

*A Look at the Trends Involving Economics and Trade from the fifth to
eighth centuries in the Byzantine Empire*

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Thesis

This study intends to show that much of the historical outlook on the Byzantine economy is focused almost entirely on agricultural production. By examining different sources, it is arguable that there are other economic factors that were present in Byzantine life, including trading networks, and the urban economy.

Sources and Limitations of Study

When I first began researching this project I started by browsing the stacks before I even looked online in part because of my fear of being overwhelmed by pseudo-research. I came across a large amount of print research, ranging from as recent as 2006 back to the 1940s. I retrieved as many books as I could carry and as I began to explore their messages, I quickly realized the troubles that I was going to face. It did not take me long to abandon many of the early-written books, not because I felt they had nothing to offer, but because I could not understand any sort of logical progression from these sources. I identified the information and overall message more so in the recent books attempting to tackle the vast history that is the Byzantine Empire. I feel one of the limitations on some of the early research I did was that it was almost strictly one-sided as far as the presentation of what we hope are facts. For many years, it seems historians have continually argued that this society, like countless others of its kind, was founded and funded solely on agriculture. The frustrating yet exciting thing about societies we do not know a lot about is that there is a constant chance of finding an item or a document that proves the existence of some part of that society. By unearthing pottery at excavation sites, we have made the link to trade and in the process, discovered an extensive network of import and export; through examining the etchings on coins, there is evidence of a degree of literacy—not only is the coin a representation of a form of payment, the writing shows sophistication and suggests potential for education.

The craftsmen of the empire provide a very interesting piece of the Byzantine puzzle; they were involved in many economic aspects including working in private workshops creating many goods, depending on their skill level, for purchase or trade. This project in itself is just a small step towards uncovering some knowledge about the Byzantines but it is something I feel responsible for. The fact that an entire society existed with many degrees of sophistication and has left lingering traces in our world today brings a certain necessity to investigate wherever we can. I benefited from more recent resources which tended to take the information we have already found and work it into the knowledge we continually discover.

Sources

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Argument, Discussion and Evidence

When attempting to study the economic history of the Byzantine Empire, it is impossible to ignore the many aspects that this particular subject presents. Through general reading, it becomes apparent that many people, be they historians or not, have taken for granted that this particular civilization had an economy based almost entirely on agriculture, where farmers farmed and handed their earnings to the state. Certainly, agriculture and the practice of farming was an integral part of Byzantine life, and contributed to much of the Empire's survival, but there are other factors to keep in mind when considering how the Byzantines sustained themselves amidst devastation including population decline and invasions from surrounding areas.

Many of the sources under consideration have been developed within the last ten years and tend to give more attention to multiple economic aspects rather than concentrating solely in one area. With that in mind, it is arguable that scholars can fall into a trap "with regards to Byzantine economic history; the main object of study has been the fiscal system and the basis on which it rested, the agrarian [agricultural] economy. The study of the urban economy, trade and everything else economic is a much more recent development."¹ In a project such as this, there is only so much research that can be taken in; some of the sources date back fifty years ago, which may be seen as out-of-date, but still offer valuable information on some aspects of Byzantine

¹ A.E. Laiou and C. Morrisson. *The Byzantine Economy*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2007. pp 2

economic life. The focus has shifted to incorporate other information, including the role of persons at multiple levels such as the aristocracy, merchants, artisans, craftsmen, labourers; the extensive trade network including import and export goods; and the balance of power in Constantinople, the city that was a key part to the Empire's survival at the time. Scholars including Laiou and Morrisson stress the importance of noting that "the Byzantine state was an important and, for a long time, a highly developed part of Europe, yet its economy is only very rarely incorporated into studies of the Middle Ages, and as a discipline it has developed only over the last few decades."² It is time to continue the exploration into the Byzantine economy and the many facets it contains.

Monetary Economy

- Economic life had ties to systems of bartering and labour services, as well as payment with coin. Salaries and wages of labourers among others were paid in coin
- Coin was used to purchase property, food and goods, and to pay taxes. Coin was minted in:

Gold	Solidus
Silver	Miliaresion
Copper	Follis

² Laiou and Morrisson, *Byzantine Economy*. pp 1



Solidus of Justinianus II
with the first image of Christ on byzantine coins, later to become a standard image, first reign 685-695, second 705-711



Miliaresion of JOHN I TSIMISCHE (969-976)



Follis of Constantinople under Justin II (565-578)

Tax System

- Taxes were collected and redistributed primarily in the salaries of military and civil officials, defence and military campaigns, and on public and infrastructural works.
- Eighth century: the base tax was the land tax, which was paid by all owners of land and was considered proof of land ownership. Tax was estimated on the value of land each person owned. The state was the largest landlord and retained exclusive rights over taxation, where it drew most of its revenue.
- The official in charge of administering the land tax was the *logothete of the genikon*, which loosely translated, means accountant or calculator. His staff included keepers of the central register: recorded tax liabilities of the empire; officials in provinces: kept local registers and collected tax.³
- The tax system was supervised by a civil service in Constantinople, while the registering of the population, land and tax collection was done locally by the staff of the *logothete*.

Peasant Taxes

- Personal tax: introduced in the 660s and was originally levied on males. This turned into the *kapnikon*- a household tax which was estimated on the basis of the productive capacity of the household.
- State corvees: taxes collected for defence needs, road building, bridge construction and fortification. *Peasant households responsible for military service were eligible for a limited tax exemption of secondary taxes such as those on animals and administration of fiscal system and the corvees.*

Commercial transactions

- *Kommerkion*: a ten percent tax on transactions at fairs and markets

Tax system information is found in Laiou, A.E. and Morrisson, C. *The Byzantine Economy*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2007 pp 49-52.

Trade

³ Mark Whittow. *The Making of Byzantium: 600-1025*. Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1996. pp 104

- Took place in many forms including: permanent shops that lined the main streets; temporary stalls in marketplaces; and in free, open spaces outside city limits.
- Merchants, churchmen, and members of the aristocracy were among the participants in trade
- The state also played a major role through participation in the system of the *annona*: military rations issued to soldiers, and the *annona civica*: commodities including wheat, bread and wine which to be distributed in the capital and other cities.⁴
- Byzantine was a passage for goods from the east, including silks, spices and jewellery. They operated a *statist* system where they extracted tariffs from commercial transactions and controlled the flow of goods.



Pottery such as *amphorae*- a two handled storage jar used for commodities such as oil, wine, and honey was a popular trading item.

Craftsmen- *ergasteriakoi*

- active in the urban economy in areas such as construction where they did masonry, sculpting, stone-cutting and architecture.
- would respond to public demands for goods and services and worked in imperial or private workshops

Imperial workshops-*ergodosia*-included

- arms workshops-*fabricae*
- dyeing workshops- *baphia*

⁴ Laiou and Morrisson, *Byzantine Economy*. pp 33

- weaving workshops- *gynaecia*
- textile workshops- *basilike istourgia*

Byzantine was an empire that suffered major devastation throughout the course of history; Arab invasions and raids put enormous strain on the economy which “suffered a severe recession but not a complete collapse. From the sixth to eighth centuries the empire was very poor, but still preserved the elements of a market and monetary economy”⁵ The sixth and seventh centuries saw a rapid population decline as a result of the plague-Great Plague of 541-542, war and conquest, among other factors. From 717-718 the Byzantines defended their last great city, Constantinople, from the last Arab siege, and enjoyed considerable economic recovery in the ninth and tenth centuries.⁶

Constantinople became the principle economic player in the lives of the Byzantines. The city was fortified by triple walls which extended beyond the city’s borders, and the land was used for farming and a secure water supply.⁷ Inside the walls of the city was the open land necessary for Constantinople to resist siege and sustain the people. A major argument in regards to Constantinople is that the empire’s survival was due to this city’s survival; although the city did decay, and saw a population decline, Constantinople “remained the centre of politics, diplomacy, administration and the source of the empire’s identity.”⁸ The city was an important part of the empire’s history and crucial to economic successes through both urban and rural contributions.

Agriculture

- Crops included wheat, barley, beans; flax-for linen making; extensive vineyards, and olive trees.⁹ Dry vegetables such as lentils and peas were cultivated in gardens, while the coastal areas farmed olive trees, apple, pear, plum, cherry and peach. Vegetables and wheat products such as barley, rye and oats constituted much of a person’s diet.
- Tools used for farming included the spade, a mattock [similar to a pick-axe], pruning-knife, a sickle [for harvesting grains or cutting grass] and an axe.¹⁰

Relation and Significance for Contemporary Education

Economics is involved in practically every aspect of society; from the most rural of towns to the centre of a bustling city, everyone takes part in some form of transaction in their daily

⁵ Whittow, *Making of Byzantium*. pp90

⁶ P.O. Long. *Technology and Society in the Medieval Centuries: Byzantium, Islam, and the West, 500-1300*. Washington: American Historical Association, 2003. pp 13

⁷ Whittow, *Making of Byzantium*. pp101

⁸ Whittow, *Making of Byzantium*. pp103

⁹ Long, *Technology and Society*. pp 9

¹⁰ Laiou and Morrisson, *Byzantine Economy*. pp 64

lives. It is important to discover and preserve the knowledge of societies like the Byzantine Empire and when we do this, we not only learn about their way of life, but we can see ways in which ancient practices have either disappeared, or continued on and are still in use today. The challenging thing about the Byzantines is how small our scope of knowledge seems to be, but as we continue to discover more about them, we can see how they fluctuated in terms of gains and losses and how it can apply to us today.

Conclusion

This Byzantine project serves to try and educate the unfamiliar in a way that considers more than just one aspect of a large portion of history. Our knowledge with regards to the Byzantines continues to progress as we continue to uncover evidence that shows where they were and what they were doing. The important thing is to keep researching; although it may appear that such a topic is too vast and too unknown, it becomes an exciting challenge to engage yourself in a topic and find something, or many things that you did not know about that subject. It is also worthwhile to research for a project such this particularly because you will often find information that adds to, or completes something you already know. It is important to note that “while some questions can never be fully answered because the sources will not permit, others are not presently answered because they have not been asked.”¹¹ We must constantly ask the questions and be in search of information. While the subject we are after may seem daunting, it is refreshing to go away with the satisfaction that you learned something you did not know before, even if it means you are still unsure of the final answer.

¹¹ Long, *Technology and Society*. pp 99