

TRADE – Transformations of Adriatic Europe (2nd–9th Centuries AD)



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Preface

In the years following the death of Commodus, a long period of transformation undermined the structure of the Roman Empire. Initially, these changes affected only aspects of succession to the Principate, especially involving the military sphere, but they also modified the social and structural organization of the Roman state.

After this period of military anarchy, interrupted by a brief phase of prosperity with the accession to the imperial throne of Septimius Severus and his successors, a period of economic stability followed, determining a new political and institutional empire. The time of Diocletian's reforms, however, culminated in a serious crisis after the death of Constantine the Great (337 AD). The lands bordering the Adriatic were disputed by the heirs of the Emperor, starting a period of economic and cultural changes that manifested, initially, as a diffuse form of recession in the dynamics of occupation of the territory. Urban and rural settlements show signs of abandonment and crisis. In the following decades, waves of peoples from northern and eastern Europe disrupted the political unity of the Empire even more. The Empire was only partially rebalanced after the Gothic War, due to the devastation of many urban centres and a drop in the number of sites in the area caused by continuous military clashes.

Archaeological excavations and field research are revealing new evidence that allows us to draw a more complex picture of this important historical period which has been in the focus of debate in recent decades.

The conference held in Zadar in 2016, organised by the Universities of Zadar and Bologna, and the Institute of Archaeology in Zagreb, focused on the basin defined as Adriatic Europe, according to geographical and cultural rather than political patterns, thus considering all territories facing the Adriatic Sea and their immediate hinterland. These areas were affected by similar phenomena of transformation, such as migrations, the formation of barbaric states, the Gothic War, at least until the Lombard invasion of Italy and Istria in the second half of the 6th century. After this point, they seemingly followed different, still poorly understood trajectories. Such close relations between the two coasts have always suggested direct cultural influences. In many ways craft productions and forms of settlement tend to follow common lines, but the many advances of recent field investigations have not yet been sufficiently compared, especially regarding the Early Middle Ages.

With the *TRADE - Transformations of Adriatic Europe* conference our aim was to analyse these transformative phenomena in areas where research was scarcer or results less widely known, while including the time span between the 2nd and 9th centuries, that is from the short period before the establishment of the Severan dynasty up to the end of the Carolingian period. Thus, it was an opportunity to share the results of the last years of research in the Adriatic area.

The volume resulting from the conference collects papers dealing with these issues in current Adriatic Europe, in order to create a new dataset for historical reconstruction. Here, processes related to forms of settlement, aspects of production, trade and movement of pottery and other craft products between the two Adriatic coasts in this period of crisis have been examined either through regional synthesis or the presentation of individual contexts of study. During our meeting in Zadar, several sessions dedicated to selected research themes were held, along with a rich poster session dealing with specific case studies and ongoing investigations. The present volume, which collects 43 papers presented at the conference stems from these sessions, here just slightly reorganised, but still keeping in line with the main research topics proposed, that is urban, rural, sacral and landscape transformations, as well as all aspects of material culture.

As most of the papers related to urban transformations show, a more general and widespread economic, demographic, and urbanistic decline can be followed from the middle of the 6th century onwards. Most of the towns on both coasts continue to serve as harbours and central places for the management of rural population, but the lines between urban and rural are now sometimes blurred, while population and landscape reorganisation meant the demise of some or the birth of new cities. Within the towns changing power relations are reflected in the creation of new central places, materialised through the interpolation of new forms of architecture – churches and Episcopal sees – thus seeing a general reorganisation of the urban fabric.

In the rural landscapes the *villae*, serving as centres of production and distribution of agricultural goods, had formed the backbone of the ancient Adriatic economy. The apex of this exploitation system flourished in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD; some decline, with abandonment or re-structuring of spaces is attested

between the 3rd and 4th centuries, while several sites show evidence of restoration and use until the half of the 6th century, rarely with continuity of occupation also during the 7th century. This outline is absolutely in accordance with the development of other Mediterranean regions of the late Roman Empire, showing similar transformations of not only the structures themselves, but of the management of the rural landscape as a whole. There is, however, evidence that many former rural sites were transformed to serve other purposes – some *villae* were changed into fortified settlements, others had a second life as aristocratic manors, while many were flanked by private churches or even monasteries. Recent data also shows that new and different forms of settling the countryside are to be expected. In many cases these places stayed in use primarily thanks to their seaside location, but after the half of the 6th century several sites were abandoned; thus the ways in which the Adriatic networks reorganized themselves to connect early medieval Europe to the Mediterranean Sea are a topic that still needs further investigation.

Some data might, as many of the papers show, come from the ever-present pottery and material culture in general. The commerce between East and West during this period underwent many changes. New archaeological discoveries show the economic vitality of some Ionian port cities during the 7th and 8th century, in contrast to other Mediterranean regions. This trend is very different from what occurred in Mid- and North Adriatic regions. Relative percentages of productions are especially different, just as it is the

curve of quantities for the period from the 4th to the 8th century. The numerous contexts so far studied show, for example, for the new city of Classe, the main port of Ravenna, a spike in imports towards the middle of the 5th century and an impressive volume of trade until the middle of the 6th century. In this period, a turn from North African imports towards Eastern Mediterranean products can be observed at most Adriatic sites, indicating that Justinian's efforts not only revolved around military conquest but were also a matter of supremacy of Eastern merchants in Western ports. On the other hand, the Late Antique period offers an interesting glimpse into more local trade patterns thanks to a wider distribution of some regional products, whose crisscrossing from coast to coast and the respective hinterlands we can now start to reconstruct in more detail.

Finally, we are well aware that revisions, but also the numerous newly tackled themes will not be fully defined by these Proceedings. One of the reasons is the complex character of the period under scrutiny, thus the only way to narrow down the lingering uncertainties is through intense future collaborative research efforts leading to more firmly grounded scientific realities. We would like to believe that these Proceedings might become a source of knowledge and inspiration for such future endeavours, thus we thank all the Authors for their effort and patience, hoping that the topics dealt with in this volume will bring new insights, but also sprung comparisons on the trajectories that the two Adriatic coasts took during Late Antiquity and the onset of the Early Middle Ages.

The Editors