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Enrico Zanini\*

# Cost, value and wealth redistribution: micro- and macroeconomy in Early Byzantine evergetism

## 1. Introduction

'Public' evergetism – an act performed by a public authority as part of its function – and 'private' patronage – an act performed by a member of the upper class as a private citizen – are the two opposite poles of a complex phenomenon that has become a classic subject in analyzing late antique and early Byzantine society (Cutler, Khazdan 1991; Gehrke 1998; Kelly 1999; Dimitropoulou 2001; Birk, Poulsen 2012; Caillet 2012).

This scholarly interest seems to be dictated by three specific characteristics of evergetism. First, the practice could be seen as an illuminating reflection of the complexity of Mediterranean society in Late Antiquity, both from the point of view of the apparent crisis at this time in the Roman socio-economic model and of the birth of a new model, which we could designate as 'early Byzantine'. This transformation is clearly visible from: a) a purely economic perspective, as the need to redistribute wealth in a structured society; b) a social perspective, as the impetus to redefine both individual and group hierarchy in a society that was marked by a new and strong potential for social mobility; c) specific aspects connected with the different 'histories' of the discrete local communities, both urban and/or rural. Synthetically, we could consider early Byzantine patronage as a kaleidoscope, in which different moments, agents and circumstances cooperate in creating an image of continuous and fluid change, which is finally recognized as the distinctive character of the Mediterranean time-space between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century AD (Mayer 2009).

Second, evergetism/patronage is a clearly visible phenomenon, in particular through the study of monumental architecture, the field in which archaeological

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research on the early Byzantine world was mainly concentrated until recent decades (Decker 2018). Concrete traces of public and/or private patronage is often distinguishable in different aspects of a single building, in urban infrastructure (from defensive walls to hydraulic distribution systems) and in territorial systems, such as a network of fortified sites, a road system regularly maintained or a network of new cities (Saradi 2006).

Third, it is a phenomenon that is not just clearly 'visible', but also particularly easy to interpret through the medium of the literary sources. The specific nature of late-antique and early Byzantine literary sources gives us a whole series of different points of view on evergetism. Juridic sources allow us to understand its social role; narrative sources and chronicles give us a clear image of its diffusion and function in the socio-economic system and, last but not least, they are a precious key to understanding, through the eyes of contemporary peoples, the 'message' explicitly or implicitly encapsulated in every act of patronage (Roueché 1997).

Such a complex phenomenon is obviously open to many different and complementary approaches. The most practiced one – solely on the basis of the nature of available sources, both archaeological and extra-archaeological – was, until now, the reading of the highest rung on a hypothetical interpretative ladder, looking at the significance of public/private evergetism as an instrument used by higher social classes to manage social relationships (Caillet 1993, 2012; Bowden 2001). Surviving monuments and literary sources give us a homogeneous image of the ideological basis of evergetism and provide much clear evidence about the way in which public patronage was read, understood and appreciated in late-antique and early Byzantine society (Pickett 2017). This generates a sort of short-cut to reaching the social interpretation of such a complex phenomenon, which is normally very hard to most practiced one solely on the basis of raw archaeological data.

Literary texts, epigraphy, decorative systems and monumental architecture tell us so exhaustively about this aspect that one is dissuaded from following the hard and often unfruitful way of cognitive archaeology, which tries to extract interpretative models about our ancestors' way of thinking using the material traces in the archaeological contexts of everyday life. This approach tends then to focus its attention essentially on the idea of 'extra-economic value'; that is, the significance that public patronage had inside its own social context. The intrinsic limit is connected to the risk of accepting uncritically the value scale suggested by a source system which is essentially not objective, being itself a product of the same social system, as demonstrated, for instance, by the infinite critical debate about the "reliability" of Procopius' *De Aedificiis* (Roueché, Carrié, Duval 2000; Pickett 2017).

A second approach has a more recent history, being grounded in the archaeology of the Roman world, but not so diffused in the archaeology of the late-an-

tique and early Byzantine Mediterranean. It could be defined as a 'logistic' approach, and it mainly focuses on the direct economic implications of the building processes of architectural artefacts that are the most-visible concrete product of any public or private act of patronage (Wilson 2006). From this point of view, architecture can be analysed at any point in the building process and quantified in terms of the costs of production (DeLaine 2006; Dell'Acqua 2020); in this way, the most objective definition possible of the economic dimension of building activities in general and of architectural patronage in particular can be sought. This approach is valuable to the present study, since it is largely complementary to the first one. It focuses on the concept of 'cost', that is largely non-specific (the cost of production of an architectonic artefact is largely, even if not completely, independent of the form of patronage) and so can counterbalance well the idea of 'value' that is totally dependent on the social interaction between the donor of the artefact and its recipients.

The third approach is quite new in the scholarly literature on the temporospatial context we are interested in here (Pickett, in press). It could be defined as an 'energetic' one – or even a 'thermodynamic' one – since it is essentially linked to the possibility of reading the whole evergetic process (from its conception to the practical achievement) in terms of the capacity to focus a workforce, coming from a specific catchment area, the extent of which depends more or less on the donor's social rank, on a specific artefact (Trigger 1990).

This approach, which is particularly interesting for our purposes because of the opportunity to check the image that is produced against those generated by the two previous approaches, is derived from anthropological-processualist thought processes, proper to prehistoric archaeology (Abrams 1989). From an economic perspective, this method is essentially centred on the idea of 'requested energy' that, together with the concepts of 'cost' and 'value', represents a third significant factor in defining evergetism as a very complex element superimposed onto the relatively simple human activity of building a monument or undertaking public works. Production costs, requested energy and artefact value are, in variable proportions of course, common elements to every building activity: they are not specific to examples of evergetism. The peculiarity of evergetism is that, while the production costs are basically the same as those of 'normal' building activity, both value and requested energy vary depending on other variables. Value is essentially a function of the communicative relationship between the donor and the users of the artefact (Di Segni 1995; Roueché 1997; Pietri 2002). The requested energy is a much more complex function of social dynamics, directly linked with the social rank of the donor or the opportunity for public expression of power; these two factors are the main instruments that allow a donor to concentrate human and material resources on a single artefact, selected by himself.



This last consideration introduces the opportunity to experiment with a more articulated approach, that in some ways synthesized the previous three: an approach that is concentrated on the concrete social and economic context of evergetism in different spaces/times/cultures. Such a contextual perspective is certainly useful as a means of explaining why evergetism may have had its own specific significance in the early Byzantine Mediterranean. If all the elements just discussed are common to any evergetic activity, regardless of the time and place of its concrete occurrence, nevertheless public patronage had a highly specific role in the period we are discussing, from at least two points of view.

First, in the early Byzantine Mediterranean, evergetism had a truly 'systemic' character. Evergetism was, of course, a major engine of urban- and land-scape transformation all over the ancient world, but between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> century it was an extremely widespread phenomenon, maybe as never before or after, at least in such a specific form. It was a multi-scalar item, ranging from local small-scale interventions to very large-scale interventions, covering whole regions. And it was deeply rooted into the culture of the time, for instance as an instrument to express the redefinition of power between social classes or to exhibit the new religious spirituality.

In other words, early-Byzantine evergetism seems to be not just the sum of a large number of isolated actions, but rather to be one of the fundamentals of the entire economic system, especially during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, when the image of the emperor as 'builder of the world' became a constant in the historical and archaeological sources (Zanini 2007a).

Second, this high-point of public and private patronage was immediately followed by a long period of progressive and deep economic decline at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of 7<sup>th</sup> century, just before the great change to the overall economic system in the Mediterranean in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (McCormick 2001, pp. 27-119; Wickham 2005, pp. 693-824). This meant that single buildings, infrastructure and territorial systems established during the 6<sup>th</sup> century had a very long life – and, as we will see, a very long economic life – well beyond the donor's expectations.

Moreover, the progressive decrease of individual richness and of the general wealth in the Mediterranean (Ward-Perkins 2005, pp. 87-122; Zanini 2010a) led necessarily to a reduced need for the redistribution of wealth itself and therefore to a dearth of a new generation of monuments, infrastructures and territorial systems. As a result, the buildings erected in the golden age of imperial, public and private evergetism (Feissel 2000) continued for many decades to be one of the major backbones of the economic system of the empire, while changing of course their function, gradually losing their communicative value and acquiring new economic values.

## 2. Ecology of an economic phenomenon

From an economic point of view, evergetism can therefore be seen essentially as one of several tools used for the redistribution of wealth in late-antique and early Byzantine society. A certain individual, who holds some wealth as a private citizen or as a public official, decides to use a large part of it to donate an architectural artefact or a coherent set of artefacts to a reference community, with the goal of improving that community's overall welfare.

This welfare can be measured in concrete terms (for example, when the result is an aqueduct or a public bath), in more intangible terms but still quite conspicuous (for example, when the result is the construction of a road or a bridge or even city walls), or in wholly spiritual terms (the construction of a new religious building). In any case, in turning private wealth into an instrument of collective well-being, patronage works as a redistribution of wealth, in many ways similar to a public distribution of money and/or food or even to the hosting of feasts and spectacles for the same community.

Unlike the other tools listed above, an act of evergetism suddenly assumes a dimension of complexity due to the specific time scale in which it deploys its value following the different temporalities of the three protagonists of the affair: the donor, the artefact produced by the donation, the final users of the artefact itself. From the point of view of the donor, the value of evergetism necessarily coincides with a reasonably long stretch of his own life. This marks a significant difference between the Early Byzantine world and the Roman one, since in Roman society the building of monuments was intended also as a way to pass on the memory of the *patronus* and of the *gens* to which he/she belonged. In the Early Byzantine world this opportunity was less appreciated, because the aristocracy became more and more an aristocracy of function: the public prestige of a person was associated to his temporary position and conveying it to his heirs was quite impossible.

From the point of view of the artefact itself, the value is divided into the stages of construction, use, maintenance and possible reuse, which may then extend far beyond the life of the donor. Finally, the value for the community who uses the artefact has in turn a time which can also be surprisingly long (especially, as mentioned, in the specific context of the early Byzantine Mediterranean), often extending well beyond the proper function of the artefact itself. In other words, evergetism can be read as an action of wealth redistribution in which the benefit passes from the donor's hands to the receivers' one in many ways and in different times.

A second element of complexity lies in the multiplicity of economic scales that public evergetism directly places side-by-side. Large interventions by central government – those involving major infrastructures or territorial scale systems – are clearly part of a macro-economic dimension (Maschek 2020), since ever-

getism constitutes the third major line of expenditure for the central administration, together with warfare and the *annona*. But, at the same time, in its concrete manifestation, both at the time of construction – which, as we shall see, almost always assumes the characteristics of a series of limited economic enterprises – and during the extended phase of fruition, the same interventions take on quite a micro-economic dimension, entirely related to the management of the simplest daily activities. In this case too, the total value of the transaction cannot be perceived immediately by the user. Its understanding, therefore, relies on a sophisticated communication system that constantly reminds the users that those artefacts/infrastructures/territorial systems were the product of the specific desire of a specific authority. Epigraphy played an important role in this respect and it is no coincidence that the great season of early Byzantine evergetism was accompanied by an extraordinarily well organized communication system (Durliat 1981; Feissel 1988; Duval, Pietri 1997; Feissel 2000; Pickett 2017).

A third element to be considered is that the systematic nature of public evergetism in the early Byzantine age renders its overall economic size very important: it is true that each operation had a budget on a definitely microeconomic scale, but it is equally true that the whole set of these small budgets would result in a large movement of money/materials/labour.

A fourth element, this time of an ecological nature, is that among those activities involving a redistribution of wealth, evergetism is the only one that modifies the environment in a definitive or semidefinite way. Artefacts or sets of artefacts enter into a real landscape – urban, suburban or rural – changing in a more or less substantial way its appearance, its functions and, inevitably, its economic structure. In addition, once the same artefacts are constructed, they become active components of the landscape, being able to determine with their presence – but also with their partial survival or even with their removal – the continuous reorganization of the forms of human life; this becoming well evident during an historical period heavily marked by the end of the traditional urban life, at least in the sense that this term had acquired in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean world (Horden, Purcell 2000, pp. 97-122).

### 2.1. Cost

The economic cost of a single evergetic intervention can be calculated starting from the perspective of the intrinsic cost of the architectural artefact which it produces. This is quite an easy task for artefacts of simple functional purpose, but it becomes much more complicated for valuable buildings or architectural complex that incorporates an extensive and/or specific decorative program.

In the first case, we can in fact assume that the real cost of building more or less corresponds with a minimum cost, estimated on the basis of a simple theoretical calculation of the cost of all operations involved in the construction activ-

from the collection site to the building site; the various activities in the building yard (trench excavations and laying of foundations, walls erection, roofing, finishing). The strictly utilitarian nature of this kind of building – which normally does not require the intervention of different specialized artisans in succession – allows us to consider as virtually irrelevant the accidents in managing the building, that could slowing down the process, increasing the costs.

In the second case, on the other hand, the basic cost is increased by a variable that is very difficult to quantify, which is represented by the work of skilled artisans, particularly those engaged in decoration, whose commitment cannot be evaluated simply in terms of workdays. For instance, it is difficult to estimate the real cost of handling, transportation and *in situ* processing of any high-quality materials used; and the same is for the time required for each stage of processing and any problems associated with the ability of different specialists to work consistently and efficiently in the sequence (DeLaine 1997). It should be said however that, particularly in the early Byzantine age and excluding buildings of a truly exceptional nature (for example Anicia Juliana's palatine church of H. Polyuktos in Constantinople; Harrison 1989), a significant percentage of each building was completed with raw materials and basic techniques, thus leaving little room for variables that are difficult to calculate.

In general, therefore, the entire building process seems to be conceived in a Least-Cost-Effort perspective, with a tendency, therefore, to minimize the cost through the use of cheap and locally available raw materials, and a non-specialized work force, normally composed of local people who otherwise would have been employed in other sectors, primarily agriculture. On these bases, despite the fact that the extra-archaeological sources strongly emphasize any act of evergetism as highly expensive (Chavarría Arnau 2020), under 'normal' building circumstances, the basic cost of a single intervention can generally be estimated as low and is substantially reliant solely on the raw total volume of the built masonry.

It goes without saying that evergetism was a significant instrument of economic stimulation (Patlagean 1977, pp. 196-203), but its immediate impact on the economic systems of local communities was not always necessarily large in itself. In the vast majority of cases, medium or even small scale interventions, without any specific building quality, could have had a limited positive economic impact on the labour market for skilled artisans – whose ability was not requested –, a low impact on the production/distribution of raw building materials – since they were largely local and very often re-used –, and a low impact on the market for unskilled labour too. In short, the 'standard' labour force employed in building activities presumably received a salary more or less proportionate to the income from agricultural labour, an activity from which this force was temporarily withdrawn. Even though it is reasonable to assume that any construction work was additional and did not replace an individual's usual job, the addition of new

'wealth' seems always to have been very modest. To the best of my knowledge, we don't have any literary source informing on this specific point, but the economic scale of this kind of labour should have been very similar to that well attested in rural contexts until the Second World War or so.

Things can change significantly, however, if at least one of the two key factors changes: the intrinsic quality of the building and/or the size of the enterprise. If the quality of craftsmanship required for all the construction or a significant part of it rises, in the same way the economic impact of the intervention increases. There are a number of literary sources describing the mobility of specialized artisans on a trans-regional scale and the interpretation of some related archaeological evidence seems today to have a more solid foundation than in the past (Zanini 2010b). Especially where the evergetic practices become a system, they seem even to be able to generate high specialization, which in turn can correspond to an increase in personal status as well. This proved true, for example, in the well-known case of Justinian's military architects, whose increased specialization was the fuel for a rapid upgrade in their social position (Zanini 2007a).

Conversely, when the technical work required on a construction is of low-to-medium quality, but the construction itself is particularly large, the socio-economic impact can be assessed as significant too. The benefits are necessarily small to the individual worker – a large labour being, from this point of view, just the algebraic product of the multiplication of the workforce –, but the overall benefit which falls sometimes on an entire region can become, at this scale, interesting to evaluate.

Two examples, the renewal of the urban water system at Gortyn (Crete) and the erection of the city walls of Dara in Mesopotamia, will help to clarify this point.

The integral renewal of the urban water distribution system at Gortyn (Crete) in the 6<sup>th</sup> century can be considered a medium-level evergetic intervention into an early Byzantine city. Very probably at the time of Justinian, the government of the Cretan provincial capital decided to entirely redraw the urban water supply model, as a result of the overall transformation of the urban landscape during late antiquity (fig. 1). This led to the creation of a network of over fifty large reservoirs/fountains, spread over almost the entire urban area (Giorgi 2007; Pagano 2007; Giorgi 2016). The reservoirs/fountains were multi-functional structures directly linked to the old Roman aqueduct, which seems to have been restored at the same time, operating a partial reorganization of the branches that carried water to different areas of the city. Each reservoir/fountain was then entrusted with three functions: the storage of a reserve to avoid water shortage; the direct distribution through one or more fountains; the role of a secondary node of the distribution system, from which other small branches departed to reach smaller fountains (fig. 2).

This intervention has not been proved to be an act of evergetism by any epigraphic document, but the sheer scale of the enterprise, its homogeneity all around the city and the fact that in early Byzantine cities many of the conflicts

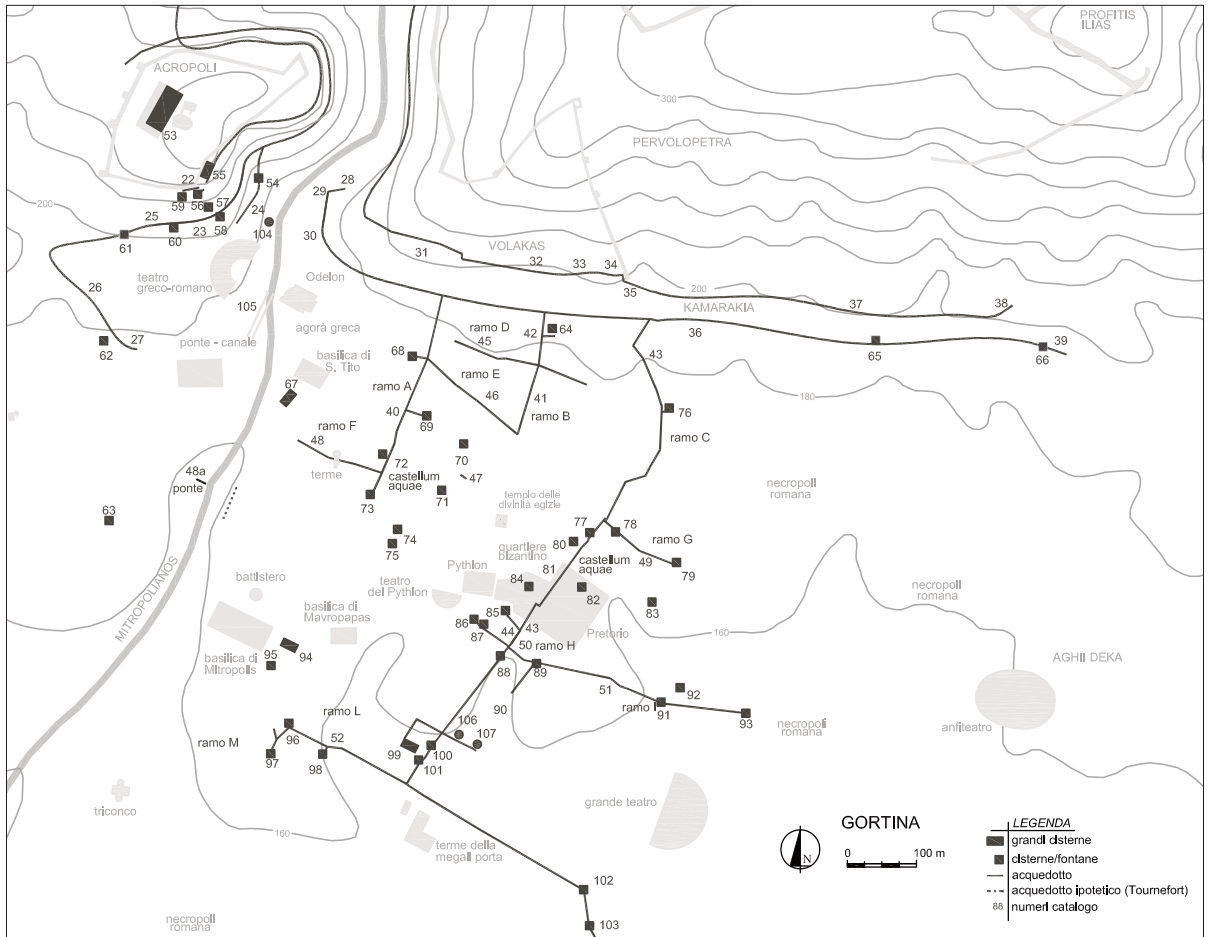


Fig. 1. Gortyna. Map of the urban water system of Early Byzantine city (after Giorgi 2016).

between the different political powers focused on the management of water resources (Saradi 2006, pp. 343-349) leaves little doubt on this point.

During a very thorough study of this important functional complex, E. Giorgi made a reliable assessment of the human and economic resources that were used to complete the building process (Giorgi 2010). The results seem to suggest that it was an intervention of some economic weight on the whole, but necessarily of a limited scale: to build up the entire system of reservoirs would in fact have required more or less 10,000 working days, equivalent to a little more than a year of work for 3-4 teams of ten workers, or even a few months if a larger number of workers was recruited for the enterprise (fig. 3). Considering that the population of Gortyna and its *chora* at this time could be estimated at 15,000-30,000

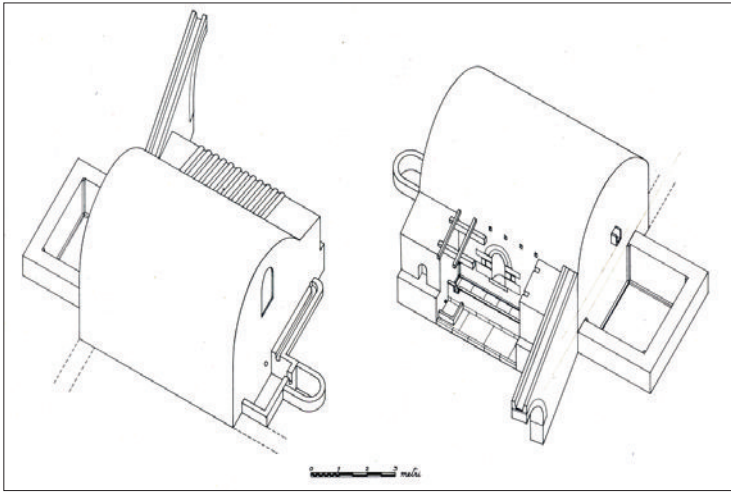


Fig. 2. Gortyn. Hypothetical reconstruction of one of the Early Byzantine reservoirs/fountains (original drawing by A. Ortega, after Di Vita 1984).



Fig. 3. Gortyn. One of the best preserved Early Byzantine reservoirs/fountains.

people (Giorgi 2016, p. 60), this was clearly an enterprise that did not have a noticeable effect on the local micro-economic system.

The Mesopotamian fortified city of Dara, on the other hand, was built and restored in some different stages during the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the whole building process was part of an act of imperial evergetism that was intended to improve the south-eastern frontier security (Croke, Crow 1983; Whitby 1986; Zanini 1990; Keser-Kayaalp, Erdogan 2017). A passage in the most-relevant literary source about the construction of the new town (*Chronicle* 1882, p. 70) emphasizes how people from “the whole region” were recruited to build the walls; this offers us an extremely interesting opportunity to glimpse and assess the economic impact of this part of the operation (fig. 4).

Calculating the total cost of construction for large-scale city walls is not as easy a task as it was in the case of the Gortyn reservoirs. Because the cost of the masonry must be added to the costs of quarrying the building materials, excavating the deep foundations, erecting the scaffolding and raising the materials to a considerable height (Barker, Coombe, Haywood 2020; Barrière 2020). For our purposes here, however, we will discuss these costs only in terms of dimensional scale rather than in actual figures.

Even in the absence of a reliable archaeological record of the walls, it seems possible to combine the outline of the city, as it is today measurable by satellite



Fig. 4. Dara. Sketch-plan of the fortified city (redrawn after FURLAN 1984).





Fig. 5. Dara. City walls.

photographs, with the information about building procedures contained in the narrative sources, which have proved to be reliable in general terms. This calculation leads to a figure of 250,000-300,000 cubic meters for the gross volume of the masonry of the city walls, and this figure could easily be doubled if one takes into account the presence of a second and smaller wall (*proteichisma*) outside the main city walls, major works to channel the river, which went through the city, and some civic and religious monuments inside the small new city (figg. 5-6).

A simple and fast calculation based on rough cement masonry, following the so called "Delaine method", reveals that 500,000-600,000 cubic meters of masonry would require some 80,000 days of labour for a "theoretical" team of ten people, making all the necessary tasks, from stone cutting (in the quarries located in the immediate proximity of the walls) to the finishing of the wall facing. This figure looks consistent with an estimate of roughly 2,000 workers distributed over the two or three years required for the construction, as reported in the literary sources and as suggested by common sense, given the nature of the defensive work that requires a quick completion. Organizing such a large amount of labour required of course very complex logistics, and we can reasonably estimate that 2,500 to 3,000 people could have been steadily employed in the building process as a whole. As we said, such a mass of people was recruited all over Syria and they were paid with a fair wage, as well as with an exemption from the payment of taxes for the entire period (*Chronicle* 1982, pp. 70-72).



Fig. 6. Dara. One of the towers of the Early Byzantine walls reused within a 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup>-century house.

In this case too, the actual redistributive value of evergetism was not exceptional by itself, albeith it was certainly higher than in Gortyn. The overall rate of workers employed over the total population theoretically available is not easy to calculate, but even a great approximation can give us an idea of Dara's enterprise. In the construction of the urban water system of Gortyn, approximately 0.05-0.1% of the local population (or rather, between 0.1 and 0.2% of the 'active' population) worked in a year. If we were to apply a similar rate in Dara, it would provide an available work force of between 1.5 and 3 million people, which is to say that masons would have arrived not only from every part of Syria, but also from regions still further afield.

This last hypothesis is obviously untenable. We therefore have to conclude that, in the case of Dara, the number of workers employed as a percentage of the total population was much higher. If we theoretically considered a significantly higher rate – around 1 or 2% of the active population – it would follow that the economic impact would have been much more significant, even on a still considerably large potential workforce, given that the location of Dara is decentralized with respect to large urban centres and regions with a high population density.

This economic impact becomes then even more significant if we take into account three other factors: the relatively long duration of employment; the simultaneous tax exemptions; and that this economic and monetary surplus flowed directly into the micro-economies of the villages, from which the majority

of the workers arrived. In this situation, the real socio-economic value of two positive elements (more income, less taxes) certainly had to be much higher.

It is therefore not difficult to imagine that the evergetic interventions by Anastasius I and Justinian at Dara had a significant impact on the overall economy of the surrounding region. Moreover, since the fortification of Dara fits in its turn into a 'system' comprising several works of maintenance and restorations on minor centres, it represented an important additional economic resource for the people of that country.

From this point of view, Gortyn and Dara seem therefore to be confirmed as representative samples for reading the economic extent of evergetism in the objective terms of manufacturing cost. Respectively, Gortyn qualifies as a good 'medium size' intervention; it therefore seems widely generalizable in time, space and different contexts. Dara seems instead a good example of large-scale evergetic intervention, with very significant costs and a correspondingly more visible economic benefit for the territory.

To obtain any assessment of both transactions in monetary terms is clearly going to be an extremely speculative affair, because we can hardly try to estimate just the cost of labour, assuming that the monthly salary of a worker could be in some way similar to that of a soldier, more or less one *solidus* per month (different literary sources give different values, see Chavarría Arnau 2020, but this does not affect the present reasoning). We cannot instead properly calculate the cost of building materials, but we could assume this one as low, since recovered material were largely used, as usual at Gortyn in this period for high level buildings too (Cagnana 2017). In sum, we should not be far from the reality if imagining for the system of reservoirs/fountains in Gortyn, a gross cost, maybe in the order of a few hundred or even half a thousand gold *solidi*. A sum which appears largely within the means of the local authority that decided to construct it, very probably the bishop, since religious authorities were charged by Justinian to manage water supply for the cities (Saradi 2006, pp. 344-345). The economic effort required by the foundation and then completion of the works at Dara, on the other hand, was much more significant, certainly in the order of between 50,000 and 100,000 *solidi*, but with the possibility of a significant increase in the latter figure too. This required, as the literary sources testify, the concentration of economic, technical and human resources by the central administration of the empire.

From the point of view we have taken in this paper – i.e. the assessment of the economic effects of evergetism as a means of redistributing wealth – we should then conclude that, at the time of its concrete realization, the economic impact of a medium-size evergetic act would tend to be decidedly low, while it could increase exponentially in the case of very large-scale interventions, which were more beneficial when inserted into a system of interventions covering a wider territory.

## 2.2. Value

Associated with the very idea of patronage or evergetism is the fact that the value of the produced artefact is to a large extent independent of the costs sustained by the *patronus* for its construction: works of relatively low cost, like the reorganization of the urban water distribution in Gortyn, could have a very high intrinsic value to the community which benefited from it. But the field of value is a really complicated one, because the very definition of value is the sum of a number of factors, most of them having little to do with the 'real' economy. So it is difficult to assign to them a numeric value, even a largely hypothetical one.

The value of evergetism has much to do with the deep structure of a historically determined society, and it passes through complex mechanisms such as, for example, mutual recognition of respective social roles between elites and the popular classes (Veyne 1993; Mundell Mango 1994; Lomas, Cornell 2003; Zuiderhoek 2005). But these mechanisms are completely economic too, and therefore it is worthwhile trying to develop some reflections on this point.

From the donor's perspective, the matter is quite simple. The act of evergetism is, at least on the surface, an operation of purely economic loss: personal wealth and/or part of a public budget is expended in order to create an artefact that the donor will enjoy in a very limited way, if at all. But, beyond any assessment of ideological value, the broadly speaking 'economic' gain of the operation is so clear as to fully justify the monetary loss due to the initial investment: social status and the acquisition/confirmation of an acknowledged rank are both elements that possess a precise economic value.

From the final users' perspective, the matter appears, if possible, even simpler. Without making any type of investment, they find themselves owners of an artefact or of a set of artefacts that improve considerably some aspects of the quality of their life. Although the price to be paid is clear – the stability of the social order has a cost that always rests on the intermediate and low levels of an ancient society – the immediate perception may legitimately be of a benefit received for free.

More complicated, but perhaps more interesting, is to try to think about how this banal exchange of public consensus in return for generosity could then be transformed into real economic value. That is to say, that it might be possible to read the systemic evergetism of the early Byzantine age as a means of economic management of the social system. The concrete value of an act of evergetism can be once again measured from its product, which could be viewed in this case as an 'added value', because an artefact that is previously non-existent becomes part of the collective patrimony.

It goes without saying that, if quantifying the manufacturing cost of a product is – as has just been demonstrated – fairly easy, it is much more difficult to quantify the value that the same artefact adds to the economic context. In trying to un-

derstand this value, our attention should therefore be directed not towards purely numeric assessments, but to more general considerations. Once again, it seems reasonable that the economic value of an act of evergetism is not directly linked to the cost incurred by the donor, but to the size and nature of the landscape affected by the operation. To erect a new church is an operation that may require a significant investment, largely determined by the quality of the decorations chosen for the interior (Chavarría Arnau 2020), but it has a relatively low economic significance in terms of added value.

The basic return on investment was accountable, for the donor, in terms of the enhancement of his public image. This opportunity, combined with a legitimate desire to guarantee oneself eternal happiness in the afterlife, made the patronage of religious buildings so attractive as to require the firm oversight of the imperial administration in order to stop any abuse of this process (Roueché 1997).

But as far as the local communities are concerned, this type of evergetism does not create an especially concrete economic benefit, except in some special cases, such as the building of shrines in particularly significant places, directly connected with the cult of famous saints and with related pilgrimage. This is the case, for instance, with the Q'alat Sem'an complex, where an entire economic system was built around the sanctuary and linked with the management of huge influxes of pilgrims arriving from abroad (fig. 7). But even in this case, the 'added value' of the sanctuary was properly due to the size of the context in which it was inserted: a macro-regional network fed by the fame of the ascetic saint venerated on that hill (Sodini, Biscop 2011).

The case of Q'alat Sem'an suggests another perspective of analysis, that we could designate as an 'ecological' one. The shrine was situated in an area not far removed from large urban centres and in the middle of a relatively well-populated region. By contrast, its immediate surroundings were largely depopulated, although they became a place of permanent settlement following the onset of a rich and permanent flow of pilgrims. The quite large village that grew to serve the needs of pilgrims (i.e. safe and warm places to rest, food, baths etc.) testifies to the economic impact of the new sanctuary in changing the settlement pattern in that region of the Syrian landscape.

From this perspective, the case of Dara is perhaps even more interesting. In that part of northern Mesopotamia, the drive towards landscape transformation was not an extraordinary event, as in the case of Q'alat Sem'an, but an event entirely usual at the time: the construction of a small fortified city intended to improve military control along a disputed frontier. The new town was created in a region which was poorly inhabited before, and the place of intervention was a small village with a predominantly local socio-economic dimension. Thus, the evergetic intervention could be considered as a capital investment that was able to induce a radical transformation in that territory, even if it would not be durable over time.

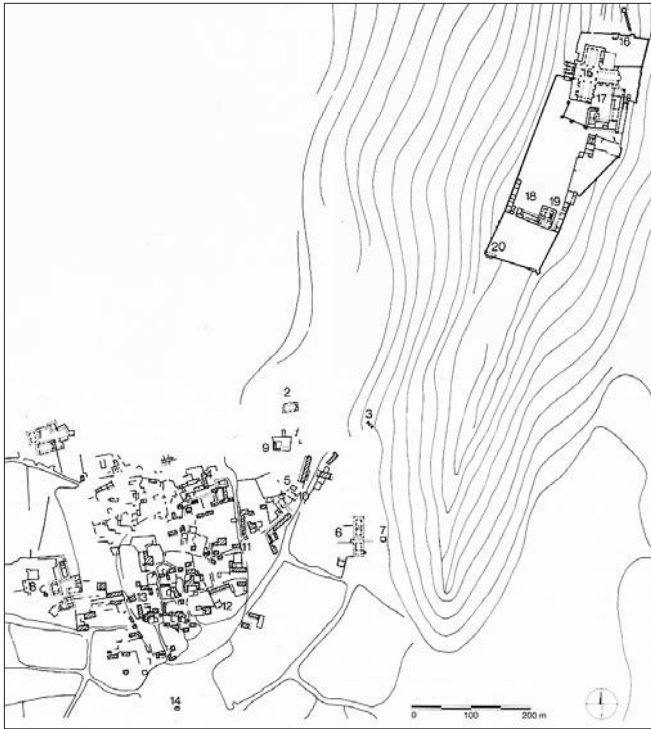


Fig. 7. Qal'at Seman (Syria). General plan with the sanctuary (top right) and the secondary monasteries and the village (bottom left; after LALA COMENENO 1992).

Due to the lack of specific archaeological investigation (Zanini 1990; Keser-Kayaalp, Erdogan 2017), we are unable to identify clear evidence of this transformation, but we can make some propositions. First, the imperial intervention in Dara changed radically the economic context of a specific territory: a small village, which was formerly a peripheral property of the Church of Amida, became one of the main fortified towns of the eastern *limes*; after that, it entered into the economic system that controlled the supplies and the wages of the troops along the imperial borders. It is hard to say how this change was concretely realized, but it is easy to imagine it on the basis of a tradition of studies devoted to the essential features of the imperial army support system in Byzantine times (Haldon 1992; 2010).

The presence of the army in a border region is necessarily connected to a flow of commodities, goods and money coming from elsewhere. In turn, this flow becomes the basis for the development of a local micro-economy, addressed to the satisfaction of all collateral needs linked to the presence of a presumably large number of men, if only because the city was the seat of the *dux* ruling that section of the Mesopotamian frontier.

Finally, another and perhaps more important element is represented by the very nature of this newly fortified place. Dara is quite different from a place of

pilgrimage like Qal'at Sem'an, the latter being a somewhat ephemeral reality, where most people came just once in their life. On the contrary, Dara is a city, a city that spread over more than 10 hectares (an area far from trivial in this age) and seems to have had an internal organization appropriate to its size, number of residents and its strategic importance. It is a city provided with a system of dams to channel and store the water of the river that flows through it, with at least three very large cisterns, and an aqueduct to feed them (Furlan 1995; Keser-Kayaalp, Erdogan 2017).

All this inevitably comprises an economic potential: if Dara is the seat of a substantial garrison which receives resources from outside, if this flow feeds a set of locally provided services, if the place is large enough to accommodate a civilian population along with the military garrison, if the city's infrastructure is sized to improve the profitability of the surrounding region, then there are all the elements needed for the onset of a beneficial economic circle that may have transformed this peripheral and semi-abandoned area into a centre of a new micro-ecological system, directly connected with the macroeconomic system of empire (Zanini in press).

Consequently, it seems possible to see here a good example of the relationship between local micro-ecologies and state macro-economies that seems to be one of the true cornerstones of the entire economic system of the Mediterranean over the long term (Horden, Purcell 2000) and which was certainly the strong point of the *floruit* of the early Byzantine system in the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Zanini 2019).

The real economic significance of the change induced by the construction of a new city is clearly not easy to quantify, and it is anyway a matter for specialists of ancient economies, but it is quite evident that the evergetic intervention by Anastasius and Justinian in Dara could be read not just as a response to defensive needs, but also as a sort of economic 'investment', maybe as part of a larger project, in which economic support for the development of a network of rural monasteries would also have been included (Zanini 2007b; 2013). This project would have been fruitful in the short and medium terms, before being ultimately thwarted by the overall change in the Mediterranean scene in the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

### *2.3. Value over time: secondary uses*

Despite their internal diversity, the cases of Qal'at Sem'an and Dara both fit into the wider category we could define as new settlements which directly or indirectly originate following a decisive intervention by a central authority. The same idea of value can then be extended to the site we can define as the 'early Byzantine new city' *par excellence*: Prima Iustiniana/Caričin Grad in northern

Illyricum. In the cases of Qal'at Sem'an and Dara, the mechanism of producing value in the face of the cost sustained by the donor is self-evident, since the ensuring of services for pilgrims and the defence of borders both fall clearly within the sphere of common interest for the local population and the central administration alike. The mechanism is apparently less clear in the case of Prima Iustiniana: here the economic cost was certainly conspicuous, but the 'primary' gain was doubtful. The primary aim of the operation was a commemorative one, and the city's function as both an administrative centre and an archbishop's seat was a later addition, which was maintained only briefly and even then with great difficulty (Spieser 1988).

Nevertheless, the very fact that a new city was founded in a region that had not expressed until then the socio-economic need for it changed the economic landscape of that same region. A city is by its nature an economically dynamic element, and it establishes a series of links with the surrounding territory. First of all for the maintenance of the administrative, religious and military elite, which are, on the one hand, parasitic with respect to the countryside but, on the other hand, create a market for handicrafts and medium-to-high quality agricultural products.

This dynamic aspect of the relationship between city and countryside does not necessarily come to an end when the original motivation for the founding of a new city becomes irrelevant. The decline and the gradual collapse of the early Byzantine administrative system in northern Illyricum from the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards does not correspond to an equally rapid abandonment of 'Justinian's city', but rather to its major reorganization, which also impacted in the economic sphere (Ivanišević 2016).

This phenomenon has largely been recognized, based on the many traces of the socio-economic "ruralization" of the city during the last part of its life yielded by the later phases of occupation in the buildings in the upper city (Popović 1982). More recently, archaeological investigation in the southern part of the lower town has further enriched and partially altered this impression, so that we can now read the ruralization as a prolonged phase of life, characterized by the settlement inside the town of groups of people coming from the surrounding countryside and bearing a composite material culture, with many elements directly connected to Slavic migrating groups (fig. 8) (Ivanišević 2010; 2017).

In this 'second life', the city that was originally conceived as a purely self-celebratory endeavour assumed further economic value: its physical structures (the city walls, aqueduct, road/street network) offered the opportunity to find a place for permanent settlement to a population which was in no way among the original intended audience of the initial operation. This is particularly relevant since at the same time the general structure of the landscape was rapidly changing in the opposite direction. This secondary value of 'systemic' evergetism in early Byzantine times is particularly recognizable in the specific





Fig. 8. Prima Iustiniana (Serbia). 'Slavic type' houses in the lower city (foreground), with the upper city and the acropolis on the background.

case of Prima Iustiniana, due to the specific historical situation, but it can be read without any difficulty in many other cases, if on a different scale.

Thus a very similar phenomenon appears in the aforementioned reorganization of the urban water network of Cretan Gortyn. Here, in the face of a relatively low initial cost, the primary value was proportionally much more evident than in the case of Prima Iustiniana, as Gortynian citizens saw a significant improvement in their quality of life. This close relationship between cost and value is verifiable on an archaeological basis by looking at the distribution map of cisterns/fountains in the urban area. The system does not follow a regular grid, but appears to be divided into areas of variable density: some areas are completely lacking the service, while others are generously served. The intrinsic primary value rests, therefore, on the service delivered to the resident population: the transport of water to wherever the residents lived and worked.

Over time, this primary value was progressively replaced by a secondary one, which was determined by the fact that once the water resource was reorganized, it entered as a stable component into the micro-ecology of the site. From this point of view, the arrangement of an urban water distribution system can easily be read as a transformation of the ecological landscape, because a natural resource previously absent or difficult to access now becomes available and easily accessible



Fig. 9. People and animals in front of a reservoir/fountain in the village of Panagià, near Gortyn, in a early 20<sup>th</sup> century picture (after GIORGI 2016).

(Giorgi 2016, pp. 109-117). This means that even when Gortyn gradually lost its physical appearance as a classical city, to be transformed into something very different, water resources represented one – maybe the most important – element in the reorganization of living and working spaces (Zanini 2019) .

Originally conceived as a means to reach and serve the citizens wherever they lived and worked, over time the reservoirs/fountains became new focal points able to attract the settlement of small, post-urban communities. These people saw in the availability of water – even though it was reduced by the absence of regular aqueduct maintenance – an added value that made physical life and everyday activities possible (fig. 9). They probably had neither any memory of the moment in which the system was built, nor of which authority was responsible for it. The communicative goal of this specific act of evergetism therefore slowly failed, but the improvement to the natural quality of the site remained self-evident. We can find some very late evidence for this in an 18<sup>th</sup>-century engraving depicting Gortyn as a field of ruins emerging from the ground: the endpoint of the aqueduct on the hills above the city is clearly visible, but the caption reads, ‘the source that supplied water to the city’, marking the definitive overlap between the historically determined image of the city and that of its natural setting (fig. 10) (Giorgi 2016, pp. 19-20, fig. 3).



Fig. 10. Gortyn. The remains of the Roman and Early Byzantine urban water system in a engraving by J. Pitton de Tournefort (*Relation d'un voyage au Levant*, 1717).

### 3. Concluding remarks

On the basis of the analysis so far conducted, evergetism appears to be a very significant institution of the complex early Byzantine society; or rather, it is a systemic one. Its overall economic impact appears to be at least equal to its importance as a structuring element of the social hierarchy. On a small scale – the micro-economic one, in the immediate space/time of the single evergetic act – the most evident aspects are those linked to the artefact produced: the cost of production, the impact on the labour market, and the induced micro-economies (building materials, semi-finished products, etc.).

In this perspective, the actual value rests on the product itself. In this case, then, the evergetism does not have a specific economic value, since it is in no way different from any other building activity, regardless of its source of funding.

The specific economic value of evergetism is more noticeable at a scale that one could term 'intermediate', by which I refer to the scale of the whole set of evergetic activities carried out at a defined time and/or site or territory. When the evergetism takes on a 'systemic' character, it develops an economic value which is far higher than the sum of the single values of individual products. From this perspective, therefore, evergetism can be appreciated as an important tool for a basic function of any ancient economic system, acting as a redistribution tool of the wealth accumulated by higher social classes.

It is only on an even larger scale, however – that of the macro-economy of the early Byzantine Mediterranean – that the economic role of evergetism can be appreciated to its full extent. On this scale, evergetism appears to be the main

driving force for a season of extensive building activity, which is one of the main structural elements in the socio-economic system of the empire of Constantinople, mainly in the centuries immediately before the great crisis of the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries. This kind of public evergetism as a whole appears to be perhaps the most important practical tool for the construction of a world-view and of the socio-economic system that governs it. This is especially relevant, because it arrives just before the great crisis and, consequently, remains a pivotal institution after the radical and irreversible change of the Byzantine Mediterranean world.

Such a radical change necessitated, in essence, a sort of forced return to the size of a local and micro-economic dimension: the practice of evergetism ceased with the disappearance both of the wealth to be redistributed and of a social class capable of carrying out this function.

In the subsequent decades and centuries, the concrete products of the great season of early Byzantine public and private evergetism progressively lost their role as relics of a social and economic system that no longer existed. Instead, they acquired a new ecological dimension, as components of a human landscape in which everyday life had taken on a quite different dimension. In this landscape, even a public monument that was a little worse for wear, a city wall that had been roughly restored, and an aqueduct working only in fits and starts retained for a long time a residual value that was particularly appreciated.

## **Abstract**

The relationship connecting public and private evergetism to the monuments that it produced is a complex one. This paper aims to explore it from a "systemic" point of view, focusing on the role that evergetism had in the Early Byzantine world, as an instrument for re-distributing wealth between center and periphery, both at microeconomic and macroeconomic scale. In this perspective, some monuments will be discussed not only in terms of their cost, but rather looking at their economic value along the time.

**Keywords:** Byzantine archaeology, evergetism, economy.

*Il rapporto tra evergetismo pubblico e privato e monumenti che ne sono l'espressione è per definizione complesso. Questo saggio si propone di esplorarlo da un punto di vista "sistemico", focalizzato cioè sul ruolo che l'evergetismo ebbe a scala micro e macroeconomica nel mondo protobizantino, come strumento per la redistribuzione della ricchezza tra centro e periferia, affiancando alla tradizionale prospettiva del costo dell'operazione, quella del suo valore economico nel tempo.*

**Parole chiave:** archeologia bizantina, evergetismo, economia.

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