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FROM ONE SEA TO ANOTHER
TRADING PLACES IN THE EUROPEAN
AND MEDITERRANEAN EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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Emporia, money and exchanges. Some reflections

In the framework connecting the “Due Mari” and establishing the role of this relationship in the first growth of European economy in the Early Middle ages¹, coins are both a tracer and an indispensable instrument of exchanges. As Michael McCormick points out in this volume, money, either cash or uncoined metal, is one of the systemic features that characterize *emporia*².

The contributions presented in this book consider the topic from both geographical points of view, or better said, points of observation, and give a *status questionis* based on the most recent textual and archaeological research. Unfortunately many archaeologists' papers, even when they mentioned coin finds, do not give sufficient details for their assessment. It may be regretted that no survey similar to that of Alessia Rovelli for Italy or Pagona Papadopoulou for the eastern Adriatic is available³, and that the paper by Nathaniel Cutajar, full of unknown material on Malta, the “emporium-island” and essential port-of-scale in the early medieval Mediterranean, was not submitted for publication. A remarkable exception for the northern side of the subject is however offered by John Naylor: his exemplary study of coinage and the English *emporia* builds on and enlarges his previous enlightening research that defines the emergence of *emporia* in an already monetized context and analyzes their role compared with the diffusion of coin use in their hinterland⁴. But numismatic information on

¹ P. Toubert, *L'Europe dans sa première croissance*, Paris, 2004, M. McCormick, *The origins of the European economy*, Cambridge, 2001, C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford, 2005

² M. McCormick, « Comparing and connecting: Comacchio and the early medieval trading towns », in *this volume*

³ A. Rovelli, « Gold, silver and bronze: an analysis of monetary circulation along the Italian coasts », in *this volume*; P. Papadopoulou, « The numismatic evidence from Southern Adriatic (5th-11th centuries): some preliminary observations and thoughts », in *this volume*.

⁴ J. Naylor, « Coinage, Trade and the Origins of the English Emporia, c. AD 650-750 », in *this volume*; and *Idem*, « The circulation of early medieval European coinage: a case study from Yorkshire, c.650-867 », in *Medieval Archaeology* 51, p. 41-61

other areas can be gathered from papers, such as Chris Loveluck's on Lincolnshire and Mateusz Bogucki on Pomerania⁵.

Even if comprehensive assessments were available, several methodological obstacles remain and were indeed debated at Comacchio: first the unbalanced nature of numismatic evidence, that is highly developed in Northern countries, less and less so when one goes southward (in France and Italy) for reasons which have little to do with the quality of archaeological work but depend mainly on the difference in regulation concerning coin finds⁶. This difference partly arises perhaps, as Richard Hodges' comparison suggests, from the fact that the Adriatic area and Italy at large were less monetized in that period than the North⁷. Sometimes also, as Alessia Rovelli underlines⁸, this may be due to the relative priority given by southern archaeologists to the study or publication of ceramic material, a tendency which can be explained by the fact that most excavation directors are more familiar with ceramology than with numismatics which is too often left to coin experts with insufficient knowledge of archaeology; but that is changing⁹.

The great problem however consists in the difficulty of comparing both synchronically and diachronically areas or periods with different coinage patterns (articulated plurimetallic systems in the South as opposed to silver monometallic ones in the North from the eighth century onward) with probably very different purchasing power and price levels. A Veronese document of 829 gives the equivalence between one *solidus mancusus* and 30 denarii¹⁰ and contemporary Italian documents that of 36 Roman denarii for a Constantinopolitan full weight solidus¹¹. So even a debased Roman or Sicilian tremissis would still be

⁵ C. Loveluck, « Central places, exchange and maritime-oriented identity around the North Sea and western Baltic, AD 600-1100 », in *this volume*. M. Bogucki, « On Wulfstan's right hand – the Viking Age emporia in West Slav Lands », in *this volume*.

⁶ See the surveys on the law and practice regarding coin finds in Great Britain, Denmark, Belgium, Austria, Spain and Israel published in *Commission Internationale de Numismatique, Compte rendu*, 49, 2002, pp. 13-64.

⁷ R. Hodges « Adriatic Sea Trade In An European Perspective », in *this volume*.

⁸ A. Rovelli, « Gold, silver and bronze: an analysis of monetary circulation along the Italian coasts », in *this volume*, p. 286.

⁹ It will be discussed in the forthcoming colloquium organized by P. Delogu and A. Rovelli on « Numismatica e Archeologia. Monete, stratigrafie e contesti. Dati a confronto » (Rome, September 2011).

¹⁰ *Codice diplomatico veronese dalla caduta dell'impero romano alla fine del periodo carolingio*, a cura di V. Fainelli, Venezia 1940, n. 131 (cited by S. Cosentino, in *this volume*, p. 458 n. 73).

¹¹ *Breviarium Ecclesiae Ravennatis (Codice Bavaro), secoli VII-X*, G. Rabotti (ed.), Rome, 1985 (*Fonti per la Storia d'Italia*, 110), n. 121.

worth some 10 tens time more than a denier of 1.3 g silver and more than the lighter sceat. Even if a common standard of conversion, equivalent of the modern PPP or the less technical Big Mac index¹², could be agreed upon, there remains the lack of comparable statistical samples. We come back here to the great gap between the northern and southern legislations regarding metal detectors. One wonders whether the evidence for Italy and France be very different if these countries, instead of a repressive legislation that they cannot systematically enforce, had something comparable to the British Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) or the cooperation policy of the Danish authorities that has so dramatically change the understanding of the Anglo-Saxon economy¹³. But the comparison drawn by Rovelli between finds from excavated sites in northern and southern countries still point to an imbalance and a greater number of coins and pottery finds dating to the eighth and ninth centuries in the North¹⁴.

If we begin to look at the picture starting from the South, the decline in monetization in Italy and specially in the Adriatic zone after the sixth century is a general phenomenon, admirably outlined in Rovelli's synthesis in this volume. The overall quantity of coins retrieved recedes while the broad-scale distribution of coins is more and more restricted to a few centres, mainly coastal. The first phenomenon reflects the minor quantities of coins issued and the second the decline of coin use (monetisation). But one should beware not to confuse the incontrovertible decrease in the quantity of issues, that is related with the regionalization of minting, with the disappearance of gold coinage etc., with a restriction of the available monetary stock. In fact the long survival of late Roman bronze coins – which is now well documented¹⁵ – as well as the recent discovery of 7th and 8th century issues of small coins in silver or bronze¹⁶ point to the persistence of daily

¹² For a definition of PPP index and its Big Mac version see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purchasing_power_parity.

¹³ On French legislation, see H. Petit et J. Meissonnier, « L'archéologie dans la législation française », in *Commission internationale de numismatique. Compte rendu*, 43, 1996, pp. 87-101, repr. in *idem*, 49, 2002, pp. 41-48. On PAS see also Naylor cited above with refs. On the Danish policy, see: J. Ch. Moesgaard, « Monnaies à la campagne au Moyen Âge. Remarques de méthode », in J. Lefort, C. Morrisson, J.-P. Sodini (eds.), *Les Villages au Moyen Âge (V^e-XV^e s.)*, Paris, 2005, p. 135-148 ; *Id.*, « Single finds as evidence for coin circulation in the Middle Ages. Status and perspectives », in *Single Finds. the Nordic Perspective = Nordisk Numismatisk Årsskrift*, 2006, pp. 228-75.

¹⁴ A. Rovelli, « Coins and trade in early Medieval Italy », in *Early Medieval Europe*, 17/1, 2009, pp. 45-76, at 59-62.

¹⁵ A. Saccocci, « Monete romane in contesti archeologici medievali in Italia ». *Numismatica e Antichità Classiche. Quaderni Ticinesi* 26, 1997, pp. 385-404.

exchanges that were carried out in petty coins till the mid-8th century. This is a bias which must be taken into account in any comparison with the situation in Northern emporia which could not rely on such legacy coins for reuse and had therefore to create a new currency *ex nibilo*. This new assessment of coin use in the South contributes to reconsider to some extent the image of a disaggregated and depressed Italian economy in the 8th century. So does of course the archaeological evidence pointing to the recovery of commercial exchanges in Venice, Comacchio and the Po area at large. But it is true that one cannot deny the fragmentation of networks and the decline in exchanges as perceived through ceramic evidence, the nadir being reached in the late 8th century¹⁷.

However, until the late 8th century, the Church of Ravenna most probably still derived a sizeable income from its possessions in Sicily and Calabria¹⁸. The influence of the sustained economy and coinage of Sicily down to the mid-9th century on the Italian peninsula can be traced through its scattered occurrences. These provide an imperfect marker of inter-Mediterranean relations, and compel us to recognize a not insignificant imprint when one looks at the distribution of Syracusan coins along the Adriatic in marked contrast with their absence from the Tyrrhenian shores. This may be due to the greater control exercised by the Byzantine emperors on the resources of the island after Leo III's measures which must have stopped or greatly affected the links with Rome¹⁹. But two elements point to the continuing relevance of Sicily for Western Europe to which it belonged geographically: first, the new interpretation of the *mancus*, proposed here by Salvatore Cosentino, who identifies the *solidus mancus bisantheus* mentioned in a Ravennate document of ca 850 with the solidus of Syracuse²⁰. This hypothesis, which brings us back to the

¹⁶ The 1/8th siliqua tiny pieces revealed by E.A. Arslan, the Byzantine-papal silver coins, the twenty nummi square coins of Rome (see refs. above in *this volume*, in A. Rovelli pp. 293-94).

¹⁷ See A. Rovelli, « Coins and Trade », as above n. 13, and the general nuanced assessment of P. Delogu, *Le origini del Medioevo*, art. II, in *Id.*, *Le origini del Medioevo*, Roma, 2010, pp. 39-92, with references inter alia to McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, Cambridge, 2001 and S. Gelichi studies on Comacchio and the laguna.

¹⁸ S. Cosentino, « Ricchezza e investimento della chiesa di Ravenna tra la tarda antichità e l'alto medioevo », in *this volume*.

¹⁹ On their interpretation see C. Zuckerman, « Learning from the enemy and more: studies in 'dark centuries' Byzantium », in *Millenium*, I, 2006, p. 79-135 and contra, V. Prigent, *La Sicile byzantine (VI^e-IX^e siècle)*, thèse Paris IV, 2006, vol I, pp. 1089-1102.

²⁰ S. Cosentino, *Le origini del mancus*, app. to S. Cosentino, « Ricchezza e investimento della chiesa di Ravenna tra la tarda antichità e l'alto medioevo », in *this volume*, quoting a Ravenna document dating to ca 850, mentioning a sale of various estates near Rimini

first intuition of Philip Grierson²¹, and prolongs the doubts expressed by P. Delogu about the identification of the *mancus/mancosus* with the dinar²², is also now defended with strong metallurgical and historical arguments by Vivien Prigent²³. The second sign of Sicily importance is offered by the extensive distribution, even though on a scattered basis, of its coins from the Black Sea to northern Europe, that constitutes another marker of long-distance relations between the two maritime zones central to the Comacchio Conference. A last promising link is just being tracked by the fingerprinting of Carolingian, Venetian and Islamic silver coins; Guillaume Sarah's analyses find high bismuth content in the two latter groups contrasting with the low value in Carolingian coins²⁴. This has to be confirmed and determined on a wider sample but clearly opens a new avenue for the study of the role of the Adriatic *emporium* in the relationship between the Islamic and the Christian world.

The picture in the northern seas is that of an increasingly active coin production of silver coins in the 8th century. After a first period in England of issues of debased gold tremisses (*thrymsas*) (ca 640-80) circulating along imported Merovingian ones, the British sceattas (ca 680-760/90) show a peak in the early 8th century²⁵. The British sceattas are imitated in the

and salines near Comacchio for 270 *solidi mancusi bisantbei* (*Le carte ravennati dei secoli ottavo e nono* a cura di R. Benericetti, Faenza 2006 (Studi della Biblioteca Card. Gaetano Marini, 9), n. 14. M. McCormick (per epist. May 2011) points out that "the very fact that in this undated copy of a lost document the *mancusi* have to be qualified as *bisantbei* indicates that *mancusi* were not normally *bisantbei*".

²¹ P. Grierson, « Carolingian Europe and the Arabs: The Myth of the Mancus », *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 32, 1954, pp. 1059-1074, repr. in *Id.*, *Dark Age Numismatics*, London, 1979, art. III.

²² P. Delogu, « Il mancoso è ancora un mito? », in S. Gasparri (ed.), *Le trasformazioni del V secolo. L'Italia, i barbari e l'Occidente romano Atti del Seminario di Poggibonsi, 18-20 ottobre 2006*, Turnhout, 2008, pp. 141-60.

²³ V. Prigent, « Le mythe du mancus et les origines de l'économie européenne », (forthcoming). I thank Vivien Prigent for having put his text at my disposal. He intends to submit this article to the *Revue numismatique* for the 2013 issue.

²⁴ G. Sarah, « Early medieval silver coins analysis: towards a better understanding of the trading role of the Adriatic *emporium*? », in *this volume*.

²⁵ See M.A.S. Blackburn and P. Grierson, *Medieval European Coinage, vol. 1: The Early Middle Ages (5th-10th centuries)* (Cambridge, 1986) and more recently Metcalf, D.M., *Thrymsas and Sceattas in the Ashmolean Museum*, 3 vols. (London, 1993-4). Our view of the quantities struck that was hotly debated between Grierson and Metcalf in the 1960s has been completely overhauled, in favour of the latter by the discoveries of British metal detectorists that showed the impressive numbers and wide distribution in Britain and on the Continent of these small silver coins.

Frisian area and beyond – if one attributes the Wodan-monster coins to Ribe²⁶. This quantitative rise is accompanied by a wider distribution, though more significant in coastal areas (at a limit of about 15km from the shore) or on sites located on easily navigable rivers²⁷. Sceattas are frequently found in Francia according to unpublished information²⁸ and bear witness to the increasingly active exchanges across the Channel studied by S. Lebecq²⁹. Among the *emporia*, the short-lived *wik* on the Canche, Quentovic, deserved a study by itself³⁰. The distribution of the tremisses marked QUANTIA FIT or VVIC, and that of other coins from neighbouring sites in Ponthieu, in hoards like Escharen, Sutton Hoo and Crondall as well as other sites in South and South-East England (fig. 1) map the trading relations which linked these coastal sites. (And one of its latest issues struck in the 660s by the moneyer Anglus – certainly a telling name – probably provided the model for the Maastricht pennies with the two interlocking rings)³¹. Coastal location is thus a central element in the emergence of trade in the northern seas. Studies in economic growth have pointed to this general principle for a long time from Cantillon in the 18th century to David Landes or Karl Pomeranz in our times. A comparable trend is not surprisingly also observed in the distribution of coin use in the Byzantine world³².

The relation between *emporia* and the production and use of coins in the 8th century is undeniable as shown by the many examples given in this volume by Loveluck for Flixborough and other eastern British sites in Lincolnshire³³ or by Bogucki for most Pomeranian sites³⁴. Though an essential feature of *emporia*,

²⁶ See C. Feveile, « Ribe – emporia and town in 8th-9th century », in *this volume*, p. III-22.

²⁷ See John Naylor, « Coinage, Trade and the Origins of the English Emporia, ca. AD 650-750 », in *this volume*, p. 237-66.

²⁸ Personal communication from Marc Bompaire.

²⁹ S. Lebecq, « The new *wiks* or *emporia* and the development of a maritime economy in the Northern Seas (7th-9th centuries) », in *this volume*, p. II-21.

³⁰ See S. Lebecq, « Quentovic : un état de la question », in *Studien zur Sachsenforschung*, 8, 1993, pp. 367-78. M. McCormick draws my attention to the ongoing work presently carried out on the site by Laurent Verslype.

³¹ J. Lafaurie, « VVIC in Pontio. Les monnaies mérovingiennes de Wicus », In: *Revue numismatique*, 151, 1996 pp. 181-239

³² C. Morriçon, « La monnaie sur les routes fluviales et maritimes des échanges dans le monde méditerranéen (VI^e-IX^e siècle) », in *L'acqua nei secoli altomedievali*, (Settimane di Studio del CISAM LV), Spoleto, 2008, pp. 631-70.

³³ C. Loveluck, « Central places, exchange and maritime-oriented identity around the North Sea and western Baltic, AD 600-1100 », in *this volume*.

³⁴ M. Bogucki, « On Wulfstan's right hand – the Viking Age *emporia* in West Slav Lands », in *this volume*. See also the rich data in the various studies assembled in M. Wołoszyn (ed.), *Byzantine Coins in central Europe between the 5th and 10th century*, Krakow, 2009 and my review thereof in *Revue numismatique* 2010, p. 587-94.



1. The distribution of Merovingian coins from VVICVS (J. Lafaurie, « VVIC in Pontio. Les monnaies mérovingiennes de Wicus », in *Revue numismatique*, 151 (1996), p. 212). This should be updated with PAS material (e.g. among many others, C. Loveluck signals a denier of Pippin III from Quentovic in Flixborough, see in this volume, p. 140).

coin use, however, seems to have predated their emergence, at least in England, where one finds evidence for multiple small monetized coastal settlements in the 7th century, before the flourish of the main emporia in the 8th century³⁵.

Conclusion

An intuitive comparison of monetization between the two maritime areas, with the caveats expressed above, leads me to the conclusion that there was a certain gap in revival. The new start for the Northern Sea in the last decade of the 7th century takes place when the general decline in the Mediterranean accelerates, except in a few preserved areas or centres like Sicily and Venice or its environs, from Comacchio to northern Adriatic. This gap derives rather mechanically from the diverging history of both domains: the Northern seas that had already been affected by piracy in the 3rd century and were definitively abandoned by Rome in the early 4th, progressively recovered and found a new balance and interest in regional commercial exchanges during the 6th century while Central and Southern Italy together with the Tyrrhenian were, on the contrary, a zone of fragmented and reduced markets around 700³⁶. However long-distance exchanges did not completely die out as the finds of globular eastern amphorae in Comacchio and other Po valley sites demonstrate³⁷.

The revival of regional exchanges and the increase of monetisation in South and South-East England and adjacent areas derive from the conditions created by the existence of complementary agricultural surplus, crafts, and raw materials produced in rural context. Profit-seeking traders both served and exploited these needs. Most of the evidence gathered in this volume supports Johan Callmer's³⁸ and J. Henning's³⁹ interpretation that

³⁵ See John Naylor, « Coinage, Trade and the Origins of the English Emporia, ca. AD 650-750 », in *this volume*, p. 237-66 (note 34-48).

³⁶ As argued by A. Rovelli, « Coins and Trade » (cit. n. 13)

³⁷ For an updated synthesis, see S. Gelichi, « Local and Interregional Exchanges in the Lower Po Valley (Eighth–Ninth Centuries) », in *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*, ed. C. Morrisson, Washington, D.C., in press, with further references.

³⁸ J. Callmer, « Urbanisation in Northern and Eastern Europe, ca. AD 700-1100 », in *Post-Roman towns, trade and settlement in Europe and Byzantium. Vol. I. The heirs of the Roman West*, ed. J. Henning, Berlin, 2007, pp. 233-70, esp. pp. 240-41 (quoted by R. Hodges, in this volume, pp. 210-11).

³⁹ J. Henning, « Early European towns: the way of the economy in the Frankish area between dynamism and deceleration 500-1000 AD », in *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium. Vol. I. The heirs of the Roman West*, ed. J. Henning, Berlin, New York, 2007, p. 3-40.

towns – including emporia [in the North] – were ultimately more an organic outgrowth of interregional networks of communications and trade than foundations sponsored by self-serving potentates. The marginal location – often marshy – of many early emporia support the pattern suggested by M. McCormick of merchants communities looking for places adapted to exchanges that they sought to make as free as possible, and who eventually struck autonomous issues like the sceats, the last Merovingian debased tremisses or deniers, the Frisian imitations and the Wodan/Monster coins as an instrument of transactions⁴⁰. Political control came later in a process where taxation to the benefit of the ruler was exchanged for a guarantee of security, that was now needed to protect the merchants' warehouses and riches from the raiders they attracted.

This northern pattern is not exactly the one obtaining in the south: there, the role of the State in the economy in what remained of the Byzantine Empire had not receded. Trade was strictly regulated, coin issue highly controlled and shared only by a few mints (even if different standards emerged around 700 as a consequence of the loss of Byzantine Africa and the growing pressure which reached its apex with the Arab siege of Constantinople in 717). Insecurity and depopulation were overcome piece-meal in the 9th century; the trading and productive cities slowly revived on new bases in the 10th century, before converging with the West in the expanding long 11th century⁴¹. The framework for traders in the early medieval period was thus quite different in the Byzantine world from that of the North. Though still Byzantine in theory, Venice – like its rival Comacchio, now part of the *Regnum* – followed however a model more akin to that of the North and a traders' culture which forms a virtual link between the two seas and justify their rapprochement in this conference.

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⁴⁰ M. McCormick, in this volume, p. 495.

⁴¹ A.E. Laiou, C. Morrisson, *The Byzantine Economy*, Cambridge, 2007, p. 90 ff.