

INTRODUCTION

The Byzantine Empire was a state with extraordinary and enviable longevity. Formally, it may be said to have begun in 330, with the dedication of the new city of Constantinople, and to have ended in 1453. Even if one considers that the changes which occurred in the seventh century were substantive enough to signal a new era (and we think this argument can certainly be made with regard to the economy), that is still a period of eight hundred years. Certainly, society underwent considerable and continuous change over the centuries, and so did institutions. So, too, did the economy, which lay at the foundation of the society and the state. Neither the great wealth of tenth- or twelfth-century Byzantium, which so impressed Western European travelers and even Arab witnesses, nor the progressive impoverishment of the late period can be properly gauged without a deep understanding of how the economy developed.

It should not be necessary to justify the need to study the economy of the Byzantine Empire. The economic history of the Western Middle Ages is a well-established discipline, with a long pedigree and numerous practitioners of remarkable scholarship. 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,¹ and as a discipline it has developed only

¹ Chris Wickham is a major exception to this statement; Jean-Marie Martin and Jacques Lefort have studied the Byzantine agrarian economy with an awareness of developments in the Mediterranean region.

over the last few decades. In part, this is due to the relative dearth of source materials: we do not have the documentation available to Western medievalists, especially for the study of the urban economy and exchange, we do not have price series although we do have price information, the archaeological record is mixed. The problem of sources, however, no longer looks as forbidding as it did in the past. Scholars have exploited known but underused sources such as saints' lives; the archaeological evidence is mounting, both for the countryside and for the cities, and archaeologists are paying more attention to humble objects such as pottery, glass and metalwork; coins have been made to speak louder than ever by being subjected to scientific analysis. The evidentiary base for the economic history of Byzantium looks much larger now than it did a hundred years ago.

Another reason for the underdevelopment or, better, the skewed development of the economic history of Byzantium has to do with perceptions. The Byzantine state was powerful indeed, and had important functions in the economy, starting with fiscal policy. Most of the most obvious sources are fiscal. The state thus laid a trap for historians, who fell willingly into it. Since the nineteenth century and the work of Russian scholars the main object of study has been the fiscal system and the basis on which it rested, that is, the agrarian economy. The study of the urban economy, trade and everything else economic is a much more recent development. Another assumption, that the Byzantines generally, and the Emperor and the officials particularly, had no interest in the economy and no understanding of its basic functions has had a much longer life, indeed has been reaffirmed by one of the most eminent Byzantinists.² To some extent this argument stems from the idea that it was impossible for people in the ancient or medieval world to have had an awareness of the economy and of basic economic behavior. For Byzantium, this is belied by the ideas expressed by historians, commentators on Aristotle and legal commentators; an excellent description of how the market functions in oligopolistic conditions, and of the effect of grain price fluctuations on prices and wages is offered by Michael Attaleiates in the late eleventh century.³ More generally, one might point at the famous

² M. Hendy, "The Economy: A Brief Survey," in Sp. Vryonis, Jr. (ed.), *Byzantine Studies: Essays on the Slavic World and the Eleventh Century* (New Rochelle, 1992), p. 149.

³ See below, Chapter IV.

Chinese text of the first century BC, the *Debate on Salt and Iron*, a text imbued with Confucian values where, nonetheless, economic arguments are advanced on both sides of the debate; although they are not necessarily arguments that a modern economist would make, they show a real concern with practical economics.⁴ The idea that the Byzantines had little interest in economic behavior has led, as a corollary, to a perhaps exaggerated interest in the actions of the state, primarily its fiscal policy, and a very underdeveloped interest in the behavior of other economic actors.

Much of this has been changing over the last fifty years or so, as new and old sources are exploited and as ideological or conceptual constraints are, much more slowly, evolving. A few important landmarks deserve special mention. A. P. Kazhdan and Clive Foss were among the first scholars to establish the fact of an urban decline in the seventh century, and the effects that had on Byzantine society.⁵ This is now generally accepted, as is the “rehabilitation” of the eleventh and twelfth centuries as a period of economic growth despite territorial contraction. A. P. Kazhdan, M. Hendy, P. Lemerle and C. Morrisson were among the pioneers who escaped the iron hand of the preconception that political reverses necessarily mean economic failure, and recognized the signs of true economic growth in these centuries.⁶ Alan Harvey’s important book, published in 1989, was a major contribution in the development of this new position.⁷

It is not an exaggeration to say that over the last few decades a “new agrarian history” is being written, along with a new understanding of the economic role of the state. Michel Kaplan has studied both the economy and the society of the Byzantine countryside, and made extensive use of hagiographic sources, among others. Jacques Lefort

⁴ E. M. Gale, transl., *Discourses on Salt and Iron: A Debate on State Control of Commerce and Industry* (Taipei, 1967).

⁵ A. P. Kazhdan, “Vizantiiski goroda v vii–xi vekah,” *Sovetskaya Arheologiya*, 21 (1954), pp. 164–83; among C. Foss’ many works, see “Archaeology and the ‘Twenty Cities’ of Byzantine Asia,” *AJA*, 81 (1977), pp. 469–86.

⁶ Kazhdan, “Vizantiiski goroda;” M. Hendy, “Byzantium, 1081–1204: An Economic Reappraisal,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, ser. 5, 20 (1970), pp. 31–52, reprinted in his *The Economy, Fiscal Administration and Coinage of Byzantium* (Northampton, 1989), Study II; C. Morrisson, “La dévaluation de la monnaie byzantine au XIe siècle: essai d’interprétation,” *TM* 6 (1976), pp. 3–48, reprinted in her *Monnaie et finances à Byzance* (Aldershot, 1994), Study IX; P. Lemerle, *Cinq études sur le onzième siècle byzantin* (Paris, 1977).

⁷ A. Harvey, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire, 900–1200* (Cambridge, 1989).

has combined a profound knowledge of documentary sources with knowledge of the topography of Macedonia and Bithynia in particular, to reach novel conclusions about settlement, land use and the production and productivity of Byzantine peasants. In the process, the economic, as opposed to the social, dimensions of the small independent peasant landholding and of the large estate have been placed in a new light.⁸ The study of demography has also progressed significantly, so that the term no longer denotes, as it did until the 1970s, the study of the ethnic composition of the Empire. As for the state, the economic effect, if not always the intent, of government actions has been underlined by the late Nicolas Oikonomides, among others.⁹

Where the economy of exchange is concerned, there has been something of a revolution. Nicolas Oikonomides and Angeliki Laiou, working independently, established the existence of Byzantine merchants in the late period, and noted the constraints on their activities.¹⁰ Oikonomides stressed the importance of the provincial merchant. David Jacoby's numerous studies have done a great deal to solidify and expand our knowledge of Byzantine trade, which now looks much more active and interesting than in the past.¹¹ The study of the urban economy has not yet seen such notable developments,

⁸ M. Kaplan, *Les hommes et la terre à Byzance du VIe au XIe siècle* (Paris, 1992). Among the works of J. Lefort, see primarily his "Radolibos: Population et paysage," *TM* 9 (1985), pp. 195–234, and his syntheses in "Population et peuplement en Macédoine orientale, IXe–XVe siècle," in *Hommes et richesses dans l'empire byzantin*, II (Paris, 1991), pp. 63–82, and "The Rural Economy, Seventh–Twelfth Centuries," in A. E. Laiou (editor-in-chief), *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century* (Washington, D.C., 2002), 1, pp. 231–310 (hereafter, this collective work will be referred to as *EHB*). See also Lefort's "Fiscalité médiévale et informatique: recherche sur les barèmes pour l'imposition des paysans byzantins au XIVe siècle," *RH* 252 (1974), pp. 315–56. All of Lefort's articles are being republished in his *Société rurale et histoire du paysage à Byzance* (Paris, 2006).

⁹ N. Oikonomides, *Fiscalité et exemption fiscale à Byzance (IXe–XIe siècle)* (Athens, 1996).

¹⁰ N. Oikonomides, *Hommes d'affaires grecs et latins à Constantinople (XIIIe–XVe siècle)* (Montreal, 1979); A. Laiou-Thomadakis, "The Byzantine Economy in the Mediterranean Trade System, 13th–15th Centuries," *DOP* 34/35 (1980/1), pp. 177–222, repr. in A. E. Laiou, *Gender, Society and Economic Life in Byzantium* (London, 1992), art. vii.

¹¹ References to these studies will be found in Chapter IV and Chapter V, pp. 134 ff., 200 ff. respectively.

because of the nature of the evidence. The work of Charalambos Bouras is an important contribution.¹²

Despite these advances, a comprehensive and general history of the Byzantine economy was long in coming. Two works, published in the late 1980s, deal at greater or shorter length with important aspects of the Byzantine economy over time.¹³ It is fair to say, however, that the first work devoted exclusively to the history of the Byzantine economy and its development from the seventh through the fifteenth centuries was a three-volume collective work published very recently.¹⁴ Since both authors of the present book were very closely involved with that publication, it would be inelegant for us to sing its praises here. However, we must clarify what the connections are between the volume at hand and the earlier work. The present volume was not conceived as either a summary or an abridged version of *The Economic History of Byzantium*. Certainly, we have made use of this work which in many areas represented and was based on the most recent research as it existed in the late 1990s. The reader will appreciate the degree to which we are indebted to the earlier publication simply by looking at the footnotes. However, this book has been written anew. The intended audience is different, and there are also substantive differences. Archaeological discoveries have made it possible to introduce nuances in agrarian history, and to rewrite, to some extent, the history of the urban economy. Both authors have engaged in new research, and recent bibliography has sometimes changed our interpretations. Some topics have become focal points, such as the productive role of cities. The material has been organized along chronological lines. This traditional organization in fact makes possible the linkage between production, distribution and demand, a great desideratum of medieval economic history generally.¹⁵ Of course, given the format of the Cambridge Medieval Textbooks series, a great deal of material could not be incorporated, so

¹² Ch. Bouras, "Aspects of the Byzantine City, Eighth–Fifteenth Centuries," *EHB* 2, pp. 497–528.

¹³ One is Michael Hendy's *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy c.300–1450* (Cambridge, 1985); the other is the two-volume collective work, *Hommes et richesses dans l'empire byzantin* (Paris, 1989–91).

¹⁴ *EHB*. The characterization is from the review by E. Patlagean in *Le Moyen Age*, 110 (2004), p. 659.

¹⁵ On this, see below, Chapter VI, pp. 243–45.

that the earlier publication retains its importance. On the other hand, the present publication, the work of close collaboration between the two authors, is more cohesive and presents a clearer viewpoint than is possible in a collective work. We consider that the Dumbarton Oaks publication attained the maximum of cohesion and coherence to which such a work may aspire. But that is always less than can be achieved in a book with one or two authors.

Two further points should be made. The first is that the chronological division, adopted for its merits, also has disadvantages. Economic processes are slow and their maturation may be, and in this case is, reached at different points in time. A chronological division that works well for the agrarian economy may not be meaningful in terms of the urban economy, and vice versa. We certainly think that all economic sectors followed similar trajectories, but the point of substantive change may differ. Therefore, the periodization must not be taken as having precise and universal significance. In the text, we have indicated the nuances that must be brought to the chronological schema.

The second point has to do with our approach to economic history. There have been, and there still are, important debates as to the possibility of studying the economic history of any ancient or medieval society; the opponents of such a notion arguing that in these societies the “economic” is embedded in the “political,” and the economy has no independent existence; therefore, modern economic concepts and rules cannot be applied. The debate is sometimes said to be between those who see the past as “Same,” and those who see it as “Other.” It affects primarily the distribution of commodities, and the role played by economic and non-economic factors. It has been a fruitful debate, which has enriched our understanding of the past. For our part, we consider, with Claude Nicolet, that societies of the past were different from our own, but were not from another planet.¹⁶ We have given due weight to the role of the state that was clearly not always motivated by economic concerns. We have taken into account non-economic exchange to the degree possible: it is not possible to estimate the extent and effect of almsgiving, for example, but gift exchange, especially with Arab rulers, is well documented.

¹⁶ C. Nicolet, *Rendre à César: Économie et société dans la Rome Antique* (Paris, 1988), p. 38: “Les Anciens ne sont pas des Modernes; mais ils ne sont pas, non plus, des habitants d’une autre planète.”

However, we also believe that it is important to recognize both the existence of redistributive and “non-economic” factors, and also that of economic exchange that follows the rules of the market. We think that there are areas of the Byzantine economy where the laws of economics have high explanatory value. We further think that when one approaches production and distribution in tandem, and not as separate processes, the sharpness of the debate is reduced, and demand, an economic mechanism, plays a primary role.¹⁷

We have also consciously elected not to engage here in the discussion regarding the mode of production prevalent in Byzantium. In the hands of such scholars as Chris Wickham and John Haldon this has been an interesting and important discussion. To the degree that it centers around the role of the state, we have taken account of the different opinions, to the extent possible in a short book such as this. We have preferred, however, to give what seems to us due weight to the behavior of various actors in the economic process, the state very much included, and hope that we have shed new light on some of them. Perhaps the theoretical discussion will be somewhat affected by this. We note with interest that the scholar who has made the most powerful argument about the Byzantine Empire being a “tributary state” has, in a recent work, given an analysis that does not seem to depend on this concept, as is indicated by the choice of subtitles: “State-influenced patterns,” “Non-state activity: the ceramic evidence,” “Trade and commerce: the structure of demand.”¹⁸

The two authors of this volume have collaborated closely, so that the book is a result of our joint efforts. There was, however, a division of labor in the writing. Cécile Morrisson is primarily responsible for Chapters I, II, III, and the discussion of monetary developments in Chapters IV and V. Angeliki Laiou is primarily responsible for the Introduction, the discussion of the state in Chapter III, and Chapters IV–VI.

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of the methodological questions, see A. E. Laiou, “Methodological Questions Regarding the Economic History of Byzantium,” *ZRVI* 39 (2001–2), pp. 9–23. For a presentation of the problems involved in the concept of “same” as well as that of “other,” see J. Moreland, “Concepts of the Early Medieval Economy,” in I. L. Hansen and Ch. Wickham (eds.), *The Long Eighth Century* (Leiden–Boston–Cologne, 2000), pp. 1–34.

¹⁸ J. Haldon, “Production, Distribution and Demand in the Byzantine World ca. 660–840,” in Hansen and Wickham, *The Long Eighth Century*, pp. 225–64; cf. his earlier *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production* (London, 1993).

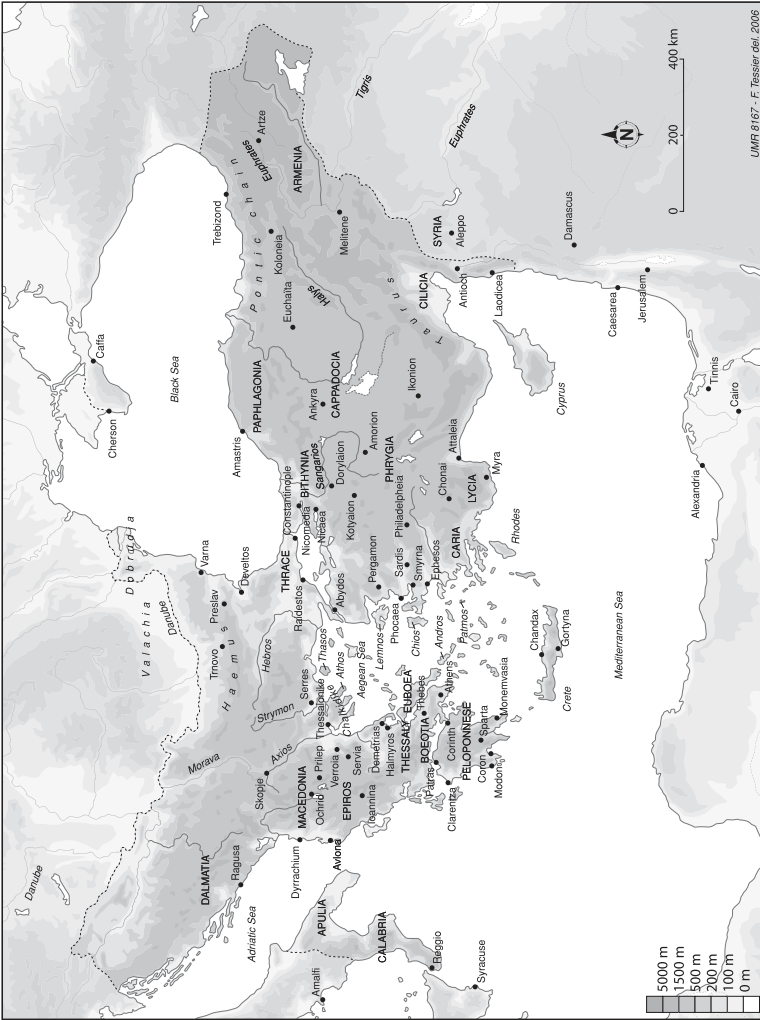
I

NATURAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES

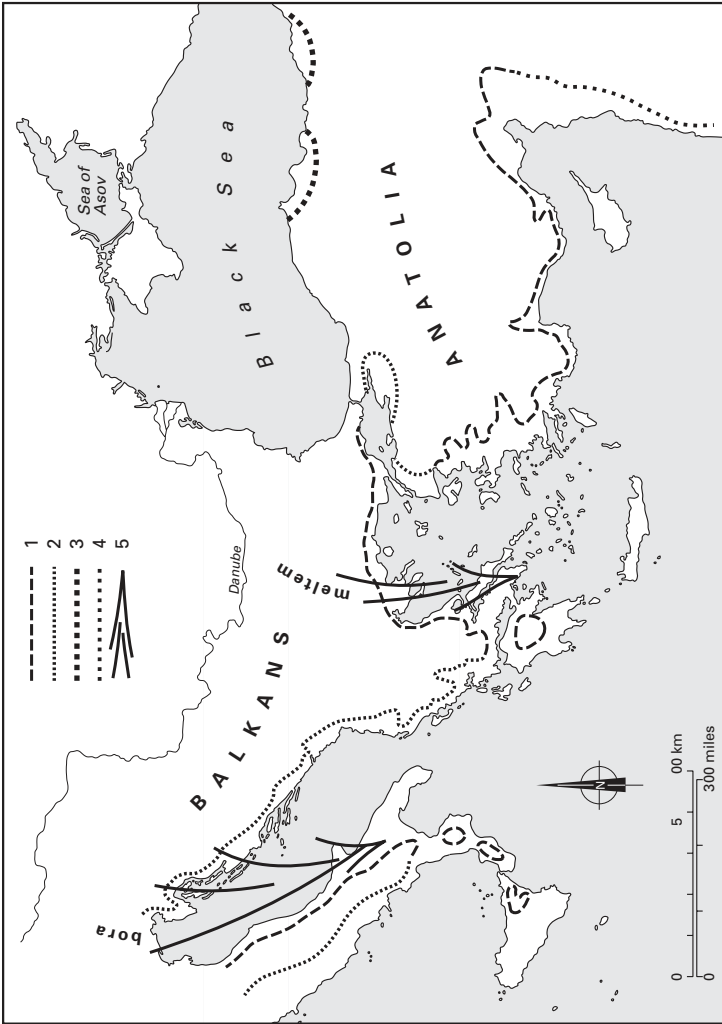
LAND AND ENVIRONMENT: GEOGRAPHY, CLIMATE,
NATURAL RESOURCES AND THEIR USE

The geographic area considered in this book is centered on the Mediterranean. This was not affected by the territorial changes that occurred as part of the transformation of the Late Roman Empire in the fourth century (*c.*3.7 million km²) into the more restricted medieval entity which we call the “Byzantine” Empire: the fall of the *Pars Occidentalis* meant a decrease to a total area of *c.*1.3 million km². The reconquest of western provinces entailed only a partial and temporary recovery to *c.*2.7 millions km² under Justinian. After the Arab conquests and the long struggles of the Middle Byzantine period, the Empire consisted of only *c.*1.2 million km² at its height in the reign of Basil II, and *c.*750 000 km² in the mid-twelfth century. The fact that this territory was always centered on the Mediterranean and on the Black Sea does not imply that it enjoyed an exclusively Mediterranean or maritime climate. The Mediterranean climate with its dry and hot summers (*c.*28° on average) and mild winters (*c.*8° average in January) with irregular and varying rainfall, obtains only in the coastal regions on either side of the Aegean or the Ionian and Adriatic seas. Its area can be plotted against the isotherm of an average 3° in January which is the limit of olive culture.¹

¹ B. Geyer, “Physical Factors in the Evolution of the Landscape and Land Use,” *EHB* 1, pp. 31–45, especially map 2; J. Koder, *Vyzantio os choros: Eisagoge sten istorike geographia tes Anatolikes Mesogeiou ste Vyzantine Epoche* (Thessalonike, 2005), pp. 53–7.



Map I. The Byzantine world
 (The dotted line indicates the frontiers of the empire of Basil II in 1025)
 (© Centre d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, CNRS Paris)



Map 2. Climatic limits to olive cultivation in the Byzantine world
 (B. Geyer, *EHB* 1, Ch. 3, fig. 2)

- 1. limit set by cold weather in winter;
- 2. limit set by cold weather in winter and damp weather in summer;
- 3. limit set by damp weather in summer;
- 4. limit set by aridity;
- 5. cold and dry wind