eISSN: 2445-3595
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14201/shhme.32087

PEASANTS AND ECONOMIC AGENCY IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES: A BYZANTINE PERSPECTIVE

Los campesinos y la agencia económica en la Antigüedad tardía y la Alta Edad Media: una perspectiva desde Bizancio

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Recibido: 2025-05-13
Revisado: 2025-07-04
Aceptado: 2025-09-17

ABSTRACT: This paper examines agrarian relations in both the core territories of the Byzantine Empire in Anatolia and Asia Minor from the sixth to eighth centuries and also those in the empire's westernmost provinces. It argues that around the western Mediterranean, both within and beyond imperial territory, the period witnessed a greater degree of continuity in the form and extent of peasant exploitation than is sometimes supposed. In so far as peasant exploitation diminished, a crucial role may have been played by labour shortages associated with the so-called «Justinianic Plague», which would have allowed peasants to negotiate better terms for themselves, and caused military and political disruption (as emphasised by Wickham).

Keywords: agrarian relations; the colonate; the Plague of Justinian; Byzantium; late Antiquity; early Middle Ages.

RESUMEN: Este artículo examina las relaciones agrarias en los dos territorios principales del imperio bizantino, Anatolia y Asia Menor, desde el siglo sexto hasta el octavo, y también en las provincias occidentales del imperio. El artículo argumenta que en el Mediterráneo occidental, tanto dentro como fuera del territorio imperial, se produjo un grado más alto de continuidad en las formas y la extensión de la explotación del campesinado de lo que se suele suponer. Es posible que la escasez de mano de obra provocada por la Plaga de Justiniano desempeñara un papel determinante en una mejora de las condiciones de explotación del campesinado. La epidemia y sus consecuencias pudieron crear un contexto que favoreció que los campesinos mejorasen su situación social. También pudo haber sido significativa la disrupción militar y política (como enfatizó Wickham).

Palabras clave: relaciones agrarias; colonato; plaga de Justiniano; Bizancio; Antigüedad tardía; Alta Edad Media.

SUMMARY: 0 Introduction. 1 The continuity of agrarian structures. 2 The effect of the Plague of Justinian on agrarian relations. 3 Works cited.

0 Introduction

It is hard to believe that we have reached the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Chris Wickham's monumental study of the late antique and early medieval economy, *FEMA*[1]. In 1964, Peter Brown commented upon the publication of A.H.M. Jones' *The Later Roman Empire*, that its appearance was akin to «the arrival of a steel plant in a region that has … been given over to light industry»[2]. The scale of Wickham's contribution to our understanding of the early medieval economy has been equally transformative.

In *FEMA*, Wickham argued that across much of the former territory of the Roman empire in the West, the period from *c.*500 to 700 witnessed a comparative golden age of peasant autonomy, in which many peasant communities were freed from the demands of the Roman fiscal system and Roman-style elites. For Wickham, the fiscal demands of the Roman state, and the economic demand generated by the Roman elite, had been the main driving forces behind the economic sophistication and complexity we associate with the later Roman Empire. The transition from antiquity to the early Middle Ages across much of the early middle West thus witnessed a contraction of economic horizons, and a decline in economic complexity, alongside greater peasant freedom. For a crucial period of time, according to Wickham, a «peasant mode of production» came to predominate in parts of the West, in a world characterised in an economic sense by family-based, more risk-averse, peasant production[3].

In this paper, I would like to return to some of Wickham's themes to consider how the model he set out in *FEMA* either does or does not apply with respect to the early Byzantine empire, and especially the westernmost territories of that empire in North Africa and Italy, which had been added to it by the emperor Justinian (*r.* 527-565) in a series of military campaigns from the 530s to the 550s. This was a world after all, where in the sixth century crucial territories would witness not so much the disappearance of Roman fiscal and governmental structures, but rather the imposition of direct rule from Constantinople on the part of an aggressively tax-hungry regime presided over by the emperor Justinian[4]. Procopius makes it clear, for example, that in both Africa and Italy,

[1] Wickham, *Framing*. For the author's response at the time, see Sarris, «Continuity and Discontinuity». A version of this paper was first delivered at a workshop on Agrarian Change and Rural Settlement in the Late Antique, Byzantine, and Early Islamic Western Mediterranean, at the University of Tübingen, May 2023. I am grateful to the participants for their helpful feedback and comments.

[2] Jones, *Later Roman Empire*; Brown, «The Later Roman Empire».

[3] See summary in Sarris, «Continuity and Discontinuity».

[4] See Sarris, *Economy and Society*; and, more recently, Sarris, *Justinian*.

Belisarius' armies of reconquest in the 530s were soon joined by Roman tax collectors sent out by Justinian to help fill the empire's coffers[5]. Likewise, Isidore of Seville would relate how, after the establishment by Justinian's armies of the province of *Spania* in the 550s, many members of the elite would come to prefer Visigothic rule, as it was, in his words, «better for them to live poor with the Goths than to be powerful among the Romans and bear the heavy yoke of tribute[6]». There are signs that across these territories, Justinian sought to impose not only what he regarded as proper political and religious order, cracking down on Arians and other dissenters, but also proper fiscal and economic order too.

But even prior to the arrival of Justinian's armies of reconquest, and even in those parts of the western Mediterranean that they would never reach, we arguably have relatively little reason to believe that the period from the fifth to sixth or fifth to seventh centuries witnessed any structural shift towards greater peasant autonomy, driven by the political and military circumstances of the period. In so far as the period did witness the ascendancy of Wickham's peasant mode, I would suggest it tended to be in quite specific regions and in response to quite specific circumstances, such as in areas where the political and military dislocation caused by the breakdown of the Roman state in the fifth century was at its most severe: north-western Gaul; northern Spain; lowland Britain. The British and north Gallic model, however, clearly does not apply to Vandal Africa, southern Spain, southern Gaul, or parts of central and southern Italy, where processes of change prior to the sixth century were much less violent and much more gradual. In particular, around the Mediterranean core of the old empire, where barbarian settlement was at its most negotiated, and where, as the late Patrick Wormald argued, symbiotic and co-operative relations soon emerged between members of the provincial Roman aristocracy and the new warlords in their midst, there is unlikely to have been any significant change in the structure of the agrarian economy or rural social relations[7]. Such symbiosis and co-operation —recorded for us by the likes of Paulinus of Pella, Sidonius Apollinaris, and Cassiodorus— was one of the key building blocks of the new order that emerged in the early medieval western Mediterranean. As a result (as I have long argued), whoever gained from the demise of the Western Roman Empire in these core territories of the old Roman state, it is very unlikely to have been the peasantry[8].

Rather, in these areas, there is likely to have been a very high level of continuity in the structures of the agrarian economy on the ground and as a result the level and intensity of exploitation of the peasantry is unlikely to have diminished. As the Visigothic and Burgundian legal evidence makes clear, for example, Roman provincial aristocrats in these parts of the West were highly successful at ensuring that their property rights over both land and labour were secured[9]. As the late Geoffrey de Ste. Croix noted, the situation here would appear to have reflected that anticipated by the Roman fabulist

[5] Procopius, *Wars* 4.8.25, 4.14.9-11 and *Anecdota* 24.9.
[6] Isidore, *Hist.*15 (first redaction).
[7] Wormald, «The Decline».
[8] See, for example, Sarris, *Empires of Faith*, 73-82.
[9] *Ibidem*, 57-68.

Phaedrus, when he wrote of how «a change in the person who controls the state brings to the poor man no change in his condition, save for a change of master»[10].

This is certainly the picture which emerges from the evidence for Vandal Africa, where historians are now much more alert to the symbiosis and co-operation that characterised relations between the Vandal leadership and the Roman secular elite, despite the anti-Vandal propaganda of the likes of Victor of Vita[11]. Paolo Tedesco's work in particular has highlighted the deep-rooted continuities in the economic and agrarian structures of North Africa, where, he has argued, landless peasants adopted strategies of mobility in an effort to escape aristocratic control and improve their bargaining position with respect to landowning employers[12]. We have clear legal evidence, for example, that African landowners in the 550s were still attempting to summon back to their estates *coloni* along with their offspring who must have fled in the 530s or even earlier. In a fascinating law issued in 552, the text of which is preserved in the *Authenticum*, Justinian wrote to the Praetorian Prefect of Africa, instructing him that «none of the *coloni* who left their estates at the time of the Vandals, and who have remained amongst the free (*inter liberos*) are to be pulled back and reduced to the status of *coloni* again: our will is that they should now still be as they were in the time of the Vandals»[13]. However, *coloni* who had migrated to the estates of other landowners, along with their offspring, could be reclaimed: «we command you», Justinian wrote, «to make restitution of any who spurned their own land and wanted to betake themselves to that of another».

In a follow-up measure issued in 558, Justinian was obliged to re-iterate his instructions[14]. Only those *coloni* and their descendants who had fled from estates after the restoration of Roman rule were to be forced to return. Landowners, Justinian tells us, were even trying to force *coloni* or the sons of *coloni* (the colonate being an inheritable status) to return to estates, despite the fact that they had become priests or ecclesiastical officials[15]. «It has come to our knowledge», Justinian declared, «that certain people in the African province are paying no attention to our commands which we made on the reclamation of peasants (*pro repetitione rusticorum*), but are continuing to bring unjustified suits for the recovery of *coloni*, peasants (*rustici*) or of their children who are shown to have left their estates before the arrival of our victorious army; in fact they even continue to harass those in ecclesiastical offices, under the law on the colonate. We know that we have promulgated sacred letters on this subject, in which we delimited from which period the reclamation of peasants, male or female, should be made; we therefore command your magnificence by all means to strike out these unjustified suits for reclamation in the African regions. We permit no-one to claim that men, women, or children are in the status of *coloni* under him, except from the time when as we said, our victorious army, with

[10] de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle*, 444.
[11] See, for example, Merrills and Miles, *The Vandals*.
[12] Tedesco, «The Missing Factor».
[13] *J.Nov. Appendix* 6 in Schöll and Kroll (eds.) *Corpus Iuris Civilis vol. III – Novellae*, 799; Miller and Sarris (eds.) *The Novels*, 1115.
[14] *J. Nov. Appendix* 9 in Schöll and Kroll, *Novellae*, 803; Miller and Sarris, *The Novels*, 1134-5.
[15] *Ibidem.* On the colonate, see Sirks, *The Colonate*.

God's help reclaimed the African province for our empire»[16]. The determination of such landowners to summon back their *coloni* should serve to remind us that the subjugation of such tied aristocratic workers to seigneurial power and control was not a purely metaphorical one (as has sometimes been argued in more optimistic accounts of late Roman social relations): rather, masters sought to assert such rights because the subjugation was real, otherwise their efforts make no sense[17].

1 The continuity of agrarian structures

In a recent doctoral thesis, the Australian historian Jason Blockley has argued that the institution of the colonate, whereby peasants or agricultural workers were tied to estates, was much less fully fledged and developed in late Roman and Vandal Africa than it would be in the Eastern Roman Empire, where it reached its legally most developed form under Justinian, and where, since the reign of Anastasius, it had been deliberately framed so as to enable landowners to build up resident pools of wage labour on their estates[18]. Now, one should be careful not to underestimate the intensity of control that African landowners had long aspired to over their *coloni*. In the early fifth century, for example, St Augustine had sought legal advice to see if it was possible for a landowner to simply turn *coloni* or the children of *coloni* resident on his estates into slaves (*liceat possessori servos facere colonos vel filios colonorum suorum*)[19]. The colonate in the eastern Empire, as Boudewijn Sirks has shown, however, did indeed follow a particular path of evolution and development in response to eastern conditions[20]. It is especially interesting, therefore, that Justinian goes on to relate in the same law of 558 referred to above how lawyers and judges in Africa had been setting aside the emperor's specific instructions with respect to the treatment of *coloni* in that province, and were instead giving precedence to general legislation on the subject that had been issued in Constantinople. That is to say, that they were trying to transpose and transplant into Africa the rather more draconian and coercive east Roman legislation on the colonate so as to tighten or extend the control of landowners over labour. A fine of five pounds of gold (or 360 *solidi*) was to be imposed on those who contravened the emperor's commands. It is interesting that Justinian's legislation on Africa uses the term *colonus* and *rusticus* interchangeably, probably indicating that the colonate was a relatively widespread feature of the region's agrarian economy[21].

During the course of Justinian's reconquest of Africa, both the Vandals and the Romans had tried to keep rural communities on their side: Belisarius ordered his troops to buy supplies from farmers and peasants rather than requisitioning them, so as not to alienate the rural population. At the same time, the Vandal king Gelimer had put a price

16 *J. Nov. Appendix* 9.
17 See, for example, Rio, «Freedom and Unfreedom».
18 Blockley, «The Colonate in Africa».
19 Augustine, Letter 24*, in Divcak (ed.), *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum Vol. LXXXVII - Sancti Aureli Augustini Opera – Epistolae ex Duobus Codicibus Nuper in Lucem Proloatae*, 126-7.
20 Sirks, *The Colonate*, 240-8 and 30-146.
21 *J. Nov. Appendix* 9.

on the head of every Roman soldier, so as to encourage African peasants to ambush them. In Italy too, rural communities got caught up in the Justinianic reconquest, with the Gothic King Totila promising automatic freedom to Italian slaves and *coloni* who joined his armies and agreed to fight against those of New Rome[22]. Here too the restoration of direct Roman rule would see a re-enforcement of legislation seeking to tie agricultural workers to estates: the so-called «Pragmatic Sanction» of 554 whereby Justinian sought to restore order to the Italian peninsula emphasised that «slaves or *coloni* who are currently being held by someone else» were to be «returned to their owners along with any off-spring born in the meantime[23].» The terminology we find used here of *servi vel coloni* is interesting and seemingly reflects an earlier breaking down in the legal distinction between tied and slave labour which we find reflected in Italy in the so-called *Edictum Theoderici*, which also speaks of «*servi aut coloni* or *servi aut originarii*», as if, as Jairus Banaji has put it, «these two groups were simply interchangeable»[24].

There are indications that in those areas of early medieval Italy where Byzantine rule in the sixth and seventh centuries was at its tightest, the distinction between free and slave labour would come to be re-asserted and the colonate revived: the Lombard *Laws of Grimoald* promulgated in 668, for example, appear to suggest that estate workers in recently conquered territory were claiming a right to acquire their liberty after thirty years' continuous service to a given landowner, which had been conceded to *coloni adscripticii* under Justinianic law[25]. But the blurring of the distinction between *colonus* and slave was probably indicative of a very high degree of aristocratic influence and power on the ground during the era of Ostrogothic domination. As we have seen with respect to St Augustine, it was a distinction that Roman landowners had long found irksome and had wanted rid of. Only the conservatism of the imperial chancery would appear to have stood in their way. It is again indicative of the very high degree of symbiosis and co-operation between Roman and non-Roman elites in post-Roman conditions that in Ostrogothic Italy, Visigothic Spain, and Merovingian Gaul, landowners would appear to have got what they wanted, turning the descendants of *coloni* and agricultural slaves into what Jairus Banaji has described as an «undifferentiated mass of servile labour[26]». In later Visigothic legislation, for example, the category of *colonus* simply disappears: all were henceforth *servi*. Likewise, a Merovingian will refers to *mancipia tam servos quam et ingenuos* —«be they slave or free». In the Burgundian legislation, both *coloni* and slaves were again subsumed under the general designation of *mancipia*[27]. In short, as I have long argued, in the absence of the public institutions of the Roman state, the distinction between tied agricultural labourer and slave would appear to have been progressively broken down, leaving only the power of the master securely in place (rather than terms

[22] See Sarris, «Landownership and Rural Society».

[23] *J. Nov. Appendix* 7 —see Schöll and Kroll, *Novellae*, 803-13; Miller and Sarris, *The Novels*, 1116-30 (c.16).

[24] Banaji, «Aristocracies», 74.

[25] On the underlying Justinianic legislation, see Sirks, «The Colonate». For the Lombard legislation, see «The Laws of Grimoald», 1, in Fischer Drew, *The Lombard Laws*, 132.

[26] Banaji, «Aristocracies», 74.

[27] *Ibidem*, 66-9 for references.

for dependence simply being used to mask or euphemise a breakdown in such control). There is little sign here of greater peasant autonomy. We do, however, have continued evidence for peasant mobility and flight as a strategy and tactic: the escape of *coloni* from papal estates in Sicily is attested, for example, at the end of the sixth century in the letters of Pope Gregory the Great, who complains of such fugitive peasants entering into share-cropping or wage labour agreements with other landowners «as if they can make their own decisions and are free» (*quasi sui arbitrii sunt ac liberi*)[28]. The clear implications of Gregory's phrasing is that in normal conditions such peasants were neither free nor able to make their own economic decisions and choices.

The relative continuity of agrarian structures in what we might term the «Byzantine West» in Africa and Italy that is discernible from the legal and literary sources would also have been greatly aided by the fact that a major goal of Justinian's regime in both regions was an expansion of lands owned and controlled by the imperial household, and hence at Justinian's own disposal. In Africa, for example, Procopius expressly describes the seizure not just of the Vandal royal treasury, but also the appropriation by the imperial household of estates that had previously belonged to the Vandal Crown[29]. Likewise, in a remarkable law dating from 537, Justinian declared the island of Sicily to be the personal fund (*peculium*) of the emperor himself, although Justinian did go out of his way to reassure the papal authorities that the Church's extensive lands in Sicily would be safe[30].

But why did landowners not just in Africa and Italy, but also in Spain and Francia, want to maintain access to or control such servile labour? A key dimension which Jairus Banaji has emphasised is that across these territories we also see the survival of Roman traditions of direct management of estates, rather than a world made up of peasant-controlled plots in which the legal dependence of such *servi* or *mancipia* was purely formal. As Banaji has argued, even in Francia we see such agricultural workers being bequeathed and transferred between owners or with land after a manner that can scarcely be construed as indicating that the peasants themselves controlled it[31]. In other words, we are not here dealing with a «feudal mode of production» as commonly understood[32].

2 The effect of the Plague of Justinian on agrarian relations

Around the western Mediterranean, both Byzantine and non-Byzantine, and deep into the region's geographical hinterlands beyond, I would suggest, there is no particular evidence to discern any structural shift towards greater peasant autonomy from the fifth into the sixth and seventh centuries, save for in those regions that were most militarily disrupted. In so far as peasantries across western Europe and the Mediterranean world as a whole may have been relatively freer or less exploited in the sixth and seventh centuries

[28] Gregory, *Epistolae* 9, 129.
[29] Procopius, *Anecdota*, 18, 10-12.
[30] *J.Nov.* 75 – Schöll and Kroll, *Novellae*, 378; and Miller and Sarris, *The Novels*, 533-4.
[31] Banaji, «Aristocrats», 75-6.
[32] See discussion in Wickham, «How Did the Feudal Economy Work?».

than in the fifth, it is likely to have been by virtue of strategies of mobility and avoidance (as well as resistance) adopted by such peasants themselves, or crucially, as a result of important shifts in the overarching demographic context which Wickham largely overlooked in *FEMA*. As a wide range of literary sources attest, the sixth century witnessed the arrival of bubonic plague —often referred to in the older secondary literature as the Plague of Justinian, and now more commonly as «The First Pandemic». The advent of this disease is attested in the literary sources not just for the Byzantine world, but also for Africa, Italy, and Francia[33].

By virtue of the concerted efforts of archaeologists and geneticists, moreover, irrefutable evidence for the bubonic plague has now been identified through the extraction of ancient DNA from early medieval skeletons discovered in rural contexts in Bavaria, France, Spain, and eastern England, such that we can now assert with some confidence that the pandemic is likely to have had a major impact on rural as well as urban populations (in so far as they existed) in the sixth and seventh centuries across the early medieval West[34]. Labour shortages and institutional disruption resultant from the plague may well have played a crucial role in expanding the opportunities for peasant autonomy in the sixth and seventh centuries by allowing peasants to negotiate better terms and conditions for themselves (a phenomenon that is certainly encountered in the eastern evidence)[35]. But these self-same labour shortages resultant from the plague are also likely to have informed the efforts made by landowners to attempt to exercise a much tighter degree of control over peasants, by asserting perhaps hitherto dormant legal rights, such as we appear to see recorded in the contemporary Justinianic legislation pertaining to Africa. The efforts of African landowners to summon back *coloni*, and to claim the labour of their offspring, several decades after their initial flight, as recorded by Justinian's laws of the 550s, for example, may be explicable against this specific demographic and epidemiological background.

The arrival of the bubonic plague in the sixth century, I would suggest, is likely to have had a far more important impact on the social and economic balance of power in the early medieval countryside than Wickham's model allows for. I also think we need to give more consideration to the likely consequences of the subsequent *fading away* of the pandemic, which the literary sources indicate would appear to have happened around the middle of the eighth century. In England, this phenomenon would coincide with a major reconfiguration of the landscape, whereby new blocks of land were carved out and delineated, signifying the emergence of directly exploited core areas of estates, in a world where such estates had hitherto been largely absent. This transformation of the landscape that we see, for example, in the English kingdom of Mercia, seems to mirror and parallel the process of manorialisation that is also discernible in parts of the Frankish world at this time[36]. In these regions, rising population levels in the countryside are likely to have facilitated an incipient re-assertion of elite control as labour shortages diminished.

[33] Sarris, «New Approaches to the Plague of Justinian».
[34] *Ibidem.*
[35] *Ibidem*, 331, discussing *J.Nov.* 122.
[36] Ousthuizen, «The Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Mercia»; Theuws, «Centre and Periphery in Northern Austrasia».

One could also question whether Wickham's «peasant mode» does not perhaps understate the potential of peasant communities and societies to generate and sustain economic complexity and networks of exchange. What of those peasants of «middling status», as Wendy Davies has called them in her studies of the Italian and Spanish charter evidence, those with several parcels of land in different but not widely scattered locations, who can be seen to have engaged in direct labour themselves whilst also employing the labour of others? Studies of the later Middle Ages have emphasised the ability of wealthier peasants to act as effective agents of change in the transition to agrarian capitalism, but their activities and possible economic contribution have been relatively neglected in the historiography of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages[37]. As the late Mark Whittow pointed out, for example, in a characteristically thought-provoking paper, peasant farmers are known to have played a crucial role in the food supply of late medieval England. Are we perhaps over-looking their role in supplying cities in Late Antiquity?[38] One is reminded of the episode in the sixth-century Byzantine *Life* of Nicholas of Sion, in which peasants from the surrounding countryside refused to bring food supplies into the city of Myra for fear of contracting the bubonic plague. As the hagiographer tells us, «The farmers brought down into the city neither grain, nor flour, nor wine, nor wood, nor anything else needed for sustenance»[39].

Moreover, has the idea of the non-acquisitive, risk averse peasant ever been anything other than a myth? Recent studies of the charter evidence for north-western Spain in the tenth century have revealed a world of acquisitive peasant entrepreneurs who bought their way to local prominence, taking on the risks of over-expansion to build up extensive property portfolios, capable of generating significant surpluses which were then re-invested through credit arrangements and in the further acquisition of land and tools. Such work has emphasised the ability of these peasants to build up lively networks of exchange despite the effective absence of coinage, «their urge to acquire driven on by an intense concern for prestige in a world in which the acquisition of land conferred status»[40]. In pondering the vast contribution of Chris Wickham's *FEMA*, we would perhaps do well to give more thought to the potential economic creativity and agency of peasants, and not just of aristocrats and the state (on which my own work has also tended to concentrate).

Similar themes also emerge with respect to the core territories of the Byzantine Empire in Anatolia and Asia Minor to the East. Here the military dislocation of the seventh century (caused by Persian and Arab warfare) led to significant urban decline and also resulted in the widespread disruption of networks of aristocratic estates that had become an important feature of the late antique countryside[41]. Although the power of the tributary state here remained greater than anywhere to the west, it has long been argued that the result was a significant rise in the prominence of communities primarily made up

37 See discussion in Portass, «Peasants».
38 Whittow, «How Much Trade?».
39 Sevcenko and Sevcenko (eds.). *The Life of Nicholas of Sion*, 83 (c.52).
40 Portass, «Peasants».
41 Sarris, «Large Estates».

of free peasant producers, a significant number of whom would come to owe military service to the state, and whose interests and concerns were thus of major concern to the imperial authorities in Constantinople[42]. There is evidence, for example, that around this time a significant restructuring of imperial fiscal arrangements took place, with peasant communities and villagers effectively being granted a right to fiscal «self-collection» (a privilege that had hitherto primarily been the reserve of the great landowner), with village elders and headmen taking over the process and thereby side-lining the long-hated figure of the tax-collector[43]. Elsewhere in the East, by contrast, rural society came to be dominated by a new class of military warlord, immortalised in Byzantine literature by the figure of *Digenis Akritas*, who led military resistance to the frequent Arab raids[44].

There is every sign, however, that the economic instincts of the Byzantine peasantry of this period had much in common with those of their highly acquisitive and often commercially minded Spanish analogues. A crucial legal text concerned with the resolution of disputes within village communities dating from around this time, for example, makes it clear that the typical Byzantine village of the eighth century was characterised by a high degree of internal social and economic differentiation, and monetary conditions were not as inimical to commercialised exchange as has sometimes been supposed[45]. For although the quality and volume of coinage issued by the Byzantine state in the seventh and eighth centuries clearly went into sharp decline, it has recently been argued that the *per capita* availability of coinage may actually have increased[46]. Moreover, it is clear that in the least war-torn parts of the empire (in Bithynia, around the Sea of Marmara, and along the fertile coastline of western Asia Minor), extensive networks of highly commercialised great estates bequeathed from late antiquity continued to prosper and survive through to the eighth century and beyond[47]. The Byzantine peasant was thus an active agent in the military, economic, and (to some extent) political life of the east Roman state, but alongside other figures both great and small. For in early medieval Byzantium, as I have emphasised elsewhere, each of Chris Wickham's three modes of production (the «tributary», the «feudal», and the «peasant») were discernible simultaneously, often in very close geographical proximity to one another[48]. The predominance of any particular mode would thus have been regionally highly variable to both East and West.

[42] See Howard-Johnston, «Social Change in Early Medieval Byzantium»; Howard-Johnston «Authority and Control»; Whittow, «Early Medieval Byzantium».

[43] Prigent, «The Mobilisation of Fiscal Resources».

[44] Sarris, «Large Estates», 436.

[45] Howard-Johnston, «Social Change»; for the legal text in question («The Farmers Law») see Humphreys, *The Laws*, 129-39.

[46] Prigent «The Mobilisation of Fiscal Resources».

[47] Sarris, «Large Estates», 435.

[48] *Ibidem*, 435-7.

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