The unbearable transience of the city. Urban spaces in the Byzantine world in the transition from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages (ca. 550 – ca. 800 A.D.)[*]

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Writing about the historical trajectories of a city is always difficult. On the one hand, as an urban centre encapsulates different layers of historical significance from symbolic to imaginary, from functional to mnemonic, one is, indeed, confronted with several concepts of city, which – as B. Jaguaribe maintains – include: “the city as *polis*, the city as locus of citizens and the state, the city as market habitat of consumer and a city as an imaginary community forged by contrasting cultural heritages”.[1] These concepts do occur within historical contingencies during which its transformations, like in A-Rossi’s analogous city, are nevertheless endured by some monuments and architectures.[2] Here we find ourselves caught in a conspicuous dilemma echoing M. Kundera’s critique of F. W. Nietzsche eternal recurrence. Will cities simply occur and recur – and therefore they experience ebbs and flows, golden ages followed by an inevitable decline, or rather their transformations embody a transient and never-to-occur-again moment to be accepted and analysed in its “light” uniqueness?[3] In fact, the real essence of a city seems to become invisible when one tries to analyse functions and historical origins of the urban phenomenon.[4] In other words (those of L. Tellier): “how can we explain that throughout history new [urban] poles have emerged and progressively supplanted the old ones? Is there an explanation for why dominant [urban] poles succeeded one another according to identifiable spatial trajectories?”[5]

On the other hand, the abovementioned more “theoretical” questions, should be pitted against the analytical constraints often imposed by geographic and chronological limitations. Indeed, problem arises when the analysis of changes experienced by an urban system focuses only on a polity, such as the Byzantine empire “where the urban network inherited from the Roman period included – at least in the sixth century – the most populous cities in the [Mediterranean] world at that time (like Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria and Thessaloniki) and numerous middle-sized cities (like Apameia, Ephesus and Caesarea Maritima or Jerusalem).”[6] Things are not any easier when one analyses the development of this same network during a period of transition. Such as the passage between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages; a period during which the very concept of the city, together with its social fabric, architectural and monumental framework, general layout, infrastructure, public and private areas and functions (economic, political, cultural and religious) underwent a phase of profound change and transformation.[7]

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[1] Iaguaribe 1999, 299.

[2] Rossi 1981.

[3] Kundera 1999.

[4] Mumford 1961.

[5] Tellier 2009, 5.

[6] Laiou – Morrison 2007, 26.

I must immediately stress that I am using the very concept of transition (that hit the headlines courtesy of the exhibition entitled Byzantium and Islam at the Metropolitan Museum of New York) not to deny the idea of a crisis or as synonym of transformation without tensions[8]; rather I am using it to compare different social, political and economic forms with no teleological implications: "a time of passage between two periods, one where conditions were mature for a change in the socio-economic system as pitted against the changing political and administrative Imperial super-structure."[9] In fact, a particularly effective use of the term transition, the so-called "smooth transition", has been introduced by A. Walmsley to both interpret the developments in material culture of Syria and Palestine in the early Islamic period and explain the various cultural and economic paths taken by a society, in which continuity, discontinuity and change all play a part.[10]

Indeed, one should not play down the fact that, as J. Haldon has recently stressed, in the early seventh century the Byzantine empire experienced the effects of a high degree of militarization of the provincial fiscal system leading to a radical change in commercial networks, urban and economic life until in mid-eighth century. This situation had established politically and economically; a change which reflects the material evidence for a more localized and regional productive and distributive networks and a highly regionalized hierarchy of settlement.[11] However, we must conclude with J. Patrich that "when one writes of a region in the transition period, one should look for the nuances that differentiates between regions and sites and even between distinctive zones of the same sites. One should focus on variations and not only common perspectives."[12]

The geographical division of the so-called Byzantine heartland proposed by C. Wickham is a good example of analytical differentiation (fig. 1). "The Byzantine heartland offers us a paradox: although it was the focus of one of the largest and most complex political systems in the whole of Europe and the Mediterranean […] it consisted of an uneasy coupling of two wildly different geographical zones, the Anatolian plateau and the Aegean."[13] To these I should also add the so-called insular system of Byzantine Mediterranean (recently celebrated by a seminal work edited by E. Zanini, P. Pergola and D. Michaelidis).[14] This "system" *de facto* emerges as a third pole playing a central role in the mechanisms of production and distribution of the Byzantine empire; it was characterized by the geographical peculiarities as connective medium (in an Hordenian-Purcellian tone) and good levels of economic prosperity which islands like Sicily,

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[7] Zanini 2003.

[8] Evans 2012.

[9] Giardina 2007, 29–30.

[10] Walmsley 2013, 69.

[11] Haldon 2012.

[12] Patrich 2011, 59.

[13] Wickham 2005, 32.

[14] Michelidis – Pergola – Zanini 2003.

Crete or Cyprus still showed in the eighth century in comparison to other parts of the Empire.[15]

This geographical tri-partition will be analysed here in terms of the vitality of urban economies. As more archaeologists focus their attention on inland Anatolian cities like Amorium, once regarded always as disrupted, these reveal a previously unsuspected economic continuity and social complexity[16] more in line with those showed by sites located along the coast (like Ephesus, or Limyra) or on the islands (like Salamis-Constantia in Cyprus and Gortyn in Crete.)[17] Although with some caveats in mind (as Amorium has remained an exceptionally important military and political hub and some areas of the Anatolian plateau like Cappadocia did experience a real collapse of urban and rural life[18]), one should admit that an earlier concept of uniform decline should be replaced with a more complex approach, recognizing that societies deal with continuity or change "through the construction of successful adaptive strategies, which have the effect of transforming and re-equipping existing social structures to deal with new realities."[19]

In fact, such an approach should be pitted against the traditional historiographical debate on Byzantine urbanism, which started in the 1950s with A. P. Kazhdan and G. Ostrogorsky and has continued in the works of D. Claude, C. Foss, J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, C. Wickham, W. Brandes, L. Lavan, H. Saradi and J. Haldon (to quote just a few).[20] More often than not this debate has been framed within the opposition between "continuists" (who stressed that cities did survive physically; that, while they may have shrunk and often have been confined to their citadels as a result of constant enemy harassment, they nevertheless retained their role as centres of commercial activity, petty commodity production and administration) and "discontinuists" (who argued for a total collapse of the antique urban organization, and of social and economic life). In my opinion, this juxtaposition must be regarded as ineffectual to analyse causes and effects of the transition of urban sites in terms of social structures, planning and fabric. Instead, the contrast should be nuanced through a comparison between different regions of the Mediterranean as part of structured economic systems of larger and smaller size focusing more on production and exchange.

This should allow us to identify "a rough hierarchy of importance of urbanism in different regions [as] there also was a considerable degree of local diversity."[21] Methodologically this analytical approach will be largely based on urban archaeology, which in recent years has in many regions developed well-structured syntheses (although some parts of the Empire still show an absence of well excavated sites.)[22] As archaeology will be mainly used as an indicator of the economic relevance of urban settlements it will hopefully help me to interpret the change in character of "occupied spaces within the city as they often shrank or relocated within the originally larger areas and in many cases supported the presence of an ecclesiastical, military or other establishment."[23]

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[15] Horden – Purcell 2000; Cosentino 2013.

[16] Lightfoot 2007; Lightfoot 2012.

[17] Zavagno 2009. On Limyra, see Foss 1994; Vroom 1998; Vroom 2004; Vroom 2012.

[18] Haldon 2012, 118.

[19] Walmsley 2013, 147.

[20] Kazhdan 1954; Ostrogorsky 1959; Claude 1969; Brandes 1989; Foss 1990; Haldon 1990; Liebschuetz 2001; Wickham 2005, 591–693; Lavan 2011; Saradi 2006.

[21] Wickham 2005, 608.

[22] That are sites that have been excavated with good stratigraphical awareness of the late antique-early medieval contexts, a scientific approach to the material culture (pottery, coins, metal works, inscriptions, seals and so on), and, not least, with a comprehensive (and published) analysis of the results.

My definition of the city is set within an economic framework and this criterion should be interpreted more as a starting point to draw a multifunctional conception of urbanism than an exhaustive definition. As C. Wickham states, a market, a demographic concentration and economic activities differing from those of the countryside could be interpreted as a minimum characterization of urban activities.[24] In principle, I tend to agree with this idea of economy as the main sign of urbanism, whereby the political and institutional indicators acted more as secondary terms than as main indicators to supplement this conception of urbanism. Things being so, my definition of city will also be more concerned with the multifunctional role of the urban settlement. So, in my opinion a city is a settlement with a concentrated population (demographic function) and multifunctional roles (cultural, political, social, religious and, economic), among which the economic one should be regarded as the most useful interpretative key to understand the fate, trajectories and development of the urban body. Dissecting this body is simply impossible; the multifunctional urban characters are too deeply intermingled.[25]

Far from considering only urban specializations, my idea of combined functions leans towards an exhaustive explanation of the relationship between social and structural forms, through the adoption of an economic category of analysis. This economic activity is marked by new ways of investing urban wealth, which ring the death knell for a classic urban life-style and townscape (made of amenities, regular town planning, monumental buildings, political and social predominance of public space), though not for the city *per se*. Different and changing functions alter the kaleidoscope to a different urban typology. "Archaeology is indeed important to re-arrange this kaleidoscope, providing us with different sets of information which should be read with methodological caution."[26] There is no doubt that we face a sharp contrast between the material culture of the early medieval period and that of the late antique era which immediately preceded it; however, one should not discount the importance of archaeology in setting the economic framing of a newly-built urban typology: ceramics, coins, seals, artefacts, and stratigraphical excavations are extremely useful to put urban transformations into perspective, by avoiding the temptation of labelling them as a collapse in the urban scenario.[27]

This is not to diminish the relevance of documentary elements, which provide useful snapshots of urban life and structures. These should be effectively combined with material documentations to sketch a reliable and effective picture of urban life.[28] Nevertheless, one should take into consideration that there are simply not enough written sources for the seventh and the eighth centuries to enable a clear and detailed picture of urban life in the Byzantine world; we cannot expect the sort of information available for the sixth century.[29] In this sense, a good deal of caution is also needed when one comes to analyse the terminology used by documentary sources when dealing with urban settlement: "in secular sources the cultural role of *mimesis*, the imitation of antique authors, leads someone to label all the cities as *polis*, whereby in ecclesiastical sources, the term *polis* refers to virtually every episcopal seat."[30] Things being so, archaeology (the material available from archaeological, numismatic, epigraphic, sigillographic sources and ceramics) allows me to propose a model of the city for the period under examination; a model which would suit my definition of the city as a multifunctional settlement, with an accent on its economic activities; a model which, of course, has to be quite abstract, since many of its characteristics can, again, recur in different peculiar combinations for different regions.

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[23] Haldon 2012, 99.

[24] Wickham 2005, 593.

[25] Roncayolo 1988, 26.

[26] Wickham 2005, 602.

[27] Whittow 1990, 12. For a detailed methodological critique of the above-mentioned material sources, see Brubaker – Haldon 2001.

[28] Brandes 1999, 33–37.

As the preliminary historiographical, methodological and empirical remarks should have by now made the focus of this paper clear, for they offered the necessary premises and limits structuring my argument, in the following parts it is my intention to move to some specific urban sites located in different areas of Byzantine empire. In particular, I will focus on Asia Minor and the Aegean proposing a brief selection of significant urban key studies through which I aim to interpret the diverse sub-regional and regional transformations of the multifunctional urban landscape. In this sense, I will later turn my attention to cities located in two areas of the Eastern Mediterranean: one that remained (although with some intervals) under the Byzantine sway as Cyprus and Crete (as integral part of the above-mentioned Byzantine insular system) and the other, Syria-Palestine, which, although moving out of the Constantinopolitan grip, could be used, in my opinion, as comparative measure to evaluate the transformations of the urban centres in the Byzantine world.

Therefore, I would like to set sail from Anatolia where since C. Foss' work on the "Twenty cities of Byzantine Asia"[31], historiography has been prone to stress the supposed dichotomy between more vital coastal cities and fortified mainland sites (so-called hilltop *kastra* like Ankara or Myra) (fig. 2) guarding the access point to the Arab-Byzantine frontier. Indeed, if on the one hand it is true that – as C. Wickham has correctly stressed – there is hardly a single excavation whose chronology for the period post-600 A.D. is absolutely secure[32], on the other hand it is indeed clear that – as C. Lightfoot recently remarked "inland cities (in Anatolia) have always regarded as disrupted only because little archaeology has been done focused on the central Anatolian plateau."[33]

Obviously, C. Lightfoot has the spectacular discoveries at Amorium in mind (to which I will return), but one can apply his comment to other sites, like Hierapolis, a city located in the Roman province of Phrygia Pacatiana[34] and regarded as a strategic hub along the water (through the Lykos and Maeander valleys) and terrestrial routes which linked the Aegean and southern Anatolian coast with the Anatolian plateau (fig. 3). Although Phrygia Pacatiana, according to the sigillographic evidence[35], kept its administrative prerogatives well into the eighth century and was included in the Thrakesion theme (from the late seventh century onwards), Hierapolis never played as much an important political, administrative and fiscal role as the provincial capital of Laodikea.[36] However, the city survived an earthquake in the early seventh century, which severely damaged the urban walls built between the late fourth and early fifth century.[37] In the seventh and eighth centuries (and even beyond), the city developed along "islands of settlement" lines (in Italian, *città a isole*)[38], with residential areas (like the ones made of reused stones and wooden framework built within the *cavea* of the theatre and those erected after the damaged walls) sometimes centred on small ecclesiastical buildings (like the one built within the shell of the former cathedral) these foci seemed to be scattered around the ancient urban landscape and linked by a relatively well-preserved road network.[39]

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[29] Haldon 1990, 92. For a detailed methodological critique of the above-mentioned material sources, see Brubaker – Haldon 2001.

[30] Brandes 1999, 27; see on this also Haldon 1990, 100–102 and Dunn 1994.

[31] Foss 1977a, 469–486.

[32] Wickham 2005, 626.

[33] Lightfoot 2007, 182.

[34] Arthur 2006, 13.

Moreover, although the complex public water supply broke down, drinking water points located along the surviving road-system and a series of open water channels continued to supply the local population and, in all evidence, supported a level of artisanal vitality as pointed out both by stone cutting activity and locally-made glass and metal-work objects.[40] The impressive levels of ceramics circulating within the town between the mid seventh and tenth century (whose stylistic and morphological parallels with productions documented in Aegina, Emporion and Chios) points to a distribution pattern which included the Lycos valley and Western Anatolia as far as Limyra.[41] In turn, the persistence of economic activity underpinned the resilience of the local demand and social sophistication of the elites (as pointed out by the so-called eighth century "Lombard Ring"), although their importance owed less to their relevance in the administrative, political and fiscal imperial system than to both the scale-strength of the wealth deriving from local landowning, and the religious importance of the city as a pilgrimage-centre.[42]

A comparable urban development can be proposed for Amorium (fig. 4), located well into the Byzantine heartland, on the Anatolian plateau.[43] The city, to the contrary of Hierapolis, was raised to the status of thematic capital (Anatolikon theme) in mid seventh-century and boasted a partitioned urban landscape: the upper fortified mound, possibly including the secure headquarters of the *strategos* (the military commander), his staff together with other imperial administrators, and the residential lower city which included foci of settlement which preserved the "late antique framework of public buildings, streets and public and private spaces forming the grid within which the Dark Age city developed."[44] The excavations have, in fact, yielded traces of streets and numerous wells, public buildings (like the so-called bathhouse complex), four churches (among them the so-called Lower City Church) (fig. 5) and, above all, artisanal installations which point to a good level of economic activity throughout the seventh and the eighth century. The economic vitality of the city in the period under consideration is further proved by local copper coin finds whose chronological pattern of circulation (seventh to mid-ninth century) allows us to assert that exceptions to the general breakdown in eighth and early-ninth century level of monetization were not only limited to some better favoured coastal regions, but also to some inland areas.[45]

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[35] Nesbitt – Oikonomides 1994, 43; Zacos – Veglery 1972, 195, 235, 243, 245.

[36] On Laodikeia, see mainly Traversari 2000.

[37] Arthur 2006, 43–44.

[38] Wickham 2005, 630–632.

[39] Arthur 2006, 46–47, 128, 151.

[40] Here I am referring to a late seventh or early eighth century bas-relief depicting St. John the Baptist recovered during the excavations in one of the small-churches located at the former Central Baths. See Arthur 2006, 48–50, 64–65, 159.

[41] Arthur 2006, 74–77. See also Cottica 2007.

[42] Arthur 2006, 92 where a parallel with a similar ring now in Montecassino is proposed.

[43] Lightfoot 2007.

One should however pair numismatic evidence with pottery and stress, as S. Cosentino maintains, "the role of locally produced ceramics (coarse wares) which points not to the change in inland patterns of trade and distribution but to their reduction in scale."[46] Indeed, one should start reassessing the role of Anatolian plateau in the survival of Byzantine empire too often limited to its role as focus of the imperial defense network in a more decentralized and fiscally fragmented political and administrative landscape. This not to deny that inland cities (like Sagalassos) did not experience a drastic reduction of economic activity while others (like Sardis, Amasya or Ankara) clearly suffered from the effects of the Persian and Arab incursions, but to nuance the idea that only those Anatolian cities which remained military and political foci (with fortifications acting as reference-point for a scattered settlement) survived alongside the coastal centres like Ephesus or Miletus.[47]

Here, it seems to me that at least some areas of Anatolia could partially tune with other regions of the Eastern Mediterranean in the seventh and eighth century as the latter experienced a fragmentation and simplification of the long-exchange system, decline in imports, localization of the sets of production and distribution (as showed by dramatic diminution of coin-finds and regionalization ceramic production) without however witnessing a catastrophic collapse of urban life. As Lightfoot indeed concludes, "in the second half of the eighth century some [Anatolian] urban centers remained and the countryside continued to provide the basic resources for subsistence and also surplus wealth."[48]

We can for instance turn our attention to the city of Ephesus (fig. 6) lying on the western coastal plain of the Anatolian peninsula. Inserted in the saddle between two hills (Bulbul Dağı and Panayr Dağı), the city had a rich port, which benefited from the Mediterranean system of shipping and exchange and was renowned in both the ancient and Christian period as a pilgrimage centre. For Ephesus traditional historiography (harkening back to C. Foss' classic work) envisioned a path of decline, shrinking and duplication of the ancient city.[49] According to C. Foss, during the so-called Dark Ages, a peculiar settlement pattern came into sight: a search for more security during the seventh and eighth-century Arab raids (on land and sea), together with the silting up of the harbour and the abandonment of the Episcopal complex of St. Mary, brought about the slow demographic and economic decline of the ancient lower city; Ephesus was endowed with a new walled enceinte which, apparently in a careless way, set aside the two/third of the old urban landscape, using massive buildings like the theatre and the stadium to orient itself.[50] Two different foci with urban pretensions came to the fore: the old city landscape, which lay in ruins, and the hill of Ayasoluk where Justinian's great basilica was built over the burial of Saint John and a later fortification, enhanced its role as successor of the classic Ephesus.[51]

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[44] Ivison 2007, 38.

[45] Laiou – Morrison 2007, 87.

[46] Cosentino 2013, 72–73.

[47] On Sagalassos, see Waelkens – Loots 2000; Waelkens 2006. See also Vionis – Poblome – Waelkens 2009. On Sardis, see Foss 1976; Crawford 1990. On Amasya, see Brandes 1989, 136ff; Ireland et.al. 2000. On Ankara, see Foss 1977b; Foss – Winfield 1986. On Miletus, see Niewöhner 2009; Niewöhner 2011. On Ephesus, see infra.

[48] Lightfoot 2012, 191.

On the one hand, if one looks at the great reduced central walled area filled with ecclesiastical buildings and at the fortified hill of Ayasoluk, Ephesus seems to fit into the type of settlement pattern we previously referred to: a fortress and military centre serving often as a refuge for low-lying settlement. On the other hand, if one takes into consideration the demographical implications of a large intramural space, the geographical and strategic location of the city in the "inner zone" around Constantinople (crucially important to the Empire as a source of much of the food which supplied the capital), its role as a pilgrimage and religious centre, its relevance as commercial centre for long and short distance trade and, eventually, the archaeological evidence pointing to a fragmentation of the inhabited area both intra and extra-*moenia*, Ephesus moves away from this model.[52]

Indeed, the fate of Ephesus owed less to the invasions than to the signs of systemic crises of the Aegean region in the seventh century: the tendency is now to locate deurbanization within a large period of disruption. But if Ephesus suffered from the disorder in the Mediterranean interregional system of exchange, it is also true that the city remained substantial (the new wall included a square kilometre of land and there was also another walled enclosure around the extramural church of Saint John) and possibly involved in those dynamics of Mediterranean shipping which M. McCormick has pointed out.[53] In fact, pilgrims as Willibald and Thomas of Farfa and tags of eastern relics as those preserved in Sens, point to a continuity of the role of Ephesus along the shipping trade-routes in the seventh and eighth century and even beyond;[54] a continuity reinstated also by resilient communications along the ancient sea-trunk linking the Aegean with Italy and the West, although horizons were more contracted and narrowed to Constantinople and Ephesus itself.[55]

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[49] Foss 1979; see also Foss 2002.

[50] Elliger 1985, 204.

[51] Concina 2003, 99; see also Brandes 1989, 83–86.

[52] On the walls of Ephesus, see mainly Müller-Wiener 1986 and Foss – Winfield 1986. See also Haldon 2005/2010, 58–61 and Müller-Wiener 1986, 448–456.

[53] McCormick 2001, 129–148, 502–508.

[54] On Willibald, see Holder-Egger 1887, 19–20, 60 (on the Vita, see Lapide 1996, 12–13); on Thomas of Farfa, see *Constructio Farfensis* 3.25–5.8 reported in McCormick 2001, 172 fn. 70.

[55] Brandes 1989, 55–62.

Ephesus persisted as an urban centre (although it never became a thematic capital), and it is not by chance that Theophanes refers to a great fair, a *panegyrion*[56], which dated back to 794/5 A.D., and possibly earlier.[57] It is important to notice, however, that the Ephesian public space was still structured and coherent as there is evidence that a processional and ceremonial route between the two main areas of settlement was still in use in the eighth century. Ecclesiastical elites and state hierarchies contributed to the resilience of urban fabric and socio-political structure. Monasteries and churches dotted the city landscape and mentioned by the sources in the seventh and eighth century, attracted the patronage of the bishop and the wealth of the local elites as ambitious and wealthy patrons were using ecclesiastical buildings to make major monumental statements.[58]

A set of lead-seals mentioning high-ranking dignities and members of the local state machinery, dated from the late sixth to the second half of the eighth century (and even early ninth century) prove that Ephesus retained an important role in the eyes of the Byzantine state; administration as further enhanced by the *kommerkion* collected during St. John's *panegyrion.*[59] The distance from the frontier allowed Ephesus to both exploit the high levels of demand of the capital, enhancing its role as grain supplier and to fuel local levels of production and distribution, revealed by the presence of a ceramic workshop manufacturing a local variant of the Phocean Red Slip Ware (in the first half of the seventh century), and later, by the vitality of the artisanal quarter of the Hanghäuser and by the continuous relevance of its port.[60] This allows us to place some residual members of regional elites in the city and argue that the spatial fragmentation of the urban landscape was not a sign of lessened urban coherence, and did not point to the social and economic collapse of the city.

This picture of spatial coherence as opposed to simple de-monumentalization; of state and ecclesiastical elites and local magnates remaining urban-oriented and therefore underpinning levels of local and (partially) interregional demand, could be traced in Athens, a city across the "Aegean pond" from Ephesus – although with clear variation insofar as social, cultural, economic and political importance. Indeed, in Athens we are stumbling into the archaeological darkness as – to the contrary of Ephesus – the contemporary densely built urban landscape constitutes a major impediment to archaeological excavations. As a result only a small part of the so-called post-Herulian walled city has been systematically unearthed and pottery in particular has never been properly analysed. Moreover, Athens is seldom mentioned by literary or documentary sources in the period under consideration. "A few sources maintain that Dark-Age Athens was an important centre for learning [but] there is no reason to treat those pieces of information as anything more than literary tropes."[61]

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[56] Theophanes, Chronographia, 387. According to Theophanes, Constantine VI went to Ephesus in 794/5 A.D., and "after praying in the Church of the Evangelist, remitted the customs dues (*kommerkion*) of the fair (*panegyrion*) – which amounted to 100lbs. of gold – in order to win the favour of the holy apostle, the evangelist John."

[57] See on the possible earlier date of this fair McCormick 2011, 199. On the very fair also Laiou 2002, 709.

[58] The bishop Willibald spent some time in Ephesus visiting the Church of St. John and the Tombs of Mary Magdalene and the Seven Sleepers; later evidence for Ephesus as monastic centre is provided by the Life of St. Lazarus (Vita Lazari, 508–588), an eleventh-century hagiographic source, which mentions the *Oratorium* of St. Marine by the main highway north of the city and describes the rise of the monastic institutions (three monasteries dedicated to the Saviour, the Virgin and the Holy Resurrection) on Mount Galesion (located on the left bank of the Caister river), where previously a hermit named Pachomius had spent his life. See Life of Saint Stephen the Younger (Auzepy 2007, 256–260) and Theophanes, Chronographia, 614 on the persecutions of local monks by the hand of Michael Lachanodrakon, general of the Thrakesian Theme. On the Emperor Theodosius III, who abdicated in 717 A.D. and became a monk in Ephesus, see Ignatios the Deacon, Vita Gregorii Decapolitae (Dvornik 1926, 9–10) and Bekker 1838, 787.

[59] On the *kommerkion* mentioned by Theophanes, see mainly Vryonis 1981 and Brandes 1989, 93.

[60] Outschar 1993, 47–52; Empereur – Picon 1986.

The fate of Athens in the seventh to ninth century has therefore been perceived by contemporary historiography as a provincial backwater characterized by demographic shrinkage, lack of political lustre (although it can be assumed that the city hosted the headquarters of the Theme of Hellas established in 697 A.D.)[62] and limited economic activities, *de facto* turning the period into a black hole engulfing the city after the famous visit of Constans II in mid-seventh century until the mid-ninth century Byzantine revival.[63] In the light of such difficulties it seems to me possible, however, to use the scanty evidence at our disposal and a re-appraisal of old excavations report to shed a different light on the urban development of the city in the transition from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages. Here one must immediately concede to the fact that unlike Ephesus material evidence of socio-economic persistence and spatial coherence of urban landscape and structures is scarce. Nevertheless, "targeted excavations […] have revealed a settlement horizon from the eighth and ninth century […]" with a "jumble of streets and alleys as well as small closely spaced and uniform houses, covering […] the area to the south of the Church of Saint Mary [They] reused early building materials and consist of small rooms for production and storage as well as for residential purpose." [64] Moreover, one should turn to sigillographic and numismatic evidence as low denominations copper coins were "injected" into the Athenian market as result of direct state intervention between 650 and 730.[65] Indeed, coins point to the presence of ecclesiastical elites and state officialdom as well as the persistence of good level of monetary circulation; this in turn proves the vitality of Athens as urban market and shows that the city clearly benefited from its location along the shipping routes linking Sicily (as some copper coins minted in Syracuse have been yielded in Athens well into the late seventh century) with Constantinople throughout the Aegean sea.[66]

Indeed, Athens, like Ephesus and Corinth threw its lot with the medium distance of exchange, which privileged the Aegean islands and the coastal settlement. This should come as no surprise considering – as F. Curta well demonstrated – "the creation of the theme of Hellas in the late seventh century did not result in a gradual extension of the imperial authority inland from the outposts on the coast, because at least initially Hellas was a little more than a naval base."[67] Moreover, one can hardly ignore the fertility of

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[61] Curta 2011, 119–120.

[62] Curta 2011, 118.

[63] Cosentino 2007; Curta 2011, 107–108.

[64] Ladstätter 2017, 246.

[65] Curta 2011, 112–113.

[66] Curta 2011, 108.

[67] Curta 2011, 125.