

Byzantine Rhodes
from the Justinian Era to the Hospitallers (ca. 500-1309s)

Introduction: Rhodes and the Byzantine Mediterranean

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For the Byzantines, or more accurately for the eastern *Romaioi*,¹ islands have always been characterized as peripheral and marginal lands.² Indeed, in the literary and documentary sources spanning the whole Byzantine millennium, large or small islands and archipelagoes constantly emerge as distant outposts, ideal places for reclusive monks³ or -more often than not- for political and religious outcasts the Byzantine court wants to exile from the capital.⁴ In this respect, one should notice that “It is not only the distance from the continent that determines the choice of the island as a place of imprisonment. Here, the possibility of political control by the central power plays a fundamental role (surveillance and immediate availability of the prisoner).”⁵ This allows us to stress the fundamental contrast between islands and continents, highlighting how islands, despite their proximity to the mainland, can become inaccessible due to unpredictable travel conditions, thereby fostering a sense of mental distance.⁶ As it will be seen, such a contrast will resurface in the case of a small but strategic island like Rhodes, located within sight of the Anatolian south-western coastline. Moreover, it prompts a further preliminary methodological remark. It has to do with the scale or better the size of the Mediterranean insular spaces defined by the sheer girth of the insular coastline.⁷ In other (geo-morphological) words, modern scholars have separated the Braudelian micro-continents like Sicily, Crete, and Cyprus from the pulverized archipelagic Aegean world of which Rhodes was an integral part.⁸ But was this also the case for the Byzantines? Or rather were islands basically the same to any Byzantine chronicler, hagiographer, or writer as marginal to the existential (for the court and the elites) political and military games played at the center of the empire (Constantinople)?

1 For the Byzantines as eastern Romans (*romaioi*) see A. Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire. A History of Byzantium*. Oxford: OUP, 2024, 11-33.
2 S. Cosentino, “Mentality, Technology and Commerce: Shipping Amongst Mediterranean Islands in Late Antiquity and Beyond.” In *The Insular System of Byzantine Mediterranean. Archaeology and History*, Enrico Zanini, Philippe Pergola, and Demetrios Michaelidis (eds.). Oxford: BAR, 2013, 64-78, at 65-8.
3 G. Varinoğlu, “‘Imagine there is no (is)land’: Conceptualizing Byzantine Islands in Southern Asia Minor.” In *Identity and the other in Byzantium. Papers from the Fifth International Sevgi Göniül Byzantine Studies Symposium*, Koray Durak and Ivana Jevtić (eds.). Istanbul: Anamed, 2019, 93–113, at 101.
4 H. Evert-Kapessowa, “L’Archipel de Marmara comme Lieu d’Exil.” *Byzantinische Forschungen*, V (1977): 27–34; R. Estangüi Gómez, “La reclusion politique à Byzance. L’exil dans l’île de Lemnos (mi-XIV- mi-XV siècles).” *Hypothèses* 2008/1 (11): 173–182. See also E. Malamut, *Les îles de l’Empire byzantin. VIIIe–XIIe siècles*, Vol I. Paris: Boccard, 1988, 175-78, and F. Bulgarella, “Bisanzio e le Isole.” In *Forme e Caratteri della Presenza Bizantina nel Mediterraneo Orientale: La Sardegna (secoli VI-XI)* Paolo Corrias (ed.). Cagliari: Condaghes, 2012, 33-41.
5 Estangüi Gómez, “La reclusion politique,” 174.
6 Malamut, *Les îles*, I, 31-33.
7 C. Constantakopoulou, *The Dance of Islands. Insularity, Networks, the Athenian Empire, and the Aegean World*. Oxford: OUP, 2007, 9.
8 F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. 2nd edition. Los Angeles: UCP, 1996, 150; Malamut, *Les îles*, 51-81

As will be seen, a possible answer to those questions forces us to examine the main ontological characteristics of an island as caught in the opposition between insularity and connectivity. As Malamut concludes: “we need to oppose the world of the islands, which form active network of communications and exchange, to the world of the island, which can be a terre fermée, a world closed to its surroundings.”⁹ Islands are defined by the encounter of two opposites: land and sea; nevertheless as the sea could be regarded as a barrier dramatically separating them from the mainland, one should consider its role as a highway connecting insular spaces with the lands around them.¹⁰ Indeed, Mediterranean islands exist along a continuum of connectivity, ranging from relative isolation from dominant political and economic systems to near-total integration within them.¹¹ In this respect, one should also stress how insularity has often a negative meaning which stems from the geographical conditions and implies socially constructed boundaries such as ghettos, enclaves or other borders between countries.¹² On the contrary, connectivity could be regarded as the main force behind social change, a “corrupting” power shaping local insular (or better maritime) identities and communities.¹³ This dichotomy seems particularly relevant in the Aegean Sea, as it is dotted by innumerable islands and archipelagoes (in particular on its northern half) which however, constantly remained within sight of one another or the nearby coast.¹⁴

With this in mind, one should consider Rhodes as the ideal place to examine not only the importance of connectivity (as opposed to isolation) in molding the political, economic, and socio-cultural trajectories of a small island vis-à-vis those of the mainland. As partially mentioned already, Rhodes is located a few miles to the south of the Dorian peninsula (tod. Datça in Turkey) jutting out of Caria. It is strategically poised to control the access to the Aegean sea from south-east and was regarded as a crucial outpost for reaching Crete by skirting the western Anatolian coast.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the history of Rhodes has been deeply intertwined with that of its *peraia*.¹⁶ The Greek term *peraia* refers to mainland territories controlled by islands across the sea;¹⁷ in the case of

Byzantine Rhodes, Caria remained administratively and economically bound to it from the creation of the so-called *Quaestura Exercitus* by the emperor Justinian I (527-565) through the establishment of the naval Carabisianoï (in the seventh century) and Kyberraiotai (in the eighth century) themes, and until the mid-twelfth century.¹⁸ As I will return to the political history of the island and these institutions in a few moments, I would also like to stress that, Rhodes was also geographically integrated in the Dodecanese archipelago which include several smaller islands encompassing the strait separating Caria and southern Anatolia from Crete.¹⁹ Focusing on the archipelagic spatial relations (the so-called archipelagic turn) helps us to challenge some of the conceptual limitations and biases ensconced in `conceptions of insular spaces as simply resulting from the encounter of land and sea. This allows us to explore a topological frame which involve the relation between and among islands.²⁰ Indeed, if “islands embody a “contradictory geography, their spatialities are characterized typically by three relatively durable topological and binary relations: land and water, island and continent/mainland, and island and island.”²¹

With this tripartite topology in mind, it is possible to see Rhodes, on a par with other “large” archipelagic Aegean islands like Naxos, Paros or Samos,²² through the analytical lens of a triple liminality which directly relate to, reverberate onto and define its political, military, economic and socio-cultural historical trajectories. Such trajectories will be examined through the analysis of both literary and documentary sources and (more importantly) archaeology and material culture. We should admit that both these types of sources are more numerous for the early part of the period covered in this contribution (early Byzantine or Late Antiquity: i.e. roughly between the sixth and the late seventh century) although recently better and better published archaeology has helped to shed new light on the so-called Byzantine Dark Ages.²³ Nevertheless a recent ad refined analysis of material culture (mainly ceramics and coins) has allowed to shed new and resilient light on the eighth and ninth century, dispelling the traditional historiographical narrative of a Dark Age followed by a re-birth of the socio-economic and political life in the Aegean in the tenth and eleventh century.²⁴

9 Malamut, *Les îles*, II, 598.

10 M. Fitzpatrick, T. C. Rick, and J. M. Erlandson, “Recent Progress, Trends, and Developments in Island and Coastal Archaeology,” *The Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology*, 10/ (2015): 3-27 at 9.

11 J. M. Gordon and A. Kouremenos, “Introduction. Mediterranean Archaeology of Insularity in the Age of Globalization.” In *Mediterranean Archaeology of Insularity in the Age of Globalization*, A. Kouremenos and J. M. Gordon (eds.). Oxford: Oxbow, 2020, 1-21, at 3.

12 G. Baldacchino and W. Veenendaal, “Society and Community,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Island Studies*, G. Baldacchino (ed.). New York-London, 2022), 338-53, at 338-9.

13 P. Horden and Nicholas Purcell. *The Corrupting Sea. A Study in Mediterranean History*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000, 14-15; 74-77; M. Harpster, *Reconstructing a Maritime Past*. London-New York: Routledge, 2023.

14 E. Malamut, “Les Îles de la Mer Égée entre l’Antiquité et Byzance.” *Revue des Études Anciennes*, 103 (2001): 25-48; K. Roussos, “Tracing the Cycladic Settled Landscape in Late Antiquity and the Early Byzantine Period (Fourth to Ninth Century AD): The Islands of Paros and Naxos.” In *Archaeology of a World of Changes. Late Roman and Early Byzantine Architecture, Sculpture and Landscapes*, Dominique Moreau et al. (eds.). Oxford: BAR, 2020, 117-36.

15 Horden and Purcell. *The Corrupting Sea*, 138. For the prevailing winds and currents (and the best conditions to navigate around and through Rhodes) see J. Pryor and E. Jeffreys, *The Age of the Δρομων. The Byzantine Navy ca. 500-1204*. Leiden: Brill, 2006, 336.

16 G. Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese and the Eastern Aegean Islands in Late Antiquity*. Oxford: OUP, 2016, 3; Horden and Purcell. *The Corrupting Sea*, 133-136.

17 L. Sicking, “The dichotomy of insularity: islands between isolation and connectivity in medieval and early modern Europe, and beyond.” *The International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 26/3 (2014): 494–511, at 507.

18 Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 9-12.

19 For a geographical description of the Aegean archipelagoes (the Cyclades, the Sporades and Dodecanese) and the terminology used by the Byzantine sources see Malamut, “Les îles de la mer Égée,” 42-3 and (for the northern half of the Aegean) J. Koder, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini 10 Aigaion Pelagos (Die nördliche Ägäis)*. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1998.

20 G. Baldacchino, “Preface.” In *The Routledge International Handbook of Island Studies*, Geodfrey Baldacchino (ed.). New York-London: Routledge, 2022, xix-xxv, at xxix.

21 E. Stratford, G. Baldacchino, E. McMahon, C. Farbotko, and A. Hardwood, “Envisioning the Archipelago.” *Island Studies Journal*, 6/2 (2011): 113-130, at 124.

22 A.Vionis, “Island Responses in the Byzantine Aegean: Naxos under the lens of current archaeological research,” in *Naxos and the Byzantine Aegean: Insular Responses to Regional Change*, Jim Crow and David Hill (eds.). Athens: Norwegian Institute, 2018, 61-82.

23 M. Decker, *The Byzantine Dark Ages*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016; N. Poulou, “Digging in the Dark: The islands of the Aegean and Crete from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages (late 6th-9th c. CE).” In *Archaeology of the Mediterranean during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Angelo Castrorao Barba, Davide Tanasi, and Roberto Micicché (eds). Gainesville: UFP, 2023, 13–52; M. Cassis, *Medieval Archaeology in the Eastern Roman World*. Leeds: ARC, 2024.

24 For the traditional narrative see in particular Malamut, *Les Îles*, 61-104; for a re-evaluation of the Dark Ages in Greece and the Aegean see Cassis, *Medieval Archaeology*, 27-64; for the tenth to eleventh century economic trajectories of the Aegean see C. Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat. Reinterpreting the Mediterranean Economy, 950-1180*. Oxford, OUP, 2023, 278-89.

In concluding this preliminary section I will now move to the different chronological period of the history of Byzantine Rhodes. As partially mentioned already, I will try to show how the changing political and administrative (as well as socio-cultural and military) role Rhodes played within the empire clearly stemmed from and were prompted by two interrelated geographical, spatial, and economic factors: its strategic position across the trans-Mediterranean shipping routes and its preeminent economic role in the interaction with its *peraia*. In this regard, the next sections will mainly use the material evidence as a contingent frame for reconstructing the fate of the island as mainly contingent upon the ability of Byzantine insular spaces at large to navigate throughout the difficulties characterizing the transition from a unified Roman and Late Antique exchange system to a more regionalized and localized Medieval Mediterranean.²⁵

Rhodes and the Late Antique Mediterranean exchange system (ca. 500- ca. 700)

As partially mentioned already, Rhodes was part and parcel of the imperial Mediterranean political and economic network and integrated in the shipping routes linking the central and eastern halves of the Great Sea as hinging on Constantinople. In fact, in the Long Late Antiquity (i.e. roughly between the reign of Justinian I and the arrival of the Arabs), its pivotal role mainly owed to the extraordinarily unified political, military, and economic outlook of the Mediterranean underpinned by the all-encompassing fiscal system as expressed by the *annona civica* and *militaris*. The former subsidized the formidable request of grain and wine to be doled out in Constantinople since its (re)-foundation by Constantine in 330s, the latter supplying the Roman army as quartered along the Danubian limes.²⁶ “The fiscal system was not only the main source of income for public expenses, but also primarily fuel for commercial exchange. It was the *annona* circuit that allowed for the formation of an integrated exchange system among different regions of the empire. The *annona* had organized a sophisticated and narrowly integrated network that ultimately linke ‘tax producing regions’ and ‘tax consuming regions’”.²⁷ Such network had its political and administrative sublimation in the creation of the *Quaestura Exercitus* in 536 which allocated the tax revenues of Cyprus, Cyclades, Caria to provision the troops stationed in the Balkan regions of Scythia and Moesia.²⁸

Although the new institution strengthened the economic contacts between Rhodes and its *peraia*, the role the island played in long-distance exchange networks and, in particular, the *annona* routes did not only predicate upon the importance of its agricultural resources and those of Caria, although a possible peak of rural expansion can be suggested in the mid-sixth century;²⁹ rather, they

also depended on its maritime capacity and the strategic location of its harbours (in particular those of the city of Rhodes on the northern tip of the island)³⁰ along the shipping routes linking Alexandria (and the Palestinian coast) with Constantinople.³¹ This should come as no surprise for already between the first and fifth century nautical text included Rhodes in the most important and better documented eastern Mediterranean open-sea routes.³² The pivotal role Rhodes played across trans-Mediterranean shipping routes is also well exemplified by the travel logs of pilgrims like Paola who traveled across the Aegean from Modone via the Cyclades touching upon Rhodes on her way to the Holy Land in the late fourth century.³³ In the same breath as Paola we should remember bishops like Porphyrius of Gaza whose sea journey from Caesarea to Constantinople had him stopping in Rhodes at the beginning of the fifth century. “In the remote parts thereof, [he met] a man named Procopius, who is now numbered with the angels; for he fell asleep five years ago, having lived a blameless life in fasting and watching and utter poverty. He had also the gift of prophecy and the power of casting out devils;”³⁴ Similarly Saint Nicholas of Sion sailed back from the Holy Land to Constantinople via Rhodes in the mid sixth century as pilgrim flasks point to the presence of pilgrims traveling to and from Ephesos and Egypt.³⁵ Moreover, as Deligiannakis cogently shown, the Aegean-Egyptian link is substantiated by literary sources like “the letter sent by the theologian and orator Procopios of Gaza to his brother Zacharia, provincial governor of Rhodes: revealing timber trade (strong commercial links) between Rhodes and Gaza.”³⁶

Ceramics bolster the picture drawn via literary sources as it also further shows that the eastern Mediterranean connections were predominant in circulation of imported ceramics (with the north African ones playing a rather minimal role as it will be seen in a few moments).³⁷ Sixth-century brick production in Rhodes is documented (by their stamps) as supplying the fabric of Justinian Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.³⁸ It is likely that the same workshops also produced the Rhodian lamps of rather crude quality documented for the period fourth to mid-sixth century as in the Justinianic

25 D. Valérien, “The Medieval Mediterranean.” In *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita (eds). London: Wiley and Sons, 2014, 77-91

26 J. Durliat, “L’approvisionnement de Constantinople. In *Constantinople and its Hinterland. Papers from the Twenty-seventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Oxford, April 1993*. Cyril Mango and Gilbert Dagron (eds.). New York-London: Routledge, 1995, 19-33; E. Rizos, “Remarks on the logistics and infrastructure of the *annona militaris* in eastern Mediterranean and Aegean areas.” *Antiquité Tardive*, 23 (2015): 287-302.

27 P. Tedesco, “Rome’s Fall and the Dawn of the Middle Ages.” In *Writings on the Tributary State and Commercial Capitalism*, Paolo Tedesco (ed.). Napoli: ESI, 2024, 19-37, at 33. On the *annona* circuit see Wickham, *Framing*, 76-91.

28 P. Sarris, *Justinian. Emperor, Soldier, Saint*. London: BB, 2023, 258; Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 8.

29 Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 89-91.

30 A.Katsioti, “ Rhodes-Constantinople, 6th Century to 1523 AD: A Two-Way Traffic.” In *Proceedings of the Symposium on City Ports from Aegean to the Black Sea. Medieval-Modern Networks 22nd-29th August 2015* Flora Karagianni and Ufuk Kocabaş (eds). Istanbul: Koç, 2015, 179-190 at 182-4.

31 S. Cosentino, “Pillars of Empire: The Economic Role of the Large Islands of the Mediterranean from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages.” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 76 (2022): 245-80; K. Manoussou-Ntella, “Byzantine Rhodes. The Evolution of a Fortified Harbour-city in the Eastern Mediterranean (4th to 12th c.).” In *Ideas of Byzantium Harbours and Anchorages of a Mediterranean Empire*, Johannes Preiser-Kapeller, Taxiarchis G. Kolias, and Falko Daim (eds). Mainz: VRGZ, 2021, 167-79, at 171.

32 Cosentino, “Mentality,” 68-9.

33 P. Maraval, *Récits des premiers pèlerins chrétiens au Proche-Orient (IVe-VIIe siècle)*. Paris: CERF, 1998, 143-64.

34 *Mark the Deacon: Life of Porphyry, Bishop of Gaza*, G.F. Hill (ed.). Oxford: Clarendon, 1913, 34.

35 *Vita S. Nicolai Sionitae* (BHG 1347), 62.1–7. A. Katsioti and N. Mastrochristos, “Aspects of Pilgrimage in the Eastern Mediterranean During the Early Byzantine Period. Archaeological Evidence from Rhodes.” In *Für Seelenheil und Lebensglück Das byzantinische Pilgerwesen und seine Wurzeln*, Despoina Ariantzi and Ina Eichner (eds.). Mainz: VRGZ, 2018, 83-96.

36 Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 90.

37 id., 91-3.

38 Katsioti, “Rhodes-Constantinople,” 181.

era first Asia Minor and later Samian productions colonized the Rhodian markets.³⁹ In a similar vein, Phocaean Red Slip the most prevalent type of tableware imported in Rhodes (as produced along the western Aegean coast⁴⁰), whereas African Red Slip wares followed the broader Aegean trend of imported fine tableware, peaking in the fourth to early fifth century before declining, only to recover with long-distance fiscal shipments to Constantinople after Africa's reconquest.⁴¹ In tune with the aforementioned evidence, the fact that Rhodes seems to have primarily imported Late Roman 1 type (from now on LRA1) wine amphorae from Cilicia and Northern Syria.⁴² Indeed, Large shipments of wine were transported from eastern Mediterranean to the north, as evidenced by the three sixth-century shipwrecks in the eastern Aegean (off the coast of Knidos and Chios) as possibly associated with the annona transports.⁴³ Finally, one should also consider the unusually high percentage of coins minted in Alexandria (although the large majority of finds was minted in Constantinople) as pointing to the fact that Rhodes was primarily included eastern Mediterranean fiscal and commercial circuit which.⁴⁴

Parallel to the economic development of the island in the sixth century, one should also document the transformation of the urban fabric, landscape, and planning of the city of Rhodes (one of the two main urban centers together with Lindos on the southern half of the island). Located on the northmost tip of the island, the city boasted an Hippodamian urban grid with residential clusters arranged near the two harbors and the acropolis. At least eight churches were built (of which four have been systematically excavated) between the fifth and the late sixth century. These monumental structures sometimes encroach on orthogonal roads as the city was not fortified because the ancient walls were spoliated for construction materials.⁴⁵ The city was the seat of the Metropolitan see of the Cyclades archipelago as several of its archbishops are documented as paying an important role in religious disputes between the fifth and the sixth century as they signed the acts of the fifth (553) and sixth (680-1) ecumenical council.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, one of the most famous bishops of the island was Hesaias who -according to the ninth-century Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor, was first deposed and then castrated as accused of pederasty by emperor Justinian: "[In 528/9] he [Hesaias] and Alexander bishop of Diospolis in Thrace were castrated and paraded publicly while the crier shouted out, 'As bishops,

you are not to abuse your holy dress.'"⁴⁷ One should, however, mention that Heasias was not the only example of unorthodox behavior and frequentation as often common occurrence in small islands. Indeed, one can frequently document the fascination for solitary insular life on the part of early religious communities which founded hermitage and monasteries on other insular outposts like for instance Pseira off the coast of Crete, Marettimo and Pantelleria around Sicily, and Cabrera in Spain.⁴⁸ As mentioned already, a solitary monk was documented as living and praying in Rhodes in the early fifth century although he clearly remained in direct communication with the court in Constantinople.⁴⁹ In fact, one can also see isolation pairing with connectivity in allowing unorthodox frequentation on islands mainly owing to their centrality along shipping routes as documented by the preaching of a Miaphysite monk in Rhodes 541 while on his way to Asia Minor.⁵⁰

As already hinted at, isolation was nevertheless central in turning Rhodes into an ideal place of exile as shown by the relegation of the presbyter Sabbatios, leader of the heretic Novatians in 413, and above all by the tragic end of empress " (the second wife of emperor Heraclius (610-41)).⁵¹ Her fate as member of the ruling dynasty well showcases the dichotomic character of an insular space like Rhodes. Indeed, the island was central to the bid to the throne staged by Heraclius against emperor Phocas in 608-10: a contemporary chronicle (the *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati*) witnesses to the support the usurper received from local sailmakers on his way to Constantinople.⁵² Moreover, it soon turned into a strategic naval hub when Heraclius tried to countermand the Arab invasion of Egypt in the early 640s: an attempt which the late seventh-century Egyptian Chronicle of the Patriarch John of Nikiu describes as unsuccessful for it was marred by political rivalries in view of the impending succession to the dying emperor.⁵³ When Heraclius died in 641 and his complex family situation leading to a confrontation between two factions resulting in the enthronement of Constans II (641-668) -the son of Heraclius's first wife- as new emperor.⁵⁴ "He had Martina and her three sons, Heraclius, David, and Marinus, escorted forth with insolence, and he stripped them of the imperial crown, and he had their noses cut off, and he sent them in exile to Rhodes."⁵⁵ It is fascinating to see how the events heralding the dawn of Heraclius's reign and its rather catastrophic sunset (with the Arab conquest of Syria-Palestine and Egypt and the creation of the Caliphate in Damascus), embodied the two contradicting ontological poles characterizing Rhodes as well as any insular space: as connecting hub it was central to the triumphal naval expedition that took Heraclius

39 A. Katsioti, "Aspects of the economic and commercial activity of Rhodes during late antiquity: The case of lamps." In *Sailing the Aegean. Readings on the economy and trade routes*, Charikleia Papageorgiadou-Banis and Angeliki Giannikouri (eds.), Athens: Du Boccard, 2008, 189-208; A. Katsioti, "The dating of the "Samian type" lamps (6th-7th c. AD). The evidence of Rhodes, Greece." In *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Lamps from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. Acts of the 5th International Lychnological Congress («LVMEN!»*, Sibiu, 15th-19th of September, 2015), Laurent Charznovski (ed.), Dremil Lafage: EM, 2019, 125-38.

40 See <https://www.levantineceramics.org/wares/751-phocaean-red-slip-ware-lrc> with further bibliography (retrieved on 15 February 2025).

41 Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 92-3.

42 *ibid.*

43 Demesticha and Zavagno, ""Wherever waves can roll, and winds can blow."Late Antique Cyprus and the State provision systems in the eastern Mediterranean," forthcoming.

44 A.M. Kasdagli, "The Provenance of Coins found in Rhodes AD. 498-1522." In *Sailing the Aegean* (above n. 38), 238-55. M. Michaeilidou, "The City of Rhodes." In *Heaven and Earth Cities and countryside in Byzantine Greece Vol. 2* Jenny Albani and Eugenia Chalkia (eds.). Athens: Benaki, 2013, 241-52 (at 243).

45 Manoussou-Ntella, "Byzantine Rhodes," 169-70.

46 Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 15-16; E. Kollias, *The Medieval City of Rhodes and the Palace of the Grand Master*. Athens: Ministry of Culture, 2005, 43.

47 *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (eds.). Oxford: OUP, 1997, 62. See also *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys and Roger Scott (eds.). Melbourne : AABS, 1986, 253.

48 On islands as ideal place for monastic life see P. Rainbird, *The Archaeology of Islands*. Cambridge: CUP, 2000, 15 and Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 31-33.

49 See above, note 35.

50 Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 15.

51 *ibid.*

52 "Jacob himself was from the East by birth, as he confided to me. He did many bad things to Christians. And in the city of Rhodes, as a Green with the sail-stitchers, he did bad things to those Blues fleeing from the East. And he betrayed them to the sail-stitchers as people of Bonosos and they were cudged." (V. Déroche, "Doctrina Jacobi." *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991): 71-219, at 216-7). On the *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati* see J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis. Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century*. Oxford: OUP, 2010, 155.

53 *The Chronicle of John Coptic Bishop of Nikiu. Being a History of Egypt before and during the Arab Conquest*, Roger H. Charles (ed.). Amsterdam: Philo, 1918, 185-192.

54 Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire*, 386-7.

55 *The Chronicle of John Coptic Bishop of Nikiu*, 192.

from Africa to Constantinople via Cyprus and the Aegean archipelago; as isolated outpost, it was regarded as the safest place were to banish (and punish) two members of the imperial dynasty.

It is worth noticing that the exile of Martina also symbolically marked a turning point in the history of both large Byzantine Mediterranean islands as well as the Aegean Sea as Rhodes was engulfed in the naval confrontation between the Byzantine and the Arab fleet culminating with the three sieges of Constantinople (between 650s and 717/8).⁵⁶ In 655 Constans II himself barely escaped death at the Battle of the Masts off the coast of Lycia, when the Arab fleet annihilated the Byzantine navy.⁵⁷ However, this did not brough about the end of the centrality of the sea for the empire. Rather it prompted the narrowing of the maritime horizons with the Aegean continuing as a zone of active interregional trading whose structural elements (mainly an urban hierarchy around its coast and its maritime proximity to Constantinople) remained in place and contributed to its economic boom in the so-called long eleventh century.⁵⁸

Rhodes in a fragmented Mediterranean (ca. 650-ca. 900)

As seen in the previous section Rhodes offset its productive deficit (although complemented with that of its Carian *peraia*) by its pivotal role along the main routes of circulation of goods as also enhanced by the prevalent shipping routes of the Mediterranean navigation.⁵⁹ In fact, its geo-strategic importance allowed the Rhodian economy to remain as resilient even after the end of the *annona civica* and *militaris* for -as Cosentino concludes: “in the seventh and eighth century Byzantine islands (in general) seem to remain an economic space relatively more developed than northern and central Italy, the Balkans or Asia Minor.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the fragmentation of a formerly fiscally unified economic space was further heightened by the arrival of the armies (and the establishment of a functional and belligerent) navy of the Caliph.⁶¹

This entailed the militarization of the local society and the upgrading of the defensive structures as shown by the walls encircling the acropolis of Rhodes as part of a late-seventh century imperially-sponsored program aiming at fortifying other (but larger) insular urban sites like Gortyn, Eleutherna, and Polyrrenhia in Crete, Salamis-Constantia, Kyrenia, Amathos, and Paphos in Cyprus, Cagliari in Sardinia, and Siracusa and Catania in Sicily.⁶² The Byzantine fortifications of the city of Rhodes, were built in the second half of the seventh century and enclosed a rectangular area of the Hellenistic acropolis located between its commercial and the military harbors.⁶³ They featured a main wall, outer wall, and moat on the south, west, and north sides, with irregularly spaced rectangular

towers.⁶⁴ As parts of the fortifications are still visible in the structure of so-called Palace of the Great Master (as built in the fourteenth century), Arab sources possibly bespeak of the existence of the Byzantine *kastron* (possibly a refuge last defensive stronghold), when describing the conquest of Rhodes on the part of the army of the future Umayyad Caliph Mu’āwiya, in 653-654.⁶⁵ This expedition was meant to neutralize on of the most strategic insular outposts (together with Crete and Cyprus which were both raided in the same year) along the naval route leading to Constantinople.⁶⁶ Indeed, the capital was unsuccessfully sieged, even if the fall of Rhodes to the Arabs is mainly recorded by Byzantine chronicles because of the final demise of the famous Colossus.⁶⁷ Theophanes states that: “In this year Mauias (sic.) took Rhodes and cast down the Colossus of Rhodes 1,360 years after its erection. It was bought by a Jewish merchant of Edessa, who loaded the bronze on 900 camels.”⁶⁸ The episode has also been reported by the tenth-century *De Administrando Imperio* written (or better sponsored) by emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (945-959).⁶⁹ Nevertheless, in recent years both Conrad and Woods have rediscussed the alleged destruction concluding that Theophilus’s claim that the Arabs destroyed the Colossus is highly unlikely. The notion that they were responsible for its destruction seems to have originated from local Syrian folklore, which held that remnants of certain monuments or structures contained salvaged materials from the statue.⁷⁰

A second, and more decisive Arab raid against Rhodes is recorded in 672/3, once again during a siege to the Byzantine capital (672-4).⁷¹

“The later third/ninth century historian of the conquests, al-Balādhurī, and in the universal historian of a generation or so later, al-Tabārī, refer that a strong Arab raid was mounted on Rhodes, led by the veteran commander Junada b. Abi Umayya al-Azdi. The accounts describe Rudus/Rudis as one of the most fertile of the Aegean islands, with olives, vines and fruits and an abundant supply of fresh water. Hence Mu’āwiya ordered the Arab troops to settle there, and this Muslim colony remained in place for seven years; the colonists built a fortress within which they could drive their cattle for safety and from which they could watch for the approach of their enemies the Byzantines, who continuously harrassed them.”⁷²

In particular, the *Kitāb futūh al-buldān* written by al-Balādhurī reports that the invasion of Rhodes was coordinated with *razzias* against Sicily, and Crete; he also quipped that seven years later

56 Malamut, *Les Îles*, 137-8.
57 S. Cosentino, “Constans II and Its Navy.” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 100/2 (2008): 577–603.
58 Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 269-92.
59 Cosentino, “Pillars,” 257.
60 Cosentino, “Mentality,” 73.
61 C. Picard, *La Mer Des Califes. Une Histoire de la Méditerranée Musulmane*, Paris: Hachette, 2015, 229-49.
62 L. Zavagno, “Insular Urbanism.” In *The Routledge Handbook to Byzantine City. From Justinian to Mehmet II (ca. 500 – ca. 1500)*, Nicholas Bakirtzis and Luca Zavagno (eds.). New York-London: Routledge, 2024, 172-91
63 Manoussou-Ntella, “Byzantine Rhodes,” 170-1; Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 45.

64 N. Kontogiannis, *Byzantine Fortifications. Protecting the Roman Empire in the East*. London: Pen and Sword, 2022, 95-7.
65 C. E. Bosworth, “Arab Attacks on Rhodes in the Pre-Ottoman Period.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, 6/2 (1996): 157-164, at 158.
66 Pryor and Jeffreys, *The Age of the Δρομων*, 25.
67 Michaelidou, “The City of Rhodes,” 243.
68 *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Mango and Scott 1997, 481).
69 *Constantine Porphyrogenitus De Administrando Imperio*, Gyula Moravcsik and Romolos J. H. Jenkins (eds.). Washington D.C.: DOAKS, 1967, 85.
70 L. I. Conrad, “The Arabs and the Colossus.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, series 3/6 (1996): 165-87; quotation from D. Woods, “On the Alleged Destruction of the Colossus of Rhodes c. 653.” *Byzantion*, Vol. 86 (2016): 441-451, at 449-50.
71 Pryor and Jeffreys, *The Age of the Δρομων*, 27; also W. Treadgold, *History of Byzantine State and Society*. Stanford: SUP, 1997, 325.
72 Bosworth, “Arab Attacks,” 159.

(in 680), at the onset of the second *fitna* (civil war) in the Caliphate, Yazid I (the successor and son of Muʿāwiya) decided to withdraw the Muslim colonists.⁷³ Indeed, it is worth noticing that the *Kitāb futūḥ al-buldān* written by al-Balādhurī similarly mentions a group of Muslims from Baʿalbek (the classical Heliopolis) as they were transplanted to Cyprus in the aftermath of the second raid against the island (in 654) and accommodated in a city built for them.⁷⁴ It is possible that the Arab colony could be located in Paphos (on the south-western coast of the islands) for Muslim tombstones have been yielded in the area of the local Basilica of Limeniotissa as dating to the seventh and eighth centuries; however, Kufic inscriptions were also found at the basilica of Kourion (as dated to the late seventh century) as well as on some Islamic amphorae, Arab-Byzantine coins and Islamic lead seals circulated on the island.⁷⁵ In a similar vein as Rhodes, the Muslim colony was vacated by Yazid I in 680 as reported once again by al-Balādhurī.⁷⁶

So it is clear that in the second half of the seventh century Rhodes (as well as Crete) became central as it guarded the access route to the Aegean and the capital as Byzantium started re-shaping its naval commands as a response to the Caliphate naval forces storming the Mediterranean and besieging Constantinople.⁷⁷ The restructuring of the imperial fleets came on the heels of the retreat of the Byzantine armies previously stationed in Syria, Palestine and Egypt to Anatolia and the institution of several *stratēgia* (better known as themes) in the so-called Byzantine heartland (the Anatolian plateau and the Aegean).⁷⁸ Indeed, although the Byzantine fleet was yet well-organized and military effective in the mid-seventh century, the arrival of the Arabs prompted its strategic and organizational overhaul. As Cosentino states: “the decision [on the part of Constantinople] of putting all naval forces active in the eastern part of the empire under the leadership of a sole commander was probably taken after the abovementioned first (653/4) or the second (668-674) attack against Constantinople” which also entailed the temporary] occupation of several Greek islands.⁷⁹ This led to the creation of the fleet (or *stratēgia*) of the Carabisianoι based in Samos or Phygela, with a large coastal and insular jurisdiction divided among local detachments (*droungariates*).⁸⁰ However, as the fleet of the Carabisianoι mutinied at least twice and could not prevent the fall of Carthage to the Arabs in 698, a further regionalization of the navy commands ensued with the creation of the *stratēgia* of Hellas (with Corinth as its capital) and more importantly of the Kybirrhaiotai theme. The

latter was based in Attaleia and as already mentioned, included Rhodes and its Carian *peraia*.⁸¹

Nevertheless, Rhodes remained part and parcel of a regional (Aegean) and (diminished) transregional trade and shipping network. This is once again exemplified by literary sources like the late-seventh century Miracles of Saint Artemios. The account mentions one George of Rhodes, a merchant and a shipowner who regularly traveled between Rhodes and Constantinople where he visited (together with his two sons) the renowned (but fictional) shrine of the Saint to cure his hernia.⁸² One can think of George traveling on one of the ships which wrecked around Rhodes (as dated between the fifth and the tenth century) as inventoried by Michael McCormick.⁸³ Moreover, ceramic evidence points to the active local workshops whose production fulfilled the needs of local consumption as well as export of agricultural surplus.⁸⁴

The island is also repeatedly mentioned by Byzantine sources as an assembly point for the Byzantine fleet in anticipation for defensive or offensive endeavors;⁸⁵ for instance, in 714/15 Theophanes reports that “on being informed that a Saracen fleet had sailed up from Alexandria to Phoenix [in Lycia] with a view to cutting cypress wood, [the emperor] Artemios (a.k.a. Anastasios II (713-15) chose the swiftest vessels of his own fleet, manned them with soldiers of the *Opsikion thema*, and ordered that they should all assemble at Rhodes.”⁸⁶ However, the pre-emptive naval strike against the Muslims’ fleet broke up in disarray in Rhodes where the army of Opsikion revolted and supported the bid to the throne of the usurper Theodosios III (715-717).⁸⁷ The military importance of Rhodes as naval base is further shown by numismatic and sigillographic evidence. On the one hand, a concentration of bronze coins (almost exclusively minted in Constantinople for the payment of the army) dated to the reigns of Heraclius and Constans II as documented on Rhodes clearly chimes with the abovementioned literary evidence and points to the pivotal role of the island in the military campaign of the late seventh century.⁸⁸ On the other hand, one lead seal belonging to a late-seventh *kommerkiarios* of Caria, Lycia, Cherson and Rhodes.⁸⁹ As Deligiannakis concludes: “This seal can be associated with the stationing on military forces after the end of the treaty with the Arabs in 691/3 perhaps in preparation of the expedition against Carthage; the resettlement of the Mardaites; or connected with the adrapoda seals (maybe suggesting a mass sale of Slav prisoners through the *apotheke* system).”⁹⁰ The second seal was also found in Rhodes as issued by the *kommerkiarios* of Asia and Caria in 691/3.⁹¹ Between 660 and 731, the *genikoi kommerkiarioi* and the provincial *apothekai* (state warehouses or granaries) were responsible for various fiscal and logistical duties, including

73 al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb futūḥ al-buldān* [*The Origins of the Islamic State*], Philip K. Hitti (ed). New York: Columbia University Press, 1916, I, 375-6.

74 al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb*, 236.

75 L. Zavagno, *An Island in Transition. Cyprus between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. London-New York: Routledge, 2017, 85.

76 al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb*, 236.

77 T.C. Lounghis, *Byzantium in the Eastern Mediterranean: Safeguarding East Roman Identity (407-1204)*. Nicosia: Cyprus Research Center, 2010, 29-30.

78 “[The thematic] system was [a new way] of devolving the financial support for provincially-recruited soldiers onto the fiscal communities from which they were recruited was introduced; [...] the word theme was used to refer to this collective provincial/communal responsibility as well as the army and the territories over which each division remained established.” J. Haldon, “What was a provincial military capital?” In *Byzantine Medieval Cities: Amorion and the Middle Byzantine Provincial Capitals*, Nikos Tzivikis (ed.), forthcoming. On the heartland, see Wickham, *Framing*, 29-32.

79 S. Cosentino, “Naval Warfare: Military, Institutional and Economic Aspects.” In *A Companion to the Byzantine Culture of War*, ca. 300-1204 Yannis Stouraitis (ed.). Leiden: Brill, 2018, 308-356 at 322.

80 Ibid.

81 T. Lounghis, “Byzantine war navy and the west, Fifth to Twelfth Centuries.” In *A Military History of the Mediterranean Sea*, G. Theotokis and A. Yildiz (eds.). Turnhout: Brepols, 2018, 21-43 at 24-25.

82 V. Crisafulli and J. Nesbitt, *The Miracles of St. Artemios*. Leiden: Brill, 1997, 185-9.

83 M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, AD 300–900* Cambridge, MA: CUP, 2001, 601.

84 Poulou-Papadimitriou, “The Aegean during the ‘Transitional’ period of Byzantium: the archaeological evidence.” In *Naxos and the Byzantine Aegean* (see above n. 21), 29-50, at 32.

85 Kollias, *The Medieval City of Rhodes*, 47.

86 The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor (Mango and Scott 1997), 535.

87 Pryor and Jeffrey, *The Age of the Δρομων*, 31; also H. Ahrweiler, *Byzance et la Mer*. Paris: Boccard, 1961, 28 and Treadgold, *History*, 344.

88 Kasdagli, “The provenance of coins,” 237.

89 <https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1947.2.70/view> retrieved on 15 February 2025.

90 Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 103.

91 Kollias, *The Medieval City*, 48.

provisioning Constantinople and the imperial army.⁹² By examining the seals of *kommerkiarioi* as discovered on Rhodes as well as on Cyprus, Crete, Sicily, Malta, and the Balearics one can witness to the evolution of Byzantine administrative structures and the resilient economic role of the Byzantine island network well into the eighth century.⁹³

Indeed, with the territorial loss the empire experienced over the course of the seventh and early eighth century and following upon the failed last Arab siege of Constantinople in 717/18, the islands guarding the access to the southern Aegean (Rhodes and Crete) and the south-western Anatolian coast turned into a borderland with Cyprus as an outlier acting as a real bridge between the Byzantine and Islamic economic networks in the Early Middle Ages.⁹⁴ It is not by chance that both Cyprus and Rhodes were targeted by the Abbasid Caliphs Harun al-Rashid between 806 and 808.⁹⁵ Rhodes did not fall to the invaders because of its impressive and advances (in terms of military architecture) fortifications.⁹⁶ As Kontogiannis concludes: “The existence of a double line of walls in Rhodes: the lower parts of the Rhodes outer wall had a talus, meant to withstand artillery fire, mining, etc. This has not been observed so far in Byzantine military architecture.”⁹⁷ It is possible that the fortifications were somehow linked to the existence of local shipyard and the importance of the “military” harbor as a base for the fleet.⁹⁸

Indeed, the early ninth century should be regarded as the real turning point for Rhodes as well as the other insular spaces of Byzantium; the loss of Sicily (to the Aghlabids) in 824 and Crete (to the Andalusian pirates) in 826-7 precipitated a shift in the Byzantine government’s approach: it signified the adoption of a comprehensive grand strategy rather than a mere incremental defense which culminated in the renewed attention to the fleet under Basil I.⁹⁹ In particular, the creation of the Cretan Emirate as lasting until 961 (when the Byzantines recovered the island) prompted a drastic change for Rhodes turning it into a military bulwark vis-à-vis the dangerous raids the Arabs staged from Crete targeting the Aegean sea.¹⁰⁰ Numismatic evidence bolsters the picture I have drawn for in Rhodes one can document an increasing quantity of bronze coins starting from the reign of Michael II (820-29) or Theophilus (829-841) hinting at the presence of a contingent of Byzantine troops (or a detachment of the fleet) on the island as also documented by bronze belt buckles (dated

between the late seventh and the ninth century) as belonging to Byzantine army officials.¹⁰¹ In this regard, the renewed significance of the fleet allows us to conclude that a new role was assigned by the state to the Aegean islands (and to Rhodes in particular): they should pander to the maintenance of maritime connections (military and commercial) with the capital, while at the same time ensure the islands’ economic survival.¹⁰²

Rhodes in the “Byzantine” Aegean from the tenth to the thirteenth century

The return of Crete and Cyprus under full Byzantine control in the second half of the tenth century, following upon the more important role played by the imperial fleet under the Macedonian emperor Basil I (867-886), ushered in a demographic resurgence of the Byzantine Aegean archipelagoes whose economic role increased to peak between the eleventh century and the twelfth century.¹⁰³ Starting in the eleventh century, commerce emerged as the driving force behind the Byzantine economy, adding complexity and stimulating economic growth.¹⁰⁴ In particular, Rhodes, Chios and Crete as well as the southern coast of Anatolia benefitted from the re-orientation of the spice and silk “roads” as Fatimid Egypt acted as a new catalyst for trade with Persia and central Asia (via the Red Sea).¹⁰⁵ Yet Rhodes appears in Byzantine literary sources as a military outpost as well as an ideal place of exile: during the 949 failed expedition against Crete, one *ousia* (the standard Byzantine naval company) and also 4 *dromons* of 220 men each were left in Rhodes to guard the imprisoned brother-in-law of the emperor, Stephen Lekapēnos.¹⁰⁶

In fact, in Rhodes one can document an increase in land cultivation as well as an intensification of production which paired with the boom in trading activities and reflected in the development of the urban fabric and landscape of the city of Rhodes (on which I will return in a few moments).¹⁰⁷ On the one hand, Anne Marie Kasdagli has documented a resurgence in the quantity of coins yielded on the island as mostly minted in Constantinople. However, she points out the peculiar presence of clipped or worn out Byzantine bronze folles dated to the mid-eleventh century; they should be regarded as “imitations” of Byzantine specimens issued by Tzacha Bey, the Seljuk emir of Izmir who temporary conquered and ruled Rhodes in 1090s.¹⁰⁸ As Byzantine low denominations returned to the island after its reconquest by Alexios I Comnenos (1081-1116), it is interesting to notice a hoard of gold coins found in the Rhodes and dated to the late twelfth century: it contains one highly refined gold coin (*hyperperon*) of Manuel I Comnenos and some contemporary Moorish coins documenting the trade route of gold bullions (later to be melted to produce coins) from Niger to Constantinople (and Europe).¹⁰⁹

92 J. Haldon, “Commerce and Exchange in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries: Regional Trade and the Movement of Goods.” In *Trade and Markets in Byzantium (Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Symposia and Colloquia)*, Cécile Morrisson (ed.). Washington, DC: Doaks, 99-124 (at 113-14).

93 Cosentino, “Mentality,” 72-3.

94 J. M. Gordon and W. R. Caraher, “From the Land of the Paphian Aphrodite to the Busy Christian Countryside: Globalization, Empire, and Insularity in Early and Late Roman Cyprus.” In *Mediterranean Archaeology of Insularity in the Age of Globalization*, A. Kouremenos and J.M. Gordon (eds.). Oxford: Oxbow, 2020, 237-74, at 263; on Cyprus as an economic bridge between the Caliphate and Byzantium see Zavagno, *An island in transition*.

95 Pryor and Jeffrey, *The Age of the Δρομων*, 41-2.

96 “In this year, in the month of September of the first indiction, Aaron, the leader of the Arabs, sent Choumeid2 at the head of a fleet against Rhodes. This man sailed straight to Rhodes and, on arriving there, carried out much devastation, but the fort that is there remained uncaptured.” *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor* (Mango and Scott 1997, 663)

97 Kontogiannis, *Byzantine Fortifications*, 152.

98 Kollias, *The Medieval City of Rhodes*, 44; an arsenal is documented in Rhodes in the tenth century when warships were constructed to attack Fatimid Egypt (Pryor and Jeffrey, *The Age of the Δρομων*, 72).

99 Lounghis, *Byzantium*, 85.

100 Kontogiannis, *Byzantine Fortifications*, 92.

101 Malamut, *Les îles*, I, 31-33; Poulou-Papadimitriou, “The Aegean during the ‘Transitional’ period,” 30-31.

102 Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 111.

103 Malamut, *Les îles*, I, 152-164; Kaldellis, *The New Roman Empire*, 522-23.

104 A. Laiou and C. Morrisson. *The Byzantine Economy*. Cambridge: CUP, 2007, 136.

105 id., 137.

106 Pryor and Jeffrey, *The Age of the Δρομων*, 259-60.

107 Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 302.

108 Kasdagli, “The Provenance of Coins,” 239. On Tzacha bey see C. M. Brand, “The Turkish Element in Byzantium, Eleventh-Twelfth Centuries.” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 43 (1989): 1-25 (at 2-3).

109 Id., 240.

On the other hand, and starting from the tenth century onwards, we can document the presence on the island of large estates belonging to local or Constantinopolitan aristocratic families. For instance, one Theodore Alopos (a Rhodian living in Constantinople) owned extensive properties on the island whereas inscriptions and toponyms suggest that members of the Vardas and Armenopouloi family, (the latter sponsoring the construction of a small cruciform church near the Byzantine wall) had their residence in the walled city.¹¹⁰ Sigillographic evidence also shows imperial officials boasting titles like *krites* (judges), *dux*, or *archontes* as dated to the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹¹¹

In particular, we should stress the importance of the *archontes*: a title which encompassed a wide array political, judicial and military functions as it was often attributed to members of the local insular elites. Indeed, we can document *archontes* presiding over the government of eight-to-tenth century Cyprus, Crete, Sardinia, and the Balearics.¹¹² This accounts for a deliberate Byzantine strategy for *archontes* were chosen from among the ranks of the local elites as heads of local administration. In this regard, it seems that the central authorities recognized that as members of insular societies were better accustomed to interacting with “the other,” and, therefore, better equipped to develop adaptive strategies to military and political difficulties as they arose.¹¹³ A good example is offered by the three members of the Cypriot aristocracy (*phangoumeneis*) who were part of an embassy sent by Justinian II (686-695 and 705-711) to the Umayyad Caliph sitting in Damascus to negotiate the repatriation of some Cypriot prisoners.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, it seems that in Rhodes the *archontes* never acquired a similar degree of autonomy for, as already mentioned, the island remained part of the Kybirrhaiotai theme until the late twelfth century; therefore, the title of *archon* should simply entail either a high-status local official whose authority extended over the port cities of Rhodes (like the city of Rhodes and Lindos), or its role as one of the subordinates of the *stratēgos* of the Kybirrhaiotai.¹¹⁵ In other words, and contrary to the abovementioned large Byzantine islands and archipelagos, Rhodes seems to have never attained an autonomous administrative and military status (as it will be seen, this only happened in the early thirteenth century under Leo Gabalas).¹¹⁶ Indeed, it seems that the *archontes* were superseded by the *krites* and dukes in the second half of the twelfth century, although it is not clear if and how their functions and responsibilities overlapped.¹¹⁷

Finally, the political and commercial role of local, imperial, ecclesiastical elites was reflected by a spate of building activities in several rural and urban sites across the island. Sigillographic evidence document the continuous political importance of the Rhodian Metropolitan although several of his suffragans in the Aegean islands slowly barreled out his sphere of ecclesiastical influence although keeping an intense correspondence with him.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, several new ecclesiastical and monastic buildings can be documented as built on the island during between the reign of Alexios

and Manuel I Komnenos (1143-1180)¹¹⁹. Moreover, during the Komnenian period the city and the harbor of the city of Rhodes experienced an upgrade of the urban defense reflecting its newly acquired importance along the routes leading the Crusaders to the Holy Land as exemplified by the stopovers of the Venetian and Genoese fleets in 1098;¹²⁰ a new defensive wall was constructed to the south of the existing early medieval one, likely to enclose parts of the settlement outside the original walls.¹²¹ This expansion created a tripartite division of the city: the citadel, the inner castle (later known as the *Collachium* of the Hospitallers), and the newly built outer city.¹²² Within the fortified Byzantine settlement, a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary (*Panagia tou Kastrou*), was built in the late eleventh or early twelfth century (as also refurbished in the thirteenth century), as indicated by coins found in its sanctuary, including a significant number from the reign of Alexios I.¹²³ Originally, a Byzantine domed cross-in-square church, it was extensively modified in the fourteenth century during the rule of the Hospitallers when it was elevated to the rank of Latin Cathedral.¹²⁴ A similar chronological development could be documented for another church (possibly dedicated to the Archangel Michael).¹²⁵

As the Byzantine empire spiraled into the dramatic dynastic crisis following upon the demise of the Komnenian dynasty and leading to the catastrophic Fourth Crusade, the Constantinopolitan rulership over the Aegean slowly pulverized into several politically and administrative independent duchies.¹²⁶ This is confirmed by the 1198 imperial *chrysobull* issued by Alexios III Angelos (1195-1203) in favor of the Venetians who had established a trading post on the island already in the late eleventh century.¹²⁷ As Malamut concludes, Rhodes’s importance as strategic trading post for Venetian commerce amped up in the course of the twelfth century other powers (like the Genoese) slowly encroached in the Aegean sea.

“In 1170, the Venetians had not yet obtained the right to trade freely in all the islands but the Byzantine authorities on the islands systematically blocked access to the Genoese through various forms of harassment while favoring the establishment of the Venetians. The Venetians openly engaged in commercial warfare against the Genoese, seizing their ships in Chios, Euboea, and wherever else they encountered them. The Genoese retaliated by resorting to piracy in the islands, blurring the line between merchants and pirates. For instance, in 1192, they presented themselves as merchants to land in Rhodes, where they looted the port and attacked Venetian ships in turn.”¹²⁸

As Venetians and Genoese vied for power in the Aegean, Rhodes and the Cyclades fell under the control of a local independent ruler: Leo Gabalas. The exact duration of Gabalas’ independent

110 Kollias, *The Medieval City of Rhodes*, 54; Katsioti, “ Rhodes-Constantinople,” 183.

111 Kollias, *The Medieval City of Rhodes*, 35-6; Malamut, *Les îles*, I, 325-59.

112 Zavagno, *An island in Transition*, 87-88.

113 L. Zavagno, “The Navigators’. Mediterranean Cities and Urban Spaces in the Passage from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages (ca. 600 – ca. 850 CE).” *Studia Ceranea* 13 (2023): 165–187 (at 175-177).

114 Constantine Porphyrogenitus *De Administrando Imperio* (above n. 63), 224-5.

115 Malamut, *Les îles*, I, 300-1; T.E. Gregory, “Rhodes.” In *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, A. Kazhdan (ed.). Oxford: OUP, 1991) II, 1792.

116 Deligiannakis, *The Dodecanese*, 317.

117 Malamut, *Les îles*, I, 325.

118 https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals#b_start=15&c2=Rhodes retrieved on 15.02.2025.

119 Malamut, *Les îles*, I, 242-44.

120 Kollias, *The Medieval City of Rhodes*, 51-3; Pryor and Jeffrey, *The Age of the Δρομων*, 105.

121 Kontogiannis, *Byzantine Fortifications*, 139-40;

122 *ibid.*

123 Michaeilidou, *The City of Rhodes*, 247.

124 Michaeilidou, *The City of Rhodes*, 248-9.

125 *ibid.*

126 Malamut, *Les îles*, I, 332. On the Fourth Crusade and its aftermath see M. Angold, *The Fourth Crusade* (Harlow: Pearson, 2003).

127 Michaeilidou, *The City of Rhodes*, 247.

128 Malamut, *Les îles*, I, 171.

rule over Rhodes remains uncertain. The island is absent from the *Partitio Romaniae* (the treaty that oversaw the division of imperial territories between the Crusaders and the Venetians after the capture of Constantinople in 1204), indicating that it had already broken away from central Byzantine authority by 1203.¹²⁹ Writing from Nicaea (the capital of one of the Byzantine “successor” states in the second half of the thirteenth century), Gregory Akropolites in his *Histories* describes Gabalas as a renegade as he describes the naval expedition set forth by John III Vatatzes to win back the island from the “usurper.”¹³⁰ Following upon the return under “Byzantine/Nicaean” rulership, it was the turn of the Genoese to mount a serious threat to the island. Indeed, according to George Akropolites:

“In 1248, the town of the island of Rhodes was captured by the Genoese by stealth at night. For its ruler, John Gabalas, brother of the caesar Leo Gabalas who was master of the island after his brother’s death, was away with the emperor in the area of Nikomedeia, attacking the Latins in Constantinople. [However,] the emperor John III Vatatzes immediately prepared a battle-worthy fleet in Smyrna, arranging for horse-carrying triremes to transport up to 300 horses, and appointing as their commander Theodore Kontostephanos [...] So then the *protosebastos* Theodore put out to sea with the triremes and, arriving at the island of Rhodes, did everything as the emperor had commanded, and routed the Latins.”¹³¹

As Rhodes was swiftly back to the Byzantines, a new threat materialized: the rising power of the Menteşe.¹³² The latter was one of the independent Turkic principalities (*beyliks*) carved in the Anatolia after the demise the Seljuk Empire of Konya by the hands of the Mongols in 1243. Some of these *beyliks* turned into maritime powers like the Menteşe Emirate, which by 1269 had established control over Caria (and the *peraia* of Rhodes).¹³³ Indeed, as in 1261 the Nicaean emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos had managed to take back Constantinople from the Latins, his brother John Palaiologos was sent to Rhodes in order to strengthen its defense vis-a-vis repeated raids of the Menteşe navy.¹³⁴ However, as the two brothers fell off, starting from 1275, the island was granted as a fief to various Genoese corsairs until one of them, Vignolo di Vignoli, transferred it to the Hospitallers (also known as the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem) in 1309.¹³⁵

Conclusions

The arrival of the Hospitallers in Rhodes brought the almost continuous millennial Byzantine (and pseudo-Byzantine) rulership to an end. The arrival of the Crusader Knights on the lookout for a new headquarters after being ousted from Lusignan Cyprus, highlighted, once again the strategic importance of the island and its preeminence along inter-regional and regional shipping routes making it a longed prize for Mediterranean powers. As repeatedly mentioned already, any island is a

prisoner to the inescapable isolation-connectivity opposition; however, the relatively short distance separating the island from its fertile Carian *peraia*, its location controlling the southern entrance to the Aegean sea, its size (which favored a better political and military control), its role in relation to the smaller archipelagic islands surrounding it (which were not part of this contribution) and finally, its role across trading routes connecting the eastern half of the Mediterranean with Constantinople and the Aegean basin, were mainly the byproduct of connectivity. In other words, and though fortified, Rhodes never simply turned into an isolated military outpost lost in the confrontation between the emperor and the Caliph. In fact, Rhodes remained economically resilient after the end of the *annona* circuit and the economic and political fragmentation of early Medieval Mediterranean. It was only after Crete fell to the Andalusian pirates in 820s that its military role clearly amped up although Constantinople already included the island (and the city of Rhodes) in its late seventh century imperially sponsored building campaign aiming at fortifying several (insular and not) urban sites. Nevertheless, it was not a deserted or socio-economically declining Rhodes the one that saw the return of the “naval ambitions” of the Byzantines from the late ninth century onwards as in the mid-tenth century both Crete and Cyprus returned fully into Constantinopolitan hands. However, from the eleventh century onwards, Rhodes became part and parcel of the increasingly more complex and distributive denser patterns of exchanged hinging on the regional routes crisscrossing the Byzantine Aegean. Although, we do not possess the same amount of ceramic evidence and distribution as in other parts of the Aegean Sea, the relevance of the archbishopric as well as the presence of imperial and landowning elites is documented by the large spate of (ecclesiastically and not) urban and rural building activities (dated between the eleventh and the twelfth century) as sponsored by them as well as the increased distribution and circulation of coins. Finally, at the end of the twelfth century and in the chaotic political and military aftermath of the Fourth Crusade, the historical trajectories of Rhodes became more and more entangled with those of the Byzantine rump states, Venetian, Frankish, and Genoese Aegean fiefdoms and later the Turkic beyliks vying for power in the Aegean Sea. It was yet a story of connectivity, but a more localized and politically disjointed one culminating in the conquest of the island by the Hospitallers in 1309. In this sense, and without forgetting episodes of isolation (either stemming from the search of monastic solitude or the need for political exile), Rhodes connects us with the histories of the Great Sea. After all, as Paul Rainbird cogently concludes “by focusing on the sea as a means of communication we can remove the perception of insular life in the past as isolated or insular although despite this the idea of islands as a microcosm a world in miniature apart from the actual world continued to exist.”¹³⁶



129 R. Macrides, *The History of George Akropolites* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 188.
130 Macrides, *The History*, 187-8; 248. See also Gregory, “Rhodes,” 1792.
131 Macrides, *The History*, 246-7.
132 Michaelidou, *The City of Rhodes*, 246.
133 H. Inalcık, “The Rise of the Turcoman Maritime Principalities in Anatolia, Byzantium, and Crusades.” *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 9(1985): 179-217 (at 182-185); Macrides, *The History*, 247.
134 Macrides, *The History*, 350; Michaelidou, *The City of Rhodes*, 247.
135 Kollias, *The Medieval City of Rhodes*, 16.

136 Rainbird, *The Archaeology of Islands*, 41-2.