

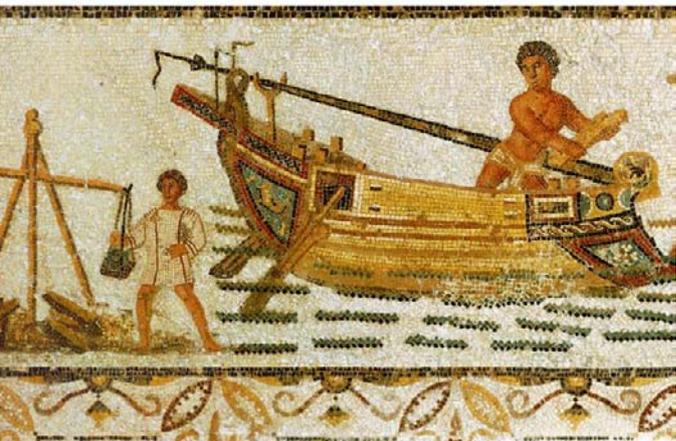
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ROME'S IMPERIAL ECONOMY

Twelve Essays

W. V. HARRIS



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W. V. HARRIS

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to my Columbia students

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Preface

Eleven of these twelve studies have been published before, as follows (Chapter 2 is new):¹

- 1 T. Yuge and M. Doi (eds.), *Forms of Control and Subordination in Antiquity* (Tokyo and Leiden, 1988), 598–610.
- 3 D'Arms and Kopff 1980 = *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 36 (1980), 117–40.
- 4 *Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999), 62–75.
- 5 *Journal of Roman Studies* 70 (1980), 126–45.
- 6 W. V. Harris (ed.), *The Inscribed Economy: Production and Distribution in the Roman Empire in the Light of Instrumentum Domesticum* (supplementary vol. 6 of the *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Ann Arbor, 1993), 186–9.
- 7 *Cambridge Ancient History* vol. 11, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2000), 710–39.
- 8 J.-F. Bergier (ed.), *Montagnes, fleuves, forêts dans l'histoire* (St Katharinen, 1989), 123–34.
- 9 C. Zaccagnini (ed.), *Mercanti e politica nel mondo antico* (Bari and Rome, 2003), 275–309.
- 10 *Journal of Roman Studies* 96 (2006), 1–24.
- 11 *Cambridge Economic History of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge, 2007), 511–40.
- 12 W. V. Harris (ed.), *The Inscribed Economy: Production and Distribution in the Roman Empire in the light of Instrumentum Domesticum* (supplementary vol. 6 of the *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Ann Arbor, 1993), 11–29.

¹ The original page-breaks are indicated by vertical strokes.

I thank all concerned for permission to reprint these items. Nathan Pilkington and Anne Hunnell Chen, young scholars at Columbia, have patiently engaged in extensive editorial toil, for which I am very grateful indeed. My debts, often deep, to the many scholars who have helped me in this area are acknowledged case by case. I owe the time needed to put this collection together to the generosity of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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Abbreviations

The abbreviated titles of literary sources are not included in the following list; in case of difficulty see LSJ, *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*, or *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. For papyrological publications (including *BGU*, *C.P.Lat.*, *CPR*, *SB*) see J. F. Oates et al., *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets*, 5th edn (Oakville, CT, 2001).

<i>Acta RCRF</i>	<i>Acta Rei Cretariae Romanae Fautorum</i>
<i>AÉ</i>	<i>L'Année Épigraphique</i>
<i>AJA</i>	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt</i> , ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase
<i>BAR-IS</i>	British Archaeological Reports, International Series
<i>Barrington Atlas</i>	<i>The Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman Worlds</i> , ed. R. Talbert
<i>BASP</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists</i>
<i>BCH</i>	<i>Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique</i>
Broughton, <i>MRR</i>	T. R. S. Broughton, <i>The Magistrates of the Roman Republic</i>
<i>CAH</i>	<i>Cambridge Ancient History</i>
<i>Ch.L.A.</i>	<i>Chartae Latinae Antiquiores</i>
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
<i>CIS</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum</i>
<i>CJ</i>	<i>Codex Iustinianus</i>
<i>CMG</i>	<i>Corpus Medicorum Graecorum</i>
<i>CPh</i>	<i>Classical Philology</i>
<i>CQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>CRAI</i>	<i>Comptes-Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres</i>
<i>CSEL</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
<i>C.Th.</i>	<i>Codex Theodosianus</i>
De Ruggiero, <i>Diz. Ep.</i>	E. De Ruggiero (ed.), <i>Dizionario epigrafico di antichità romane</i>
<i>Dial.Arch.</i>	<i>Dialoghi di Archeologia</i>
<i>Dig.</i>	<i>Digesta</i>
Durrbach, <i>Choix</i>	F. Durrbach, <i>Choix d'inscriptions de Délos</i>
<i>EAA</i>	<i>Enciclopedia dell'Arte Antica</i>

<i>EconHR</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i>
Ed.Diocl.	Edictum Diocletiani
<i>Eph.Ep.</i>	<i>Ephemeris Epigraphica</i>
<i>FGrH</i>	<i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> , ed. F. Jacoby
<i>FIRA</i>	<i>Fontes Iuris Romani Anteiustiniani</i> , ed. S. Riccobono et al.
GRR	gross reproduction rate
<i>ID</i>	<i>Inscriptions de Délos</i>
<i>IDR</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Daciae Romanae</i>
<i>IG</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i>
<i>IGLS</i>	<i>Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie</i>
<i>IGRRP</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae ad Res Romanas Pertinentes</i>
<i>IGSK</i>	<i>Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien</i>
<i>IGUR</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae Urbis Romae</i>
<i>ILLRP</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Liberae Rei Publicae</i>
<i>ILS</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i>
<i>I.Magn.</i>	<i>Die Inschriften von Magnesia am Maeander</i>
<i>Inscr.It.</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Italiae</i>
<i>JÖAI</i>	<i>Jahreshefte des Österreichischen Archäologischen Instituts</i>
<i>JRA</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
<i>LSJ</i>	H. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones (eds.), <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i>
<i>LTUR</i>	<i>Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae</i> , ed. M. Steinby
<i>MAMA</i>	<i>Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua</i>
<i>MBAH</i>	<i>Münstersche Beiträge zur antiken Handelsgeschichte</i>
<i>MEFRA</i>	<i>Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome, Antiquité</i>
<i>NC</i>	<i>Numismatic Chronicle</i>
<i>Not.Sc.</i>	<i>Notizie degli Scavi</i>
<i>NRR</i>	net reproduction rate
<i>OGIS</i>	<i>Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae</i>
<i>OLD</i>	<i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i>
<i>ORF</i>	<i>Oratorum Romanorum Fragmenta</i> , ed. H. [= E.] Malcovati
<i>PBSR</i>	<i>Papers of the British School at Rome</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne
<i>PIR²</i>	<i>Prosopographia Imperii Romani</i> , 2nd edn

<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne
<i>RAAN</i>	<i>Rendiconti dell'Accademia delle Arti di Napoli</i>
<i>RE</i>	<i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Alterthumswissenschaft</i>
<i>RÉA</i>	<i>Revue des Études Anciennes</i>
<i>SCO</i>	<i>Studi classici e orientali</i>
<i>SEG</i>	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i>
<i>SIG³</i>	<i>Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum</i> , 3rd edn
<i>SVF</i>	<i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i> , ed. H. von Arnim
<i>TAPhA</i>	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
<i>TLL</i>	<i>Thesaurus Linguae Latinae</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>
<i>ZSS</i>	<i>Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung, Romanistische Abteilung</i>

Introduction

THIS COLLECTION

Volumes of collected scholarly articles sometimes give the impression that the scholar was, from the beginning, already perfectly skilled in his or her field of expertise; later, it was simply a matter of applying his or her skills or methods to one problem after another. This book, by contrast, is more like a *Bildungsroman*, in which the hero slowly learns some more or less painful lessons, ending up definitely older if only a little wiser.

Nonetheless I have decided to leave these articles virtually as they were when first published (the paper on poverty is new). Some light editing has left the views I held in the past unconcealed, even in cases where I now think that I was definitely or probably in error. I have indicated in double square brackets the principal passages that I no longer agree with, some omissions of redundant material, and also a few essential items of more recent bibliography.¹ I have eliminated the polemical comments that no longer have any point; many remain, however, with apologies to all concerned. At the end of each reprinted article I have added some brief comments on subsequent debates and research. On the other hand I have not debated here in detail with scholars who have expressed opposing views, for life is short and this book is already long; in the most important cases I hope to continue the discussion in other places. I have left intact almost all citations of older bibliography, even in the paper on the organization of lamp-production (where the documentation was even in 1980 extremely extensive) (Chapter 5). If this has the effect of reminding scholars who are in danger of disappearing beneath avalanches of recent publications that things written on this subject in the 1950s, indeed 1750s, may still be worth reading, so much the better. At the same time, I would not be publishing the book if I did not believe that it would speak to some of the concerns of presently active historians of Rome.

¹ A certain amount of self-repetition is almost inevitable in a collection of this kind, but I have eliminated as much of it as possible.

I confess that I have not changed my mind over any central issue that arises in this book. What are those issues? They are for the most part structural. I have tried to grasp the *shape* of the economy of the Roman Empire, and how it evolved. This may be the best we can do, given the impossibility of answering in any but the most hypothetical way some of the questions that an economic historian would like to have answered, such as the size of Roman GDP, the relative volume of slave labour, the degree of integration of markets, and in particular whether the Roman Empire of any period delivered per capita growth in a sustained fashion (in Chapter 11 I have attempted to show how this question can best be answered as far as the late Republic is concerned).

A good place to begin the study of structural questions about the Roman economy is the matter of social class (Chapter 1) and the related problem of poverty or rather, as I prefer to say, destitution (Chapter 2). In my view there is much to be gained and little to be lost from analysing the population of the Roman Empire in terms of social classes. In my view again, we shall never construct a convincing model of the Roman economy if we do not take full account of the destitution which the Roman Empire inevitably—as I think—created, especially in the provinces. This too is a structural argument: we have virtually no usable statistics of poverty—though there is plenty of anecdotal evidence—and no basis for extrapolating any.

One of the reasons we have generally failed to grasp the extent of Roman poverty is that the Roman economy was in many ways, by the standards of the era, an impressive success. Another reason is that we have paid too little attention, relatively speaking, to labour relations. The recent *Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* has characteristically little to say on this subject: the chapter on the eastern Mediterranean tells us that

labor on the land . . . varied in composition. The ‘relative absence’ of servile labor in rural activities has been noted in Asia, being perhaps somewhat more widespread in Greece. Tenancy (embracing a spectrum of dependent statuses), together with the periodic hiring of free labor, was surely a very common means of organizing production.²

Apart from the unavoidable absence of numbers, what strikes one here is the tentative tone—and, even more, the lack of interest in how free and unfree labour of various kinds interacted. I note in passing that the only useful number we have for slaves in any part of Roman Asia under the high Empire (Galen on Pergamum) implies that slave-labour was not ‘relatively absent’ at all.³ For this reason, among others, I have thought it worthwhile to reprint two papers about Roman slavery.

² Alcock (2007: 678). She adds an appropriate footnote. I choose this quotation because the author is a fine scholar.

³ In fact Bussi and Foraboschi (2001) have briefly shown that rural slavery in Roman Asia Minor was extensive.

The first of these papers (Chapter 3) was a preliminary exercise intended above all to establish the large scale of the slave-trade. This involved a discussion of the sources of slaves, especially in the period after Augustus when the intensity of foreign wars diminished. Abandoned infant children figured largely in that argument, and I later wrote a more detailed account of child abandonment in the Roman Empire,⁴ and—in debate with Walter Scheidel—proposed a revised account of the sources of slaves (Chapter 4). The point is not of course to argue that slaves outnumbered the free population in any region.⁵ Nonetheless the role of slavery in the Roman economy was central (see also Chapter 2).

The kind of Roman economy that is portrayed in the papers mentioned so far is implicitly, sometimes explicitly, different by a whole hemisphere from the model—at one time very widely influential in English-speaking lands—proposed by Moses Finley's *Ancient Economy*. The main weakness of Finley's presentation (which has sometimes been faulted to an excessive degree) is probably that it fails to absorb the lessons that are to be learned from the material evidence. Yet, notwithstanding all this, it was Finley's teaching that encouraged some of his successors, including me, to devise alternative models of the Roman economy, for it was he, almost alone among the ancient historians of his generation, who wanted to bring the social sciences in. And even his derision of the material evidence was a great stimulus, since it made some of those who more or less instinctively understood that such evidence was very important formulate meaningful questions instead of simply digging things up or mapping surface finds of ceramics.

How then did production, distribution, and consumption work in the Roman world? How did they function 'operationally', to use a Finleyan word? Consumption patterns, though not ignored in these studies, receive less attention than they deserve.⁶ Production I have attempted to approach mainly through the inscriptions on *instrumentum domesticum* (household objects), the subject of a conference I was able to put together, in combination with Silvio Panciera, in Rome in 1992. Making sense out of the names inscribed on many thousands of terracotta lamps turned out to be rewarding because it proved possible (Chapter 5) to relate the physical material to known social and legal institutions, in particular to the figure of the *institor* or branch-manager, who was afterwards studied to such good effect by Jean-Jacques Aubert.⁷ I came away from this work and from the *instrumentum domesticum* conference more than ever convinced that the Romans (taking that term in the widest sense, as is usual in these pages) were capable of creating complex

⁴ Harris (1994).

⁵ As one might gather from some of the proponents of what might be called the 'insignificant slavery model'.

⁶ See, however, pp. 276–80.

⁷ Aubert (1994).

commercial mechanisms, and also that the question of land-transport costs needed to be revisited. The same conference also made me more sceptical about the role of distribution by large landowners and by emperors, as distinct from trade, in the high imperial economy (Chapter 6 sums up my immediate conclusions in the *instrumentum domesticum* volume).

Hence it suited me very well to write the chapter about trade in the new edition of volume 11 of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, covering the period 70–192 AD, reproduced here as Chapter 7.⁸ From this I hoped that the reader would take away among other things some doubts about the emphatic dichotomy between staples and luxuries which had distorted previous accounts (the influence of this polarity now seems to have diminished),⁹ together with some information about the wide range of economically significant commodities that were traded in the high Roman Empire and the enormous geographical area that was involved, outside the frontiers as well as within them.

Missing from that account was a strong diachronic element, since fundamental patterns of trade are unlikely to have changed within the artificial period in question—though particular Mediterranean regions sometimes took market-share away from other regions. The overall volume of trade may have decreased during and after the Antonine Plague, but the consequences of that event are a highly controversial issue that I do not claim to settle in this book. Still less do I claim to set up any definitive periodization of ancient trade—which is not to ignore the dramatic contrast between the volume of shipwreck evidence from the period from 200 BC to 200 AD (very round numbers) by contrast with what came before or afterwards.¹⁰ If I were to return to this topic now, I would want to explore further the links between trade, specialization in agricultural production, and productivity.¹¹

A topic that would merit still further exploration in the history of ancient trade is river transport. Many scholars have said a little about this, but a larger study would be worthwhile. One of the weaknesses of my study of trade along the River Po in Roman times (a conference paper that has become Chapter 8) was that it was carried out in isolation from the study of other Roman rivers. I should also have studied a much longer *durée*; it would have helped, for instance, if I had read Laven's paper (not yet published at that time) about the rivers of the Venetian Republic in the sixteenth century.¹² I now think that my

⁸ It is worth mentioning that this chapter was ten years in the press.

⁹ Horden and Purcell (2000: 146) put this dichotomy in its historiographical context.

¹⁰ For updated information about this see Parker (2008: 187). But see the important qualifications framed by Wilson (2009a). The well-known fact that this evidence is skewed towards amphora-bearing ships in the western Mediterranean does not come near to justifying the attempt of P. F. Bang (2007: 15 n. 28) to dismiss it altogether.

¹¹ On agricultural productivity in the later Roman Empire, note the comments of B. Ward-Perkins (2005: 144).

¹² Laven (1989).

study of trade along the Po rests on fragile foundations. I based too much on an argument from relative silence. We may have as much evidence about riverine trade along the Po and its tributaries as we have any right to expect. Not that it is a false conclusion that the Via Aemilia and the other main roads of the Po plain greatly facilitated trade and distribution of all kinds.

The physical problems raised by the River Po, together with the Roman road systems in northern Italy, remind us of the question of the role of government in the Roman economy and particularly in the trade economy. The old truism is that in high classical times, governments—whatever that term means or implies in a Roman context—were not much interested. The truth is far more complicated, as I attempted to show in another conference paper (Chapter 9). On the one hand, there were traditional areas of government action—war, the administration and refinement of law, the building of infrastructure. On the other hand, there was from an early date a criss-crossing of public and private interests, which intensified under the emperors. And once again, there are many questions to follow up, such as the apparent emergence in Flavian times of the notion that the government should sometimes control prices.¹³

Another paper printed here (Chapter 10) tends, however, to reduce the significance of the government in economic life, though that was not its purpose. Long-standing doubts about the prevalent notion that the money supply of the Roman Empire was virtually co-terminous with its supply of coins led me to take up the question of credit-money, with some essential consideration of what we mean by money (here, more perhaps than anywhere else in this collection, real economics helped form my opinions). If my argument that credit-money was extremely important is accepted, the effective decoupling of the money supply from the supply of coinage should be taken into consideration when the overall nature of the Roman economy is debated.¹⁴ The strength of the argument, apart from the fact that it explains a goodly amount of otherwise mysterious evidence, is that it reveals ancient ingenuity and complexity without ‘modernizing’ the Roman economy.

Finally, two surveys that attempt to integrate what we know about all the most significant aspects of the Roman economy in two given periods. The one that was written earlier (Chapter 12) puts forward a view that I hope is no longer contested much: this is not simply a matter of arguing that the Roman economy did not lie at either theoretical extreme (in other words, the Roman economy was neither an undeveloped Finleyan affair nor a modern market economy in embryo). It is rather to seek out the specifics of a complex, in some ways extraordinarily successful system, quite unique though always to be compared with other pre-modern economies—and here one must welcome

¹³ See p. 210.

¹⁴ For a further statement of the case, with some additional arguments, see Harris (2008a).

the recent attempts of Scheidel and Bang to compare it with, respectively, the Han and Mughal Empires.¹⁵

A more recent and perhaps more ambitious essay (Chapter 11), a survey of the economic history of the late Republic, addresses the question of growth. Many indicators suggest that in this period at least the Roman economy did indeed achieve some noteworthy per capita growth. But recast the question to consider the lives of the whole population of the Roman Empire and not just those of the more prosperous inhabitants of Italy (thus we circle back to the perspective employed in the chapter on poverty and destitution). Then take into account the destruction of lives and fixed capital brought about by internal wars, and the likelihood of per capita growth mostly evaporates.

Two strategies in particular hold these papers together, though I am acutely conscious of having executed both of them very imperfectly. One is essentially heuristic, and that is making comparisons with the other pre-modern economies alluded to just now. Of course I do not maintain that the shipping practices of ancient Near-Eastern merchants or the monetary practices of early modern England demonstrate anything in particular about the Romans. But let it be underlined that such allusions are not merely arabesques: the point is to explore the inner logic of patterns of economic behaviour, so often *not* revealed to us by the sources. But what are the 'sources'? The other constant in this volume is the conviction, shared of course by many others, that it is foolish to write about problems in economic history, especially though not only Roman economic history, without paying attention to every possible kind of evidence, and more specifically without balancing the many varieties of both material and textual evidence. As a principle, this is a banality—but it is easy to forget.

There are other principles here too, and two of them are worth enunciating because they have been explicitly or more often implicitly contradicted in much of the recent writing about the Roman economy.

1. The whole Roman Empire has to be our subject, and sometimes a still wider area.¹⁶ This should be glaringly obvious in a state in which taxes were drawn from every province, and it does not depend on whether we accept all of Peter Temin's arguments in favour of integrated markets. Yet some scholars continue to write as if Rome and Italy can be isolated from the rest (see Chapter 2 on poverty, for example).¹⁷

¹⁵ Scheidel (2009), Bang (2008). I reject, on the other hand, Bang's attempt to argue (2007: esp. 6 and 14–21) that the approach taken in this paper, simplistically labeled 'a free-market interpretation of imperial economic history', is somehow invalidated by the 'vitality' of the late-Roman economy (on which see below).

¹⁶ This book is after all the work of a historian of Roman imperialism; some of what I wrote in Harris (1979: ch. 2) foreshadows themes that are to be encountered here.

¹⁷ In giving this book its title I intend to emphasize that the Roman economy was an organic whole (and to resist any trend there may be to write about the economies, plural, of the Roman Empire), without asserting any particular degree of integration.

2. A good deal of subjectivity is inevitably involved in writing the economic history of the Roman Empire, yet the intellectual style of many of the scholars in question tends to mask this fact. I have probably been as guilty as anyone else on this score. But it is equally misguided to go to the opposite extreme: there are facts—a few of them at least—and accurate descriptions of them fit some models better than others. Choosing between competing models of how Rome's imperial economy worked is not simply a matter of arbitrary preference.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The above summary brings home to me forcefully that there are many vitally interesting questions about the Roman economy I have not addressed or have addressed much too briefly. I have already alluded to several of them—consumption patterns, river-transport, and a whole set of problems to do with debt. But three large problem areas are especially inviting.

First of all, the recent proliferation of work about Roman technology needs a long hard look from economic historians. It is not especially difficult to identify technological improvements—the question is whether they made any large difference to the productivity of a significant number of people.¹⁸ This question is regularly neglected even now. The recent *Oxford Handbook of Engineering and Technology in the Classical World*¹⁹ is often admirable but has extremely little to say on this subject. There is currently quite a spectrum of opinions about the effectiveness of Roman productive technology, ranging from the high though necessarily unquantified estimates of Hitchner and Wilson to those of, for example, Saller and perhaps Pleket, who, while acknowledging that some improvements occurred, consider that their effects were slow and marginal.²⁰

The best way to learn more about this matter may be to concentrate on specific topics and to bring the technical experts face to face with actual economic questions. Agriculture and stock-breeding should remain at the centre of this discussion:²¹ one historian has produced a picture of the 'Roman cow', showing it to be larger than earlier and later cows.²² Quite important if true. There is now a serious as well as a dilettante bibliography

¹⁸ I have sometimes made moderately optimistic statements on this subject (see Chapter 11).

¹⁹ Oleson (2008).

²⁰ Hitchner (2005: 213–16), Wilson (2002), Saller (2005: 235–6), Pleket (2006: 324).

²¹ See now esp. Marcone (2006), Zelener (2006); Brun (2006) gives a useful overview of the controversy about water-mills.

²² B. Ward-Perkins (2005: 145), but note his caveat that 'the sizes are *very* approximate' (211 n. 6).

about Roman food (and a sharp division of opinion about the amount of meat the Romans ate), but there is still more to be done.²³ It was to bring more technical experts into dialogue with economic historians that I organized a conference in June 2009 to discuss the question whether improvements in ship design or in navigation in Roman times had any economic significance.²⁴

Secondly, we need more environmental Roman history. Some of the things we do not yet know about the ancient environment are only connected loosely with the main questions of economic history—the type and degree of deforestation, for example.²⁵ Others are closely linked to it: to what extent, for example, did population growth or other trends drive inhabitants of the Roman Empire to farm marginal lands? Several recent scholars have drawn attention to the steadily increasing evidence that, in some Mediterranean provinces at least, Roman-period irrigation was strikingly effective,²⁶ and there is no doubt more to be said about the consequences for productivity and for the Roman response to the Malthusian impasse—are we, in short, contemplating anything more than a noble but doomed attempt to escape from a cul-de-sac?

Horden and Purcell's *Corrupting Sea* offered ancient historians the chance of a sharp change of direction. It will no doubt remain unclear for some time whether they will follow Horden and Purcell's lead in a useful fashion.²⁷

There is, from my point of view, a third challenge that is more demanding still. In short, what happened to the Roman economy between Diocletian and Justinian or, much better, the Arab invasions? Fortunately more and more scholars are venturing across the traditional ancient/medieval divide, but there are very few who are truly expert on both sides of it, and I do not pretend to be one of them. The last decade has witnessed a number of synthetic accounts of this matter, in which sharply contrasting conclusions are presented. Yet there is in fact something of a consensus.²⁸

This consensus asserts that economic activity declined²⁹ in the western Empire only after the German invasions at the beginning of the fifth century; there was much less 'prosperity' after that date. In the eastern Empire the decline came much later, not starting until the late sixth century or even 600,

²³ Garnsey (1999) and Jongman (2007) are useful recent discussions. On the controversy about the consumption of meat see also below, p. 49.

²⁴ The proceedings of this conference are in the press: Harris and Iara (forthcoming, 2011).

²⁵ On this matter see Harris (forthcoming, 2011).

²⁶ Bagnall (2005: 189–90), Margaritis and Jones (2008: 161–2), Wilson (2008: 309–11; 2009b).

²⁷ The initial reactions are virtually all mentioned in Harris (2005a), which also includes further contributions from Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell.

²⁸ The clearest outliers are the not inconsiderable figures of Banaji (2001) and Bang (2007).

²⁹ Some of those who in essence agree with what follows prefer more euphemistic expressions. It is pointless to complain that the word implies a value judgement: 'prosperity' and indeed any term that judges how well an economy was faring does so too. As to what our criteria are for decline or prosperity, that is another and more interesting matter.

though not in all areas even then. What happened to ‘prosperity’ in certain regions, in particular mainland Greece and the Proconsularis-Numidia section of North Africa, within these two centuries, 400–600, is debated, but the consensus about the rest of the Roman Empire is as I have stated it. And insofar as there was a single underlying cause of the eventual deterioration of economic conditions within what had once been the Roman Empire at its height, it was in fact invasions, mainly though not only German, Persian, and Arab. (In other words, hardly anyone is interested any more in strictly internal weaknesses.³⁰) As for the gap between rich and poor, it receives relatively little attention from economic historians writing about late antiquity (though experts on early Christianity have had much to say on this subject). The one aspect of late-antique labour relations that continues to receive attention is the infamous colonate, which seems once again to have gained recognition as a widespread, though in fact unsystematic, system of oppression.³¹ It remains unclear what all the implications of the development of this institution might be for the general state of the economy. What it meant for very many human beings is, however, perfectly clear: servitude in one form or another.

The consensus is undoubtedly right that there was a sort of bifurcation, roughly speaking between east and west, very shortly after 400—indeed this is merely an economic version of a history that has always been known. Signs of impoverishment, contraction, abatement—what have you—are commonplace in the western provinces, from the first decade of the fifth century onwards,³² and not until after 600 in most of the east, at least the east beyond the Bosphorus.

Yet it is not clear that the right questions are being asked very often. Sometimes they are indeed difficult to frame: how can we discuss per capita incomes in a world as turbulent as that of fifth-century Spain, Gaul, Italy, or North Africa?³³ But that is precisely what we need to do, for otherwise all talk of ‘prosperity’, ‘growth’—and of course the reverse—is meaningless.³⁴ It is all the more to be regretted therefore that recent syntheses have had very little to say about demography. Meanwhile the vast proliferation of archaeological evidence for the centuries in question seems paradoxically to have greatly increased the temptation to make vague generalizations.³⁵

³⁰ But the epidemic of bubonic plague (if that is what it was) that began in the mid-sixth century has recently been receiving more attention (Little 2007).

³¹ See Scheidel (2000) and Giardina (2007: 749–53) for the state of the question.

³² From a few decades earlier, I think, but this is not the place to argue the point.

³³ On the crucial problem of population density, cf. B. Ward-Perkins (2005: 138–46).

³⁴ Cf. Jongman (2006: 244–5).

³⁵ Banaji (2001: 17–20) quotes every structure as if it were evidence for an expanding economy.

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