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Review of Neville Morley, *Trade in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge, 2007. Pp. xiv & 118. £40.00 HB, £15.99 PB. ISBN: 978-0-521-63279-9 (HB), 978-0-521-63416-8 (PB).

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Trade in Classical Antiquity (TCA) is a new issue of the *Key Themes in Ancient History (KTAH)* series published by Cambridge University Press, which ‘aims to provide readable, informed and original studies’ of topics related to the Classical civilisations, not only for specialists, but also for the wider public. Thus, it is an easy read, short, without footnotes that may hinder the reading flow; and with a brief bibliographical essay at the end of the book to help the reader to delve more deeply into the topic.

As with many other books in the *KTAH* series, *TCA* should be seen less as an introduction to the topic it deals with, but rather as a polemic that tries to challenge the assumptions held by the academic community on a given area. Accordingly, Morley starts off by discussing the long-standing ‘great debate’ between modernists and primitivists on the importance and relevance of trade in Classical Antiquity. He points out how the discussion has become stagnated because ‘prior assumptions about the nature of the ancient economy’ (5) determine the interpretation of any isolated piece of evidence, no matter how inconclusive this evidence might be. This introduction, however, is somewhat misleading, as it is basically the primitivists whom Morley takes to task, whereas the modernists are barely mentioned again. This is understandable. In the British academic world, primitivist ideas, as embodied by Finley’s *Ancient Economy*, have become the orthodox view on the matter. Morley, on the contrary, adopts the viewpoint of the New Institutional Economics (‘a recent school of economics’), which analyses trade within the social institutions and cultural trends that ‘constrain and condition human behaviour’ (14). This approach allows him to emphasise the importance of trade in Classical Antiquity without any need to advocate the misuse of modern neoclassical economic concepts. At the same time, it protects him from the most radical exaggerations of the primitivists, who sometimes have downplayed trade to such an extent that one might be led to believe that there was no such activity in ancient Greece and Rome.

In the next four chapters, Morley discusses the most common primitivist assumptions. The second chapter challenges the idea that the ancient Mediterranean economy lacked any regional specialisation and that it was mainly directed towards self-sufficiency (a classical economic ideal). The heterogeneity of the Mediterranean environment, the availability of certain materials in some regions and not in others, the differences in the quality of the products, the annual variation in yields, and the constant threat of shortage, all made trade not only a suitable option to overcome uncertainty, but also a desirable one. The fact that the Mediterranean ‘can be crossed with relative ease’ (27) was another key factor to encourage the development of trade, offsetting the risks and costs it involved.

In the third chapter, Morley analyses the ancient patterns of consumption. He discusses the nature of demand, not only as a purely economic concept, but also as one deeply determined by social and cultural practices, likes and – most interestingly – fashion (e.g. when a wine from a certain region was preferred over another). He challenges the dichotomised view of ancient society as one in which an elite few consumed luxury goods acquired in the market, whereas the masses barely survived on the produce of their small farms. Morley even ventures the notion that more people took part in trading activities than is usually assumed, and that ‘the aggregate demand of millions of peasants ... was potentially enormous’ (46). Urbanisation also encouraged the development of trade, because it increased demand, created employment and provided both great landowners and small peasants with a market where they could sell their surplus. Morley is right to offer a picture of the relationship between the ancient city and countryside that is less contradictory than primitivists tend to think. It is more debatable, however, to suggest that primitivists see the ‘consumer city’ (a notion that he himself does not challenge) as an ‘impediment to trade and economic development’ (51).

The fourth chapter is perhaps the most fruitful of the book. The ancient state is usually portrayed as being solely preoccupied with “uneconomic” activities such as tax collection, the construction of luxurious buildings or the maintenance of the military. Morley, on the contrary, shows how different state policies created the framework within which trade was practiced and made possible. The construction of harbours, roads and canals was almost exclusively a state enterprise. The introduction of standardised measures and coinage made exchange easier. The enforcement of different laws of sale provided for the resolution of disputes and ‘reduced the level of uncertainty ... and transaction costs’ (68, 70). Even the provision of supplies for the army, the embellishment of cities with public works and the

supply of cheap cereal to the masses were all activities in which merchants were deeply involved. Rather than hindering its development, the expansion of the state encouraged trade, 'which was closely connected to, and frequently dependent upon, the integrative force of imperialism' (15).

The fifth chapter, on the contrary, is the weakest one. After briefly describing ancient markets, Morley deals with elite attitudes to trade and merchants. He is right to dismiss claims that the absolute 'disdain for trade' by the elite classes (83) provides evidence for its scarce development. In fact, he argues, many members of the landowning elite were involved in different forms of trade and their disdainful attitude merely epitomised the image they had of themselves. Morley, however, is less convincing when he claims that this ideological stance stemmed from the threat to the position and values of the 'old elite' posed by the increasing 'commoditisation' of society, which, theoretically, 'undermine[d] ... the traditional means of distinguishing the aristocracy from the masses' (88). The evidence he summons to support this claim is very feeble.¹ In addition, he fails to successfully challenge the primitivist assumption that the ancient elite derision of merchants was rooted, more than anything, in the key importance agriculture had in Antiquity as a means to secure wealth and political power.

The last chapter is one of the most groundbreaking parts of the book. It treats the Roman world as a global community, and describes the limits of its globalisation. There is certain logic of contradiction underlying this chapter. Whereas Roman imperialism fostered the universalisation of Roman culture and the expansion of trade, it also expanded the capacities of local communities to satisfy their demands with local produce. Thus, the local economies became more isolated and endogenous, a process that was accelerated by the transferral of the capital to Constantinople and the collapse of the Roman state in the West. The 'exceptional', universal and large-scale trade that the Roman state had made possible eventually gave way to the 'normal' early medieval pattern of self-sufficient estates barely related to each other.

Besides a minor flaw on page 98 (where the first two centuries AD are referred to as 'the period 0 (sic) - 200 CE'), my main concern with *TCA* is Morley's reliance on a small number of ancient sources, which he seems to treat as representative of the twelve-century period his

¹ The only evidence he gives for the threat to aristocratic privileged position allegedly posed by a powerful merchant class is a debatable use of the etymology of *existimatio*, i.e. the process of 'discriminating between true aristocrats and the rest' (88), which derives from *aes timare*, i.e. 'the establishing of a relationship of exchange between property and money' (88).

book covers. Sometimes one wonders whether he is not overusing Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai*, a few speeches by Ps. Demosthenes, Pliny's *Natural History*, Diocletian's Edict of Maximum Prices, and the remains of one shipwreck near Pisa. In fact, the bulk of his otherwise well-argued discussion is solely built upon secondary literature, mainly in English. My second objection to the book is that Morley barely discusses (or even lists) authors who write in languages other than English, which, for an author as concerned about imperialism as he is, seems somewhat contradictory.²

Nonetheless, I have to say that I have found *TCA* to be a very stimulating read, primarily because it challenges many of the "truths" in which students of Classical Antiquity are educated. I do disagree with some of Morley's political assumptions and I find it difficult to accept the underlying (and to some extent naïve) idea that a self-sufficient, simpler agrarian life is more desirable than our modern, market-ridden society (a utopia enticing only to those who are free from the constraints of backbreaking agricultural labours). Nonetheless, I did enjoy Morley's interpretation of the ancient economy and the role of trade in the light of modern political debates. *TCA* is a good reminder that, as Benedetto Croce said, 'every true history is contemporary history.'

² The current trend amongst English-speaking students to engage only with authors who write in English may indeed be unconsciously encouraged by the monolingual bibliographies which many scholars deal with.