



Ode to Context¹

Before Herodotus introduced the African land
I thought it was all just beaches and sand
But the temptress she mentioned beautiful coins
Which I must confess caused a stirring in my loins
Now we are here to explain to you
The connection between money and settlements too

And profit from each other's palpable zest
safe in the knowledge that historians know best
What to expect from research like ours?
Is it all made up from our ivory towers?
Today we will talk about problems and realisation
grounded in hard work to provide a demonstration
Of what we can learn from collegial talk
which someday we will teach on blackboards with chalk

¹ By PhD student Olav Elisás Gundersen and Assistant Professor Federica Sulas; the ode was performed at the UrbNet Christmas party as part of a pecha kucha presentation, 8 December 2017.

Towns were important and are impossible to define
but quibbling will not take us further down the line
Can we find all-explaining connections of trade
when all we have is what someone once laid
down on the ground without a purpose in mind?
To say we can recreate this is being too kind

An object is found on a pretty girl's lawn
on this our interpretations are drawn
We try to debate and deliberate
chasing links and tracing boundaries to calibrate
What objects reveal can truly be manifold
but a word of caution: do not be too bold

Most commodities are different in size and form
Their use may vary like a student dorm
One day home, the next beer makes it sticky
as we shall see the coins can be tricky
The function of coinage is time and place specific
Failure to acknowledge this means your results are horrific

People travelling from near and far
carrying coins and looking for a bazaar
With long-distance coins trade can be postulated
When dealing with national currencies this will be obfuscated
Inside the borders of a tiny Northern state
the coins honestly didn't arrive very late

During their presence in this wonderful land
their use and function changed from hand to hand
Coins can naturally take the role of a commodity
and them doing so is really no oddity
Of precious metal they often consist
which is why debasement the peasants resist

But the primary purpose of coins and money
is to allow exchanges like lumber for honey
They should function as means of exchange primarily
though sometimes that only comes secondarily
In areas where coins are not minted for general use
we may at length arrive at a truce

Coins are commodities that reveal a link
like pottery or iron or the fur of a mink
From the late twelfth century coins circulate with speed
in the countryside that has Bjørn Poulsen decreed
Before we can use them for network analysis
After we are left with something like paralysis

All things are made with a purpose in mind
But sometimes even the greatest can be blind
For the functions of coins become both less and more
it is perhaps enough to make your eyes go sore
They function differently and reveal not barter and cost
but economic structures that determine where they got lost

How can we reveal this monetary flow?
It is important for history, but where can we go?
To understand this problem tools we need
Can network analysis be our faithful steed?
But what links and nodes do we have really
if a coin minted in London is found up in Ely?

Let us now turn to consider dwelling
Settlements we study, our brain find them compelling
As the spade lifts the soil
the pots and thoughts begin to boil

Local resources and foreign imports
with the quill moving fast to fill in reports
The fisherman leaves behind his mussels
The moulding of clay is tiring her muscles
We dig, we sort and we pick
while the theory develops in fear of no trick

What's that?
A yarn or a fact?
In the sieve we find a charming bead
with a scent of Indian fennel seed
Our quest for distant relations is nourished
Now we can see how this forgotten community once flourished
Oh dear, has the theory gone wild?
Perhaps, it is us who have been beguiled

But was this not a fishing village?
The bead speaks of mileage
Can you call this dwelling a city?
Or are we fooled by lenses so witty?
Words, names, labels and thoughts
I feel like the theory is at odds
Nodes, flows, and links may we seek
but it is hard to see how can these be with no tweak

Think of the spice island
Where sea and sky bless the land
Recently known for the Sultan's slaves
new knowledge of the past comes in with the waves

Here, the cooking pot lay
where the foreign beads go astray
People living in beautiful red huts
hidden by palms while eating nuts
Were these Swahili urban or what?
An answer to this have we not!

(Let the ancient map speak now)

It is the year of our Lord 1230, '....There are twenty anchorages around a town called Ukuh'
The dhows from Sofala are in sight
The Jackal king sending gold and Zanj merchants not itching for a fight
While the scribe files his pen eating a bowl of rice
the woman thread the cotton and negotiate price

Are we then witnessing quite similar trends
where time sharpens functions, removing all bends?
The nature of progress is often specialisation
of sites and objects and the rest of creation
We find not evolution in the classical sense
but history that unfolds – be weary of pretence

All our theory will end up just being sound
if we cannot understand what's going on around
Settlements and coins were not isolated
But part of societies that were not easily sated
on objects and buildings and other things nice
leaving lots for archaeologists as well as the mice
We have both realised one important thing:
Context is most definitely king.



From all of us at

