
Rosetta

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Dimitri Van Limbergen, Adeline Hoffelinck, Devi Taelman (eds.). *Reframing the Roman Economy: New Perspectives on Habitual Economic Practices*. Palgrave, Palgrave Studies in Ancient Economies, 2022. Pp. xxv & 406. £103.50 eBook; £129.99 Hardcover Book. ISBN 978-3-031-06280-3 (HB).

Reviewed by Lluís Jerez Bertolín

Future historians of the historiography of the Roman economy might characterise the period we are in right now as one of transition. For more than a decade New Institutional Economics (NIE) has been the prevailing theoretical framework with which the ancient economy has been analysed. However, in recent years there have been increasing attempts at finding new perspectives with which to examine different aspects of the economies of the ancient world, and this volume, a compilation of chapters on underexplored and unusual aspects of the Roman economy, also tries to suggest ways forward after NIE.

In their introductory chapter “Pathways to Reframing the Roman Economy: from Uniformity to Diversity?” the editors alert that current research goals in the study of the ancient economy have narrowed the scope of inquiries on it. They point out that major economic activities have been obscured by the lack of large traces of archaeological material attesting them, and set the aim of the book as relaying the complexity of the Roman economy (p.2-4). NIE is criticised for underplaying human agency and unpredictability, and overemphasising the role of the market in economic exchange (p.5-6). The editors mention Complex Economics (CE), an approach that contends that economic systems have a non-linear development and are unpredictable while being dependent of other evolving systems, as a recent alternative to NIE, which favours seeing economic systems as the result of rational attempts to create institutions and ‘mould’ a pre-existing market to lessen transaction costs. The editors praise this approach for its capacity of providing a flexible understanding of the economy, but fall short of endorsing it (p.6-7). Time will tell whether this framework will be adopted by ancient historians and become the new dominant one in historiography. Other new ways of understanding ‘diversity’ in the Roman economy are mentioned, such as ‘glocalization’ as an alternative to romanisation and a new focus on the impact of local ecologies and social resilience to stresses (p.7-10). It is the purpose of the

editors to bring the spotlight to Roman economical particularity and discourage fitting evidence to rigid economic models that can fail to account for economic diversity (p.17-18).

The contributions to the book are divided in different themes, the first being on “unusual actors, attitudes and perspectives.” It includes a chapter on using a spatial approach to studying Roman textile economy in Veneto by Maria Stella Busana, an exploration of craftsmen and shopkeepers working for the army by Marine Lépée and Lucas Guillaud and an inquiry into the role of children in Roman agriculture by Tamara Lewit. What is interesting just by the themes of the chapters alone is that these economic phenomena are not only unusual and underexplored but are also ancillary to activities much more trodden by historiography such as farming, shopkeeping in general, and artisanship. This shows that one does not need to go very far away from the beaten paths of ancient economic research to start breaking new grounds.

In her chapter, Busana comments on the results of the Pondera Project, which geolocated findings of textile tools in the Veneto and East Lombardia (p.30-37). The picture that emerges is of local urban and rural manufactures operating under traditional methods consistent with textual evidence (p.37-44). Lépée and Guillaud use archaeological findings in Lugdunum (p.57-66) to explore craftsmen who catered to military customers. The site was almost unique in its specialisation in weapon production (p.69-70) for both long distance trade and local clientele (p.70-72). Finally, Lewit uses comparison with the modern Mediterranean world (p.98-112) to fill the gaps in the sources on child labour in agricultural settings (p.86-98). Her conclusion is that agricultural child labour was mainly confined to ancillary low-skilled tasks that complemented the work of the adults.

The second theme ‘Unconventional Loci of Production’ focuses on spaces used for production that are different than the farms and workshops that come to mind at first glance. This section includes contributions on the presence of metallurgy in both urban and rural contexts, urban animal husbandry, olive oil production in Mauretania Tingitana, and the archaeology of road stations. These articles help question the ‘urban-rural’ divide in historiography, and encourage us to see that what is considered ‘typical’ of one of these settings may also have been present in the other.

Leonardo Bernardi argues that in Italy metallurgy gradually moved from the cities to their suburbs in the first century BCE, and that by the end of the century it even had a foothold in rural contexts that lasted until the crisis of the third century CE (p.145-150). Ken Tardio and David Wallace-Hare examine the presence of the husbandry of pigs and deer in Tarraco and apiculture in Segobriga and Baccara Augusta, concluding that Tarraco enjoyed a robust pig-farming industry (p.160-166) and that the presence of urban apiculture in Iberia might be caused by the presence of bears in more rural areas (p.174-175). Leonardo Bigi explores oil production in Mauretania Tingitana, a province traditionally, and perhaps unfairly, considered not to be particularly prosperous (p.199), despite, as Bigi concludes in his profiling of oil production there, experiencing a large expansion of olive cultivation brought about by the social changes in the profile of the elites after Roman occupation (p.199-200). Finally, Andrea Zemignani analyses the road stations that housed imperial officials and messengers on the move (p.207-208) in Gallia Cisalpina, concluding that they acted as lightning rods for urban development (p.226-227).

The book then moves on to a single-chapter section. To exemplify the study of 'Distinct Landscapes of Exploitation' Gijs Tol and Tymon de Haas look at Roman exploitation of the wetlands in Lazio. Although wetlands have a reputation for being hostile to development, they are also spaces of economic activity (p.234). The authors trace wetland uses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (p.238-243) to help interpret the Roman period findings in the Pontine marshes (p.243-245). The Pontine marsh appears to have been used for fishing, dormice breeding for use as a delicatessen, manufacturing of pottery, and herding of sheep (p.246-255). All in all, the Pontine wetlands appear to have been a very active productive space.

The book's fourth section tries to shed light on objects and products that are generally hard to trace, whether due to them not being able to be preserved in the archaeological record or due to a lack of attention in the sources. The two products identified as 'less-visible' by the chapters of this section are salt and perishable vessels holding agricultural products such as fruits, fish, or olive oil.

In regards to salt, Michiel Dekoninck and Wim de Clercq look at its production in the northern parts of the Roman empire, which featured both a hostile climate to salt production and a large demand for this staple product (p.268). Their study, tracing as

far back as the Iron Age (p.278-282) up to the third century (p.290-293), shows considerable ebbs and flows (some of them even paradoxically disconnected from demand for the product) in salt production. For her part, Simonetta Menchelli traces attestations of perishable vessels in the literary record and archaeology, including wooden barrels and baskets complementing ceramic containers (p.306-320) and animal skin sacks (p.320-322). She concludes that the use of these perishable vessels might explain the relative absence of *amphorae* in some regions that produced olive oil and wine (p.322-323).

The final section of the book seeks to challenge historiographical models and assumptions, and try to bring a new perspective on how to study certain aspects of the Roman economy. This section focuses more specifically on how to evaluate the 'performance' of the rural productive spaces of southern Etruria and the effect of trade along the Indian ocean to the Roman economy.

In his chapter on the rural productive spaces of southern Etruria, Paul P. Pasioka addresses the methodological difficulties historians face when reconstructing a rural landscape, mostly born out of the necessary use of proxies. The lack of a theoretical framework to interpret proxies leaves their use and importance to be "taken for granted or [...] self-evident" (p.334), and generates interpretation problems. With a proper methodological inquiry into economical proxies lacking, Pasioka goes over recent publications on the problems of proxy use and how to tentatively solve them (p.334-337). This is followed by theoretical considerations on how to use proxies appropriately, stressing the need to use several distinct proxies and regional comparisons to draw conclusions on the Roman economy (p.337-345). The author then tries to apply these precepts in a case study of the characteristics of production and distribution in the rural landscape of southern Etruria, selecting as proxies the presence of presses (to measure production), millstones (to measure processing), metalworking (to measure rural crafts), water tanks (to measure the presence of water irrigation), and ports (to measure exchange). (p.353-354). From the presence and distribution of these proxies Pasioka infers a period of economic prosperity in the first and second centuries and a wide diversity of spatial usage (p.356-359). In the last chapter of the book, Jeremy A. Simmons seeks to question previous academic dogmas on Roman trade in the Indian ocean (p.372-375). According to Simmons,

Rome had some access to the Indian ocean (p.377-380), with the Roman state having a stake in commerce there, but little willingness or ability to establish a policy towards it (p.380-384). The institutions and techniques governing trade seem to not be particularly Roman either (p.384-390). Overall, Simmons argues, contrary to orthodoxy, that Rome was not indispensable towards promoting or organising the Indian ocean trade and that it was part of a wider multipolar context (p.391-393).

Overall, the chapters in this book are a worthwhile read for anyone who is interested in their respective topics or is interested in the prospects and where-next of the study of Rome's economy. The objective of the book's editors to bring a focus towards particularity is achieved, and through the different cases in the chapters the reader is impelled to reconsider their frameworks and their general thoughts on the Roman economy.