

The following conversation took place in December 2020, after Dr. Paolo Tedesco (University of Tübingen) had delivered a Lecture at the RomanIslam Center and had taken part in some of the activities of the Center. On that occasion, the interviewer sought to contextualize Tedesco's work within a decade of engagement with agrarian history, state-landlord-peasant relationships, and the theory of labor organization, across the Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic Mediterranean.

## *Uneven Trajectories from Rome to Islam*

**Interviewer (I):** *Paolo, your work on taxation, economy and labour in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages is both influential and stimulating. This led us at the RomanIslam Center to invite you to present some of your achievements in our Guest Lecture held in November. On that occasion, you presented the multilinear trajectories of the North African economy following the fifth-century crisis of the imperial tax system - a fascinating topic, despite its complexity. Now we want to explore in more depth the background to your intellectual formation. We are curious to know how you came to be an historian of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. What were your influences? Why did you take up these kinds of questions?*

**Paolo Tedesco (PT):** I will answer your questions in a strictly chronological order. I wanted to become an historian since I was a child, but as someone once said, we do not make our history as we please. We all live and work within circumscribed limits, under the material and symbolic constraints imposed by our historical circumstances. Therefore, after school in 1995, I started working for the Italian state apparatus, with various functions at the beginning. Then from 1998 to 2011, I held a permanent post in the financial administration. While working full time for the government, I received in 2002 my first degree in law (quite significantly, with a thesis on the history of Roman law), but it was only in 2004 that I returned to the study of history. From 2004 to 2009, I studied Medieval History under the supervision of Paolo Delogu at the University La Sapienza of Rome. Delogu introduced me to the Medieval Mediterranean world and to the long afterlife of Pirenne's Thesis. In the same years, I also had the chance to attend the lectures of two students of the late Santo Mazzarino (1916-1987), that is, Mario Mazza and Elio Lo Cascio, who were both teaching in the Department of Ancient History at that time. The explosive combination of these two distinct but intersecting schools of thought (which bear influences from Marx, Weber, Sombart, Dopsch, Pirenne and Croce) led me to focus on the period stretching from 300 to 900 CE, which obviously included the Late Roman, Byzantine, Medieval and Islamic worlds. Whereas my broad interest in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages goes back to this period, which I consider the prehistory of my academic career, the kinds of question that shaped my 'intellectual' journey, and that are still the core of my investigation, emerged later while I was working on my PhD Dissertation in Vienna and Princeton (2012 to 2015). In particular, my research-question as to how 'modern' the late antique and medieval economies really were, developed from the exchange of ideas with John Haldon and Jairus Banaji. These two scholars have had an enormous influence on my work in the course of the last decade.



**I:** *John Haldon is a leading medieval historian of the Eastern Mediterranean and Jairus Banaji is a scholar of Late Antiquity with a deep interest in Islam. They both seem to reflect nicely the essence of the RomanIslam Center. Is this correct?*

**PT:** That is right. Haldon is an historian of the Eastern Roman Empire and Byzantium, but he has also a deep knowledge of pre-modern state formations, in particular the Mughal and Ottoman Empires. As a Byzantinist, his interest in Islam can be summarized in two propositions. His first inquiry deals with how Islam contributed to the transformation of the Eastern Roman Empire from the seventh century onwards. His last book, *The Empire that would not die* (Harvard UP 2016), addresses this question, but it has not yet received the attention it deserves. The second inquiry asks what kind of political and economic structures underpinned the Islamic empires that replaced the Byzantine Empire: were they structurally different from their predecessors? For his part, Banaji is an agrarian historian interested in the history of capitalism and the fate of the peasantry. He has written extensively on the economy of Late Antiquity and on how the monetary revolution of that time shaped the emerging Islamic economy. His recent book *A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism* (Haymarket 2020) is a summary of his work and ideas, and at the same time a programmatic manifesto for future research on the history of capitalism. Intellectually, both scholars belong to the galaxy of historical materialism, and along with Chris Wickham, they are, in my view, the most influential medieval historians of the last fifty years. But I am not a neutral observer in this respect. Their ideas diverge at many points, but they share the fundamental notion that the Eurasian societies that preceded the industrial revolution all had comparable socio-economic structures that varied significantly in their degree of sophistication, but not in their essential form of organization, which involved the presence of a tributary state, a monetary economy, and commercial capital. The combination of all these factors together resulted in the exploitation of the peasantry, or to be more precise, in the exploitation of specific strata of the peasantry. I have written extensively on their achievements, so I do not want to repeat them here; in particular, I do not wish to oversimplify a sophisticated historiographical tradition by picturing some monolithic model that does not correspond to the complexity of their ideas. What I would like to stress here is that owing to these kinds of influences, I have found it natural to interact with those scholars working on the Medieval Middle East, though I am by background a medieval historian of the Western Mediterranean. Obviously, my interest in North Africa, and more recently in the Iberian Peninsula, has somehow facilitated this exploration beyond the traditional disciplinary border. Let me mention a single episode that elucidates this point, and that connects my argument to the function of RomanIslam. In 2018, Roland Steinacher and I organized a conference in Tübingen aimed at exploring the historical trajectories of North Africa from the late Roman period to (roughly) the year 1000 CE. The event was financed by the local DFG Center for Advanced Studies in Migration and Mobility between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. We invited Roman historians, Arabists and Africanists, who all engaged in a lively debate on various crucial topics related to the development of Medieval African societies. We are very pleased with the results of this meeting, which will appear in *Medieval Worlds - the Journal of the Austrian Academy of Sciences* directed by Walter Pohl - in the Fall of 2021. Though fascinating, the meeting was only an isolated occasion for confrontation and exchange. The RomanIslam Center offers instead an exciting opportunity for scholars from different backgrounds to engage in a



systematic and even a programmatic conversation, which could substantially improve the results of our collective as well as individual work in this specific field. Looking at the participants in my lecture, therefore, I was not surprised to see Daniel Syrbe, a valiant Roman historian, and Antonia Bosanquet, a marvelous Arabist, both present at the Tübingen meeting, and working side by side as Fellows of RomanIslam. Neither was it an accident that the debate following Jelle Bruning's paper and mine was very lively and stimulating. I recall plainly that participants such as Pablo Díaz, Peter Fibiger Bang, and Volker Menze raised questions that applied indiscriminately to both the Roman and the Islamic periods, for they dealt with issues such as the monetization of the economy, the ability or inability of the state to react against the endemic thirst for money, and the various strategies that the economic actors adopted to circumvent the failure of the state to respond to their demands. These kinds of questions suggest a historical scenario with comparable structures and constraints. The task of historians is to reveal which actors (state elites, landowners, merchants, or even the peasantry) overcame these limits, rather than to connect political transformations in a mechanical way with changes in economic performance.

**I:** *In the light of all that, what ways forward do you see for the Center and how do you imagine you might contribute to future initiatives?*

**PT:** I spoke briefly about the future plan with Sabine Panzram, the director, together with Stefan Heidemann of RomanIslam. The idea of a yearly thematic call for application is very promising. It should bring together for a sufficient time scholars from different backgrounds who are interested in the same topic, but who do not usually meet each other because the disciplinary boundaries keep them separated. Also, I am really enjoying the present format of the lectures, with two speakers presenting on the same topic from two different perspectives. I hope that the series of lectures will continue in this format and thus might develop into a sort of publication series of the Center: that is, a selection of those lectures which best represent the Center's aims. Concerning the nature and extent of my contribution, I have to stress that the crucial connecting thread between RomanIslam and my work is the DFG. The DFG has financed two Centers of absolute excellence, the one in Tübingen (of which I was a Fellow in 2017) and RomanIslam in Hamburg. These two poles have in turn organized (and continue to organize) conferences, workshops, and seminars on a large spectrum of intersecting themes. I have already mentioned Daniel Syrbe and Antonia Bosanquet's involvement in both enterprises. Let me add that in the Fall of 2021, another meeting under the aegis of the Center for Advanced Studies in Migration and Mobility will take place in Tübingen. Merle Eisenberg (Maryland U.), Jamie Wood (Lincoln U.) and myself are organizing *Approaching the Early Medieval Iberian Economy from the ground up*, a workshop which involves the participation of Sabine Panzram among many other international scholars. Moreover, the DFG is also funding my current project *Globalizing the Mediterranean Economy in the Seventh Century*, whose research-question represents a kind of mandatory juncture for all those interested in the period stretching from 300 to 900 CE. Under these circumstances, as you can see, collaboration between scholars and institutions develops as a natural outcome of the framework created by the DFG.

As a final remark, there is no need to say that I am looking forward to the moment when the economy of Late Antiquity, which in my view includes the economy of Early Islam, will be the main focus of the Center. When that happens, my participation might be more structural and perhaps of some help in defining the economic trajectories from Rome to Islam.