

# The Use of Non-Commercial Networks for the Study of Byzantium's Foreign Trade

## The Case of Byzantine-Islamic Commerce in the Early Middle Ages

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**Abstract** Building upon the anthropological studies, I would like to put forward a fresh outlook on the nature of Byzantium's foreign exchanges in the example of the Byzantine-Near Eastern relations from the 7th to the 11th centuries. Examining the types of objects/people/information exchanged (i.e. diplomats, merchants, booty, gifts, military technology etc.) and the ways they moved through different modes of exchange (commerce, plunder etc.) critically and comparatively would help every Byzantinist elucidate areas that are less well understood, such as commercial exchanges; it also makes us aware of the fact that the categories presented above are *ideal types*, and that objects and people had multiple and changing identities while different modes occasionally coalesced.

**Keywords** Byzantine-Islamic relations. Economic and non-economic exchange. Gifts. Plunder. Tribute. Commerce. Theories of exchange. Byzantine trade.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Current Perspectives on Exchange. – 3 Constructing a Model. – 4 Using the Model for Heuristic Purposes (Holistic and Parallelist Approaches). – 5 Deconstructing the Model. – 6 Further Methodological Suggestions.

## 1 Introduction

Almost every modern work on Byzantine-Near Eastern relations acknowledges the multifaceted nature of their contacts when the Byzantines were neighbours to the Umayyad (661-750), Abbasid (750-945), and post-Abbasid dynasties in the eastern Mediterranean and western Asia until the arrival of the Crusaders and the Seljuks into the Near East in the eleventh century. Modern historians list diplomats, merchants, pilgrims and all other types of travellers together with various types of objects that passed between these realms, such as commodities and gifts, and occasionally refer to the modes in which these objects, people and information moved, such as commerce, diplomacy or violence.<sup>1</sup>

Benefiting from anthropological studies and building upon the previous scholarship on Byzantium, I would like to put forward a fresh outlook on the nature of Byzantium's foreign exchanges. Examining the *types of objects/people/information* exchanged (i.e. diplomats, merchants, booty, gifts, military technology etc.) and the ways they moved through different *modes of exchange* (commerce, plunder etc.) critically and comparatively would reward every Byzantinist with additional sets of historical data as well as fresh perspectives and conceptual tools. Bringing together and comparing types of objects, people, and information as well as modes of exchange serves a heuristic purpose, helping us elucidate areas that are less well understood, such as commercial exchanges; it also makes us aware of the fact that the types of objects and people we discuss are *ideal types*, and the modes of exchange are theoretical models that help us to find our way in the messy reality of historical experience. Separating types of exchanged objects, people, and information as well as modes of exchange (mode defined as a system of exchange with certain assumptions and limitations, a certain type of relationship between the participants, and a certain purpose which may be personal or social, economic or non-economic) into a set of distinct boxes is unnatural in view of the picture we get from the primary sources on Byzantine-Near Eastern relations. The sources present examples of fluidity in the identities of people and objects that were exchanged, and permeability among the modes of exchange.

With this point of view in mind, I will first present the current scholarship on Byzantine-Near Eastern relations from the perspective of how scholars conceptualise types and modes of exchanges (§ 2). Then,

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The research for this paper has been supported by a grant of the Mellon Foundation to the Bogazici University Byzantine Studies Research Center.

Many thanks to the members of the *Eastern Mediterranean Byzantine Discussion Group* for their comments.

by constructing a model, I will attempt a near-exhaustive categorisation of types of exchanged objects and people in order to show the complexity of the exchanges (§ 3). At this point, I will present anthropological perspectives on exchange, specifically modes of exchange, in order to situate the discussion in Byzantine studies in a wider context. My focus will be on people and objects rather than information, although how the information was formed, manipulated, and carried through the agency of people (like diplomats or pilgrims) or objects deserve close examination, since “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1964; Lounghis 1994; Griffith 1997, 250; Koutrakou 2007). In the section “Using the Model” (§ 4), I will show how considering the types of exchanged objects and people in a collective or comparative manner and studying the modes of exchange in comparison to each other would give us more historical data. In the next section entitled “Deconstructing the Model” (§ 5), I will show the fluidity of the categories constructed above. Objects and people had multiple and changing identities and different modes occasionally coalesced. I will finish my discussion with further methodological suggestions.

## 2 Current Perspectives on Exchange

Byzantinists and medieval Islamists who attempt to provide a general view of the Byzantine-Near Eastern relations such as Gibb (1958), Canard (1964), Bosworth (1991-92), and Reinert (1998), Mansouri (2000) list various groups of travellers, from diplomats and prisoners to artisans and merchants, who moved between the Umayyads and Byzantines, Abbasids and Byzantines, and Constantinople and the Islamic world. Usually, travellers and objects in motion are conceptualised without much questioning, studied separately or listed one after another without focusing on the relations among them. However, there are exceptions to this tendency. Although most of his examples comes from the communications between Byzantium and western Europe in the early Middle Ages, McCormick (2001, 242, 274-5) concludes that “fluid boundaries among ambassadors, pilgrims, and merchants are unmistakable”. He also (2001, 242; 2002) suggests utilising data obtained from one type of exchange to understand the other better or bringing the data from all types of exchange together to learn more about the routes. Likewise, Pryor (1988, 104) argues, “all major [naval] engagements were fought along the trunk routes [in the Mediterranean]”. Bonner (1996, 146, 152) shows on the basis of Arabic sources relating to eighth- to tenth-century Islamic Cilicia how ascetics and religious scholars from this region were active in the holy war against Byzantium, and were also engaged in long-distance trade.

Following the traditional scheme, scholars of Byzantine-Islamic relations usually focus on major modes of exchange, in an almost hier-

archical order from military to cultural contacts, without examining the relations between these modes (Bonner 2004; Kaegi 2008). For instance, Vasiliev (1948) starts his discussion with a focus on booty and tribute moving between the Byzantine and Islamic worlds, followed by diplomatic exchanges and commerce, while Soucek's (c. 1997) examination of Byzantine-Islamic relations from an art historian's perspective foregrounds the role of diplomatic and commercial exchanges for artistic contacts. The same is true when certain areas like Crete or periods like tenth/eleventh century Byzantine-Fatimid relations are examined (Miles 1964; Lev 1995; Thomas 2012, 124-32). Commerce, tribute, gift, and booty are presented as the major but independent venues for the movement of objects, when modern historians study the Mediterranean Sea and its contacts, such as Abulafia (2011, 241-70), or when they study together Byzantium and the larger European and Eurasian world around it, such as Grierson (1959, 130-9), Preiser-Kappeller (2018), and Drauschke (2011). Similarly, those who focus on the Byzantine-Near Eastern frontier have a tendency to compartmentalise very complex, almost web-like relationships into a number of linear channels like the 'cultural', 'military', and 'commercial'. Although they acknowledge the impact of, e.g. the military (developments) or the political (decisions) on the commercial structures, they do not pay attention to the confluences and permeabilities among different modes that conveyed objects and people (Obolensky 1974; Haldon, Kennedy 1980; Eastmond 2001, XVI-XVII).

Exploring the movement of wealth outside the markets, historians of Byzantine economy have been receptive to thinking through modes of exchange. They suggest that objects moved within Byzantium and between the Byzantium and the Near East through a number of modes of exchange. While scholars like Harvey (1989, 82-5, 182-3), Temin (2012), Morrisson (2012), Carrié (2012), and Curta (2021) apply this dual system of economic/non-economic movement to the Byzantine economy itself; Patlagean (1993), Laiou (2002), and Wickham (2005, 693-6) carry the discussion to the field of Byzantium's foreign trade. Patlagean (1993, 614) wrote:

*Les échanges du grand commerce privé ne sont pas fondé exclusivement sur la chaîne régulière des transactions marchandes [...]. Le trafic des esclaves par excellence est alimenté, on l'a vu, par les prises des pirates enter rives grecques et rives étrangères. Le rachat des captifs n'est qu'une variante de la transaction.*

Such an outlook underlines the importance of non-economic or non-commercial modes of exchange in the movement of people, objects, and information, dethroning the dominance of economic/commercial exchange, and opens the door to asking whether there were entanglements between the modes.

Taking a step further, some medievalists have already observed that the lines of separation between the modes of exchange were not so clear. In his study on early medieval European economy, Moreland (2000, 32) claims, “objects are not inherently gifts or commodities”. Horden and Purcell (2000, 154-9, 388, 606-7) draw attention to the fluidity between piracy and commerce, calling piracy as a continuation of cabotage by other means. The strong correlation between the commodities and gifts exchanged between the Byzantines and Near Easterners was first referred to by Canard (1964, 54) and taken up again by Bauer (2006, 144), Hilsdale (2012, 179 fn. 7), and especially by Cutler (2001, 255, 266). Tolan (2011, 9) stated:

Indeed, the borders were often thin between commerce, piracy and naval war [...] Arab, Byzantine and Italian merchants made a lucrative business out of taking captives for ransom and buying and selling slaves.

Eger's (2015, 260-1) reading of raids on the Byzantine-Islamic Syrian frontier in the early Middle Ages as part of the transhumance movement of nomadic and semi-pastoralists groups, and Rotman's (2012) study of the intricate relations between captives and slaves, and the commercialisation of the booty obtained from military attacks and piracy in the early medieval eastern Mediterranean, are among other successful works that questions whether the modes of exchange can be strictly separated.

### 3      **Constructing a Model**

In order to build a picture of relations that goes beyond a simple laundry list of types of exchanged objects and people, and to explore the relations among them in order to produce a web of relations, one should create a table that combines the forms of movement as well as the purposes of exchanging objects and people [table 1].

**Table 1** Types of people and objects exchanged

Purposes of exchange	Forms of exchange		
	People	Objects	Information
Political	Deserters	Tribute	Propaganda
Diplomatic	Envoys	Gifts Letters	Treaties
Military	Soldiers Spies Guides Raiders	Booty Captives	Military technology Espionage
Commercial	Merchants Artisans	Commodities Slaves	Production methods
Religious	Clergy Pilgrims	Relics Pilgrimage tokens	Apologetics
Cultural	Travellers Scholars and students	Art works Books/Manuscripts	Literature Translations
Relocation	Immigration Transhumance		Jewish diaspora Communications

The contact between the Byzantines and the Near Easterners took three forms – people, objects, information –, although again, making a sharp distinction between these categories and setting them on the same plane brings inconsistencies and exceptions to the surface. One should remember that people were the most important agents among the three, since information cannot travel except through people or objects (e.g. contained in books or silken garments), and similarly, objects also typically needed the agency of people (unless we talk about the flotsam that washed ashore or the slow diffusion of plants around the eastern Mediterranean via wind or animals spreading their pollen and seed). Captives, especially slaves, would fit both categories of people and objects, and one might find it difficult to define the favourite parrot of Emperor Basil I, known to be “a mimic and a chatterbox”, as simply an object (John Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Byzantine History* [transl. Wortley 2010, 162]). Moreover, how can we separate the object from the human? Following the story of relics in the Middle Ages, Geary (1990, 3-4) writes, albeit from a highly anthropocentric perspective,

it is the individuals who came into contact with these objects, giving them value and assimilating them into their history, who are the proper subject of historical inquiry.

Exchange in these three abstracted forms took place for certain purposes. Based on the accounts of the medieval writers and the almost universal needs of inter-society interactions, we can define politi-

cal, military, economic, religious, and cultural/educational purposes as the main reasons for contact, although relocation (immigrants, refugees, and transhumance pastoralism on the frontier) should be added to this list.

Frequency, duration, and association or proximity between these types of exchanged objects and people should be kept in mind in any study of relations, although they are not the focus of the present study. To take one example, Jewish Talmudic students' visits from Byzantium to Baghdad for education, or the travels of the likes of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, who visited Byzantium to find rare manuscripts, would not be as frequent as the travels of merchants or the raids of soldiers, which would sometimes occur twice a year.

As I stated at the beginning, movement of objects, people, and information took place through diverse modes. Application of theories of exchange, which has found a warm welcome in the fields of Ancient Near Eastern and Greek studies (Gill, Postlethwaite, Seaford 1998; Klinkott et al. 2007; Carlà, Gori 2014), is still a desideratum in Byzantine studies. The major modes of exchange between Byzantium and the Near East – commercial transactions, gift exchanges, tributes, and plundering – fit nicely into the well-known categories of exchange as theorised in anthropological studies. In an attempt to explain how economies of past societies was instituted and embedded in social relations, Polanyi posited a tripartite model composed of reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange. Reciprocity, in Polanyi's words (Polanyi, Arensberg, Peason 1957, 250), refers to "movements between correlative points of symmetrical groupings" in which constructing and sustaining social relations are more important than obtaining the objects themselves. This mode is most clearly represented in gift exchange. The second major mode of exchange, redistribution, "designates appropriational movements toward a centre and out of it again", and is best represented by taxation in a centralised state. This mode involves the movement of surplus through political means, which is similar to Marx's term "appropriation without exchange" (1993, 514-54), and in the case of Byzantine-Near Eastern relations is best represented by tribute. In the third mode – commercial exchange – objects change hands between free actors with a profit motive in a market environment. Byzantine-Near Eastern exchange largely took place in this mode, constrained by a number of political and military limitations on the free movement of commodities and merchants. Underlining the importance of reciprocity and redistribution for pre-modern societies, Polanyi's views are closer to the 'primitivist/substantivist' camp of economic historians who emphasise the predominant role of non-market forces in pre-modern exchanges, as opposed to the views of 'formalists' who see utility maximisation and rational behaviour as central and consider the social, political and cultural ties that appear on the surface to have been es-

tablished via exchange (Polanyi 1977, 35-8; Duncan, Tandy c. 1994, 9-10). However, according to the current consensus, neither the past economies were devoid of commodification, nor the modern societies are solely dominated by economies disembedded from the social, cultural, and religious. Moreover, the emphasis has moved from economic institutions to economic behaviour, exploring the individual decision-making process, and “maximizing” (Wilk, Cliggett 1996, 10-11).

Building his argument on the close relationship between social distance and exchange, Sahlins distinguished in *Stone Age Economics* (1972, 191-204) between generalised, balanced, and negative reciprocity. He attributed generalised reciprocity to the relations between near-kinsmen, socially closest to each other, where expectation of return is unseemly such as free gifts; he attributed negative reciprocity to relations between total strangers, where one party gets more than the other, or gets something for nothing. The most extreme example of negative reciprocity is theft, or in our case, plunder. Trade is an example of perfectly balanced reciprocity, where goods are exchanged simultaneously for other goods of equivalent value. There are other cases of balanced reciprocity involving “transactions which [stipulate] returns of commensurate worth or utility within a finite and narrow period” but not simultaneously, which characterises the exchange of diplomatic gifts between the Byzantines and the Near Easterners. However, by viewing gift and commodity exchanges not as opposites but as two extremes in a continuum, Sahlins presents the first signs of the late twentieth-century scholarship that questions the segregation of one mode from another.

Currently, rather than ‘cording off’ the theories of exchange within a number of spheres, the focus is on the fluid relationship between gifts and commodities, emphasising the ambiguous cases that do not fit the neat divisions (Morris 1986; Parry, Bloch 1989, 1-32; Carrier 1990; Yan 2005, 254-6; Peebles 2015, 476). Kujala and Danielsbacka (2019, 10) succinctly express:

On the contrary, the gift institution functioned alongside commercial exchange and, depending on the time and the situation, the same commodity or service could be a gift or a commercial commodity (or appear as neither one).

#### **4 Using the Model for Heuristic Purposes (Holistic and Parallelist Approaches)**

Considering information on the types and modes of exchange together provides two kinds of insight from a heuristic perspective. First, a general picture of exchange emerges from this holistic approach that emphasises the commonalities among the types and modes of ex-



change (see [fig. 1, arrow a]). Bringing to bear evidence on the routes used by armies, pilgrims, merchants, and envoys travelling between Byzantium and the Near East would give us detailed information about the main routes that were used, and the changes to these routes over time. As tenth-century geographer al-Muqaddasī *Aḥsan al-takāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm* (*The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions* [transl. Collins 2001, 124-5]) emphasised, Muslims used the routes to Byzantium “to ransom prisoners, send dispatches, invade, or conduct trade”. This method provides evidence on the seasons in which travel occurred as well as the means of transportation. Dimitroukas (1997) is a good example of such a holistic approach. Any work on the state control of the borders would also employ a holistic approach to reveal what universal control mechanisms were employed and how the Byzantine state employed a differentiated regime of control over different types of objects and people entering and leaving the empire. How can one understand the Byzantine decommodification of certain types of silk for diplomatic purposes without examining the larger silk market in the Byzantine world and its neighbours?

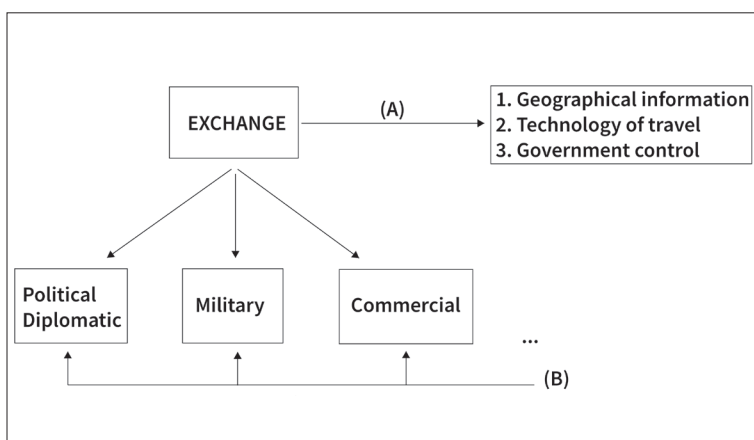


Figure 1 Holistic approach for heuristic purposes

Moreover, many types of objects exchanged hands through various modes of exchange simultaneously. For instance, relics were stolen, brought as gifts or transferred as a result of military conquests (James 2001, 119-21). Most of the relics from the Near East were brought to Byzantium in successful military campaigns, like the lock of hair from John the Baptist which was carried to Constantinople from Hierapolis in Syria by Emperor John Tzimiskes (Leo the Deacon, *Historiae* [ed. Hase 1828, 166]). However, there were also other means. For example, the relic of the arm of John the Baptist in the

Church of St. Peter the Apostle in Islamic Antioch was stolen by a deacon of the Antiochene Church and brought to Emperor Constantine VII in the mid-tenth century (Theodore Daphnopates, Θεοδώραου τοῦ Δαρνοπάτου λόγοι Δύο [ed. Latyshev 1910, 17-38]), and the head of John the Baptist was brought to Constantinople by an envoy from Aleppo in 1032 (Felix 1981, 100). The Mandylion's transfer from Edessa to Constantinople was a result of both military action and diplomacy. An awareness of the multiplicity of modes of exchange for relics liberates us from the fallacy of associating relic transfer only with the imperial power, or of assuming that anything holy needs to be decommodified. Therefore, a scholarly work on the movement of books or relics or on any object from ambergris (Durak 2018) to giraffe (remember the giraffe of Constantine IX) between the Islamic Near East and Byzantium will certainly have to take into consideration all the possible modes of transfer. The holistic approach lets us ask questions like: what impact did the availability of exotic items in the market have on the ability of the imperial centre to monopolise the exotic? Or conversely, how did the supply of Byzantine silk to the Islamic world through plunder affect the market mechanisms of the Byzantine silk in the Islamic markets procured through import?

Secondly (see [fig. 1, arrow b]), information gleaned from one type or mode can be applied to less-understood areas. This is called the parallelist approach. As I will try to show below, additional pieces of evidence regarding Byzantine-Islamic commerce can be gleaned from studying commercial mode with the mode of gift exchange and plunder; and commodities can be understood better when studied in relationship to gifts and booty.

The relationship between commerce and diplomatic gift exchange can be summarised as gifts generating demand for the gifted objects, which would then be met by imitation in the state or private workshops of the receiving country (Cutler 2001, 272; Jacoby 2004, 214-16). For example, the Byzantine-style brocade available in the Fatimid court, as eleventh century travelling intellectual Nāṣir-i Khusraw (*Naser-e Khosraw's Book of Travels* [transl. Thackston 1986, 48]) wrote, was the product of Fatimid imperial workshops (*tirāz* factories) imitating Byzantine gifts. The demand for objects that arrived as gifts could also naturally be met by trade. An examination of Byzantine and Islamic sources for exchanged gifts and commodities confirms the correlation between them. Medieval Greek and Arabic sources show that Byzantines both exported and gifted textile items, vessels and utensils, jewelry pieces, hunting dogs and birds, as well as medicinal drugs to the Islamic world between the seventh and eleventh centuries. The correlation becomes even more clear when we look into the details of the textile items. Various silk types from brocade to wool-silk, "coloured cloth", linen, drapes, belts, kerchiefs, turbans, and velvet-cloaks are on the lists of both Byzantine

diplomatic gifts and Byzantine exports to the Near East. There are a few exceptions: wraps/blankets and furs were Byzantine gifts but not exports, as were Turkish slaves (Durak 2008, 265, 430). Focusing on the example of the Turkish slaves, that were included among the Byzantine gifts presented to Egypt in 1053 (*Kitāb al-Hadāyā* [transl. Al-Qaddumi 1996, no. 85]), we may ask: Did Byzantines, bypassed by slave routes to their west and to their east (Rotman 2009, 68-72), consider re-exporting northern slaves to the Islamic markets? The following evidence calls for a tentatively positive answer, at least for a short period sometime between the late tenth and the early eleventh century. First, the *Ḥudūd al-Ālam* (ed. and transl. Minorsky 1937, 142), a geographical work from the late tenth century, describes Armenia and Arran (today's Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and eastern Turkey) as places where "Byzantine, Armenian, Patzinak, Khazar and Slav slaves are brought". Since Pontus was the major outlet of land-locked Armenia to the Black Sea, Patzinak and Slavic slaves might have entered Armenia through the Byzantine ports of Pontus, such as Trebizond, although the same slaves were alternatively or additionally brought to the Islamic markets over the land route connecting the north Caspian region to Arran. Secondly, there were enough supply of northern slaves in Byzantium to sell to the south. We know independently that the northern Black Sea region was a major source of slaves for Byzantine markets. Most slaves who were sent to Byzantium were Slavs in the tenth century (Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-A'lāq al-nafīsa* [ed. de Goeje 1892, 143]; Sorlin 1961, 329-50, 475) and Turkic people, such as Patzinaks, in the eleventh century (John Skylitzes, *Synopsis* [transl. Wortley 2010, 457-9]). Thirdly, two other products - Rhos linen and walrus tusk - were already imported regularly from the northern territories to the Islamic markets via Byzantium (Durak 2008, 157, 218-21). Fourthly, we have additional evidence that slaves were exported from today's southern Ukraine to the Near East via Asia Minor and Constantinople in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Heyd 1936, 2: 560-3; Balard 1978, 2: 785-833). Finally, as will be seen in the coming pages, medieval Mediterranean states were eager to promote their commodities in new markets via gift giving. Taken together, all this evidence leads me to raise the hypothesis that the Byzantine authorities of the tenth and eleventh centuries considered selling slaves from the north of the Black Sea to the Fatimids whose army was composed of Turkish and Berber soldiers.

Following the same methodology, one wonders if the specific types of textile items which we find as gifts but not as commodities - for examples, wraps or blankets - were actually imported from Byzantium into the Islamic markets; or if fur, which appears among the gifts sent from Byzantium, also arrived in the Near East as a commodity from Byzantium, not only, as it is assumed, through an eastern route around the Caspian Sea from the Eurasian plains. As one

can see, such comparisons may encourage scholars to ask new questions and test new hypotheses.

Comparing another set of objects, namely commodities and booty, allows us to draw similar conclusions about what could have been commercially exchanged between the Byzantines and the Near Easterners. The overwhelming majority of the information in the Byzantine and Arabic sources comes in the form of short references to the capture of booty and captives without further comment on the content of the booty. From the clearer references the following categories appear as the most frequently looted items:

- Money, gold and silver, jewelry. For instance, Nikephoros Phokas seized 390 talents of silver from Sayf al-Dawla when he captured Aleppo in 962 (Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam* [ed. and transl. Margoliouth, Amedroz 1920, 2: 192-3]) and the Seljuks found a large amount of money and jewelry in Artze when they attacked this town in eastern Anatolia in 1049 (Michael Attaleiates, *Historia* [ed. Bekker 1853, 148]; Stephanos of Taron, *Patmut'iwān* [eds Gelzer, Burckhardt 1907, 208]).
- Textile products. For example, during the sacking of Thessalonica in 904, Arabs carried away silk robes and linen garments (John Kameniates, *Εἰς τὴν ἀλωσιν τῆς Θεσσαλονίκης* [eds and transl. Frenzo, Fotiou 2000, 96-8]). Hamdanid ruler Sayf al-Dawla passed into the Byzantine territory around the river Arsanas in eastern Cappadocia and seized “uncountable quantity of brocade” in 957 (Canard, Grégoire 1950, 128).
- Animals. In 846, when an Arab frontier leader from the Byzantine-Syrian border seized c. 1,000 head of cattle and 10,000 sheep from the Byzantines (Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa 'l-mulūk wa 'l-ḫulafā'* [ed. de Goeje et al. 1964-65, 3: 1357]).
- Merchandise. Large amounts of merchandise, pieces of furniture, and vessels (*āniyah*) from Byzantine merchant ships were carried away during the Muslim attack of Attaleia in 904 (ʿArīb ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabarī continuatus* [ed. de Goeje 1897, 6]; Canard, Grégoire 1950, 167).

High value and portability were the main determinants in deciding what would be carried away. Precious metals, jewelry and textiles were chosen for their high value, while animals and people could carry themselves. In the comparison of commodities and booty, we find a full consonance too, because, the booty listed above were also exchanged commercially. We know from Islamic geographical sources that the eastern regions of the Byzantine Empire produced large amounts of livestock and silk and exported them to the Near East. Their mention as looted objects confirms the observation about their status as commodities (Nikephoros Ouranos [transl. McGeer c. 1995, 155-7]; Ibn al-ʿAdīm, *Zubdat al-ḥalab fī ta'riḫ Ḥalab* [ed. Zakkār 1997,

1: 156]). Mentions of vases and pieces of furniture as booty from Byzantine Attaleia in the first decade of the tenth century are very significant in terms of the Byzantine manufacture or trade in southern Asia Minor. Al-Marwazī (Minorsky 1982, 456), the twelfth-century physician at the Great Seljuk Court, lists vessels (which means any type of container) among the major exports of Byzantium to the Islamic world. The vessels looted from Attaleia in 904 might have been either ceramic bowls or just amphorae used to carry goods on ships. However, since raiders looted valuable objects, the vessels looted from Attaleia were probably high-quality (perhaps glazed) bowls rather than amphorae. Pieces of furniture looted might be related to the Byzantine chests, cupboards and bedsteads that appear in the Genizah documents a century later (Goitein 1967, 1: 46). Similarly, looting of silk from Thessalonica during the Arab siege of 904 is in line with John Kameniates' report (*The Capture of Thessaloniki* [eds and transl. Frendo, Fotiou 2000, 18]) that silk was a common item of manufacture in the city. What does Sayf al-Dawla's capture of large amounts of brocade in eastern Cappadocia in 957 say about the textile industry or commercial routes of tenth-century Cappadocia, about which we know little? As the cases discussed above show, information obtained from exchanges of negative reciprocity (plunder) consolidates what we know about the markets and helps us understand the nature of commodities better.

Students of commercial history might study other types of people 'on the move' to learn more about merchants, commodity networks and industries. The Genizah documents provide a wealth of information on the ransoming of Byzantine Jews who were carried away by Muslim pirates in the eastern Mediterranean. For instance, the Jewish community in Alexandria was willing to pay the ransom money that the Muslim pirates demanded for the seven Jewish merchants of Attaleia (Cowley 1906). This piece of information might point to commercial networks between Byzantine Attaleia and Fatimid Alexandria.

The Arabic sources present a number of ascetics and religious scholars from Islamic Cilicia in the ninth and tenth centuries who were active in conducting holy war against Byzantium, and also engaged in long-distance trade. Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Ubayd Allāh from the tenth century was a carpenter, Asab ibn Muḥammad was a lumber merchant from Massisa, and Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn 'Ālī was a cotton merchant who settled in Adana on the Cilician plain. 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Ḥusayn from Massisa had the nickname *al-bazzāz* (cloth merchant), and he had moved to Damascus in 880 (Bonner 1996, 146, 152, 166-7, 179). The occupations of these individuals fit the commodities exported and imported through this region to the Islamic south and Byzantine north, such as timber, wooden products and cloth (Jacoby 2000). This concurrence between two data sets al-

lows historians to be more confident about their claims on the nature of trade on the Byzantine-Islamic frontier (Durak 2017).

Likewise, even though based on a small sample, the correlation between what the Byzantines commercially exchanged with the Near East and the occupations of the captives gives significant insight into the nature of artisans who might have travelled between Byzantine and Islamic worlds. Among the captives exchanged in Cilicia in 861, Abbasid authorities ransomed from Byzantium two Muslim goldsmiths. A Byzantine silk-dyer from Constantinople escaped to Egypt (Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa 'l-mulūk wa 'l-ḫulafā'* [ed. de Goeje et al. 1964-65, 3: 1451]; Goitein 1967, 50). Could it be just a coincidence that gold items, jewelry and silken products were among the major commodities exchanged in Byzantine-Islamic trade? (Ibn al-Adīm, *Zubdat al-ḥalab fī ta'riḫ Ḥalab* [ed. Zakkār 1997, 1: 156]).

## 5 Deconstructing the Model

Examining types and modes of exchange not only augments the information we have about movement in general and about each type or mode of exchange specifically, but also allows us to dispute the traditionally unquestioned terms such as *commerce*, *merchant*, and *commodity* in view of the blurred lines between the types and modes of exchange. Like any oversimplification, our model of types and modes of exchange becomes a straightjacket that reduces the complexity of the real past experience because it predisposes us to see each type of exchanged object and person as having an unchanging identity, and each mode of exchange as a sealed process.

The fluidity in the types of individuals and groups that travelled between the Byzantine and Near Eastern worlds speaks directly to the issue of identity, defined as referring to characteristics shared by a group that in turn help the group define itself as a distinct entity (Durak, Jevtić 2019, 4-5). Recent scholarship in the social sciences and humanities from sociology to queer studies challenges the notion of well-defined identities, and instead suggests a focus on a number of situations or practices that individuals or groups occupy simultaneously (multiple identities) or successively (changing identities). What is meant by identities in this study includes occupations (e.g. merchants, soldiers), missions (diplomats, pilgrims, and warriors of the holy war), and statuses (captives, students and immigrants), each of which was a cause for moving between Byzantium and the Near East. And what is meant by multiple or changing identities is the co-existence of two identities from among the various occupations, mission and statuses described above. For instance, an Iraqi who happened to be a rich merchant moving between the two worlds had a singular merchant identity for the purposes of the present study. His eth-

nicity and class was not a direct cause for movement, although various religious, ethnic, and communal identities played important roles in shaping the ways networks were established between Byzantium and the Islamic East as Preiser-Kapeller and Mitsiou (2018; 2019), Krönung (2019), and Drocourt (2019) show. On the other hand, a diplomat to or from Byzantium who also acted as a merchant to or from Byzantium would be considered to have two identities.

There are, of course, further complications. Some identities were meant to be secret: spies were disguised as merchants or pilgrims. Some identities were temporary: one could be a captive for a while before being ransomed, or gradually cease to have the identity of an immigrant by becoming naturalised. In some cases, individuals carried more than one identity, just like the Muslim prisoners or slaves in Constantinople who made a living as artisans (al-Muḳaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taḳāsīm fī ma'rifat al-aḳālīm* [ed. de Goeje 1967, 148]; Aggelide 1985).

Byzantine and Islamic sources are full of individuals or groups who changed sides (Necipoğlu 1999-2000). An example that pushes the limits of changing one's avowed identity is that of a Muslim man in Amorion who was captured by the Byzantines, converted to Christianity, and married a Byzantine woman, only to convert back to Islam when the Abbasid armies under the Caliph al-Mutasim arrived in Amorion (Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa 'l-mulūk wa 'l-ḳhulafā'* [ed. de Goeje et al. 1964-65, 3: 1245]). Byzantine law had already foreseen such cases: in the Novel 67, Leo VI, *Novellae* [ed. Noailles, Dain 1944, 245]) promulgated the pardon of a deserter to the enemy side in the first and second incidents of desertion and returning. Only when a Byzantine subject deserted for a third time would he be sold as a slave. Some actors certainly changed their mind, or their purpose during their travel. One example is the case of Seljuk envoy Siyavush, who was sent to the amir Karatekin in Sinope by the Seljuk ruler in the late tenth century, switched sides, and in doing so helped Emperor Alexios recapture this region (Anna Comnena, *Alexias* 6.9.3-5 [ed. Reinsch, Kambylis 2001]).

Sometimes actors were given multiple missions to accomplish, just as objects had varying or multiple uses. A sailor from Tyre who raided the Byzantine coast regularly was asked by the Umayyad ruler Mu'āwiyah to disguise himself as a merchant, visit Constantinople, and approach the palace with the pretext of selling luxury products from the East. After a few business visits, he enticed a specific palace official to come to his boat to check on the merchandise that the official had ordered. The Tyrian sailor then kidnapped the official and brought him back to Syria so that Mu'āwiyah could exact revenge, because this official had slapped an Arab prisoner in the face (Mas'ūdī, *Les prairies d'or* [ed. and transl. de Meynard, de Courteille 1962, 75-86]). The Tyrian sailor was thus a raider who acted as a merchant and a secret government agent with a James Bond-like



mission. People made the best of the situations they were subjected to. For instance, seven Jewish merchants from Attaleia were taken prisoner by Arab pirates. They were ransomed by the Jewish community of Egypt before 1028. One did not return to Attaleia immediately, but visited Jerusalem for pilgrimage purposes (Cowley 1906). Here we have a case of a Byzantine Jew who was a merchant, made captive against his will, and became a pilgrim willingly.

What information can we learn about commercial networks from this perspective on people's multiple or changing identities? First, once we accept that people who could not be called merchants engaged in trade temporarily or permanently, we are freed from the conundrums and so-called ambiguities that we actually create ourselves due to the mistake of thinking in terms of strict either/or dichotomies. For instance, we do not need to call the sailors of the Emirate of Crete simply raiders and look for separate Cretan individuals whom we call traders. Raiders could be traders! The tenth-century geographer al-Muḩaddasī writes (*Aḩsan al-takāsīm fī ma'rifat al-aḩālīm* [ed. de Goeje 1967, 177]) the following about the Palestinian coast:

The warships and galleys of the *Rūm* [Byzantines] pull into them [*ribāts*: chain of castles for defence] bringing with them captives taken from the Muslims [...] at each of these *ribāts* are men who know their language, since they have missions to them, and trade with them in foodstuffs.

It is not clear from al-Muḩaddasī's account whether the Palestinians who travelled to Byzantium were merchants or warriors, since *ribāts* were military outposts for defending Islam that were settled by military volunteers. Instead of looking in vain for a separate population of merchants in these castles, we might see traders among the raiders. It is very easy to find examples of armed men (be they soldiers in regular armies or volunteers in the holy war) engaging in commercial activities. While the ascetic warriors of the Islamic Tarsus in the early tenth century engaged in forestry on the Tauros Mountains during times of truce with the Byzantines and carried timber to the Mediterranean coast to sell it, the warriors for faith, in Ibn ḩawḩal's words, were pursuing commercial gain instead of fighting for religion in later tenth-century Syria (Bīrūnī, *Book on Pharmacy and Materia Medica* [ed. and transl. Said 1973, 216]; Ibn ḩawḩal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-arḩ* [de Goeje 1967, 184, 188, 204-5]). On the other side of the frontier, Byzantine soldiers could sell the slaves that they received as part of their share of the booty in the Byzantine markets without paying the *kommerkion* while Emperor Leo VI did not approve of provincial generals engaging in trade in his *Taktika* (ed. Koliaş 1995, 129-31; transl. Dennis 2010, 16).



With this new perspective on the multiple and changing identities of traders, we can begin to ask if they employed the advantages and networks that they developed through other identities, or vice versa. For instance, the Tyrian sailor employed by Muawiya as a merchant was a raider who spoke Greek, and he probably knew the physical and economic geography and culture of Byzantine Asia Minor better than an average merchant from Palestine. Another example is the tenth-century Ibn Zur'a, who went regularly to Byzantium for trade and was a Jacobite Christian (*Suryānī*) philosopher, physician, and translator ('*Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'* [ed. Al-Sūd 1998, 293-4]). To the best of my knowledge, there has not been extensive examination of the role of the merchant networks to facilitate the networks of manuscript transmission from Constantinople to Baghdad in the ninth and tenth centuries.

Moreover, an examination of the diplomats-*cum*-merchants or merchants-*cum*-diplomats might tell a lot about the nature and mechanism of luxury trade as conducted by officials in a sort of tied-trade. The use of merchant boats by Byzantine diplomats travelling to Egypt or the inclusion of merchants on diplomatic missions have already been noted by Jacoby (2004, 213 fn. 92). Reading the letter (ed. Canard 1936, 727) of the Ikhshidid ruler of Egypt to Emperor Romanos Lekapenos, in which the he writes that he gave permission to Romanos' ambassadors "to trade in goods that you have sent for this purpose", one wonders what goods there were, whose goods they were (the emperor's or ambassadors') and who was involved in their sale (professional merchants or diplomats themselves). Plus, there must have been a substantial difference in access to information, networking, and acquiring privileges between a diplomat-*cum*-merchant and a 'regular' merchant. This point must be constantly underlined to avoid the fallacy of assuming that there was a clearly defined market with a uniform set of rules and merchant profiles in Byzantine-Near Eastern trade.

Just like people, objects can be difficult to pigeonhole into a single category. The ways objects move via gift exchange, plunder, and market exchange present clear cases of the permeability among the modes of exchange. The strong correlation between diplomatic gifts and commodities can be explained by:

- a. Byzantine and Near Eastern authorities receiving gifts of whatever luxurious items were available in the home markets of the senders. Some evidence of this comes from the case of Emperor Constantine VII recommending the purchase of textile goods from the market of Constantinople to give as gifts to the foreign potentates in the East (Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions* [ed. and transl. Haldon 1990, 109, 113]);

- b. gifts tended to be the commodities that the sender thought the receiving party would appreciate the most, taking into consideration which commodities were already known to - and in some cases even directly demanded by - the receiving party (Pfälzner 2007);
- c. sending parties actively sought to promote their own commodities by sending them as gifts in the diplomatic relations between the two worlds, a point raised by A. Cutler. A very clear example comes from the letter of the Ikhshidid ruler of Egypt to Emperor Romanos Lekapenos in 937 (ed. Canard 1936, 727):

today we have given your envoys large numbers of precious gifts, which we ourselves chose carefully; they are the products of our capital and of the interior of our country; because, God, in his justice and wisdom, gave to each region a specialty in order that the attention of the foreigners are drawn to that specialty, and in order that the specialty contributes to the prosperity of the world and the subsistence of people. We would like you to learn about certain objects by giving them to your ambassadors who would carry them to you, if God wills.

The statement shows clearly how the amir saw gift-giving as a means of promoting the commercial products of Egypt. Such a motivation can be observed in other areas and periods from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period (Tremml-Werner, Hellman 2020, 196-7). Furs, swords, slaves, wax, and honey exported to Byzantium by the Rhos were also the gifts that Prince Igor gave to the Byzantine envoys in 945 (Martin 1986, 39). Lopez writes that Venetians sold Byzantine *pallia* and spices only in Pavia in Italy, and Venice had to give an annual present of *pallia* to the treasury of Pavia in addition to some spices (Lopez 1945, 37). The Venetians in the early fifteenth century promoted their most expensive textile products to the Ottomans through diplomacy. Similarly, the Ottomans sent three types of velvet to the Venetians in 1483. The velvet in question was beginning to be produced locally in Bursa, which was in competition with the Italian textile industry. Mack claims (2002, 23-4, 176) that “Beyazid II undoubtedly anticipated that it [the Bursa velvet] would serve as an important source of revenue”. There is no contemporary account of such a motive in Byzantine sources, but the Palaiologans in later centuries had such a policy in mind. Mansouri (1992, 238, 147-65) shows that the Byzantines sold slaves and fur, which they obtained from the Eurasian Steppes via the Black Sea, to Egypt in the thirteenth century, and sent them as diplomatic gifts too. At this point, one may ask again if the Turkish slaves and fur sent as diplomat-

ic gifts by the Byzantines in the tenth and eleventh centuries were meant to signal to the Near Easterners that Byzantium had access to the northern markets.

A similar permeability among modes of exchange can be observed in the case of booty. What did the looters do with the booty? Much of the booty, especially captives, was sold. The oil that the Byzantine admiral Nasar seized in 880 as a result of his raiding Sicily was poured into the market in such abundance that the price of olive oil in Constantinople fell sharply (Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographia* [ed. Bekker 1838, 304-5]). Since the booty was sold in the market, we may ask if the looters were discriminating about what objects they looted on the basis of their knowledge concerning market demand. Should I plunder the *siklātūn* (*sigillatos*) type of silk rather than velvet since the former is in higher demand back home? The relationship between commodities and booty becomes even more interesting when we realise that in certain cases, plunder was sold in the markets of the looted rather than the looting party. For instance, the Aghlabid general Ibrāhīm ibn Aḥmad captured Taormina in 903, ordered the sale of captives and booty there, and then left to undertake more expeditions against the Byzantine towns in Sicily (Ibn al-Aṭḥīr [ed. Canard, Grégoire 1950, 134]). Similarly, Arab pirates arrived in the city of Demetrius with five shiploads of booty to sell in the 1030-40s (Kekaumenos, *Consilia et Narrationes* [ed. and transl. Roueché 2013, II]). The Arab pirates who pillaged the Byzantine shores came back to Byzantium to sell their booty, which then became a commodity. While the acquisition of the goods took place outside of the usual economic exchange, the supply of goods by the looters-turned-merchants, demand from the looted party, and sales (using currency) all took place within the market framework. This was a phenomenon that involved commercial calculations and consequences. Which raider would be foolish enough to miss the chance to capture a Jewish rabbi or a rich merchant, especially when he knew which buyer would pay the highest ransom?

Ransoming between the Christian and Muslim communities in medieval Spain from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries involved a high level of commercialisation, such as the easy commoditisation of already-bought slaves or involvement of merchants in ransoms and prisoner exchanges. The parents of a Christian captive had the right to buy any Muslim slave in their Christian hometown in order to exchange the slave for their son, even at the purchase price. Aragon's king in the twelfth century had given some merchants (Brodman 1985, 320, 328; Castro 2007, 319): "a commission for each captive that he redeemed in the amount of 10 percent of the ransom or one gold *maraveda* for each prisoner exchanged".

Kaiser and Calafat (2014) show how the ransoming of captives between southern Europe and the Maghreb from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries involved a large number of actors, some of whom

were merchants, and was associated with fees and financial procedures such as credit and insurance; they also argue that in the antagonistic atmosphere of contact where merchants from the other side were always under suspicion, the networks created by ransom-ing acted as a lubricant of trade, allowing merchants and captains to build commercial networks with the enemy. How much of the reality on the other side the Mediterranean can be applied to the eastern Mediterranean? A cursory look at the multiple – including the commercial – roles the pirates and slave-traders played in the medieval eastern Mediterranean, and various stories of Byzantine saints going to the Islamic territories to ransom Byzantines calls for a positive answer (Burns 1980; Malamut 1982; Rotman 2009, 50-1, 74-6; Gertwagen 2013; Preiser-Kapeller 2015, 132-44).

Finding market incentives in non-commercial exchanges does not make these exchanges commercial, but it shows that the terms 'economic/commercial' and 'non-economic/non-commercial' are conceptual tools that represent two extremes in any situation where exchange is involved. Many more ambiguous situations fall between the two extremes, inviting us to go beyond the primitivist/substantivist versus formalist/marketist debate. Non-commercial exchanges were influenced by commercial factors, just as markets were influenced by non-commercial factors such as the intervention of the state or moral/social factors.

The commercial factors in question should not be confused with utility or maximisation of gain, which can be found in almost every transaction, and thus have little meaning. I am speaking instead of the factors that come into play when a non-commercial transaction, such as a military confrontation or diplomatic exchange, is carried out with market mechanisms in mind. For instance, prisoner exchanges between the Byzantines and the Abbasids were ostensibly non-commercial exchanges. The purpose was to free all the captives taken by the enemy. However, if the Abbasids did not have enough Byzantine captives to match the number of captives in the hands of the Byzantine authorities, they would attempt to buy them, as occurred in the case of 845 exchange where Caliph al-Wāṭḥīk bought slaves in Baghdad and Rakka (Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa 'l-mulūk wa 'l-ḫulafā'* [ed. de Goeje et al. 1964-65, 3: 1353]).

Although the 'commercial' cannot be defined too broadly, as merely the act of pursuing gain, neither should it be defined as a well-demarcated or sealed process where professional businessmen exchange goods on the market with the aim of making profits. The commercial should rather be defined as a component in any process of exchange; a component that is most visible in the behaviour of individuals and groups. The commercial can be found in 'intention/advertising' as in the case of gifts acting as promotional items in diplomatic exchanges; in 'valuation' as in the case of determining the

value of objects or people to plunder or capture in raids or when one prisoner is swapped for another in an exchange where everyone is aware of the market value of each prisoner; in 'target consumers' as in the example of raiders selling booty back to the raided party; and in the very flexible 'commodity status' of objects.

Expanding on the last point raised above, it makes sense to describe the objects exchanged between the Byzantines and the Muslims as objects that acquired or lost the status of a commodity depending on the context. These objects had what we might call "commodity potential" (Appadurai 1986, 13-15). An enslaved person passed from the status of a commodity to that of a non-commodity when liberated through ransom. Relics were not commodities when they were stolen from their original locations, but they were commodities when a Byzantine monk paid money for them. An object was not a commodity before it was snatched away through looting, but became a commodity when it was offered back to the market. We can argue that the exchanges between Byzantines and Muslims in general were highly commercialised, because objects passed in and out of the 'commodity phase'. As Moreland (2000, 30-2) writes, "gifts are not invariably gifts, and commodities are not invariably commodities". Such an approach would help us scholars, especially art historians and artists, in tracing the social life and cultural biography of things.

## 6 Further Methodological Suggestions

All this being said, it was nevertheless the case that the fluidity and permeability of identities in the context of Byzantine-Near Eastern relations had their limits. The first level of limitation concerns the legal sphere. For instance, when the host country's legal system defined a certain person, among other categories, as *dhimmī* (member of another Abrahamic religion under Islamic hegemony) or *ḥarbī* (non-Muslim living outside Islamic hegemony) on the Islamic side, or as a diplomat, slave, or a merchant on the Byzantine side, these primary definitions had practical advantages or disadvantages for actors who attempted to wear more than one hat. At this point we should remind ourselves that the permeability among the modes presented in this paper was not due to the lack of specialisation in the Byzantine and Islamic societies. Both sides had professional merchants or diplomats. The modes through which Byzantines and Near Easterners exchanged people and objects were well-established systems that facilitated movement between the two worlds; they were simply open-ended processes.

The second level of limitation concerns the labels or identities created by authors of the written sources. Historians, geographers or hagiographers of the medieval Greek and Arab worlds defined people

with the identity that they, the writers, deemed to be primary - driven by various motives, especially narrative or ideological ones. Some of the complexity of real life might have gotten lost 'in translation' to the literary page. The choices of the authors not only applied to people, but also to modes of exchange. Instead of "paying tribute" to the foreign potentates, Byzantine authorities preferred using the term "giving gifts" or used the term *pakton*, which might mean treaty or tribute (Engemann 2005, 39-40; Bartusis 1991, 1553). Leo the Deacon defines the tribute that Arabs brought to Emperor John Tzimiskes in his 974 campaign as gifts (Leo the Deacon, *Historiae* [ed. Hase 1828, 162-3]). Reading the written sources 'against the grain' would help Byzantinists recover some of this lost reality.

The third level of limitation constraining the fluidity of identities is imposed by us as modern historians, and it is the easiest one to overcome. Many times we prioritise the primary identity of actors, as attributed to them by the primary sources or by us, disregarding how multiple or changing identities affected the way these actors behaved and how their behaviour transformed the transaction in question, as well as how objects carried with them various histories and functions that gave them great versatility in use and perception. Maybe we modern historians should use the preposition *cum* in Latin more frequently when the case calls for it, such raider-*cum*-trader or diplomat-*cum*-clergy. For example, just as objects carried 'commodity potential', acquiring and losing the status of a commodity depending on the context, we should not disregard the 'trader potential' of Byzantine and Near Eastern warriors, diplomats, and pilgrims.

Going beyond the subject of trade and traders, this methodology can be applied to other areas of Byzantine-Near Eastern relations (such as the study of channels for the exchange of scientific and technological knowledge between the two worlds) or to, say, Byzantine-Russian religio-cultural interaction. Methodologically, we should first determine the primary identities of travellers (based on occupations, missions, and statuses that had direct relevance for the movement) and secondary identities (such as race, gender, religion that did not constitute a cause for movement, but had an impact on the way people moved), always being conscious of the differences between the categories of sending/hosting and receiving/travelling parties, as well as the differences between the categories we tend to use as modern historians and those of the cultures we study. We should secondly study the possibilities and limitations that define the potential behaviour and movement of the traveller, created by the external factors such as legal boundaries imposed by the hosting party, as well as internal factors such as cultural baggage - *habitus* - of the traveller. Finally, we should always be aware that individuals were bound by the templates of behaviour imposed by the modes of exchange in which they engaged, but they also knew how to make the best of their cir-

cumstances and developed tactics to pursue their goals, meet challenges, and attain or sustain positions in the society they visited. It would be useful to explore which 'spaces' gave more freedom to the actors to act on their multiple or changing identities such as the frontier regions, markets, or war conditions.

Likewise, in order to present a "thick description" of an object (Geertz 1973), we should acquaint ourselves with the use and perception of objects by both sending and receiving parties, based on:

- a. the collective historical/hermeneutic traditions of both parties as well as the contemporary needs of those parties that would transform the traditions in question;
- b. the biography of the specific object(s) in movement, which had its/their own independent agency;
- c. the highly elastic mechanisms of exchange that allowed for (or inhibited) multiple or changing identities for an object.

I think that only in this way can we understand the captive, diplomat, and merchant potential of the same traveller, or the gift, booty, and commodity potential of the same object in the highly mobile and multi-centred world of the medieval Mediterranean.

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