

Review article

Globalisation *vs* the state? Macro- and micro-perspectives on Roman economies

Martin Pitts*

ANDREW WILSON & ALAN BOWMAN (ed.). 2018. *Trade, commerce and the state in the Roman world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-879066-2 £110.

TYMON C. A. DE HAAS & GIJS TOL (ed.). 2017. *The economic integration of Roman Italy: rural communities in a globalising world*. Leiden: Brill; 978-90-04-32590-6 €132.



There can be few topics in Roman archaeology and history that are contested with such vigour and widespread interest as the Roman economy.

In part, this present situation arises as a legacy of older debates on the significance of ancient economic growth and long-distance trade, in which key twentieth-century figures such as M.I. Finley, M. Rostovtzeff and K. Hopkins continue to loom large and provide compelling insights. More recently, the debate has been re-cast around questions of state involvement *vs* free markets, and the extent of market integration, as this pair of edited collections demonstrates. On the one hand, *Trade, commerce and the state in the Roman World* (edited by Andrew Wilson and Alan Bowman, hereafter *TCS*) takes a big picture view on the role of the Roman state in long-distance trade, arising from a conference that took place in 2009 as part of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, ‘The Economy of the Roman Empire: Integration, Growth and Decline’. In contrast, *The economic integration of Roman Italy* (edited by Tymon de Haas and Gijs Tol, hereafter *EIRI*) brings together a series of typically smaller-scale studies focused on understanding the impact of economic changes on rural communities in Roman Italy. It emerges from another

conference, held in 2013, this time as part of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research project ‘Fora, Stations, and Sanctuaries: the Role of Minor Centres in the Economy of Roman Central Italy’.

The structure of the respective volumes underlines significant differences in their intellectual approach. After a thoughtful and concise overview by the editors, *TCS* adopts a tripartite division of chapters, comprising ‘Institutions and the state’, ‘Trade within the empire’ and ‘Trade beyond the frontiers’. While this partition ensures robust coverage of substantial facets of economic activity in the Roman world and beyond, the sections address their respective themes largely in isolation from one another, leaving it to the reader to make connections. The main thread holding the various contributions together is the general insistence that state involvement in trade was significant in a plethora of economic activities, which tends to be convincingly reasoned. Utilising a variety of evidence, there are substantial arguments here that cannot easily be dismissed by those who would cast Roman economic integration as being governed predominantly by free-market forces. The preface states that a general aim of the project led by Bowman and Wilson was to “bring together both documentary and archaeological evidence” (p. v), yet it is not until over 200 pages into the volume with the chapter on stone by Ben Russell that archaeological evidence gets any meaningful treatment. While this division is to some degree a product of the thematic organisation of the volume, it nevertheless reinforces a sense of separation between archaeologists and economic historians (however unintended by the editors), and even the implicit primacy of written, over material, evidence, with archaeology relegated to the status of data-provider to test historical models. A few more overtly archaeological or comparative approaches to Roman economic institutions could have provided a

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welcome methodological contrast with the largely text-based discussions in the section on ‘Institutions and the state’.

EIRI likewise features a substantial tripartite division of its middle chapters, with sections on ‘Arable production and society’, ‘Rural crafts’ and ‘Commercialization’. These are supplemented by an extended introductory section on ‘The economic, social and geographic context’ and a pair of concluding chapters, including one by Gary Feinman who provides an outsider’s perspective from his experience in the archaeology of Mesoamerica, Central America and East Asia. The addition of the framing introductory and concluding sections serves to anchor this volume firmly in a more explicit theoretical and methodological discourse. In this vein, I found the opening discussions by Wim Jongman, Robert Witcher and Tymon de Haas to be tremendously thought-provoking in different respects. For example, Jongman makes a compelling case for why Roman history matters from the perspective of global history; Witcher thoughtfully examines the pay-offs of applying interdisciplinary notions of the ‘global countryside’ for better conceptualising the integration of Roman rural economies; and de Haas presents an illuminative series of maps using aspects of network analysis to model the economic and demographic geography of Roman Italy. This all provides ample food for thought before tackling the middle sections of the book. In contrast to *TCS*, the body chapters of *EIRI* are more thoroughly archaeological from the outset, with serious attention given to scrutinising landscape survey data. While most individual papers effectively deal with micro-scale regional analysis (either in detail or from a comparative perspective), there are some striking synergies with *TCS*, most notably in assessing the contribution of the Roman state and the importance of modelling population trends. At the same time, it is notable how few of the contributors engaged explicitly with the volume’s advertised focus on ‘rural communities in a globalising world’. While several contributions refer to this, only Witcher gives a detailed explanation, whereas others frequently assume the existence of the ‘process of Romanisation’ without qualification or reference to the substantial body of literature critiquing this concept. Although the Romanization debate has become something of an unhealthy obsession in Anglophone Roman archaeology, its uneven treatment in this volume potentially undermines some of the theoretical and methodological advances made in other areas. Aside from a

brief mention in Bowman and Wilson’s Introduction, *TCS* largely avoids the term Romanisation altogether.

Given the limited space available for this review, it is impossible to do justice to the 19 individual chapters in *TCS* and the 18 in *EIRI*. One larger issue worthy of further comment is the primacy and treatment of pottery data in both volumes. In this regard, the contributions by Michael Fulford, Michel Bonifay and Paul Reynolds in *TCS* are prime examples of the potential of macro-studies of ceramic data to shed light on big picture economic patterns. Fulford’s chapter, which examines the distribution of stamped *terra sigillata* in Britain and the north-western provinces, presents a provocative series of inter-provincial pottery distribution maps that point towards state involvement in the supply of certain *sigillata* kiln outputs, most notably Lezoux, Trier and Les Martres de Veyre and La Madeleine. Despite an incisive discussion of the significance of these patterns, it is disappointing that this contribution utilised data from only the first three of nine volumes of the ‘Names on Terra Sigillata’ project, which was completed in 2012. Bonifay’s chapter likewise reveals a series of patterns in the distribution of African amphorae and fine wares. His interpretations, highlighting the simultaneous operation of ‘imperial’, ‘extra-provincial’ and ‘provincial’ economies, chime with the concluding discussion of Feinman in *EIRI*, that there was no such thing as a single ‘Roman economy’, with economic activity better conceptualised in terms of a series of networks, which often overlapped in time and space. In contrast, the treatment of pottery in *EIRI* is typically more specific and context-sensitive, if no less significant for bigger debates. Here, the important contribution by Emanuele Vaccaro, Claudio Capelli and Mariaelena Ghisleni sheds new light on the (otherwise poorly understood) emergence of Italic *terra sigillata* production in rural Italy, at Podere Marzuolo. Elsewhere, Theodore Peña outlines the potential for studying rural pottery production through a series of four thoughtful case studies, stressing the need for high-quality excavated data. As Witcher astutely observes (*EIRI*, p. 49), while “top-down ‘grand narratives’ fail to accommodate the diversity attested by over 50 years of archaeological survey [...] a plethora of bottom-up case-studies obscures wider trends and underestimates connectivity”. Despite some admirable efforts, these statements are largely applicable to the pottery studies in *TCS* and *EIRI* respectively. In this regard, one potentially exciting future pay-off of investigating notions of ‘globalizing processes’ or the ‘global

countryside' is the prospect of better integration of pottery data at multiple scales of analysis simultaneously.

A more general issue that is pertinent to the treatment of pottery and indeed other classes of material culture is the use of archaeological data as 'proxy evidence' for economic activity, something which both volumes indulge in extensively. To a large degree this kind of approach is inevitable given the aims of the respective projects, and is pervasive in the substantial and growing body of literature addressing ancient economies. It remains the case, however, that reducing the immense complexity of material culture data from the Roman world to a series of economic indicators is ultimately partial. One wonders, for example, what patterns lurk beneath the charts and distribution maps of pottery if the style and appearance of vessels is examined more comprehensively on a quantitative basis, and compared with vessels manufactured locally in the context of whole assemblages. This might shed further light on the essential cultural basis of economic demand, a factor that is all too often overlooked in economic studies, or assumed to be uniform—a dangerous proposition indeed in an empire as culturally diverse as Rome's.

Taking a broader view of the intellectual contributions of *TCS* and *EIRI*, a good general yardstick is what they add to the extant classic literature on the Roman economy. For the bigger picture, a particularly resilient explanation of the Roman economy is the 'tax and trade' model offered by Keith Hopkins (1980), in which the imposition of taxes is proposed to have fostered increased surplus production and inter-provincial trade. Many of the contributions in *TCS* underline the explosion of new data, only a fraction of which was available to Hopkins, as well as fleshing out some of the mechanisms by which inter-provincial trade took place in a variety of different locations and circumstances. Conversely, the contributions in *EIRI* speak to another major work by Hopkins, this time his book *Conquerors and slaves* (1978), which presented a systemic explanation of the transformation

of the Italian rural economy at the end of the Roman republic. Here several contributors in *EIRI* propose significant corrections to Hopkins's grand narrative. For example, Alessandro Launaro's analysis of survey data from across Italy seriously undermines the notion of rural depopulation (according to Hopkins, it was fuelled by urbanisation and casualties of citizen-soldiers in wars of expansion) and a corresponding reliance on slave labour; Frits Heinrich notes increased diversity in rural crop production as opposed to the expected shift towards monoculture following market integration; Dimitri Van Limbergen, Patrick Monsieur and Frank Vermeulen demonstrate in their contribution that not all wine-producing regions of Italy were capable of substantial annual exports; and Kim Bowes and colleagues make a compelling case for re-interpreting settlement intensification in survey data in terms of the "accumulated residue of short-duration work-huts" (*EIRI*, p. 199).

In sum, both volumes succeed in their ambitious aims of shedding new light on aspects of Roman economics, as well as convince of the need for future studies that better integrate macro- and micro-scale analysis of archaeological evidence. Whereas *EIRI* forms a focused and cohesive collection that rewards careful reading as a whole, *TCS* offers comprehensive treatment of a number of substantial facets of state involvement in Roman trade. Both books should be considered essential reading for those with an interest in the archaeology and history of Roman economics.

References

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