



Commercial networks between the Byzantine Empire and Europe, including the British Isles

Xarxes comercials entre l'Imperi Bizantí i Europa, incloses les illes Britàniques

Redes comerciales entre el Imperio Bizantino y Europa, incluidas las Islas Británicas

Redes comerciais entre o Império Bizantino e a Europa, incluindo as Ilhas Britânicas

Elena Ene DRAGHICI-VASILESCU¹

Abstract: In the literature concerning Byzantium usually the historical phenomena are analysed as they took place along the Eastern-Western axis of its territory. What my paper proposes is an alternative to this approach. Because of the need to circulate goods between the Mediterranean and the North Sea, roads were constructed to connect the two, and along these both merchandises (textiles, metal objects, etc.) and cultural items as manuscripts, ivory for book covers, pigments for painting, etc. were transported. The same thoroughfares and points of connection within a large network were used for religious purposes and by the military. I adduce testimonies to make a strong argument that the division 'North-South' within the Empire was as important as that 'East-West'.

Keywords: Commercial networks – Byzantine Empire.

Resumen: En la literatura sobre Bizancio se suelen analizar los fenómenos históricos tal como se produjeron a lo largo del eje Este-Oeste de su territorio. Lo que propone mi artículo es una alternativa a este enfoque. Debido a la necesidad de circulación de mercancías entre el Mediterráneo y el Mar del Norte, se construyeron caminos para unir ambos, y por estos tanto mercancías (textiles, objetos de metal, etc.) como objetos culturales como manuscritos, marfil para cubiertas de libros, pigmentos para pintura, etc. fueron transportados. Las mismas vías y puntos de conexión dentro de una gran red fueron utilizados con fines religiosos y militares. Aporto testimonios para argumentar con fuerza que la división 'Norte-Sur' dentro del Imperio era tan importante como la división 'Este-Oeste'.

Palabras-clave: Redes comerciales – Imperio Bizantino.

¹ Prof. Dr. Elena Draghici-Vasilescu, [Faculty of History and Wolfson College, University of Oxford](#).
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9946-8580>. E-mail: elena.ene-v@wolfson.ox.ac.uk.



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There is a substantial literature about the connectivity of roads across the Roman Empire –both within its eastern and western parts, especially in relation to the circulation of saints’ cults and of military troops during various wars and also during the crusades; see, for instance, Peter Brown’s publications² and my two books that came out in 2018 with Palgrave³ that refer to those; more titles will be introduced later.⁴

But there are not as many volumes about commercial routes; nevertheless, I will mention a few here and make a suggestion concerning the topic under discussion. The references are both to land passages, many of which, as expected, followed Roman roads, and to waterways (on which usually heavy cargoes were transported).

I shall begin with the suggestion I mentioned: in my book *Heavenly Sustenance...* I put forward a proposal for us, the academic community, to analyse the phenomena in Byzantium and Medieval Europe as they took place along the North-South axis, or at least to do so complementary to the ‘usual’ consideration of them from the East-West perspective. Edward Gibbon advanced the same idea in the eighteenth century, and I am surprised that it has not become better established by now.

This is what Gibbon said: “The distinction of North and South is real and intelligible...But the difference between East and West is arbitrary and shifts around the globe”.⁵ While I do not agree with the second part of his statement, as I said, I hope

² BROWN, Peter. *The Cult of the Saints: Its rise and function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

³ ENE D-VASILESCU, Elena. *Heavenly sustenance in Patristic texts and Byzantine Iconography*. London, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018; ENE D-VASILESCU, Elena (ed.). *Devotion to St. Anne in Texts and Images. Byzantium to the Middle Ages*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

⁴ This paper is based on a presentation at the South-Wales and Wales Late Antique, Early Medieval, and Byzantine Network Colloquium (SWW LAEMB Network), the Second Annual Summer Colloquium on the theme of Connectivity and Networks, 300-1200 CE, on the 3rd of June 2021.

⁵ GIBBON, Edward. “Introduction. Notes to the second edition”. In: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. I, 1776; London: Strahan & Cadell, second edition 1814, vol. 1, p. xxxvi.



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more attention will be paid in historical analyses to the North-South orientation of events. We shall see in the paper that in the matter of trade the Byzantine routes to Northern Europe, including to the British Isles, were very beneficial to the Empire's economy and prestige. But for the moment we refer to *Via Egnatia*, which is the most known trade course of Byzantine period.

I. Byzantium's commercial relations within Southern Europe

The main *land route* that traversed Byzantium was *Via Egnatia*; its usage is very well documented. It connected, as it also does today, the Adriatic Sea at Dyrrachium (now Durrës) in today Albania with Thessaloniki *via* the Pindus Mountains, Macedonia, Illyricum, Thracia, and contemporary Greece and European Turkey as a continuation of the *Via Appia*. Ramifications into the Empire from the Egnatian Way existed, and it was easy for people and their trade to follow them.

These branches went from one end to Constantinople and Mount Athos, and from the other to Venice and further into Italy, and also to sections of the Silk Road. They were constructed despite increasing attacks effected by the Barbary Pirates that populated North Africa from the beginning of the eight century – especially in the Western Mediterranean.

The maps in **figs. 1** and **2** illustrate the *Via Egnatia* during the Byzantine Empire as well as today since chiefly it has the same itinerary. The Romans built this route in the second century BC, during the Republic, between 146 BC and 120 BC, on the orders of the proconsul of Macedonia Gnaeus Egnatius.⁶

⁶ Gnaeus Egnatius appears in the historical records around the year 149 BC, where he is introduced as the senior witness to a *Senatus consultum* sent to Corcyra. Egnatius was elected Praetor sometime prior to 146 BC and following this he was assigned the newly created province of Macedonia as its Proconsular governor, replacing Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus who had just finished pacifying the area. See, inter alia, BRENNAN, Corey T. *The Praetorship in the Roman Republic*, 2000, vol. 2; and BROUGHTON, Robert S. T. *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic*, 1986, vol. 3.



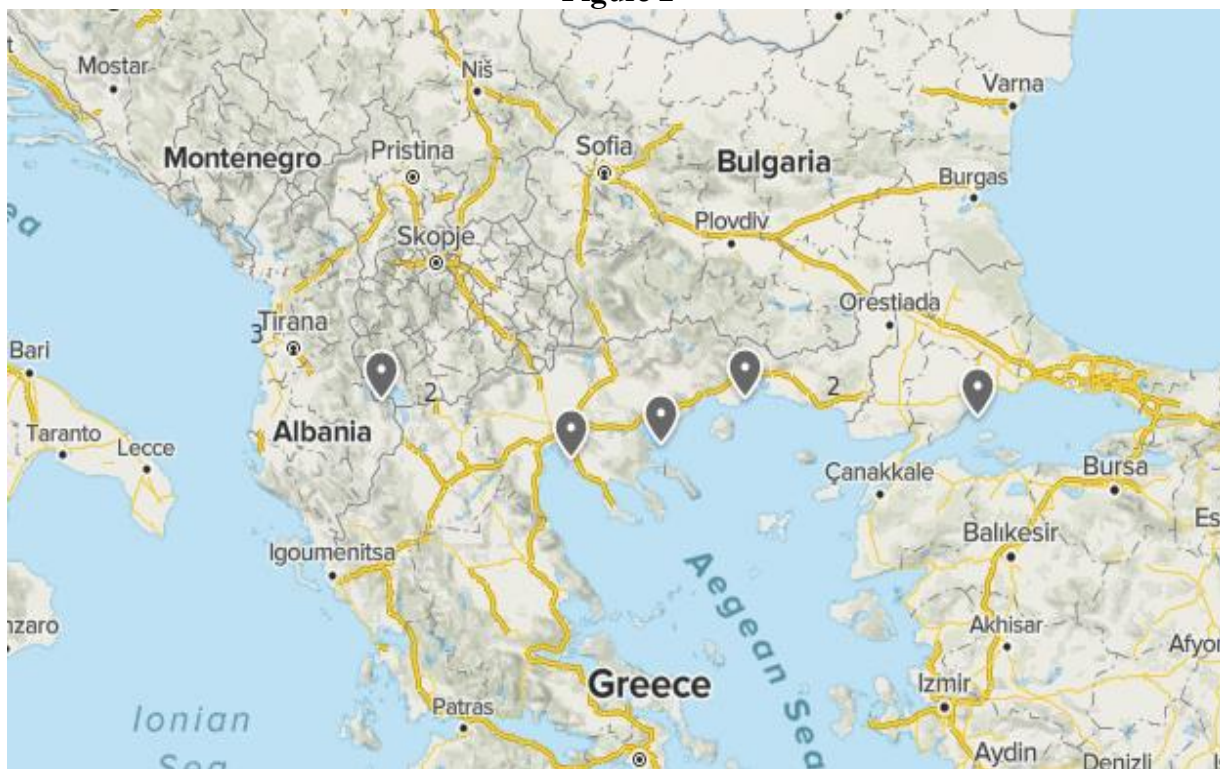
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Figure 1



[Via Egnatia today.](#)

Figure 2



[Via Egnatia today in context.](#)



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The bibliography regarding the commerce and the economy along the *Via Egnatia* includes, for example, titles by Angeliki E. Laiou,⁷ Cécile Morrisson,⁸ Sophia Menache, Benjamin Z. Kedar, Michel Balard,⁹ Vladislav Popovic, Vujadin Ivanišević,¹⁰ Denis Feissel,¹¹ Jacques Lefort,¹² Jean-Pierre Sodini,¹³ John William Nesbitt,¹⁴ and Georg-D.

⁷ LAIOU, Angeliki E. “Economic Concerns and Attitudes of the Intellectuals of Thessalonike”. In: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 57, 2003, pp. 205-223; LAIOU, A. E. (ed.). *The economic history of Byzantium: from the seventh through the fifteenth century*. Washington D.C: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Dumbarton Oaks studies, 39, ©2002; second edition 2009-2013, vols.1-3; LAIOU, Angeliki E.; MORRISSON, Cécile. *Le monde byzantin. Byzance et ses voisins 1204-1453*, book 3: L’empire grec et ses voisins, XIIIe-XVe siècle, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011; LAIOU, Angeliki E.; MORRISSON, Cécile. *The Byzantine Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

⁸ MORRISSON, Cécile; SCHAAF, Georg-D. *Byzance et sa monnaie: IVe-XVe siècle: précis de numismatique byzantine*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2015; MORRISSON, Cécile (ed.). *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2012; MORRISSON, Cécile (dir.). *Le Monde byzantine I. L’Empire romain d’Orient (330-641)*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2004; MORRISSON, Cécile. *Les Échanges au Moyen Âge: Justinien, Mahomet, Charlemagne; trois empires dans l’économie médiévale*. Dossiers d’archéologie 256, Sept. 2000, Dijon: Faton, 2000; MORRISSON, Cécile; SCHAAF, Georg-D. *Byzance et sa monnaie: IVe-XVe siècle: précis de numismatique byzantine*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2015; MORRISSON, Cécile; NESBITT, John William. *Catalogue of Byzantine seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art, 6: Emperors, patriarchs of Constantinople, addenda*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Dumbarton Oaks studies, 2009; MORRISSON, Cécile; POPOVIC, Vladislav; IVANIŠEVIĆ, Vujadin. *Les Trésor monétaires byzantins des Balkans et d’Asie Mineure (491-713)*. Paris: Lethielleux, 2006.

⁹ MENACHE, Sophia; KEDAR, Benjamin Z.; BALARD, Michel (eds.). *Crusading and Trading between West and East: Studies in Honour of David Jacoby*. London: Routledge, 2018.

¹⁰ MORRISSON, Cécile; POPOVIC, Vladislav; IVANIŠEVIĆ, Vujadin. *Les Trésor monétaires byzantins des Balkans et d’Asie Mineure (491-713)*. Paris: Lethielleux, 2006.

¹¹ FEISSEL, Denis; Cécile Morrisson; CHEYNET, Jean-Claude. *Trois donations byzantines au Cabinet des Médailles: Froehner (1925); Schlumberger (1929); Zacos (1998)*, Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2001 (exposition organised on the occasion of the XXe Congrès International des Etudes Byzantines à Paris, 16 July - 14 October 2001).

¹² LEFORT, Jacques; MORRISSON, Cécile; SODINI, Jean-Pierre (eds.). *Les Villages dans l’Empire byzantin, IVe-XVe siècle*. Paris: Lethielleux, 2005.

¹³ LEFORT, Jacques; MORRISSON, Cécile; SODINI, Jean-Pierre (eds.). *Les Villages dans l’Empire byzantin, IVe-XVe siècle*. Paris: Lethielleux, 2005.

¹⁴ MORRISSON, Cécile; NESBITT, John William. *Catalogue of Byzantine seals at Dumbarton Oaks and in the Fogg Museum of Art, 6: Emperors, patriarchs of Constantinople, addenda*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Dumbarton Oaks studies, 2009.



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Schaaf.¹⁵ My own above-mentioned book has sections that refer to the Egnatian Way, its ramifications, and especially to the consequences of its existence for trade and cultural exchanges within the Byzantine Empire. Morrisson, in a paper that came out with *Dumbarton Oaks* in 2003, explains how money produced in Thessaloniki between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries were disseminated beyond the city;¹⁶ *Via Egnatia* made that possible.

From among the *waterways* that connect a particular city in Southern Europe with the Mediterranean Sea during the existence of the Byzantine Empire, that originating in Florence is reasonable documented. Therefore, I will elaborate here on it to some extent. Regardless the modern debates that focus on establishing the date of the first settlement on the site of contemporary Florence: either around the sixth century BC (by the Etruscans known in Antiquity as *Tyrrheoi*¹⁷) or after 59 BC (the year in which Julius Cesar was appointed consul)¹⁸, the inhabitants of Po Valley and of the Tyrrhenian coast (what is now Tuscany) had an intense trade in pottery and metalwork with the Greek cities that existed in southern Italy, as Christopher Hibbert indicates.¹⁹

The citadel of Florentia was so prosperous that “Long before 325 when Constantine the Great [...] had presided over a General Council of the Church of Nicaea, merchants and traders from the eastern Mediterranean, Greeks and Syrian and Jews, had been riding into [it].”²⁰ As early as the second century AD, from the time of Emperor Hadrian (reigned 117-138 AD), an intense commercial and artistic traffic was carried out between Florence and the Mediterranean, especially its eastern side.

From that time and all throughout the Byzantine era cooper vessels, woollen goods, wine, oil, livestock, and wood from the forests surrounding the town were transported either along the river [Arno] to Pisa or on land north across the Apennines to Venice,

¹⁵ MORRISSON, Cécile; SCHAAF, Georg-D. *Byzance et sa monnaie: IV^e-XV^e siècle: précis de numismatique byzantine*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2015.

¹⁶ MORRISSON, Cécile. “The Emperor, the Saint, and the City: Coinage and Money in Thessalonike from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth. Century”. In: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 57, 2003, pp. 173-203.

¹⁷ Herodotus believed that the Etruscans came from Lydia.

¹⁸ HIBBERT, Christopher. *Florence: The Biography of a City*. London: Penguin, 1994, p. 2.

¹⁹ HIBBERT, Christopher. *Florence: The Biography of a City*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁰ HIBBERT, Christopher. *Florence: The Biography of a City*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.



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and from these cities to the sea in order to reach other lands, including some belonging to the Byzantine Empire.²¹ Gradually Florence became full of luxurious villas with gardens; the forests disappeared in time making space for orchards and vineyards, cornfields, as well as olive groves.

Also the buildings in town acquired large courtyards and marble, statues, colonnades, and sometimes the masters themselves arrived in Florence from Greece and Rome to decorate those and laid mosaics on their floors.²² The banking system developed more and more, and divisions of local banks were opened in other cities and countries.²³

II. Byzantium's commercial relations with Northern Europe

Regarding the trade of Byzantium with Northern Europe, from among the publications that exist – not very numerous – those of Haki Antonsson and Ildar H. Garipzanov, *Saints in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe between 1000 and 1200*,²⁴ Malcolm D. Lambert's book about the Cathars,²⁵ and Agustí Alemany, *Sources on the Alans*²⁶ are three significant examples.

Also volume 6 of *The new Cambridge medieval history (c.1300-c.1415)* published in 2015 by Cambridge University Press²⁷ brings valuable contributions to the subject. Michael McCormick's considerations in its seminal article "Byzantium's Role in the Formation of Early Medieval Civilization: Approaches and Problems" are still relevant today and they bear on the relationship between Byzantium and Europe, including the Northern part of the continent; Byzantine trade and commerce are important parts of European

²¹ HIBBERT, Christopher. *Florence: The Biography of a City*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

²² HIBBERT, Christopher. *Florence: The Biography of a City*, *op. cit.* p. 4.

²³ HIBBERT, Christopher. *Florence: The Biography of a City*, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

²⁴ ANTONSSON, Haki; GARIPZANOV, Ildar H. *Saints and their lives on the periphery. Veneration of Saints in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe (c. 1000-1200)*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010.

²⁵ LAMBERT, Malcolm D. *The Cathars*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.

²⁶ ALEMANY, Agustí. "Byzantine Sources". *Sources on the Alans: A Critical Compilation*. Leiden: Brill, 2000. Aland established the kingdom of Alania in the North Caucasus in the ninth century, and this survived until the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century CE

²⁷ JONES, Michael C. E. (ed.). *The new Cambridge medieval history; volume 6, c.1300-c.1415*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.



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medieval civilization.²⁸ So are those of Jonathan Shepard,²⁹ Anthea Harris, and Jörg Drauschke, for example.³⁰

This literature offers the details that prove that the merchants followed the same routes which the religious and the military people did; it is obvious that they did so, but it is always desirable to provide more evidence – in our case, especially with regard to particular roads. Concerning this aspect, in an article published in 2010, Garipzanov states that during the existence of the Byzantine Empire: “Trading contacts via the Baltic Sea were [...] important.

It is not coincidental that in the same period or slightly later [NB i.e. the twelfth century] Nicholas became the favoured patron saint of early churches founded in newly Christianized Pomerania – that is, along the southern coast of the Baltic Sea on the way from northern Germany and Denmark to Novgorod – for instance, in Kamien and Gdansk.”³¹ The map represented in **fig. 3** shows not only that these itineraries were followed also by goods, but which of them were traded along these in various parts of Europe as well.

²⁸ MCCORMICK, Michael. “Byzantium’s Role in the Formation of Early Medieval Civilization: Approaches and Problems”. In: *Illinois Classical Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2: Byzantium and its Legacy (FALL/1987), pp. 207-220.

²⁹ SHEPARD, Jonathan (ed.). *Emergent Elites and Byzantium in the Balkans and East-Central Europe* (Variorum Collected Studies Series, 953). Farnham, Eng., and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate/Routledge, 2011.

³⁰ DRAUSCHKE, Jörg. “Byzantine’ and ‘oriental’ imports in the Merovingian Empire”. In: HARRIS, Anthea (ed.). *Incipient Globalization? Long-distance contacts in the sixth century*, British Archaeological Reports International Series, London: BAR Publishing, 2007, pp. 52-73.

³¹ GARIPZANOV, Ildar H. “The cult of St. Nicholas in the Early Christian in the Early Christian North (c. 1000-1150)”. In: *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 35, n. 03, 2010, p. 142. See also ANTONSSON, Haki; GARIPZANOV, Ildar H. *Saints and their lives on the periphery. Veneration of Saints in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe (c. 1000-1200)*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010; CHRISTIE, Haakon. “Old Oslo”. In: *Medieval Archaeology* 10, 1966, pp. 45-58, and DIETRICHSON, Lorentz. *Sammenlignede Fortegnelse over Norges Kirkebygninger I Middelalderen og Nutiden*. Kristiania: Mallings, 1888, p. 6.



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Figure 3



Map indicating commercial routes between the Mediterranean and the North Sea, including the British Isles. [Source](#).

One can see that while from around Novgorod furs were sent to the South, from the Mediterranean – areas close to Constantinople and Thessaloniki – grain, wine, and oil were sent to the North. From around Jerusalem, Damascus, and Alexandria spices, glassware, ceramics, and carpets were transported to Northern Europe. This trade took place both on the land and on the sea. The map in figure 4 show how those routes developed between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries, including at the time of Constantinople’s conquest.



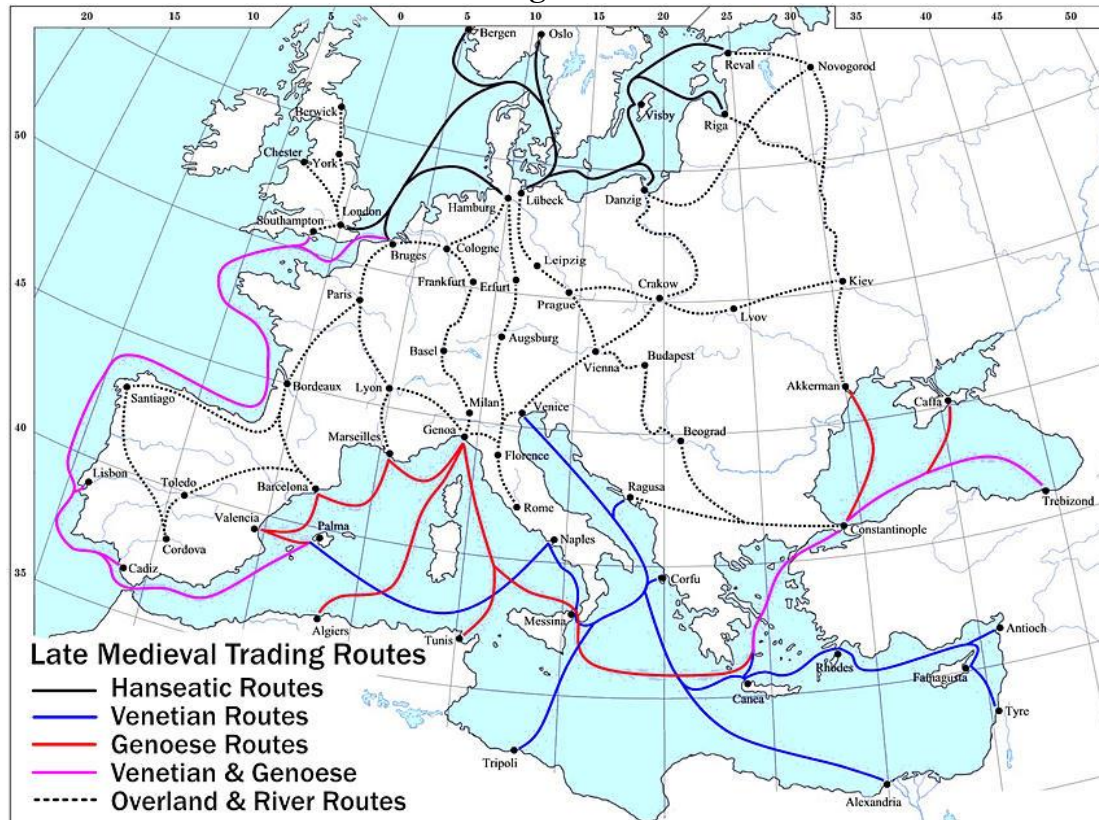
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Figure 4



Map indicating commercial routes between the Mediterranean and the North Sea, including the British Isles. [Source](#). The image is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 licence.

Among the important European manufacturing and commercial centres that flourished during the existence of the Byzantine Empire, in addition to the above-mentioned Florence and, for instance, Troyes in France, within the North of the continent Bruges and Ghent in Belgium, as well as York and Winchester on the British Isles are to be mentioned.

Those also held markets and trade fairs where both raw materials and finished goods – some locally produced and some imported– were traded.

The map represented in **figure 5** indicates some European commercial centres in the thirteenth century, including in some detail the routes that crossed the North Sea to the British Isles, on which trade I shall concentrate now.



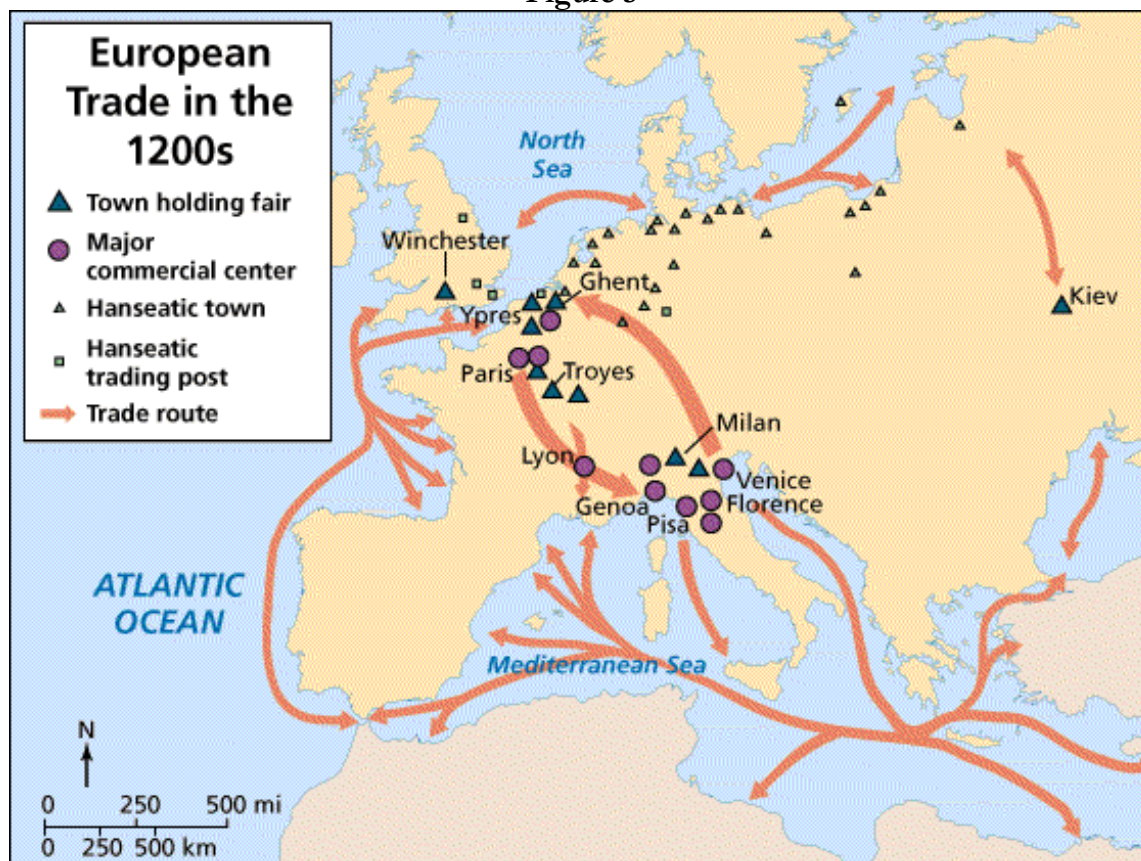
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Figure 5



Map indicating commercial routes between the Mediterranean and the British Isles in the thirteenth century. [Source](#).

Because during the existence of the Byzantine Empire the Mediterranean and the North Sea were connected by trade and other interests, various objects reached Britain quite early in its history.

To begin with, we can show a famous object, a Byzantine bucket that reached England in the sixth century AD. It was found near Sutton Hoo; **fig. 6**.



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Figure 6



Bucket made of copper alloy; 330 AD - 900 AD; 140 mm (Height); 240 mm (Diameter); 1.5 mm (thickness); Sutton Hoo, Suffolk; NT 1433741; [Source](#).

Another object coming from the Mediterranean is a wooden Italo-Byzantine triptych representing The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints (Saints Peter, Paul, and four angels). It also shows fourteen other saints, four angels, the Crucifixion and Annunciation, and the evangelical beasts; **fig. 7**.

This icon of three hinged panels is today in the collection at Polesden Lacey.



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Figure 7



The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints (Italo-Byzantine School) – Saints Peter, Paul, and four angels); It also shows fourteen other saints, four angels, the Crucifixion and Annunciation, and the evangelical beasts; Egg tempera and gold on wooden panel, circa 1317-1350; Venice, dimension, 394 x 279 mm; today in Polesden Lacey, Surrey (Accredited Museum) NT 1246462. Polesden Lacy © [National Trust Images/The National Gallery/London](https://www.nationaltrustimages.com/).



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Another icon of which original reached the British Isles via Ottonian Germany is a relief-sculpture that represents the Virgin and Child (c. eleventh century; Byzantine Macedonian period); **fig. 8**. It resembles the sculpted Mangana Virgin in the Ottoman Museum, Constantinople/Istanbul, and today is hosted by York Cathedral.

Figure 8



Virgin and Child (c. eleventh century); today in York Cathedral. Source: Virgin and child; Source: V&A Explore The Collections (vam.ac.uk) [i.e. Victoria and Albert Museum)



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Furthermore, a plaque of Mary and the Child in the style of the Byzantine Virgin of Nicopea (dating to early ninth century) is now in Deerhurst Church, Gloucestershire (it was made in the tenth century). Additionally, there are frescoed churches along the coast of Wales and they also display a Byzantine style.

Figure 9



Frescoes from Dorchester Abbey, Oxfordshire; 1340, when it was a Catholic shire. The first bishop of the district, Birinus, who had his See there, was sent by Pope Honorius I (585-638; in See 625-638) in AD 634.



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This fact made me even more aware of people coming from the Mediterranean the British Isles; some went to Ireland/Hibernia as well as to Scotland. More research on these realities needs to be done. Archaeological objects (mainly jewellery and coins) from Byzantium have been found in areas of central and southern Ireland (such as Tara and Cashel).³² Coins have also been found at Newgrange.³³ In the early twelfth century textiles, especially made of linen, came to England from Ypres in Flanders and they were also traded on the markets of Novgorod in Kievan Rus'; that until 1241 when a major fire ruined much of the old city.

Closer to Oxford, where I work, is Dorchester Abbey, Oxfordshire, which has frescoes from 1340, when it was a Catholic shrine. They look like the Byzantine wall paintings. There is no information to attest that the decoration of this church was made by local people or masters from Byzantium that traded their skills, but if I reproduce here some published information, further research might be initiated.

Dorchester church was the seat of a bishopric from 634 AD to 1085. In 634 AD Pope Honorius I (585-638; in See 625-638) sent its first bishop of the district and of the Mercian See, Birinus, who resided in this place. In 1085 the See was transferred to Lincoln.

The abbey of Dorchester was founded later, in 1135 (on the site of an Anglo-Saxon cathedral); it was dedicated to Birinus as well as to Saints Peter and Paul. It was richly endowed from the lands and wealth of the former bishopric, and had twelve parishes subject to it, that were included in the order of Peculiar of Dorchester, until the suppression of this order.

The first abbot appears to have been Alured, whose name occurs in records from 1146 and again in 1163.³⁴ The last was John Mershe, who was elected in 1533, and in the following year subscribed to the king's supremacy, with five of his canons. Sometimes between Alured and Mershe' time in service another abbot invited fresco painters to decorate the church of Dorchester Abbey.

³² BHREATHNACH, Edel (ed.). *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005.

³³ RAFTERY, Barry. *Pagan Celtic Ireland: The enigma of the Irish Iron Age*, London; Thames and Hudson, 1994.

³⁴ STENTON, Frank. *Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.



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One can presume that the decoration and the endowment of this shrine are the result of trade, but so far there is no direct evidence to support an assumption like this. What is certain, as the maps have indicated, is that Byzantium had very active networks.

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