible and dynamic economy, it also sustained or provided some of the important needs of the people: basic necessities, but also often a surplus; relative safety; relatively good communications; even a fairly extensive basic literacy. That the economy became disarticulated in the 13th century or after must not blind us to the fact of its very considerable success over a very long time.

Angeliki E. Laiou

METODOLOŠKA PITAŬA EKONOMSKE ISTORIJE VIZANTIJE

Дело које разматрам је The Economic History of Byzantium, у три тома, сада у штампи у Дамбартон Оукс. Ради се о колективном подухвату. Мада постоје многе добре студије о различитим аспектима византијске привреде, неколико нових моментана учинило је једно синтетско дело не само могућим него и неопходним. Нови археолошки подаци захтевају шире интерпретације. Затим, постоји шира историографска потка, посвећенаreinterpretацији средњовековне економске истоци Западне Европе, што византологи морају узети у обзир. Такође, веома користан посао обављен је у вези са економском идеологијом, наровногу у западноевропским оквирима.

Први методолошки проблем тиче се хронологије. Наш пројекат замишљен је као историја СРЕДЊОВЕКОВНОГ друштва и стога се чини да је VII век одговарајућа почетна тачка. Друго, улога државе, значајна у византијском друштву, разматрана је на крају читавог дела, чија развојна линија полази од производних снага и ресурса и преко облика и организације производње постепено долази до улоге државе. Све ово засновано је на принципу да силе које делују у византијској привреди по својој суштини нису различите од оних које делују у другим економијама, односно да је, у извесној мери, комбинација чинилаца била различит од оне у другим средњовековним државама. Друго методолошко питање везано је за однос између идеологије и реалности, што у нашем случају значи однос између идеолошких поставки и вођења производње или размене. Стоґа су испитивани и правни текстови. С друге стране, третирани су однос према профиту и реалности економског понашања, као што је питање аутаркије. Ипак, чинилац који је највише утицао на развитак византијске агарне производње била је превага сигналног поседа у експлоатацији земље, без обзира на то да ли су у питању била независна сељачка имања или велики поседи на којима су сељаци радили као зависни људи или закупци. Ова појава је препозната као шири медитерански феномен.
Други важан методолошки проблем је повезан са дебатом вођеном између „примитивиста“ и „модерниста“ о употребљивости савремене економске теорије као средства за разумевање привредних чињеница, структура и развојних процеса у прошлости, односно, уопштено говорећи, у прекапиталистичким друштвима. То је дебата са важним последицама. Сви се слажемо у томе да су економске и неекономске појаве коегзистирале, а многи од нас мисле да су постојала подручја византијске привреде у којима економски закони имају велику експликативну вредност. Направили смо „национални рачунски модел“ за XII век, којим су обухваћени новчани и робни делови аграрних и неагарних сектора, са извученим импликацијама за монетарну циркулацију.

Последње питање се односи на општу интерпретацију структура и развитка византијске привреде. Њено пажљиво испитивање, упоређено са подједнако пажљивим испитивањем компаративних података, показује да византијска привреда представља један од најуспешнијих историјских примера мешовите економије.

То није била само једна флексибилна и динамична привреда, него и привреда која је прихватала и обезбеђивала важне потребе становништва — основе али често и сложеније, релативну сигурност, релативно добре комуникације, чак и доста раширену основну писменост. Чињеница да је ова привреда постала мање артикулисана у XIII веку или касније не сме нас учинити слепима за њене значајне успехе током дугог временског периода.