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LOCAL COMMUNITY AFTER THE EMPIRE: PEASANTS AND THE ECONOMY IN LATE ROMAN NORTH AFRICA AND BYZANTINE EGYPT[1]

Las comunidades locales después del imperio: los campesinos y la economía en la África tardorromana y el Egipto bizantino

Paolo Tedesco
Universität Tübingen. Keplerstrasse 2, Room 45, 72074 Tübingen (Germany). C. e.: paolo.tedesco@uni-tuebingen.de. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5232-8508

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ABSTRACT: Wickham's definitions of economic structures as tributary, feudal, and peasant modes of production offer an ideal framework to appreciate the divergent trajectories of early medieval peasantries in the transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. In this arc of time, differences emerge in how peasants related to the state, landlords, and the market. Through an analysis of the early medieval rural communities from North Africa and Egypt, this article shows that different segments of the peasantry —rich, middle-class, and poor peasants— coexisted in every post-imperial society, just as divergent economic trajectories —market-oriented economy, mixed farming, and subsistence agriculture— were not specific to a certain area but were found coexisting even within a small group of cultivators. In these communities, peasant protagonism worked as an economic engine that led to two different outcomes. When peasants prioritised the subsistence of their household, the community remained cohesive and mutually supporting, notwithstanding the existing social differentiation between its members. Conversely, when peasants engaged in commercialized agriculture, it resulted in deep social polarization, with peasant farmers who became similar to landowners, and lesser peasants who were reduced to tenants.

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Keywords: peasants; agrarian economy; mode of production; late Roman North Africa; Byzantine Egypt.

RESUMEN: La definición de Wickham de las estructuras económicas como modos de producción tributario, feudal o campesino ofrecen el marco ideal para apreciar las trayectorias divergentes del campesinado medieval en la transición de la Edad Antigua a la Edad Media. En este arco temporal, surgen diferencias en cuanto a las relaciones que tuvieron los campesinos con el estado, los señores y el mercado. A través del análisis de las comunidades rurales del Norte de Africa y de Egipto, este artículo demuestra que los diferentes sectores del campesinado —sean ricos, medianos y pobres— coexistieron en todas las sociedades post-imperiales. Del mismo modo, las trayectorias económicas divergentes —economía de mercado, agricultura mixta y agricultura de subsistencia— no eran propias de una región determinada, sino que se pueden encontrar coexistiendo incluso dentro de un pequeño grupo de cultivadores. En estas comunidades, el protagonismo campesino fue el motor económico que llevó a dos resultados diferentes. Cuando los campesinos priorizaron la subsistencia de su grupo familiar, la comunidad conservó su cohesión y había un apoyo mutuo, incluso existiendo diferencias sociales entre sus miembros. En cambio, cuando los campesinos se involucraron en la agricultura comercializada, el resultado fue una polarización social profunda, con campesinos-granjeros que alcanzaron una situación semejante a los dueños de tierras, mientras que otros campesinos quedaron reducidos a arrendatarios.

Palabras clave: campesinos; economía agraria; modo de producción; África del Norte tardorromana; Egipto bizantino.

0 Introduction: the economic logic of agrarian societies

Before industrialisation, people living in agrarian societies belonged to one of two main social groups: the peasantry —the overwhelming majority everywhere in post-Roman Europe, who directly cultivated the land, and the ruling classes, who monopolised economic surplus and oversaw all the key political functions[2]. According to this picture, peasants constituted the working base of agrarian societies, while the top of the power structure was constituted by either a state-like institution requiring tax-payments from its people, a group of feudal lords collecting rent from its tenants, or a dominant elite (either sedentary or nomadic) demanding irregular tributes from the rural population[3].

In his historical analysis of the premodern world, Chris Wickham distinguishes between three economic systems reflecting this tripartite classification: tributary systems, where the state systematically taxed the producing population; feudal societies, where

[2] Hilton, *English Peasantry*, 13; Joyce, *Remembering Peasants*, 22.
[3] Haldon, *State*, 67-9; Wickham, *Framing*, 70.

political power resided *de facto* with whomever held direct ownership of the land; and finally, peasant societies, where landlords or the state could not appropriate the economic surplus in a systematic way[4]. Political power in the tributary state lay in the hands of a ruling elite at the very top of the system. Historical formations of the tributary kind included, for instance, some of the great empires of the past: the Roman, the Byzantine, the Abbasid, and the Ottoman[5]. In feudal societies, power was wielded by local landowners, namely rural overlords, who were subject to little or no control from central political authorities. Such societies developed in Europe after the fall of Rome, in North Africa and the Middle East after the collapse of the Abbasid dynasty (750-945), or in Eastern Africa after the decline of the Aksum empire (100-960)[6]. In the third option, which Wickham calls the peasant mode of production, various forms of the peasant economy took shape whenever the labour of working families in the countryside was aimed at preserving, and reproducing, the peasant household, rather than aimed at generating surplus for the landlord, the state, or the market[7]. In the Middle Ages, many examples of such communities populated the countryside of the European and Mediterranean regions, all with different degrees of internal social mobility, from late fifth-century Numidia to the seventh-century Italian Apennines, and from early medieval northern Spain and Brittany —«Atlantic Europe»—to late medieval Norway and Iceland[8].

In *FEMA*'s model, change came top down into the countryside. State taxation and the landowners' search for rent and labour forced peasants to enter the market (either commodities or the labour market), generating stratification among the members of the rural community. If and when these powers declined (even though they never disappeared) peasants reacquired their economic independence and restored internal hierarchies and sustainable living standards.

This essay accepts Wickham's modal definitions of economic structures, since they show that the conditions in which peasants lived changed from the fourth to the eighth century, even in the most remote corners of the European and Mediterranean countryside. The economic gap between landowners and peasants in the sixth, seventh, and especially eighth centuries was less significant than it had been in the fourth century, given the decline of Roman imperial infrastructure and of Mediterranean-wide trade network[9]. However, Wickham's transition does not imply that all rural communities were fundamentally similar with the same dynamic at work everywhere. In *FEMA* changes in modes of production marked the passage from a dominant economic system to another, but then different processes of extraction existed beneath that dominant mode. This situation explains the concurrence of diverse agrarian regimes and various types of peasants even in small rural communities between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

[4] Wickham, *Land and Power*, 7-40, 43-74; *Framing*, 57-62.

[5] Wickham, «Tributary Empires».

[6] Wickham, «Historical Transitions», 9-14; Phillipson, *Foundations*, 227-43; Crummey, *Land and Society*, 50-72.

[7] Wickham, «Productive Forces», 7-8.

[8] Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 111-200; Wickham, *The Mountains*, 40-67; Portass, «Peasant Proprietors», 194-208; Davies, *Small Worlds*, 86-104; Wickham, «Passages to Feudalism», 114-9.

[9] Wickham, *Framing*, 536-7.

This article presents an analysis of five different early medieval rural communities, two from North Africa (Thugga in the Medjerda valley and the *fundus* Tuletianos in southern Numidia) and three from Egypt (Apiones' estates in Oxyrhynchus, the villagers of Aphrodito, and the peasantry from Jēme in Upper Egypt). This comparative examination shows that not only the power of state structures and landlords, but also different forms of peasant protagonism led to social and economic transformations in the countryside[10]. Each case study significantly complicates our understanding of the period between 400 and 800. Without invalidating *FEMA*'s encompassing model of economic transformation, these surveys demonstrate that different segments of the peasantry — rich, middle-owning, and poor peasants— coexisted in every imperial and post-imperial society, just as diverse agrarian systems —market-oriented economy, mixed farming, and subsistence agriculture— were not specific to a certain area but could coexist even within a small group of cultivators[11]. Transformation or continuity in these societies came from below through local decisions.

The distinction between «farmers» and «peasants» within these five communities provides an ideal framework to capture the divergent economic mentalities as well as the strategies of the various sub-groups of the late ancient and early medieval peasantries. Both farmers and peasants accessed markets, where values of goods, services, and labour were in theory established by «supply and demand»[12]. Farmers engaged in a market economy, with profit as their primary aim, while peasants produced for their own subsistence. Although farmers may consume some of their produce and peasants may sell some of theirs, the key difference between the two is that the former ran business enterprises whereas the latter ran households[13]. This distinction also created varied rural, class stratification. Peasants producing for themselves and the reproduction of their households did not cause the cohesion of the peasant community to disintegrate. But such community preserved a strong identity, as anthropological and historical studies have indicated[14]. When rich peasants or middling farmers became further involved in commercial agriculture, they had to employ an ever-growing number of poor peasants, who owned insufficient land for subsistence farming and sold their labour[15]. Commercialisation thus resulted in division between the members of the community and ever greater class differences.

My analysis on these ideas is organised into three sections. The first section, «Historical Transitions», delves into the different fates of Mediterranean peasantries in the early Middle Ages, according to the framework Wickham argued in *FEMA*. In the fifth century, following the crumbling of western fiscal infrastructures, economies became localised: in Wickham's terminology, they became «feudal». Kings or local magnates became the

[10] Wickham, *Inheritance*, 39, 214; Tedesco, «Manorial Economy», 134; Portass, «Peasant Protagonism», 5-9.

[11] Wickham, *The Mountains*, 180; *Framing*, 434-41; Grey, «Rural Society» 140-1.

[12] Suzman, *Work*, 248-9.

[13] Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies*, 24-5.

[14] Wolf, *Peasants*, 13; Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture*, 67-9; Shanin, «Peasantry as a Concept», 2-5; Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 215-6.

[15] Wickham, *Framing*, 386-7.

most powerful figures because they possessed the largest landholdings and could exercise close control over free or unfree tenants working their land. However, whenever a local landlord did not hold enough power to coerce his peasants into some one-sided forms of work agreement, these peasants could be left in control of both their land and labour. In the eastern Mediterranean, in contrast, the rural world was organised differently, although similar scenarios also emerged. In the key economic regions for the survival of the empire —such as Egypt, North Africa, Sicily—, cooperation between the Byzantine state and landholding elites secured the full subordination of the peasantry. In those areas that were not important to the state, peasant communities preserved their autonomy and social cohesion in exchange for payments or services to local patrons[16].

Section two shows how, from the late fifth to the seventh centuries, the end of the empire in the West saw new and diverse forms of economic organisation emerge in North Africa. In the region of Thugga, the end of the empire resulted in an expansion of local production, population, and exchange. Local landowners were no longer members of the super-rich, senatorial elites, but were wealthy enough to employ local peasants, who served as tenants, sharecroppers, or seasonal labourers. Attracted by the profits of commercialised agriculture, middling owners became the main force behind production, exchange, and social differentiation in the countryside. In contrast, the peasants from the *fundus* Tuletianos in southern Numidia were not part of this economic pattern. In this location, «peasant logic» had prevailed over the market forces predominating in the northern regions. Stratification within the community of Tuletianos arose as a result of internal dynamics, not as a consequence of an increasingly weak state or an ever more intrusive landlord[17].

Section three examines the Egyptian evidence. Drawing on these data, it describes the coexistence of large estates and village smallholdings in various regions, from Oxyrhynchos to Aphrodito, and even in Jēme, in remote Upper Egypt. Within this diverse set of contexts, the social structure was highly differentiated with a complex pattern of stratification and an almost unlimited series of gradations between the imperial landowning elites and the rural labour force. The economy was also more complex and diversified than elsewhere in the early medieval Mediterranean, with the longer survival of urban life, a larger urban middle class, and a substantial layer of village landholders involved in business[18]. It would be misleading to frame these composite communities as an opposition between the commercialised agrarian economy and the peasant subsistence economy. In sharp contrast to the standard division between landowners and merchants or between farmers and peasants, these different agrarian systems, along with the people managing or cultivating the land, complemented each other.

[16] Wickham, *Framing*, 720-8, 759-69; Sarris, «Post-Roman Economy», 407-8; Grey, *Constructing Communities*, 126-7; «Rural Society», 133.

[17] Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 149-51.

[18] Banaji, *Exploring*, 75-6, 177; Tedesco, «Late Antiquity», 131.

1 Historical transitions

A notable feature of Wickham's *FEMA* was its use of modal definitions to examine the relationships between the state and local societies and between landlords and peasants in the period between 400 and 800. Before I test some of Wickham's contentions in concrete case studies, it is useful to discuss some of the most salient features of his model.

The late Roman empire, and subsequently the Byzantine state, developed a centralized tax system that effectively functioned as a means to gather and mobilise resources. The ruling elites at the top of these state systems were strong because they controlled at least two crucial institutional mechanisms. First, they supervised a strategic element in the production process: the collection and management of standardised information (i.e. data to enable tax payments)[19]. This allowed the ruling elites and their local representatives to create records about property, income, demography, and productivity. This data allowed the late Roman state to be efficient in its tributary mission on the taxable labour capacity of each piece of land[20]. It also helped that, under the institution of the late Roman colonate, peasants (*coloni*) were tied to their place of tax registration (*origo*) to meet their fiscal obligations[21].

Second, ruling elites controlled a strategic element of coercion: a standing army equipped with superior military capability. By overseeing the activities of both soldiers and state officials, rulers could rely upon two public tax-funded bodies who could operate without any assistance from more local elites —unless local figures became state or municipal officials[22]. Moreover, by offering military protection to local aristocrats and wealthy landowners, the state could secure the loyalty and support of the upper classes, especially in provinces far from the centres of imperial power[23]. Local landowners then, in turn, cooperated with state representatives, serving as tax gatherers on municipal councils. This collaboration reinforced ties between local elites and the central state, while securing taxation of the rural population[24].

The steady flow of fiscal revenues was then channelled to cover state expenses, including the military and the bureaucratic apparatus. The late Roman state used its tax revenues to maintain a standing professional army —variously estimated from 400,000 to 700,000 men[25]; to pay for the cost of the administrative personnel— 20,000 to 35,000 men —and imperial infrastructure— roads, public buildings, postal services[26]; and

[19] Kula, *Measures and Men*, 18-23; Scott, *Against the Grain*, 118-20.
[20] Scott, *Seeing like a State*, 33-5.
[21] Grey, «Contextualizing the *Colonatus*», 165-70; *Constructing Communities*, 190.
[22] Kelly, «Emperors», 163.
[23] Wickham, *Framing*, 56-62.
[24] Grey, *Constructing Communities*, 181-97; Haldon, *Empire*, 197-204.
[25] Lee, «The Army», 219-20; Elton, «Warfare», 332; Whitby, «The Army», 292; Wickham, *Framing*, 73.
[26] Heather, «New Men», 18-21; Kelly, «Emperors», 163, note 132; Wickham, *Framing*, 73; Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 76.

finally, to provide food for the population of the imperial capitals of Rome —500,000 to 700,000 people— and Constantinople —400,000 to 700,000 people[27].

The fiscal system was not only the main source of income, but also the primary catalyst of commercial exchange. Through taxation, the state organised a sophisticated and closely integrated network that linked «tax producing regions» and «tax consuming regions»[28]. Money, goods, and resources flowed from the producing and tax-paying population —the vast majority of the peasants living in the provinces— to the centres of consumption—the people living in the cities, administrative hubs, and military garrison, creating an integrated exchange system comprising all regions of the empire. Goods travelled from the southern provinces of Africa and Sicily to Rome; from Gaul and Britannia to the Rhine frontier; from Egypt to Constantinople; and from regions like Syria and Palestine to the eastern and northern military borders[29]. While collecting taxes and distributing their income, the Roman state thus created an exchange network that allowed private producers and traders to take advantage of its infrastructure. This tributary-driven economic system ensured the cooperation of the landowning elites with the imperial institutions since it co-opted them into the system to their great profit. Private merchants exploited this circuit to move their products as well[30].

From the second half of the fifth century and continuing through the seventh, the political and economic relations between the state and the landowning elites atrophied in western European societies. When the Goths, Franks, Burgundians, and Vandals occupied the western imperial provinces, they changed the political regime of their lands. The new rulers and their armies wanted to be landowners, like the provincial elites they were now dominating and living beside[31]. In these territories, the fifth and sixth centuries saw a momentous transition, in which a tax-based state system gave way to looser and less structurally complex polities in which land-based power dominated; from a mostly salaried army, which was occasionally compensated in land, to a predominantly settled army, which was still provisioned and quartered during campaigns[32].

Taxation did not immediately disappear. Post-imperial rulers continued to tax as long as they could; but over time, taxation became less necessary to pay armies now settled on the land[33]. As a result, tax revenues ceased moving around, especially from tax producing to tax consuming provinces, with serious effects on the survival of the administrative personnel, public services, and the provisioning of Rome, which, as a city, lost a significant part of its population[34].

[27] Rome: Hodges and Whitehouse, *Mohammed,* 49; Lo Cascio, «*Canon frumentarius*», 178-9; Dey, *Medieval Rome*, 42. Constantinople: Mango, *Le development urbain*, 51; Jacoby, «La population»; Zuckerman, *Du village*, 205-6; Laiou and Morrisson, *Byzantine Economy*, 26.

[28] Hopkins, «Taxes», 101-3; Lo Cascio, «Forme», 356-7; Tedesco, *Writings*, 41-4.

[29] Ward-Perkins, «Specialization», 167-76; Wickham, *Framing*, 77-80.

[30] Tedesco, *Writings*, 11.

[31] Wickham, «Historical Transitions», 9.

[32] Wickham, *Framing*, 60.

[33] *Ibidem*, 70; «Historical Transitions», 9; *Medieval Europe*, 29.

[34] Dey, *Medieval Rome*, 65.

Local elites, which had played crucial political and economic roles in provincial society under the empire, adjusted to the new post-imperial political and economic system. Where newcomers settled, the production, distribution, and consumption of goods were confined to regional or local markets. In the post-imperial world, the wealth of elite groups, now composed of Roman landlords and «barbarian» newcomers, was the sole driver enriching the small-scale economy of local communities. Landowning elites had more power in exchange networks than imperial fiscal demand did and it was these elites who promoted regional commercial exchange, albeit in a far less effective and cohesive fashion. Thus, the end of imperial unity negatively affected the interregional circulation of goods. The main indicators are in the fewer goods moving about across medium- to long-distances and reduced ostentatious material culture of the upper classes[35].

The decline of the imperial tax system also determined the parallel transformation of the late Roman colonate, which shifted from an instrument for collecting taxes to an arrangement aimed at tying peasant labour to their landowners so that they could have a stable workforce on their estates[36]. This change had divergent consequences on the peasantry. Where aristocracies were wealthy and powerful, they still controlled plenty of tenants, many of them unfree with landowning peasants reduced to marginality —as for example in the Seine valley or Paris basin[37]. In these areas, to follow Wickham, the close control of aristocrats over rural labour led to a feudal economic logic[38]. But where aristocracies had less land and wealth, as for example in the Rhineland, Lucchesia, or northern Spain, landowning peasants with little to no dependence on aristocrats became more numerous and were probably more prosperous too. Under these circumstances, Wickham argues, a peasant mode of production was the main form of economic organisation[39]. But how peasants adjusted their levels of production, labour effort, and exchange varied significantly across time and space. Peasants could produce beyond the subsistence level, and could access local and regional markets, expanding the peasant economy beyond the simple reproduction of their household[40].

Unlike in the West, the eastern Roman empire experienced political stability and even an economic boom in the fifth and sixth centuries. Until the year 600, the eastern Roman empire managed to maintain its fiscal structures and its regional interrelationships, which were similar to those described for the fourth-century Roman empire in the West[41]. Constantinople, the imperial capital, was still principally fed with grain from Egypt, by far the richest province for agrarian productivity and tax revenues[42]. The Balkan and eastern frontier troops were still, presumably, supplied by Syrian and Palestinian

35 Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 29-30.
36 Banaji, *Exploring*, 161-5.
37 Wickham, *Framing*, 185, 193; Devroey, *Puissants*, 526-30; Rio, *Slavery*, 183-6.
38 Wickham, «Feudal Economy», 18-9.
39 Wickham, «Problems», 234-6; *Framing*, 393-8.
40 Hodges, *Dark Age Economics*, 41-66; Fouracre, *Eternal Light and Earthly Concerns*, 113-6; Naismith, *Making Money*, 134.
41 Whittow, «Middle Byzantine Economy», 467-72.
42 Zuckerman, *Du village*, 194; Haldon, *Empire*, 27-30, 249-58.

agrarian production[43]. All in all, even in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, the tax-gathering procedures and the logistical support network needed to move goods from the producing to the consuming provinces had not changed. However, in the sixth century, the eastern Roman state had begun to rely more on landowners to gather tribute from the various types of peasants and tenants populating their estates[44]. Sixth-century laws give the impression that everywhere in the current or former imperial territories large landowners dominated a mass of poor tenants. Although the landlords' tax-collecting responsibilities could be effectively deployed to limit peasant mobility and to intensify their dependence, landowning dominance or peasant autonomy depended on everyday agrarian relations in the fields[45]. In some areas, landlords' efforts to subordinate the peasantry worked successfully. For example, in Fayum and Oxyrhynchos —middle Egypt— and Hauran— southern Syria—, landlords seemed to control a countryside peopled by a majority of landless sharecroppers[46]. However, there were also regions, such as the Limestone Massif in northern Syria, northwest Galatia, in Anatolia, or the territory of Aphrodito in middle Egypt, where a fierce and autonomous peasantry still prospered[47].

In the successor states and the eastern Roman empire, the social stratification of the peasantry assumed different gradations: region by region, village by village, or even from one estate to another. Social and economic stratification among the rural population depended first on whether or not the state could successfully implement taxation; second, upon the different concentrations of imperial, royal, ecclesiastical, or aristocratic land; third, on the ability of each landowner to exert control over the local peasants; and fourth, on peasants' capacity to access the market, and whether or not such access was mediated by landlords or the state. Each of these factors featured differently in every region of the empire and led to different outcomes. As a consequence, each of these areas requires its own, independent analysis[48].

In the next two sections, I will delve deeper into the divergent routes of two regions: North Africa and Egypt. In the late Roman period, these two provinces were economically comparable because they acted as the resource bases of the western and eastern Roman empires respectively. From the fifth century, however, they follow different political trajectories: North Africa was occupied by the Vandals in the middle of the fifth century, reconquered by the Byzantines in 530s, and finally fell under Islamic dominion at the end of the seventh century. During this long period, the African economy shifted from

[43] Sarantis, «Military Provisioning», 353-7, 364-5; Gandila, «Free Market», 323-4.

[44] Sarris, «Social Relations», 96-8; Stern, *Taxes and Authority*, 27-58.

[45] Kaplan, «Producing Population», 148.

[46] Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 184-8: Fayum and Oxyrhynchos; Sarris, *Economy and Society*, 71-80; Hickey, *Wine*, 79-89: Oxyrhynchos; Villeneuve, «L'économie rurale», 115-6: Hauran.

[47] Tate, *Les campagnes*, 269-71: Limestone Massif; Kaplan, *Les hommes et la terre*, 199-227; Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 215; Wickham, *Framing*, 406-11: Galatia; Keenan, «Egypt», 633-6; Ruffini, *Life*, 75-93: Aphrodito.

[48] Wickham, *Framing*, 68-9.

state-based to market-oriented, but continued to prosper until regional fragmentation prevailed in the eighth century[49].

Egypt remained under Byzantine rule until the early seventh century, when first the Sassanians and then the Islamic armies conquered the region. But despite these political changes, the economy of this former Roman province continued to thrive without any significant transformation, and Egypt remained the wealthiest region of the Mediterranean throughout the early Middle Ages[50].

The prosperity of these two provinces suggests that their economic power lay in their productive base more than their political structures. Their agrarian structures could respond to different types of demand —state, market, local needs— notwithstanding changes in the political structures controlling the systems of surplus extraction and distribution. This continuity was possible because landowners, prosperous farmers, and lesser peasants continued to manage or work the land as parts of diverse but still interconnected economic systems.

2 North Africa

From the beginning of Roman dominance of the Mediterranean, Africa was a crucial region in the Mediterranean exchange network, and it continued until the eighth century. In this long period, the rural and urban centres of Africa seemingly reached their peak in the third and fourth centuries, which also marked a booming period for exports of African red-slip ware and amphorae[51]. Production and circulation of the African Red Slip (ARS) are one of the principal indicators of the African economic performance in the Mediterranean scenario[52]. During the late fourth and early fifth centuries, the late Roman state and the landowning aristocracy gained more control to steer the African economy, handling and mobilising most of the resources in the region. Once the Vandals settled there in the middle of the fifth century, the once thriving, state-backed export circuits of the region shrank, as the inland rural and urban centres progressively lost their economic weight[53]. Around the year 600, the Mediterranean market pivoted toward the highly developed commercial sites of the east: from there, trading routes departed westwards towards southern Italy, Sicily, and northern Tunisia[54]. The cooperation between African landowners, state officials, and merchants from the eastern Mediterranean supported this renewed network until the late seventh century[55]. As a result of the general

[49] Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa*, 53-80; Wickham, *Donkey*, 168-71.

[50] Wickham, *Donkey*, 647, 650-1.

[51] Fentress *et al.*, «Accounting for ARS», 147-8; Ward-Perkins, «Specialized Production», 374; Dossey, *Peasant*, 62-76; Hobson, *North African Boom*, 9-13.

[52] Bonifay, «African Economy», 220.

[53] Fentress *et al.*, «Accounting for ARS», 150-1; Reynolds, *Trade*, 112-6; Mattingly and Hitchner, «Roman Africa», 189-196, 211; Tedesco, «Missing Factor», 398-404.

[54] Ward-Perkins, «Specialized Production», 382; Whittow, «Middle Byzantine Economy», 469-72; Haldon, *Empire*, 258-66.

[55] Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 93-6.

reshuffling of the conditions of production, distribution, and trade in the entire Mediterranean, the eighth century marked the end of the ancient economic circuit, while also marking the beginning of the new economic cycle of the Middle Ages[56]. This represented a major economic transformation, yet the production and exchange systems in the Mediterranean did not simply shrink in a linear way. The eighth century brought about a remarkable 'qualitative' change in economic life that affected the landscape of Africa itself. As a consequence of its effects, whole areas of specialised productions disappeared, many trade routes were abandoned, and even some very basic infrastructures ceased to exist[57].

The rural landscape of North Africa varied enormously, ranging from the fertile estates in Proconsularis to the isolated settlements in pre-desert Numidia. In what follows, I compare two environments situated at the extremes of this spectrum: Thugga and the *fundus* Tuletianos. The zone of Thugga in the High Tell represents, at a local level, the trajectories of the African economy from the Roman period to the second half of the seventh century. As shown by a survey of the region, the town of Thugga covers about 25 hectares and is estimated to have had c. 5,000 inhabitants in the urban area and a further 5,000 in its hinterland. Beyond this were seven other smaller towns: Thimida Bure, Numluli, Thubursicu Bure, Glia, Aquae, Agbia, Aunobari[58]. According to Mariette De Vos' estimates, the total population of these minor centres, counting the inhabitants of the 374 farms in their rural areas, totalled c. 25,000 people[59]. The survey reveals that its landscape has been intensively exploited by the local population. During the fourth century, the state acquired a key role in channelling local productions through its fiscal infrastructures. But apparently, around Thugga farming did not simply provide for state and local needs, but also generated profit from the commercialisation of the crops. As an example, the average annual yield of olive oil from this area was so abundant that production significantly exceeded what its inhabitants required. De Vos has estimated that peasant households could only consume up around 2.2 per cent of the overall production of olive oil[60]. These figures suggest that if a share of this agrarian surplus was delivered as taxes to Rome, an even larger amount was sold on Mediterranean markets.

After the Vandal takeover of the imperial fiscal infrastructure, production and trade continued to flourish in the late fifth and sixth centuries. Evidence from this area reveals unmistakable signs of agricultural intensification in this post-imperial period, as attested by its high density of settlements and the numerous farms featuring presses for oil or wine and mills for grain. The rural landscape witnessed a systemic change from a tributary economic model to a market-driven economy under the Vandals[61]. The end of imperial taxation did not lead to a reduction in production because demand from Mediterranean

[56] Wickham, «Mediterranean», 163-5; Banaji, *Exploring*, 19-27; Tedesco, «Late Antiquity», 127-8.

[57] Ward-Perkins, «Specialized Production», 361; Wickham, *Framing*, 695-708, 720-8; Fenwick, «From Africa to Ifrīqiya», 16-20, 32; Whittow, «Environmental Turn», 363; von Rummel, «Transformation», 183-91; Conant, «Forgotten Transition», 12-3; von Rummel and Möller, «Chimtou medievale», 191-3, 209-10.

[58] De Vos, «The Rural Landscape», 153.

[59] *Ibidem*, 174.

[60] *Ibidem*, 174.

[61] De Vos, «Rural Settlement», 212.

markets pushed local landowners and peasants to keep producing well above subsistence levels. But this shift toward a market logic occurred alongside trends of fragmentation and regionalisation that allowed for divergent regional development. In Thugga and its hinterland, exportation to both former *Annona* —Rome— and non-*annona* regions —the Iberian Peninsula, Marseille, Constantinople, and the Near East— continued, but along separate commercial paths since trade routes were no longer integrated through the fiscal system[62]. In internal regions, in contrast, production and exchange became a local business, even though these isolated settlements continued to provide rural labourers to the northern estates like those in Thugga[63].

Following the transformations both inside and outside the region, Thugga adapted to embrace a different landowning pattern, which affected the socio-economic status of people cultivating the land. In the late fifth and sixth centuries, the former imperial or senatorial large estates, located to the north-east, north, and north-west of Thugga and to the south and west of Numluli, turned into small- and medium-sized *villa*-farms and factories.[64] According to Bruce Hitchner, many of these sites, which usually included up to three presses, were similar to those found in the Kasserine region[65]. This semi-arid area in western Byzacena had comparable agrarian structures, which were involved in the intensive production of olive oil for export, just like those north-west of Thugga and to the south and west of Numluli[66]. These two areas had also similar labour regimes: sharecropping was probably the prevalent agrarian arrangement, while medium owners and rich peasants continued to be involved[67]. The farms immediately south of Numluli were larger than many of the ones connected to the imperial estates, suggesting that those might have been the properties of urban elites who relied on tenants, sharecroppers, and rural labourers[68]. The smaller communities of Glia and Thimida Bure occupied relatively small farms, inhabited by lesser peasants who also had to serve as tenants or labourers on the land of the municipal elite or some other major or medium owner[69]. These work arrangements were quite common: market demands pressed local landowners and rich peasants to increase the exploitation of the large and medium agrarian infrastructures and they recruited poorer and/or landless peasants from the neighbouring areas or the southern regions[70].

The size of Thuggan households corroborates the hypothesis that peasant stratification was correlated to the commercialisation of agriculture. Households consisted of 10-15 members each, well above the standard size of 6 to 7 members recorded in

[62] Wickham, «Africa – Ifrīqiya», 318.

[63] Reynolds, *Hispania*, 101-12, 124-31, 153; «From Vandal Africa to Arab Ifrīqiya», 132-9; «Supply Network», 388-90; De Vos, «The Rural Landscape», 180; Tedesco, «Missing Factor», 409-10.

[64] De Vos, «The Rural Landscape», 183-4; Battisti, *Insediamento rurale*, 32-3.

[65] Hitchner, «*Rus Africum*», 307.

[66] Hitchner, «Organization», 401-2; «Olive Production», 76.

[67] Dossey, *Peasant*, 87, 243, note 128; Mattingly, *Imperialism*, 153-4; De Vos, «The Rural Landscape», 185-7. For various labour regimes, see Grey, «Rural Society», 126-8.

[68] De Vos, «Aïn Wassel», 39-41.

[69] Hitchner, «*Rus Africum*», 307-8.

[70] Shaw, *Bringing*, 23, 48-92; Merrills, «Invisible Men», 361-9.

Segermes and the *fundus* Tuletianos[71]. For all this variation in size, it is unlikely that Thugga had a different demographic regime than the rest of North Africa. This discrepancy seems to suggest households incorporating further kin-members —as brothers or other relatives— or hosting wage-labourers. These additional hands were necessary to cope with the more complex labour schedule required by the high levels of production and commercialisation.

In the late sixth and seventh centuries, this favourable economic trend continued, but shifted from trade directed to supply the demand of the middle classes from the eastern Mediterranean to meet the needs of the Byzantine state following Justinian's conquest in the 530s. The new in-kind tax requisitions from Constantinople curtailed a significant part of the exports to feed the capital and the army: but since the government reimbursed surpluses at market prices the landowning class continued to enrich itself[72]. This resulted in closer control over the labour and the mobility of the lesser and landless peasants. The collaboration between the Byzantine state and African landowners caused social polarisation and tension among the local peasants: the conditions of the lesser strata tended to deteriorate. However, this conjuncture did not last long. Due to the fragmentation and contraction of Mediterranean demand in the eighth century, both production and exchange simplified. Social and economic stratification among the rural population of Thugga continued, but it grew reliant on the demand of local urban elites and upon the ambitions of rich peasants and middle owners[73]. In this new context, the gulf between these peasant groups and landlords declined significantly: thus, in one respect, Wickham's peasant mode prevailed there too, even though local peasants preserved intensive farming methods, enabling them to produce more than the required subsistence to provide for non-agricultural members of society.

While Thugga offers a long-term perspective, the Djebel Mrata wooden tablets —known as the Tablets Albertini— focus on a three-year span, and shed some light on the every-day life of peasants from the *fundus* Tuletianos, in southern Numidia[74]. The discussion of the *fundus* Tuletianos summarises my monograph *Living at the Margins*. This study examines the social and economic profile of each member of this marginal community, demonstrating that the internal dynamics at work among the Tuletiani reinforced social relationships between them as well as giving rise to a process of stratification[75].

The tablets record land transactions from 493 to 496: nevertheless, they allow us to follow the vicissitudes of three generations of peasants. The tablets provide a window on ordinary life in the African countryside throughout the fifth century and even beyond[76].

[71] De Vos, «The Rural Landscape», 174: Thugga; Ørsted, «Conclusions: From the Ideal to the Real», 174: Segermes; Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 119: *fundus* Tuletianos.

[72] Haldon, *Empire*, 258-66; Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 227-30.

[73] Wickham, «Africa – Ifrīqiya», 318-9; Wickham, *Donkey*, 171.

[74] Courtois, «Les documents», 3-14.

[75] Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 111-200.

[76] Courtois, «Les hommes et les choses»; Mattingly, «Olive Cultivation», 403-5; Hitchner, «Historical Text», 134-8; Merrills and Miles, *Vandals*, 159-62; Conant, *Staying Roman*, 97-9.

Geminius Catullinus, the wealthy absentee landowner of the *fundus* Tuletianos, represented the head of this community. Catullinus probably resided in the town of Cillium or Thelepte, and he managed his estates in southern, pre-desert Numidia through a network of relatives —four local landowners called Felix, Cresconius, Ianuarius, and Urbanianus. The local peasantry tilled the soil of his property, and it constituted a middling size community of 250 to 350 individuals[77]. State and market demand on day-to-day operations is not clear nor can it be inferred, but Catullinus and his relatives required different levels of labour from the peasantry, depending on the size, the crop, and the irrigational needs of the estate. Not only did they need several types of rural labourers, but the peasants themselves searched for different opportunities throughout their lives.

As with other societies studied in Wickham's *FEMA*, the peasantry from the *fundus* Tuletianos had its own stratification: the higher group consisted of rich peasants who could compete with the four middle-sized landowners —but, of course, not with Catullinus— in terms of wealth and social prestige. They had enough land to produce for export —probably for the urban elites— and to recruit external free und unfree labour. Three exemplary figures of this group are Donatianus son of Victor, Lucianus son of Iannarius, and Paulinianus son of Quintus. They were all literate peasants; they represented the local sharecroppers in the transactions with the members of the Geminii, and they were the local leaders of the peasant community[78]. Peasants of this status, rank, and skill-level, it must be admitted, do not feature prominently in Wickham's ideal-typical peasant mode societies; but the conditions that prevailed in Africa were unlike those in much of the post-imperial West.

A second category includes a large group of middle-class peasants whose priority lay in the reproduction of their household. They cultivated the land of the Geminii, but they occasionally recruited labour from their relatives, friends, and neighbours. Whatever surplus they had, they likely sold it on the local market. They normally lived above subsistence level unless they encountered difficulties in acquiring land during the transition from one generation to the next. They leased additional land to provide their growing children with a plot before they would eventually get married and form their own households; but when this happened and parents grew older —or died—, additional land was no longer necessary and was handed back to the owner. Iulius Secundianus and his wife Fotta, and Serbunis and his wife Adeodata, are documented examples of this type, demonstrating that this work pattern was in use in the period between the mid-fifth century and the early sixth century[79].

Finally, a third group of peasants leased plots from local landlords and rich peasants because the land they owned, if any, was insufficient for sustaining their families. These peasants —people such as Soricus, Mastuntus, Gibalus, and Sigibalus— possibly came from more marginal desert areas, where they lived off pastoralism and subsistence agriculture. They offered their labour on the tiny and marginal plots of the *fundus*, probably

[77] Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 119.

[78] Conant, «Literacy», 203-10; Wickham, *Framing*, 538-9; Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 191-2.

[79] *Tablettes Albertini*, xxix (n.d.), xxiv (21 April 496): Iulius Secundianus and Fotta; xviii (21 January 494), xi (11 May 494): Serbunis and Adeodata.

via short-term contractual arrangements similar to those documented in the ostraca from other neighbouring regions[80]. Even in the remote estates of southern Numidia, there were landlords and rich peasants engaged in commercialised agriculture, middle-class peasants producing for themselves as well as for the local markets, and poor peasants forming an important labour force for the other, better-off social groups. None of these economies functioned in isolation[81]. This is not to say that Wickham's modal distinction does not work. What this variety shows is that the processes beneath the dominant mode of production can be different and variable. While the concept of mode of production is an analytical tool designed to describe long term macroeconomic changes, different and contingent types of labour regime and economic organisation coexisted. Within those structures, forms of social mobility both upwards and downwards were a continuous reality.

The differences between these two case-studies make this clear. The Thugga survey focuses on the macroeconomic changes at the level of production and commercialisation to reveal changes to social differences among peasants created by oscillations in state or market demand. Thuggan peasants could profit from opportunities from the market —whether Mediterranean, urban, or local. Similarly to landowners, these peasants (occasionally acting more like «farmers») increased production by accumulating land and recruiting —and exploiting— lesser and landless peasants. Their economic attitude contrasted with Wickham's peasant mode on one fundamental point: not only did it generate social differentiation, but it also caused deep polarisation within the local community. But this trend stopped in the eighth century, when economic simplification reduced the differences among the rural population: in this new context, the rural community of Thugga came to resemble the peasant communities characterised by *FEMA*'s model of peasant economy.

In contrast, the Tablets Albertini describe peasant protagonism as the actual engine of social stratification in the countryside. Even large estates —such as the *fundus* Tuletianos of Geminus Catullinus— were part of a local peasant economy and facilitated the reproduction of the peasant household. Obviously, as elsewhere in Late Antiquity, there was market-centred exchange in the *fundus* Tuletianos too, and people wanted to accumulate wealth: Geminius Felix and Geminius Cresconius were a clear illustration of this economic mentality[82]. But the existence of a market and of people pursuing profit did not erode the social bonds between the members of the community nor did it distort the primary goal of the peasant economy. To give one example, the plots of the *fundus* Tuletianos were transferred in exchange for amounts that, unlike the prices of the other goods mentioned in the Tablets Albertini (such as cloth, jewels, or olive oil), cannot be considered market prices; these amounts were instead conceptualised as values reflecting the social relations between the people living on the estate[83]. In this sense, this rural

[80] Dossey, *Peasant*, 243, notes 127 and 128; Leveau, «L'économie domaniale», 261-7; Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 262.

[81] Mattingly, *Imperialism*, 138; Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 263.

[82] Mattingly, «Olive Cultivation», 414-5; Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 155-9.

[83] Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 134-41.

community from southern Numidia is one of the best examples of Wickham's peasant mode. Landowners did not dominate the countryside; various peasant groups did. But unlike their northern peers from Thugga, they did so neither behaving as landowners nor subordinating other peasants to their own needs.

3 Egypt

Byzantine Egypt (conventionally dated 284-642) had unusually high levels of agricultural production, so much so that it devolved a fair share of its rural goods —among other various assets— to Constantinople to meet the demand of the imperial capital. Because of its extraordinary economic prosperity, from the fourth to the seventh centuries Egypt was gradually but uniformly connected to the fiscal structure of the eastern Roman empire[84]. The province was organised in five eparchies, which were in turn divided into about sixty smaller units called pagarchies. At the head of these administrative units stood the pagarch, whose main task was to impose and collect taxes in all the villages, estates, and monastic communities of his district[85]. While these territorial units were taxed collectively, individual taxpayers were assigned their taxes locally, which means that in every location —whether it was a village, an estate or a monastery— each citizen paid depending on their own possessions and means. For each agrarian unit, bureaucrats calculated taxes drawing on the list of liable cultivators: each quota varied according to the extent of land under cultivation and the number of cultivators recorded in the tax register[86]. While the legal status of the cultivators was not restricted by their fiscal registration upon given agrarian units, their actual social and economic condition depended on their ability to resist the pressure of the imperial, private, and ecclesiastical landowning elites, especially when these rich landlords acted as both private collectors of rents and public gatherers of taxes[87].

Under the Byzantines, the Egyptian peasantry varied considerably in its internal composition. Overall, peasant strata refer to three broad categories: wealthy peasants, peasant smallholders, and landless peasants[88]. Among the many examples of wealthy peasants —that is farmers—, the figure of Aurelius Phoibammon from Aphrodito stands out, with James Keenan describing him as a man who defied the rigid, traditional dichotomy between landowners and peasants[89]. Phoibammon was indeed a «rational» and entrepreneurial peasant, and an extraordinarily successful one[90]. Since he was involved as lessor, lessee, middleman, and investor in multiple economic activities, Keenan concluded

[84] Palme, «Imperial Presence», 244; Soto Marin, *Economic Integration*, 74-7, 89-92, 199-208; Sarris, «Egypt», 20-4; Laver, «Small Change» 62.

[85] Mazza, «Ricerche», 211-9; Palme, «Imperial Presence», 263-4; Stern, *Taxes and Authority*, 217-30.

[86] Carrié, «L'Egypte au IVe siècle», 439-43; Cromwell, *Recording Village Life*, 90-107.

[87] Gascou, «Grands domaines», 7-19; Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 93-100; Tedesco, «What Made a Peasantry», 351-7.

[88] Banaji, «Agrarian History», 197.

[89] Keenan, «Aurelius Phoibammon», 150-1, 154; Bagnall, *Reading Papyri*, 43.

[90] Keenan, «The *New Papyrology*», 166.

that the best designation for Phoibammon was «prosperous farmer»[91]. Phoibammon's economic performance suggests that between the wealthy landowners and the poor room remained for a middling sort to thrive and achieve economic and social prominence, at least at a local level[92]. Since his economic strategy created a gulf between his household and the rest of the peasants Phoibammon is the ideal example showing how under the umbrella of Wickham's peasant mode there was space for alternative trajectories. He was representative of a rich peasant stratum comprising a small circle of his community's leading families. Members of this group called themselves *ktetores*, *syntelestai*, or even *misthotai*: whatever the specific name, they referred to their work differently to set it —and themselves— apart from the lesser peasantry and the common *georgoi*, the peasants who survived by dirtying their hand with soil, theirs or someone else's[93].

Unlike farmers, lesser peasants cultivated their holdings personally. They only rarely needed supplementary labour, which could be provided by the members of the peasant household or by a neighbouring peasant unit through mutual cooperation; at the same time, since they hardly owned enough land to survive, they rented small parcels from large landowners and middling peasants, occasionally also serving as hired hands[94]. Many peasant families experienced a bewildering succession of tenancy contracts as they moved from farm to farm, some getting involved in sharecropping, some in general labour service, which appears redolent of seigneurial obligations, and quite frequently in some combination of the two[95]. But as much as these occupations could entail differences in the nature of the labour, the status of «peasant» still applied[96].

There was, however, a difference between those peasants (*georgoi*) who relied on more precarious form of tenancy or even wage labour as supplementary sources of income, and those cultivators (also categorized as *georgoi*) defined less by their ownership of land or other resources than by their physical labour on them, whether as smallholders, sharecroppers, or rural labourers. During the Byzantine period, especially in the larger, more concentrated estates, the social and economic condition of peasant smallholders —the first group of *georgoi* tended to deteriorate into the status of labourers— the second group of *georgoi.* This change occurred because they became more dependent on someone else's land, and more vulnerable to the domination of the wealthy landowners, who, besides owning land, were also interested in the labour of their peasants as a key source of profit. Wealthier people sometimes manage their estate directly, and they tried to impose their authority over the workforce by controlling its mobility[97].

Late antique Egypt presents several examples of these agrarian relations, but by far the best known is the large estates of the Apion family of Oxyrhynchos[98]. The Apiones' estates were divided into directly managed lands (*autourgia*) and smaller allotments

91 Keenan, «Byzantine Egyptian Villages», 237.
92 Bagnall, «Managing Estates», 132; Tedesco, «What Made a Peasantry», 347-8.
93 Banaji, «Agrarian History», 197-8; Keenan, «Egypt», 635; Wickham, *Framing*, 415-6.
94 Brett, «Way of Peasant», 48; Tedesco, «Peasantry», 349.
95 Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 200.
96 Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 152.
97 Banaji, «Agrarian History», 198; *Agrarian Change*, 192, 195; Sarris, «Origins», 282-8.
98 Keenan, «Egypt», 625.

(*ktemata*) that were leased out to the inhabitants of the private owned estate settlements (*epoikia*). The revenues derived from the tenancies were in part used to support the cultivation and development of the landlord's domain or demesne. The inhabitants of the estate settlements were deployed directly on the demesne as a centrally supervised workforce, alongside a servile resident labour force (*paidaria*)[99]. The combination of these two labour forces secured a massive production of cash crops for export. According to some historians, the working inhabitants of the estate settlements were not simple tenant farmers but tenant or wage labourers primarily employed in cultivating the demesne[100]. The position of such workers was, consequently, highly insecure, as they depended on the landlord for their accommodation: they could be often relocated between settlements and transferred in close proximity to the fields in need of additional workers. Rather than being stable members of the local rural community, these peasants, habitually housed in cramped and poor barracks, appear more as rural workers, that is, extraneous to the land they tilled and the places in which they lived[101].

This diversity in the stratification of Egyptian rural society is not merely a matter of contrast between an economy dominated by large estates and one with many village smallholders, exemplified by the hypothetical divergence between the worlds of Oxyrhynchos and Aphrodito. Rather, even within the Oxyrhynchite district, a generalised, schematic view of wage-labour displacing tenancy would be imprecise and, above all, groundless[102]. Conversely, it is reasonable to assume that some areas in the Oxyrhynchite district were dominated by the large estates of the Apion family and some were not: indeed, over half the land in this district must have been held by villagers in their own right, in addition to their role as tenants of the absentee landlords[103]. A fair amount of the Apiones' estates, especially those outside limited sectors, conform to this model[104]. At the same time, however, it seems that in Aphrodito some of the smallholders' fields lay next to large estates[105]. Moreover, the biggest properties were not in the hands of a single owner. As revealed by Isabelle Marthot-Santaniello's examination of monastic landownership in the area surrounding the village of Aphrodito in the sixth century, eight monasteries owned a substantial amount of all the recorded arable land in this region. According to local ecclesiastical archives, the monastery of Apa Sourous possessed about 300 arouras of arable land, twice the amount owned by all the other monasteries combined. The structure proves that its landholding was not managed as one estate but

[99] Sarris, *Economy and Society*, 47-8.

[100] Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 198-9; Sarris, «Jairus Banaji's Agrarian Change», 218; Tedesco, «What Made a Peasantry», 361, 369. For third-century examples: Rathbone, *Economic Rationalism*, 146, 150, 182-3.

[101] Banaji, «Agrarian History», 206; Sarris, *Economy and Society*, 48-9.

[102] Bagnall, «Introduction», 12; «Village Landholding», 189; Ruffini, *Social Network*, 147-97; Hickey, *Wine*, 146; Freu, *Salariés*, 73-8; Tedesco, «Late Antiquity», 135.

[103] Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 119-21; Rowlandson, «Agricultural Tenancy», 146; Hickey, «Aristocratic Landholding», 296-8.

[104] Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 182-6; Sarris, *Economy and Society*, 78-80; Haug, «Dependent Labour», 435-41.

[105] MacCoull, «Social Structure», 71-5; Keenan, «Absentee Landlordism», 147-54; Zuckerman, *Du village*, 221-2; Ruffini, *Life*, 88-93; Bagnall, «Village Landholding», 185.

was split into medium-size parcels in the hands of numerous tenants[106]. The social and economic status of these tenants varied significantly. While the estate register mentions one tenant, the prosperous farmer Phoibammon, the writings of monks, such as the *Sayings of the Fathers* and the works by Shenoute and Besa, reveal that the «poverty-stricken peasantry' of Upper Egypt» formed an important source of labour for the monasteries of the region[107].

A comparable picture of mixed economies emerges elsewhere, too. The complementary analyses of the Hermopolite district conducted by Alan Bowman and Roger Bagnall showed that the very high degree of inequality in land distribution around urban centres, such as Antinopolis or Hermopolis, was not mirrored in the villages. While in towns more than half of the inhabitants owned so little land that it was probably not enough to support them, the villages had a wide range of landowners with a relatively equal distribution of land, and, most likely, of wealth and income, too[108]. These villagers were similar to the peasants from the *fundus* Tuletianos; in this sense, they match Wickham's peasant mode in a way that Phoibammon from Aphrodito could not. Inequalities were present, of course, but most peasants had enough land to support a family, and there was a broad group of middle-class owners capable of fulfilling public obligations[109]. In addition, fifth-century Alabastrine, in the Antinoite district, is the perfect example of a village where landowning featured a few small holdings owned by local residents[110]. The extant evidence from the region of Fayyum suggests that in the Byzantine period a middle stratum of peasant holders lived alongside the superrich aristocrats —such as Strategius, Theodorakios, and Theodosius, the former in the larger villages of the area, while the latter controlled the smaller settlements[111].

In 642, the Arab conquest ended the Byzantine rule of Egypt. Following the expulsion of the Byzantines, tax revenues previously sent to Constantinople were redirected to pay for military endeavours and soldiers' stipends, or to finance the Arab officials who replaced the Byzantine high-level functionaries in Alexandria and, starting from 691, also in Fustat[112]. The remaining revenues were delivered to the caliphs in Medina (632-661)[113]. To secure the continuation of both agrarian production and tax collection, the Arabs allowed local landowners and the administrative personnel to stay[114]. There is no evidence of Arabs engaged in agriculture, neither indirectly as absentee estate-holders, nor directly as cultivators or locally settled landowners, at least not until the very end of the eighth century[115]. Taxes were still assigned and collected according to the Byzantine

106 Marthot-Santaniello, «Landowning Monasteries», 80-1.
107 *Ibidem*, 86; Keenan, «Byzantine Egyptian Villages», 239, for the quote.
108 Bowman, «Landholding in the Hermopolite Nome», 151; Bagnall, «Landholding in Late Roman Egypt», 142; Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 122.
109 Bagnall, «Landholding in Late Roman Egypt», 142.
110 Gagos and van Minnen, «Rural Economy», 187.
111 Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 146-8; Gonis, «Aristocracy», 207-10.
112 Papaconstantinou, «Fustat», 45-6.
113 Sijpesteijn, «Arab Conquest» 443.
114 Gascou, «Arabic Taxation», 671.
115 Sijpesteijn, «Landholding Patterns», 125.

system and by the same officials in the previous years. Under Islamic rule, the existing pagarchs retained their position, while new appointees were gradually chosen from amongst the same landholding elite who had supplied the pre-Islamic tax-officials[116]. But even if large landowners continued to exercise control over the pagarchy, the traditional cooperation between pagarchs and state did not survive the conquest[117]. There is no longer evidence of great houses of state-loyal landowners like the Apiones[118]. Quite the opposite: as Michael Brett perceptively observes, «in the absence of close supervision by the Arabs, the complicity between pagarchs and peasants served to keep the tax lists short and the quotas correspondingly low»[119]. Such lucrative collaboration between tax-collectors and taxpayers, «combined with the recognition of the Coptic Church as the representative of the local population», created conditions that, down to the early eighth century, the Arabs met comparatively little opposition from the peasantry[120].

Much of the relevant evidence concerning the life of Egyptian peasants under early Islamic rule comes from a single region: the southern Egyptian town of Jēme and the nearby interrelated monasteries in the western Theban area. For the period spanning approximately 600 to 800 CE, a large dossier of Coptic-language documents reveals the activities of the inhabitants of this region, a predominantly Coptic population which had minimal or no contact with the Muslim rulers and the local administrators[121]. The fragmentary nature of the documents makes it hard to track the individuals and be certain of their social tenure, except for some of Jēme's headmen, who were sometimes rich peasants and sometimes medium owners: for example, Peter son of Komes, headman in 724/725, was a prosperous peasant[122]. The overall landholding pattern looks similar to the network of complex ownership of Aphrodito: the monasteries of Phoibammon and Epiphanius were the major landowners in the region[123]. In the matters related to land, farming, and exchange, these institutions interacted with the residents of Jēme —1,000 to 2,000 people. Among its population, the town included medium and small owners leasing fields out to others and hiring for wages, as well as lesser peasants searching for a job[124]. Jēme and its smaller neighbouring communities were the main source of agricultural labour for the local ecclesiastical institutions[125]. In this sense, the town fit into the standard patterns for Egyptian villages elsewhere. Village organization was solid and efficient in the post-Byzantine period, while Egyptian villagers were well-aware of the

116 Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 153, note 120; Sijpesteijn, «Landholding Patterns», 122.
117 Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 157.
118 *Ibidem*, 154-5.
119 Brett, «Way of Peasant», 49; Frantz-Murphy, «Land-Tenure in Egypt», 242-4.
120 Brett, «Egypt», 545; Mikhail, *Islamic Egypt*, 118-27.
121 Wilfong, «Agriculture», 218 and *Women of Jeme*, 8-17; Mikhail, *Islamic Egypt*, 146-53.
122 Wickham, *Framing*, 422-3.
123 Wegner, *Monastic Communities*, 88-96.
124 Wipszycka, «Resources», 172; Blanke and Cromwell, «Monastic Economies», 22: production for local market; Wilfong, *Women of Jeme*, 13: population estimates; «Gender», 322-3: female occupations.
125 Wilfong, «Agriculture», 220.

importance of keeping neighbours far from their land, particularly if they were powerful foreigners[126].

However, the demography of the Egyptian countryside, as well as the structure of the agrarian relations, changed by the end of the eighth century, when political-administrative transformations at the core of the Abbasid empire resulted in a very different system of tax-collection and government. This new organization relied on two main changes. First, tax-farmers and estate holders were recruited among Muslim large landowners, who, not being necessarily of Egyptian origin, were alien to the Coptic peasants[127]. Second, Arab peasants settled in Egypt, where they significantly altered both the composition and the cohesion of the local population[128].

4 Conclusion: comparing agrarian economies

This essay has discussed various types of agrarian economies within the different degrees of peasant exploitation or protagonism that resulted from the diverse ways rural estates were organised and managed by their owners in the period from 400 to 800. It is useful to compare these forms of agrarian organisation with Wickham's modal definitions to reveal potential similarities and differences. The goal of Wickham's model in *FEMA* is to think about state formation or political power as it was concretely expressed for example through fiscal structures and conflicts among elites or between elites and central powers. It is a broad framework for tracking gradual shifts and transformations in the substructures of state and society: its value is especially useful when considering changes in power relationships between these two political and economic forces[129]. The peasant mode emerges as an economic structure in cases when ruling classes and landowning elites declined. Peasants became masters of their economic decisions when the state ceased to impose taxation and landowners reduced significantly the levels of rent they extracted.

In this article, three microhistories drawn from African and Egyptian evidence reinforce *FEMA*'s model, which classifies pre-modern societies in tributary, feudal, and peasant modes of production. In Byzantine Egypt, where an effective tributary state was in action, large landowners like the Apiones deployed their public and private power to subdue their resident peasants. These large landowners combined their tributary function —the power to collect tax and rent— with a market-oriented logic to obtain the highest level of control over their peasants ever enforced in Byzantine Egypt. Peasants

[126] Wickham, *Framing*, 425-6.

[127] Muslim landonwers and tax farming: Morimoto, *Fiscal Administration*, 96-104; Sijpesteijn, «Landholding Patterns», 130-1; Brett, «Egypt», 557; Gascou, «Arabic Taxation», 676-7; Legendre, «Landowners», 405-6, 415; Wickham, «Power», 80-7.

[128] Arab peasants: Frantz-Murphy, «Land Tenure and Social Transformation», 132-4; Sijpesteijn, «Arab Conquest», 453-4; Brett, «Egypt», 553.

[129] Haldon, «Problems», 39.

were not merely tax- and rent-payers, but were, in a real and substantive sense, reduced to labour tenants or wage labourers[130].

An exemplary scenario of the feudal mode can be found in Upper Egypt in the centuries of transition from the Byzantine to the Islamic rule. The monasteries of Jēme offered local peasants a chance to complement their incomes by working as tenants or occasional labourers on their fields. These ecclesiastical institutions acted as large landowners, but in the absence of centralised taxation and interregional market demand, they were not in need —or willing— to exert pressure over the local rural community[131]. These monasteries differed from both the Apiones and the urban landowners of Middle Egypt. In their capacity as landowners, they behaved more like the Geminii from southern Numidia: yet the peasantries from Jēme and Tuletianos differed from one another in several ways, including their respective settlement patterns, the preponderant types of tenancy and contracts of employment to which they were bound, and the degree of autonomy and labour mobility they experienced[132].

The peasants from the *fundus* Tuletianos were the best documented case of the peasant mode of production as theorised in *FEMA*. Like the peasantry of Jēme, they lived in a region where state control was negligible. Unlike their Egyptian peers, however, the Tuletiani displayed a notable economic autonomy from their local landowners: they decided when they needed additional land and how much of it, all according to their own needs and to their primary goal of reproducing their household. Sometimes, they could also use someone else's land and labour to improve their economic condition: however, the large estate of the Geminii was an opportunity, not a constraint[133].

FEMA's scheme is logical and linear: in the absence of state intervention and landlord pressure, peasant production dropped and market exchange declined. This relaxation from external demand permitted peasants to reduce their labour effort or alternatively to improve their diet: in Wickham's words, «peasants would eat more» or «they would work less»[134]. However, we have examined some examples from Middle Egypt and North Africa revealing peasants could also make different decisions. In the village of Aphrodito, the sixth-century farmer Phoibammon was representative of a group of rich peasants who not only produced for themselves but also recruited lesser and landless peasant to intensify production and engage in commercialised agriculture[135]. These farmers were not comparable in terms of wealth with large landowners, especially those with public offices, but they could compete with them and their local representatives for control over poor peasants. In sixth- and seventh-century North Africa, the landowners and rich peasants from Thugga used wage incentives in a competitive labour market to

130 Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 180-9; Sarris, *Economy and Society*, 71-4; Tedesco, «What Made a Peasantry», 357-70: *status quaestionis*.

131 Wickham, «Feudal Economy», 10-2.

132 Bagnall, *Egypt*, 138-42: pattern of mobility; Wilfong, «Agriculture», 220-1: types of crop and labour regimes; Papaconstantinou, «Credit», 637-9; Laver, «Small Change», 69, 91-2: market and monetisation.

133 Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 262.

134 Wickham, *Framing*, 549.

135 Keenan, «Aurelius Phoibammon», 150-1, 154.

recruit lesser peasant from neighbouring or southern areas. They did so to cope with the expansion of the Mediterranean market and, later on, with the demands of the state in the East[136].

The fundamental question is whether these two examples undermine the validity of *FEMA*'s model. My answer is no. Much like the landowning elites, the late ancient and early medieval peasantry was characterised by internal variety, diverse levels of protagonism and ambition, and different fates. These well-off peasant households from Thugga and Middle Egypt secured continuity in production and exchange. Under these circumstances, supply and demand reflected peasant constraints, desires, and initiatives, and remained stable (if not constant and unchanging) over generations, regardless of the vicissitudes of the state and its dependent landholding elites. These diverse routes do not shape a historical vision alternative to *FEMA*'s transition from late ancient to early medieval economy: rather, they reveal its multiple and uneven trajectories.

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[136] De Vos, «Aïn Wassel», 27; Tedesco, *Living at the Margins*, 224-30.

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