

COMMERCE IN THE DARK AGES: A CRITIQUE OF THE EVIDENCE

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I

WHEN Pirenne contributed an article entitled 'Mahomet et Charlemagne' to the first issue of the *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* in 1922,¹ he can have little realized how the ideas he there put forward were to be developed. His paper was designed as a protest against the traditional and deep-rooted conviction of western scholars that Latin Christendom was the direct and almost the sole heir of classical antiquity. Its argument was the now familiar one that Greco-Roman society survived with little change the shock of the Germanic invasions, and that it was only the appearance of Islam upon the scene that pushed the centre of Latin Christendom away from the Mediterranean and made possible the emergence of a new cultural unit based upon the land mass of western Europe. Medieval Christendom was not a continuation of the Roman world but something new, and Muhammed was a necessary precursor of Charlemagne.

In his first formulation of this point of view, Pirenne was not particularly concerned with economic issues, but he did argue that even after the invasions the west remained under the economic dominance of the east. Jewish and Syrian merchants continued to provide it with luxury goods, and it was through their intermediacy that it received the papyrus used in its chancelleries and the gold necessary for its coinage. Economic emancipation did not occur till the end of the Merovingian period, and when it did occur, it was almost synonymous with economic collapse.

Such opinions were not likely to pass unchallenged, and as discussion of Pirenne's views developed, economic and social considerations came more and more to the fore. Statistical evidence could not be hoped for: for the centuries in question there was a total absence of commercial documents, of customs and taxation

¹ *RBPH*, i (1922), 77-86.

records, of gild regulations, of detailed trade agreements, of the innumerable sources from which we can piece together something like a credible picture of the nature, direction and volume of commerce during the last four centuries of the Middle Ages. The west provided one with nothing comparable even to such Byzantine sources as the *Book of the Prefect* or the *Rhodian Sea Law*, unless the *Capitulare de Villis* could be regarded as coming into such a category. In the absence of quantitative evidence, such scraps of qualitative evidence as were available had to do. Chronicles, ecclesiastical biographies, *Miracula* and *Translationes* of relics, royal and episcopal correspondence, monastic privileges and concessions, Carolingian capitularies and Anglo-Saxon law codes were ransacked for references to traders and trade. Archaeology and in particular numismatics were brought in to help, since they provided much information on the distribution of coin and of certain other types of manufactured articles. The net result by now, thirty-five years after the opening of the great debate, is the very widespread impression that Pirenne and his critics were almost equally wrong. Commerce in the Dark Ages was much more considerable in volume than has been generally allowed, even if less highly organized than it was to be in later centuries.¹

This view I believe to be largely incorrect. It results in the main from the failure to distinguish between three different types of evidence: (i) evidence of the existence of traders, *i.e.* of persons making their living by commerce; (ii) evidence of trade, in the narrow sense of the sale of specialized or surplus goods directly by producer to consumer without the intervention of any third party; and (iii) evidence for the distribution by unspecified means of goods, particularly luxury goods, and money. The confusion between the first two categories is not perhaps very important,

¹ It is not possible here to attempt a bibliography. Pirenne's own views were embodied in his posthumously published *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Paris-Brussels, 1937). Two valuable critical studies, concentrating on certain aspects and including much bibliographical material, are R. S. Lopez, 'Mohammed and Charlemagne: a revision', *Speculum*, xviii (1943), 14-38, and D. C. Dennett, 'Pirenne and Muhammad', *ibid.*, xxiii (1948), 165-90. A résumé of the views of Alfons Dopsch will be found in his *Naturalwirtschaft und Geldwirtschaft in die Weltgeschichte* (Vienna, 1930), pp. 110 *seq.* Many works on specific topics are referred to below. The most recent general survey is R. Latouche, *Les Origines de l'économie occidentale* (Paris, 1956).

but that between trade and distribution, and still more the habit of treating evidence for the distribution of luxury goods and coin as if it were nothing more than supplementary evidence of the existence and activity of traders, is of a serious character. It involves the error of reading history backwards—or in this case also forwards: of assuming that because material goods were later, as they had been in Roman times, distributed largely by the agency of trade, the same was necessarily the case in the Dark Ages. Even the briefest reflection must show that this is scarcely likely to have been the case. The whole approach, that of accumulating evidence for the existence of trade instead of trying to form an overall picture of how and to what extent material goods changed ownership, is in itself profoundly misleading and can only result in conclusions that are far from the truth.

II

The confusion between 'traders' and 'trade' need not delay us for long. *Mercator* and *negotiator* were elastic terms. They could cover a *quidam pauperculus* hawking a mule-load of salt between Paris and Orléans, or two petty traders in the Saturday market at Fleury quarrelling over a shilling,¹ just as effectively as rich Syrian or Jewish traders who dealt in slaves and spices or wealthy merchants at Mainz who bought corn in the upper Main valley and sold it in the Rhineland. The merchants of Verdun who are found specializing in the slave trade in the ninth and tenth centuries, shipping their unhappy merchandise from eastern Europe or Britain as far afield as Spain and Constantinople, may well have vied in wealth with some of their counterparts in the Islamic or Byzantine worlds. Merchants of these various types, ranging from pedlars to rich traders but alike in the fact that commerce was their profession and means of livelihood, existed throughout the Dark Ages. Only their numbers and character, and to some extent the regions in which they operated, altered with the passage of time.

The *mercatores* dealt mainly, though not exclusively, in goods that were to some degree luxuries; only exceptionally did they deal in corn or clothing. The ordinary surplus of a great estate, the eggs

¹ Cf. E. Sabbe, 'Quelques types de marchands des IXe et Xe siècles', *RBPH*, xiii (1934), 176–87.

and chickens and the fish from the fish ponds which the lord's household did not need and which the steward in the *Capitulare de Villis*¹ is told to use his discretion over selling, would go to the local market; only when an estate was of a specialized character, possessing vineyards or salt deposits or minerals, were professional *mercatores* likely to be interested in its produce. The development of this local buying and selling can probably be related to the transition from gold to silver as a medium of exchange in the last quarter of the seventh century. The spread of a silver coinage in regions where no coin had previously circulated—Mercia and Wessex in the ninth century, Germany and east central Europe in the tenth—is intimately connected with its further extension.

The development of markets—and grants of *moneta* are closely associated with those of *mercatum publicum* and *teloneum*—is one of the most noticeable features of the economic history of the ninth and tenth centuries, but while recognizing the importance of the mutual buying and selling of surplus farm produce or peasant handicrafts, we must be careful to distinguish its economic consequences from those of the activities of the *mercatores*. Such exchanges might in varying degrees raise the standard of life of those participating in them, but they would only rarely serve as a stimulus to increasing output and to saving and investment. It is here that the activities of the *mercatores* left their mark: they injected the element of a profit motive into a society so organized as to exclude it from many aspects of its daily life. Mr. Southern has with characteristic felicity described the far-reaching consequences of 'the taste for spices and the charm of luxuries':

it was to satisfy this taste that merchants travelled, sailors perished, bankers created credit and peasants raised the numbers of their sheep. As so often happens, the secondary effects are more interesting than the primary ones: . . . the activities and organization which existed to satisfy the demands of the relatively few coloured the whole history of the Middle Ages, and are the foundations of modern commerce and industry.²

One of my colleagues, a specialist on the economy of under-

¹ *Capitulare de Villis*, cc. 39, 65 (in *Capitularia regum Francorum*, ed. A. Boretius, i (Hanover, 1883), pp. 86, 89).

² R. W. Southern, *The making of the Middle Ages* (London, 1953), p. 42.

developed counties, has commented to me on the insight displayed in this passage, since in regions as far apart as west Africa and Malaya he had again and again seen the same process at work at the present day.

In dealing with the economic life of the Dark Ages, therefore, there are good reasons for keeping these two types of trade separate from one another. The undoubted importance of the Vikings in the economic development of Europe¹ has often been attributed to their interest in trade and supported by somewhat unconvincing parallels between their activities and those of Elizabethan buccaneers in whose enterprises no hard and fast line between piracy and commerce can be drawn. The situation of the two was in fact very different. The background in the one case was a society with a money economy in which the profit motive, if not dominant, played at least a leading role; in the other it was a society in which coined money did not even exist and money and the concept of mercantile profit were alike in an embryonic stage. The reputation of the Vikings as traders depends very largely on archaeological evidence, which is ambiguous, or on the misinterpretation of such texts as that which describes their first landing at Dorchester, when they were taken for peaceful merchants instead of pirates.² It is true that Franks had to be prohibited from selling them arms and horses³ and that Danegeld

¹ See particularly A. Bugge, 'Die nordeuropäischen Verkehrswege im frühen Mittelalter und die Bedeutung der Wikinger für die Entwicklung des europäischen Handels und der europäischen Schifffahrt', *Vierteljahrsschrift f. Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, iv (1906), 227-77; P. Kletler, *Nordwesteuropas Verkehr, Handel und Gewerbe im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna, 1924); H. Arbman, *Schweden und das karolingische Reich. Studien zu den Handelverbindungen der 9. Jahrhunderts* (Stockholm, 1937); and the work of Jankuhn referred to below, p. 136, n. For a very sceptical approach, see F. J. Himly, 'Y a-t-il emprise musulmane sur l'économie des états européens du VIIIe au Xe siècle?', *Revue suisse d'histoire*, v (1955), 35-48.

² Aethelweard, *Chronicon*, iii. 1 (in H. Petrie, *Monumenta Historica Britannica*, i (1848), p. 509). The king's reeve ordered them to come to Dorchester, *putans eos magis negotiatores esse quam hostes*. The text does not imply that he believed them to be *Scandinavian* traders, and the terms of Alcuin's letter to King Aethelred on the sack of Lindisfarne, in which he expresses his amazement that Scandinavians should have made such a voyage (*nec eiusmodi navigium fieri posse putabatur*), sufficiently shows that they cannot have been regarded as such (*Mon. Germ. Hist., Epist. Karolini Aevi*, ii. 42).

³ *Edictum Pistense*, c. 25 (in *Capitularia*, ii. 321).

sometimes included a demand for wine as well as gold and silver,¹ but these objects were obviously required for use, not for sale. This was trade, if you like, but it scarcely proves that the Vikings were traders. Their importance in the history of European commerce resulted, it seems to me, from quite different considerations: by their accumulation of treasure they naturally encouraged enterprising merchants to attempt to relieve them of it by offering them goods in exchange. These hopes were sometimes disappointed, as in the case of the luckless merchants who made their way into Asselt in 882 hoping to trade with the victors and were massacred for their pains.² Even in the case of such acknowledged trading centres as Hedeby and Birka we do not know how far the 'trade' was in Viking hands or how far their influence extended.

Furthermore, in recognizing the existence of traders and of trade, we must also remember that purchase was not the 'natural' way in which a household in the Dark Ages strove to satisfy its needs. Its ambition was to become as self-sufficient as possible. Lesser households could not hope to match the range of produce envisaged in the *Capitulare de Villis*, but the desire to do so was a universal one. The efforts made by monasteries to acquire 'propriétés excentriques' which would supply them with wine or salt or wax was not characteristic of the Carolingian era and a contracting economy, as Van Werveke argued,³ it was natural and reasonable in itself and examples of it can be found in any of the centuries for which a reasonable documentation exists.⁴ Buying was only resorted to when all else failed. Einhard might resign himself to paying £50 for the lead required to cover the roof of

¹ E.g. *Annales Bertiniani*, a. 866 (ed. G. Waitz, Hanover, 1883, p. 81).

² *Annales Fuldenses*, a. 882 (ed. F. Kurze, Hanover, 1891, pp. 98–99). Kurze's identification of *Ascloha* with *Elsloo* is incorrect.

³ H. Van Werveke, 'Comment les établissements religieux belges se procuraient-ils du vin au haut moyen âge', *RBPH*, ii (1923), 643–62; 'Les propriétés excentriques des églises au haut moyen-âge', *ibid.*, iv (1925), 136–41.

⁴ Van Werveke's views were criticized by Dennett, *op. cit.* (above, p. 124, n. 1), pp. 188–9, who points out that the grants of vineyards cited date from anywhere between 650 and 1180. He himself regards it as a form of investment. It seems to me that Van Werveke is correct in treating it as an urge towards greater self-sufficiency, since the grouping together of estates with products complementary to one another is found elsewhere, but that difficulties over purchasing the commodities had nothing to do with it.

his church at Seligenstadt,¹ but Servatus Lupus preferred to write directly to the king of Wessex and a court official named Felix and beg for the metal he wanted as a gift. Merchants would thus be excluded from the transaction; the lead would be paid for not in material wealth but in the promise of prayers, and the abbot arranged to send his serfs to the mouth of the Canche to collect the lead and bring it by barge to the abbey.² Similarly, when Pope Adrian I was promised a thousand pounds of lead for the repair of the roof of St. Peter's, he requested Charlemagne to have it sent in hundred-pound packages in the baggage of court officials who happened to be visiting Rome, instead of arranging its transport by the care of traders.³ In both these transactions we are in the presence not of commerce but of a form of gift-exchange to which we will return in a moment.

III

Distortion of the picture arises less from the confusion of traders with trade than from the assumption that goods and money necessarily passed from one hand to another only by means of trade. Here we come up squarely against the archaeological evidence, which in its very nature substitutes inference for explanation. It has been said that the spade cannot lie, but it owes this merit in part to the fact that it cannot speak. There is of course some written evidence, such as references to silks, spices, ivories and similar objects in the inventories of monastic possessions or in the correspondence of the time. But the evidence is mainly archaeological: the finding of Byzantine coins and silver plate in such hoards as Pereshschepino and Sutton Hoo, of 'Coptic' bronze bowls and Frankish brooches in England, of Islamic silver coins in gigantic quantities in eastern Europe and Scandinavia. The importance of this type of evidence has grown enormously in recent years, since archaeological advances in the last half-century now enable us to speak with greater assurance than was previously possible on the dates and places of origin of

¹ *Epistolae*, no. 36 (*Epist. Karolini aevi*, iii, 128). See H. Van Werveke, 'Note sur le commerce du plomb au moyen âge', in *Mélanges d'histoire offerts à Henri Pirenne* (Brussels, 1926), pp. 653-62.

² Loup de Ferrières, *Correspondance*, ed. L. Levillain, ii (Paris, 1935), 70-74. Cf. also below, p. 139, n. 3.

³ *Codex Carolinus*, no. 78 (*Epist. Karol. aevi*, i, 670).

many of the objects that have been found. Almost all scholars who have written about them have assumed that they reached their destination through the medium of trade. This is particularly true of numismatists, whose approach to the whole subject is sometimes one of singular naïvety. Walter Hävernick, perhaps the most distinguished living German numismatist, virtually assumes that even coins of an exceptional character, like the gold *solidi* of Louis the Pious, were produced for commercial reasons and that since they were distributed in the normal course of trade it is possible to draw valid conclusions regarding trade routes from studying the localities in which they have been found.¹ One of the best of English numismatists can write, of a silver coin of Athalaric found at Brighton, that 'this piece can have journeyed hither only by the slow process of trade. In this way it might have taken upwards of a century to reach Britain'²—and this despite the fact that the coin was quite fresh and in good condition when it was found. The most recent work on the economic life of the Dark Ages, Professor A. R. Lewis's *The Northern Seas*,³ takes it for granted that trade, and trade alone, was responsible for the distribution of goods and coins in the centuries with which he deals.⁴

IV

Such a view is altogether too narrow, and prejudices too many issues. There are other means whereby goods can pass from hand

¹ 'Die Anfänge der karolingische Goldprägung in Nordwesteuropa', *Hamburger Beiträge zur Numismatik*, ii/vi (1954), 55–60.

² C. H. V. Sutherland, 'Post-Roman coins found at Brighton', *Numismatic Chronicle*, 6th ser., i (1941), 87.

³ Princeton, 1958. This book is frequently unreliable over details, quite apart from the deductions based upon them: e.g. on pp. 208 and 305 the Delgany hoard is cited as having contained Frankish coins and consequently providing evidence of commercial relations between Ireland and Gaul. Not only is its commercial character unproven and unlikely—Evans, who described the hoard, believed that it came from a Viking raid on Kent—but it contained no Frankish coins at all.

⁴ The titles of many books on the subject testify to the interpretation placed upon the evidence by their authors. Cf. C. A. Nordman, 'Schatzfunde und Handelsverbindungen in Finnlands Wikingerzeit', *Acta Archaeologica*, xiii (1942), 272–93; H. L. Adelson, *Light weight solidi and Byzantine trade during the sixth and seventh centuries* (American Numismatic Society, Notes and Monographs, No. 138. New York, 1957).

to hand, means which must have played a more conspicuous part in the society of the Dark Ages than they would in more settled and advanced periods. They can be characterized most briefly as 'theft' and 'gift', using 'theft' to include all unilateral transfers of property which take place involuntarily—plunder in war would be the commonest type—and 'gift' to cover all those which take place with the free consent of the donor. Somewhere between the two would be a varied series of payments, such as ransoms, compensations, and fines, while such payments as dowries, the wages of mercenaries, property carried to and fro by political exiles, would all form part of the picture. Our difficulty lies in trying to estimate their relative importance.

We need not linger long over the category of 'theft'. Life in the early middle ages was insecure in the extreme, and plundering raids, highway robbery and theft in the narrow sense were everywhere of frequent occurrence. There is a curious clause in the laws of Ine of Wessex which seeks to define the various types of forcible attack to which a householder and his property might be subjected: if less than seven men are involved, they are thieves; if between seven and thirty-five, they form a gang; if above thirty-five, they are a military expedition.¹ Such phrases as *cum predam* or *captis thesauris* form a regular accompaniment to the accounts of wars in Gregory of Tours and Fredegarus. Plunder and robbery must be accounted factors of major importance in the distribution of valuables in the Dark Ages, and would sometimes be effective over a considerable area. Gifts from the plundered Avar treasure were sent to English kings and bishops as well as to favoured recipients throughout the Frankish kingdom,² and much of the plate and many of the silks and oriental embroideries which occur in ninth-century ecclesiastical inventories had probably passed through Avar hands.

Almost equally important, and in their total bulk far overshadowing transfers of bullion for commercial purposes, were payments of a purely political character. These might be war indemnities, annual tributes, *ex gratia* payments intended to keep

¹ Cap. 12, § 1.

² Cf. *Annales regni Francorum*, a. 796 (ed. F. Kurze, Hanover, 1895, p. 98); Alcuin, *Epist.*, no. 100 (*Epist. Karol. aevi*, ii. 146). Offa received a sword-belt, a *gladium Hunicum* and two *pallia sirica*.

a potentially troublesome neighbour in a good humour, or the purchase of services under specific circumstances and on carefully defined conditions. The distribution of gold, in particular, must have been largely influenced by the political payments which bulk so large in the history of Byzantine foreign relations from the fifth century onwards. Theodosius II, for example, was compelled in c. 430 to promise an annual tribute of 350 lbs. of gold a year to the Huns, a figure which was doubled in 435 and sextupled—with a lump payment of 6000 lbs.—in 443, the consequent payment of 2,100 lbs. a year continuing down to the accession of Marcian.¹ His successors were only to a slight degree more fortunate, and if Germans and Avars were normally less well placed to bring pressure on the empire than the Huns had been, the tradition of tribute continued throughout the sixth and well into the seventh century. We find Maurice paying 50,000 solidi to Childebert II in the hopes of enlisting his aid against the Lombards,² while the exarch of Ravenna had to buy off the attacks of the latter by an annual tribute of 300 lbs. of gold.³ Similar payments, sometimes in one direction and sometimes in the other, played a major part in Byzantine–Arab relations, and the huge sums involved in such transactions—the 6000 lbs. of gold paid to the Huns in 443 would have amounted to nearly half a million solidi—must have largely determined the distribution of bullion between the Byzantine empire and its neighbours.

Political payments of a similar character were also effective within the barbarian world itself. Witigis paid the Franks 2000 lbs. of gold in the hope of securing their neutrality in the Gothic war.⁴ At one moment, in the late sixth century, the Lombards were paying the Franks an annual tribute of 12,000 gold solidi.⁵ It was probably a Beneventan tribute paid in gold

¹ E. A. Thompson, *A History of Attila and the Huns* (Oxford, 1948), p. 161.

² Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, vi. 42 (*Script. rer. Merov.*, i. 282).

³ Fredegarius, iv. 69 (*Script. rer. Merov.*, ii. 155).

⁴ Procopius, *De bello Gothico*, i. 13, 14, 27 (Loeb edn., vol. iii. 136, 140). The Byzantines had earlier tried to buy Frankish support (*ibid.*, i. 5.10; vol. iii. 44).

⁵ Fredegarius, iv. 45 (pp. 143–4). Fredegarius mentions the bribing of three Frankish nobles with 1,000 solidi apiece.

that made possible the scanty gold coinage of Louis the Pious.¹ The payments of Danegeld by the Franks and Anglo-Saxons were at a later time responsible for the transfer of comparable sums in silver from one part of western Europe to another. Works of art, as well as coin or metal in ingot form, sometimes passed to and fro in a similar fashion. It is notorious that many of the surviving gold medallions of the later empire have been found in Germanic territory and probably reached it by way of gift,² like the gold medallions of Tiberius II which Chilperic I showed with pride to Gregory of Tours.³ When the Visigothic king Sisenand revolted against Swinthila and asked help from Dagobert, he promised in return an immense gold *missorium*, part of the royal treasure of the Goths, which weighed 500 lbs. and had been given by Aetius to King Thorismund two hundred years before. In the end, the Gothic nobles vetoed its alienation, and Dagobert had to content himself with 200,000 gold solidi instead.⁴

Two further facets of diplomatic intercourse, the exchange of gifts between rulers and the expenses of embassies, must not be overlooked. The interchange of gifts can be regarded as a survival of gift-exchange, and will be referred to later. The payment of the expenses of envoys was an extension of the custom of hospitality, but served the not unimportant functions of gratifying and impressing potentially friendly individuals and allowing suspicious governments to exercise some control over their activities. The sums involved were often enormous. Procopius estimated the total lavished by Justinian on a Persian ambassador, including his expenses within the empire and what he was able to take home with him, at 1000 lbs. of gold,⁵ and Constantine Porphyrogenitus

¹ P. Grierson, 'The gold solidus of Louis the Pious and its imitations', *Jaarboek voor Munt- en Penningkunde*, xxxviii (1951), 3-5.

² Cf. E. Babelon, 'La trouvaille de Helleville (Manche) en 1780', *Revue numismatique*, 4th ser., x (1906), 185-9.

³ *Hist. Franc.*, vi. 2 (pp. 245-6).

⁴ Fredegarius, iv. 73 (pp. 157-8). The last figure must be an exaggeration, for the bullion value of a gold object weighing 500 lbs. would only come to 36,000 solidi.

⁵ Procopius, *De bell. Pers.*, ii. 28.44 (Loeb edn., i. 526). We know from Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De ceremoniis*, i. 89-90 (Bonn edn., i. 398-410), that foreign envoys were regarded as imperial guests from the moment that they crossed the frontier and not merely while they were in Constantinople. This is also apparent from Liutprand of Cremona's account of his embassies.

gives the precise reckoning of the payments in silver, amounting to over a million *miliaresia*, which were made to the Russian princess Olga on the occasion of her visit to Constantinople in 957.¹ A substantial proportion of these sums would no doubt be recovered in the form of gratuities before the envoys departed, but much of it would normally leave the empire in the form of either bullion or luxury goods.² In the case of Olga's embassy, the *miliaresia* brought back to Russia must have exceeded the total number of Byzantine silver coins found in that country many times over.

Sums paid in ransoming captives formed likewise an element of great importance in the life of the early Middle Ages. A successful raid into the Byzantine empire would be followed by complex negotiations regarding the fate of those who had been carried off, while towns and cities might have to buy immunity during the actual campaign. Enormous sums of money might change hands in this way. Procopius has recorded the levies of Chosroes on the cities of Syria during the Persian wars of Justinian: 2000 lbs. of silver on Hierapolis and Beroea, 1000 lbs. of gold on Antioch, 1000 lbs. of silver on Apamea, 200 lbs. of gold on Chalcis, 200 lbs. of gold and later a further 500 lbs. on Edessa.³ Such huge figures were no doubt exceptional, and it is probable that in the relations between Byzantium and the west, and within Latin Christendom itself, personal ransoms were as a whole of rather greater significance. A solidus per head was the common reckoning at Constantinople, though it might be higher or lower on occasion: when Maurice broke off negotiations with the khagan of the Avars for the ransom of over 12,000 captured soldiers, they were priced at

¹ *De ceremoniis*, ii. 15 (Bonn edn., i. 594–8). Cf. also the gifts to Saracen ambassadors detailed in the preceding section, e.g. on pp. 584, 592. The *miliaresion* was probably reckoned 24 to the nomisma at this period.

² Cf. the purchase of cloaks by Liutprand of Cremona on his embassies to Constantinople and his consequent difficulties with customs officials (*De legatione*, cc. 53–55; *Opera*, ed. J. Becker (3rd edn., Hanover, 1915), pp. 203–6).

³ Procopius, *De bello Pers.*, ii. 6.24; 7.5–8; 8.4; 11.3, 24; 12.2, 34; 27.46 (Loeb edn., i. 312, 314, 325, 352, 356, 362, 372, 514). The 1000 lbs. of gold at Antioch was not actually paid, and the city was captured and sacked instead, while at Edessa, when Chosroes believed himself on the point of capturing the city, he had demanded that it should hand over either 50,000 lbs. of gold or all the gold and silver it contained (*ibid.*, ii. 26.39; p. 498).

only 4 *keratia*—a sixth of a solidus—apiece.¹ Individuals of any importance were naturally worth a great deal more. When Isaac Comnenus, duke of Antioch and brother of the future emperor Alexius, was captured by the Seljuqs in the reign of Michael VII, a sum of 20,000 nomismata had to be paid for his release,² and the ransom of Romanus IV after the battle of Manzikert was reputed to be a million or even a million and a half nomismata. At Byzantium, amid a mass of legislation forbidding the alienation of church property, an exception is always made *causa redemptionis captivorum; cum non absurdum est*, in the words of the Code of Justinian, *animas hominum quibuscumque causis vel vestimentis praeferri*.³ Probably many of the articles of silverware which left the empire in the sixth and seventh centuries did so for the ransom of prisoners; one remembers that a silver dish in the Pereshschepino hoard had previously belonged to a bishop of Tomi,⁴ and Priscus tells us how a far-sighted bishop of Sirmium set aside the sacred vessels of his church to ransom him in the event of his capture during the campaigns of Attila.⁵

The payment of mercenaries must also not be forgotten. In the later Roman period we hear mainly of the services rendered by neighbouring tribes, or on occasion by the Huns, to such leaders as Stilicho and Aetius, but we are ignorant of the precise figures for which they were hired. Individuals—adventurers or exiles—may have come from even further afield; it is reasonable to conjecture that the gold coins of the fifth and early sixth centuries which have been found in considerable numbers in the Baltic region reached there as payment to mercenaries instead of by trade, as they are frequently assumed to have done.⁶ One of the

¹ Cedrenus, *Historia*, a. 19 Mauricii (Bonn edn., i. 700). His totals do not agree with one another, and it is clear that the number of prisoners was above 12,000, but it is not apparent how the two demonstrable errors in his text should be corrected.

² Nicephorus Bryennius, *Commentarii*, ii. 29 (Bonn edn., p. 99).

³ *Cod. Just.*, 1.2.21. Cf. *Nov. Just.*, 7.8; 65.1; 120.10.

⁴ L. Matzulewitsch, *Byzantinische Antike* (Berlin, 1929), no. 6, pp. 101 seq.

⁵ Priscus, *Excerpta de legationibus* (Bonn edn., pp. 186–7).

⁶ This particular point has been much discussed. T. J. Arne was firmly of the opinion that the coins left the empire as payment for mercenaries ('Solidusfynden på Öland och Gotland', *Fornvännen*, xiv (1919), 107–111; 'Deux nouvelles découvertes de solidi en Gotland', *Acta Archaeologica*, ii (1931), 1–28), a view supported by J. Werner for the Öland but not for the Gotland series ('Zu den auf Öland und Gotland gefundenen byzantinischen

clearest examples of such payments to mercenaries dates from the mid-eleventh century. In the late 1040's there was a sudden spread of Byzantine types in Danish coinage, which up to then had been mainly English in inspiration. It was quite short-lived, starting under Sven Estrithsson (1047-75) during the civil war between him and his predecessor Magnus (1042-47) and ending under St. Cnut (1080-86). But it was intense while it lasted: almost half of the 77 monetary types attributed to Sven Estrithsson are of recognizably Byzantine origin. The explanation is not a sudden expansion of Byzantine trade with Scandinavia, but the return of Harold Hardrada from Constantinople in 1046 with an immense treasure which, if a gloss in Adam of Bremen can be believed, twelve men could scarcely lift.¹ Its dissemination during the twenty years between his return and his death at Stamfordbridge provided the models for this whole remarkable series of coins.²

The compensations and fines of Germanic law would normally result in dissemination of wealth only within relatively restricted areas, but there would be exceptions, as for example when the men of Kent paid 'thirty thousands' to Ine of Wessex in compensation for the death of Mul and his companions or when Theodore of Tarsus induced Aethelbald of Mercia to pay compensation to Ecgfrid of Northumbria after the death of the latter's brother at the battle of the Trent.³ Dowries might be important: a Frankish princess took with her fifty waggon-loads of treasure in gold, silver and other valuables when she set out to marry Reccared of Spain.⁴ The constant movement of exiles to and fro

Goldmünzen', *Fornvännen*, xlv (1949), 257-86). A non-commercial origin seems to me indicated by the uncirculated condition of many of the coins and by the dating of the hoards, notably by the coincidence between the fall of the Ostrogothic kingdom and the ending of the Gotland series in the 550's. H. Jankuhn in his capital study 'Der fränkisch-friesische Handel zur Ostsee im frühen Mittelalter' (*Vierteljahrschrift f. Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, xl (1953), 193-243) regards them as commercial imports.

¹ *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, iii. 51, Schol. 84 (*Mon. Germ. Hist., Script.*, vii. 356). The scribe believed that Harold still had at least the bulk of it in his possession at the time of his death, and that it fell to William the Conqueror, which is certainly incorrect.

² Cf. P. Hauberg, 'De l'influence byzantine sur les monnaies de Danemark au XIe siècle', *Congrès international de numismatique* (Paris, 1900), pp. 335-45.

³ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Parker MS.), a. 694; Bede, *Hist. eccles.*, iv. 19.

⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Hist. Franc.*, vi. 45 (p. 284).

must also not be forgotten. Lombard exiles in Bavaria, Frankish exiles in Ireland, Northumbrian exiles at the court of Charlemagne would rarely be entirely penniless, and the feuds of the Germanic world must have frequently contributed to the transfer of jewellery and personal valuables from one country to another.

Last but not least, though perhaps the most likely to be overlooked, is the survival in early medieval society of the phenomenon known to anthropologists as gift-exchange.¹ The custom of present-giving is only vestigial in modern society, confined to such occasions as Christmas and Easter and to birthdays and other anniversaries, but in earlier times it was a major form of social activity, serving a function analogous to that of commerce in securing the distribution of goods and services. Such gifts would not be one-sided, for social custom required that every gift had to be compensated sooner or later by a counter-gift, or by equivalent services if persons of different social status were involved. This mutual exchange of gifts at first sight resembles commerce, but its objects and ethos are entirely different. Its object is not that of material and tangible 'profit', derived from the difference between the value of what one parts with and what one receives in exchange; rather it is the social prestige attached to generosity, to one's ability and readiness to lavish one's wealth on one's neighbours and dependents. The 'profit' consists in placing other people morally in one's debt, for a counter-gift—or services in lieu of one—is necessary if the recipient is to retain his self-respect. From this point of view, indeed, the relationship between the Church and its benefactors can be regarded as involving no more than a particular form of gift-exchange, the counter-gift taking the form of prayers for the souls of the donor and his family.

The practice of gift-giving is naturally most strongly found in the period of the invasions and the barbarian kingdoms, where society had altered less from its primitive Germanic pattern. Tacitus had long before recorded the peculiar pleasure which Germanic chieftains took in the receiving of presents from neighbouring states, such objects as fine horses and armour, or metal discs and collars,² and there is a striking passage in *Beowulf* in

¹ The classic study is M. Mauss, *Essai sur le don* (1935; Eng. transl. by I. Cunnison, *The Gift; forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*, 1954).

² *Germania*, c. 15, *ad fin.*

which Hrothgar bids farewell to the hero, praising him for the peace he has brought about between the Danes and the Geats, so that in the future gift and counter-gift can be freely exchanged between the two peoples:

There shall be, while I rule this spacious kingdom,
Interchange of treasure: many with good things
Shall greet one another across the gannet's bath;
And over the deep the ringed ship shall carry
Gifts and love-tokens.¹

Again and again, in Anglo-Saxon literature and in northern sagas, the giving of gifts and the generosity of a ruler is singled out for the highest praise. In the preface to Wulfsgie's copy of the Old English translation of Gregory's *Dialogues* the bishop describes Alfred as 'the best ring-giver' he has ever heard of amongst earthly kings,² and in such poems as the *Battle of Maldon* the relationship of mutual obligation created by gift-giving is one to which appeal is made again and again. Meanness vies with cowardice as the most shameful of human defects; the miserliness of the Scylding Prince Hrethric, son of the generous Hrothgar, earns him the nickname Hnauggvanbaugi, 'the niggard with rings', in the Old Norse royal list (*Langfêðgatal*).³ The wealth amassed with insatiable cupidity by Merovingian kings⁴ was not intended to defray the expenses of an elaborate system of government, as was the heavy taxation of Roman times, but was designed to maintain the social prestige of the kings by being lavished on their followers.

¹ Ll. 1859-63. The translation is that of D. H. Crawford.

² H. Hecht, *Bischofs Waerferth von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen*, i (Leipzig, 1900), 2. On the identity of the bishop—Wulfsgie, not Wulfstan, as it stands in the text—see K. Sisam, *Studies in the history of Old English literature* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 201-2, 225-31. Gold rings were the chief form in which wealth was displayed in the early Germanic period, hence the general use of the word for 'riches'.

³ Ed. J. Langebek, *Scriptores rerum Danicarum*, i (Copenhagen, 1772), 5, cited in Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), p. 36, n. 4.

⁴ Cf. R. Doehaerd, 'La richesse des Mérovingiens', in *Studi in onore di Gino Luzzatto* (Milan, 1949), i. 30-46. The urge to accumulate treasure was common to all Germanic rulers. Amalasantha's treasure, sent for safety to Epidamnus, was reputed to include 40,000 lbs. of gold, the equivalent of nearly three million solidi (Procopius, *De bello Goth.*, 2. 26-28: Loeb edn., iii. 22).

The custom of gift-giving survived the heroic age, and the correspondence of such men as St. Boniface and Alcuin, as later of Einhard and Servatus Lupus, is full of the passage of gifts to and fro. Often these are objects which would be produced in the household of the donor, or in his monastery if he happened to be an abbot, but they might be luxuries or manufactured goods of some special type. Spices being both valuable and easy to transport were in constant demand, and a number of Boniface's correspondents at Rome accompanied their letters with such gifts. These are constantly referred to in the letters which accompanied them as being of a most trifling character—'small indeed, but given out of heartfelt affection'—but such depreciatory terms should not delude us into believing their values were as slight as the donors pretended. The hawk, two falcons, two shields and two spears which Boniface sent to King Aethelbald of Mercia¹ cannot really have merited the description of them as 'those trifling gifts' (*munuscula*), and the presents of spices must always have been costly. No doubt they represent a development in the direction of the modern custom of gift-giving, where the gifts are of the nature of tokens, but they have not yet reached that point. Nor were men reluctant to ask for what they wanted, however curious or unusual their demands might be. When King Aethelbert of Kent sent Boniface a silver gilt cup weighing $3\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. and two woollen cloaks—*nonnulla munuscula*—he asked the bishop to procure him in return a pair of falcons of a breed, rare in Kent but common in Germany, which would attack cranes.² We have seen already how such a raw material as lead might form an acceptable gift,³ and in any picture which we make of exchange in the early Middle Ages, the phenomenon of gift and counter-gift must be allowed a conspicuous place.

V

In attempting to assess the importance of trade in the Dark Ages, then, we have a body of 'positive' evidence for the existence

¹ Boniface, *Epistolae*, no. 69 (ed. M. Tangl, 1916, p. 142).

² *Ibid.*, no. 105 (pp. 230-1).

³ Cf. also Alcuin's gift of 100 lbs. of tin—presumably lead is meant—to Archbishop Eanbald II of York for covering the bell-tower of the cathedral (*Epist. Karol. aevi*, ii. 370).

of traders and trade, another body of 'positive' evidence for the existence of various alternatives to trade, and a third body of 'neutral' evidence—mainly archaeological—for the distribution of wealth—goods or coin—by unspecified means. All that we know of the social conditions of the time suggests that the alternatives to trade were more important than trade itself: the *onus probandi* rests on those who believe the contrary to have been the case. In a few instances we can say definitely that trade was *not* involved: for example, Dr. Adelson's view that Byzantine light-weight solidi were struck for the convenience of merchants trading with the Germanic world¹ is contradicted by reiterated imperial legislation forbidding merchants on pain of death to export gold from the empire.² This case, however, is exceptional; in general, we do not know how coins or jewellery or similar objects reached their destinations, and with so many possibilities from which to choose any conclusions that we draw can only be of the most tentative description. Much evidence alleged to 'prove' the existence of trade proves nothing of the kind, and in dealing with the Dark Ages, in cases where we cannot prove, we are not entitled without a careful weighing of the evidence to assume.

¹ Above, p. 130 n. 4.

² *Cod. Just.*, 4.63.2; *Basilics*, 56.1.20. I hope to deal with this question in a forthcoming article in the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*.