

New Perspectives on the Ancient World

Modern perceptions, ancient representations

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Provincial interdependence in the Roman Empire: an explanatory model of Roman economy

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Introduction

The political economic understanding of the Roman Empire has been limited, until now, by two propositions, both established in the 19th century: the so called 'primitivist' vision, supported by M. Finley (1973; 1974; 1983; 1985) and his students, and the 'modernist' vision, with M. Rostovzeff (1926), as its most famous supporter for many years.

I must point out that, since the beginning, I have felt closer to Rostovzeff's thesis. First, because I share with him the experience of having traveled around most of the Roman Empire, which gave me the opportunity to perceive that objects produced in a corner of the Empire appear in very distant places from where they were produced. Secondly, because I follow his criterion of counting on archaeology when learning to write history, particularly economic history (Remesal 1995; 1997). Like the primitivists, I recognize that the means of production and of transportation were very limited in the ancient world. Nevertheless, this limitation cannot make us deny the existence of long-distance commerce in the Roman Empire. The archaeological evidence demonstrates that such commerce existed, so the question here is to explain how and why, despite all the limitations highlighted by the primitivists, such traffic of goods ever existed. The point is to explain why this commerce existed and not to deny it, as the primitivists do.

In short, I hope I have been able to go beyond this dichotomy in my research, offering an explanatory model that will allow us to understand how and why a long-distance system of trade was produced in the Roman Empire.

The archaeological data and written sources to study Ancient Economy

I have departed from a system of micro-regional analyzes. My point of departure was the study of Beatican olive oil production and commerce during the Roman Empire. As my research gained depth, I started to ask general questions regarding the meaning of economy to the Roman Empire and its influence on social and political life (De Blois 2002).

If we take only the textual sources into account, all we can say is that Beatican produced olive oil in great quantities and that this oil was exported to Rome. But if we consider the archaeological evidence, the fragments of the amphorae that transported the Beatican olive oil and the associated epigraphy, our view changes profoundly. Nowadays, almost a hundred production centers of those amphorae and a thousand associated stamps from Beatican are known. We were able to show those amphorae to have been most disseminated around the Roman Empire's western area. Nevertheless, they also appear in the eastern part of the Empire, reaching even India. Furthermore, in Rome there is a mound called Testaccio, an artificial mound made up, exclusively, of remains of amphorae, with more than 85% of them being Beatican. At Testaccio we have not only the stamps on the amphorae, like in Andalusia and in the rest of the Empire, but also, luckily, the so-called 'tituli picti.' These are the equivalents of our modern labels; on them appear both the tare and the net weight of the amphorae's content, the name of the dealer and a fiscal control. From the 2nd century onwards we have also consular dating among the data.

For the first time in the economic history of the ancient world, we have serial data. The threatening question of lack of data, in Ancient History, can be thus faced.

As Droysen used to claim, the sources do not establish the questions; historians do so. The point is to know how to ask the right questions of the sources and to ask ones they can answer. We began with two initial questions. Why did Rome use almost exclusively only Beatican olive oil during the first two centuries of the Christian era? Why did Beatican olive oil, a product foreign to the diet of the European northern peoples, become so widespread in *Britannia*, *Germania*, *Gaul* and *Retia*?

Fortunately, in the European world, nowadays, hunger within its territory is no longer a major concern. Europeans hear about famine only through the press. Nevertheless, if we pay attention to what is written in newspapers and magazines, we can perceive a great deal of tension within Europe regarding production and distribution of food supplies and the political control. In this sense, I understood it to be relevant to ask about the issue of political control

over food supplies in the Roman Empire, and so I have dedicated my attention to this subject, studying not only the literary sources, but also the archaeological evidence. Finley and his school did not investigate the latter.

Aristotle (*Ath. Pol.*, 43, 3) shows us how hunger was a constant issue in the urban communities of the ancient Mediterranean when he points out that the first thing to be dealt with in the meetings of the prytanies was the question of wheat. Once this issue was resolved, other political subjects could be addressed.

In fact, Rome overcame very rapidly the stage of city-state and soon started to make use of resources extracted from beyond its territory. In 299 BC we have a note of a concession of grains at reduced prices (Liv. 10, 11). In 203 BC, the great quantity of wheat that came from Hispania enabled the *curule aediles* to distribute great amounts of grain at reduced prices (Liv. 30, 26). Notwithstanding, it will only be in 123 BC that the novel political attitude of the Gracchi will transform food distribution into a true political weapon: the state should facilitate the acquisition by citizens living in Rome of a certain amount of grain at a reduced price. In fact, the only benefit received by Rome's plebs, among so many conquests, was a plate of lentils.

The year of 57 BC marks a qualitative jump within this policy. In the context of the struggles for power between Caesar and Pompeius, the latter obtains, during five years, the *cura annonae* (Cic. *Att* 4, 1, 7), by which citizens receive a certain amount of grain for free. This grain is only for a defined number of citizens and is known as *frumentationes*. The importance of this fact did not escape Pliny the Younger, one and a half century later. When comparing Pompeius and Trajan, he affirms that what brought more glory to the former, besides having freed the seas from the pirates, and besides his political advances, was precisely the fact of having held the position of *cura annonae*. Nevertheless, to Pliny's eyes, Trajan had accomplished even more because he built ports and roads, which enabled products from any part to be found everywhere, as if they were local products (Plin. *Paneg.* 29).

The importance of this fact did not escape Caesar. He imposed upon Numidia, through his military conquests, a tax to be paid in olive oil. The reason for this was clear: when Caesar celebrated his triumph in Rome, not only did he give away grains, as Pompeius had done, but he also added olive oil to the package (Suet. *Caes.* 38, 1; Cass. Dio 42, 21, 3).

Augustus' triumph left him with an immense territory made up of ancient conquered spaces administered by the Senate, and of new territories recently conquered by Caesar and Pompeius. Augustus left to the Senate the administration of the old provinces, whereas the new territories were kept under his control, where he established armies. His argument was that peace had been brought to those areas only recently. The armies set by Augustus were very

different from the old citizen army; they did not make an oath to the health of the Republic, but rather to that of the emperor's.

Since Mommsen (1996) [1856] the belief that Caesar was a politician capable of planning all the major changes inherent to a new political situation has been common. On the other hand, Augustus is seen as a character who, without having great initial plans, accommodated himself to the circumstances of the moment. For instance, the argument goes that the creation of the *praefectura annonae* at the end of his reign, when he held, since 22 BC, the position of *cura annonae*, is proof of his ability to improvise and to accommodate himself to each moment.

Notwithstanding, in the *Res gestae*, the first political fact that projects Augustus, after he enumerates his deeds, is precisely his acceptance, in 22 BC, of the *cura annonae*, being that according to him he accepted the titles given to him by the Roman people. He decisively affirms that '*non sum deprecatus in summa frumenti penuria curationem annonae quam ita administravi, ut intra dies paucos metu et periculo preasenti civitatem universam liberarem impensa et cura mea*' (RGDA. 5, 2.). Expressions like *Privata impensa, ex horreo et patrimonio meo* often appear in the *Res gestae* (1; 5; 1). When Suetonius (*Aug.* 101, 3) describes to us Augustus' final act, he puts in his mouth the argument that he would not leave to his heirs much money because the fortune he received from his two fathers and the enormous amounts received from his friends, as they had stipulated, had all gone to the creation of a new state. Augustus was fully aware of the fact that he was creating a new state, as can be seen in the decree that he, according to Suetonius (*Aug.* 28, 2), made public: '*I hope that I can establish a fully prosperous state on a solid foundation and that I can attain the result that I aspire to gain through this enterprise, which is none other than to be considered the founder of the best political regime...*'

Thus, in my opinion, the late creation of the *praefectura annonae* did not happen due to Augustus' inability; rather, the contrary occurred. Augustus left the direct control of food supplies in the hands of others only when he was certain he had control over the whole system. Proof of Augustus perspicacity is that he entrusted both the *praefectura annonae* and the *praefectura Aegypti* to individuals of equestrian rank, a social group that, at the time, could not dream of having political aspirations. To leave Egypt under the control of an individual of senatorial rank, with legions under him and control over a considerable portion of the grains needed in Rome, would have been to create a potentially dangerous enemy.

Food and Politics

Up to now, the research on the *frumentationes* has led to the belief that the function of the *praefectura annonae* was to assure the storage of the necessary grain for the same *frumentationes*. I have defended the idea that the

frumentationes and its organization do not coincide with the *praefectura annonae*. The *frumentationes* are a privilege for a reduced group of Roman citizens, rightful claimants. Moreover, the *praefectura annonae* should keep social peace in Rome, keeping everyone's belly full, as Seneca (*De brev. vit.* 18, 5) affirms when he refers to his father-in-law, a *praefectus annonae*: *Pompeius Paulinus: cum ventre humano tibi negotium est.*

Suetonius (*Aug.* 42, 3) affirms that in a case of hunger in Rome, Augustus withdrew from the city as many people as he could. As the number of mouths to feed decreased, the resources available increased proportionally. That is, in the case of hunger, it was expected from everyone that Augustus would satisfy all. In order to fulfill the alimentary need of Rome, Augustus counted on resources from the immense imperial properties and on the tribute paid in products by the provinces. Additionally, if it was necessary, he could also make use of the feared *indictiones*, that is, obligatory selling to the state, by fixed price established by the state. The inhabitants of Rome expected Augustus to fulfill all their needs, as can be seen in the famous text in which the people ask for Augustus to intervene in the price of the wine, which had become too expensive. Augustus' response, 'my son-in-law, Agrippa, has built sufficient aqueducts for us not to feel thirsty' (*Suet. Aug.* 42, 1), is not an appropriate political answer, but I believe to have an explanation for it. Just as grain arrived in Rome, as tribute, from various provinces, and olive oil mainly from Baetica, the wine trade was in the hands of members of the senatorial rank. Augustus could limit their political power but could not attack their pockets. Columella used most of his work *De re rustica* to talk about the advantages of producing wine. This is for me proof that this business rested outside the realm of the *annonaria* interventions. In fact, the first indications of wine grants to the Roman people are from Aurelian's times.

Augustus was also aware of the negative effects upon the Italic peninsula and upon agriculture of the *frumentationes* system and of the general aid to maintain food prices at low levels. He thought of suppressing these benefits. Nevertheless, as Suetonius points out (*Aug.* 42, 3) he did not carry out such a plan because he knew that any other ambitious politician would offer these benefits again to the people and that making such a change could have meant the end of his political career. What started to change the Italic agriculture was the fact that Rome was not anymore a market for the Italic products. Rome had turned into a venter that engulfed products arriving from the provinces. Columella (*R.R.* 1 *Praef.* 20) complains bitterly, in the prologue to his work, about the fact that products arrived in Rome from the provinces and not from the land of Saturn. But this was the first consequence of the system created by Augustus. Augustus had to ensure the general provisioning of Rome and had to obtain the plebs' support against Senatorial control, and so he assumed the perpetuity of the *tribunicia potestas*. He bought the vote of Rome's plebs in exchange for the assurance of their subsistence.

The Army and the economy

Research on military supply in the Roman Empire has been conditioned by a sentence attributed by Livy (34, 9, 12) to Cato, *bellum se ipsum alet*: war feeds itself. This was the answer Cato gave the Senate when the possibility of taking the war into *Hispania* was denied to him due to lack of resources. The sentence does not have, in this sense, a general scope, but rather a specific meaning at a specific moment. The army created by Augustus, for which he fixed the rules of conduct, a salary and the guarantee of a final reward due to the deposits kept in the *Aerarium militare*, was not a predatory army, in search of new territories at war, but an army quartered within the territory of the Roman Empire, a guarantor of the frontiers and of peace in the recent conquered lands (Edrkamp 2002; Remesal 2002a; 2002b; 2002c). It could not live off the pillage of the very place where it stood. On one hand, an army quartered in a same place for a long period of time could need products that were not produced there, for instance, metals. On the other hand, the regular supply for an army cannot be left to the randomness of circumstances, as Vegetio's words (3, 3) remind us: '*Saepius enim penuria quam pugna consumit exercitum, et ferro saevior fames est. Deinde reliquis casibus potest in tempore subveniri, pabulatio et annona in necessitate remedium non habent, nisi ante condantur. In omni expeditione unum est et maximum telum, ut tibi sufficiat victus, hostes frangat inopia.*'

The Latin analysis of papyrus proposed by Ginebra 1 states that, approximately two-thirds of the soldiers' salary was retained by the army as payment for products that the state had made available to them. Those who defend the 'primitivist' view have calculated the volume of nummery necessary to keep the army, and have stressed that the Roman state did not possess such volume. Moreover, the cost of transportation of such volume of nummery to where the army was quartered could be higher than the volume itself. However, from my point of view, the Roman state did not need to coin this enormous amount of nummery, nor transport it: it only needed a third of the total, since the other two thirds the soldier received in products. So, I believe I have solved one of the main points that the primitivists have set upon the study of the Roman economy.

In this way, supplying of the army with all those products that were not produced in the region where it was quartered was made easier by the imperial administration (Funari 1996; 2002). On the other hand, as I have already pointed out, the multiplicity of products that came from the imperial properties and those received as means of payment were used by the administration in order to fulfill the needs of the Roman plebs, army and servants to the administration. Putting those products into circulation allowed a considerable economic activity to happen, without the use of nummery, which would entail on the creation of an administrative compensation system among the provinces and between them and Rome, as I believe

to have demonstrated. I believe that grain was not the only *annonarius* product, as has been sustained so far. All those products necessary for feeding Rome and the maintenance of the army were *annonaria*. For instance, let us remember that the Frisians paid their tributes in ox skins, which were used for the soldiers' tents. Olive oil, one of the most important products of the Mediterranean diet, was included among the *annonaria* products since Augustus' time, as can be perceived by the existence of Mount Testaccio (Rome) and by the fact that an exogenous product, like olive oil, was present in all the camps of the western *limes* of the Roman Empire.

I sustain the position that the need to provide Rome and the army with supplies, two of the foundations of Augustus' power, is a determining element in the evolution of the Roman Empire's economy, politics and administration. In my opinion, the functions of the *praefectura annonae* were to control those resources and to be responsible of their redistribution. This redistributive function cannot be understood as true commerce, even though it generated an economic activity, because those in charge of transportation received a payment, the *vecturae*, from the state and because under the shadow of this redistribution free commercial activities could be accomplished. Those activities, since Claudio's time, were encouraged by the concession of social privileges to those who dedicated themselves to satisfying the needs of the Roman market.

I perceive the relationships that emerged between Rome and each of the provinces, as well as those among the provinces, as motivated by the Roman State's needs, through an interdependent point of view. These relationships determined the role fulfilled by each of the provinces in specific moments and, lastly, the political and administrative evolution of the Roman Empire.

One can better understand the Roman Empire's evolution through this perspective and can explain the reasons for both the rise and the decline of each of the provinces.

In my opinion, the conquest of *Gallia* and of *Germania* had important effects on *Hispania* and its men. Firstly, because Cornelius Balbus, and, without a doubt, many other equites from Gades financed Caesar's expeditions, which enabled them to join the Roman elite rapidly. Secondly, because it led to the conquest of *Cantabria* and of *Gallaecia*. Rome needed, then, to navigate between the Mediterranean and the Rhine without facing enemy territory. An extraordinary evidence, the lighthouse of Corunna, built by Augustus, is the best argument to support my proposition. The lighthouse was not dedicated to the recently overcome Callaici, but to the vessels that, according to Arminius (Tac. *Ann.* 2, 15, 2), enabled the Romans to receive supplies from the sea beyond.

The recent research that I and my students have produced regarding the supplying of the Britain – Rhenish – Danubian *limes* using amphorae fragment shows clearly

that *Hispania*, and specifically *Baetica*, had a relevant role. Moreover, during Julio-Claudian times, products coming from all over the Mediterranean basin arrived at the German *limes*. Notwithstanding, from the Flavians on, the preponderance of Hispanic products is complete, and products from Gaul are also abundant. There was no logistical reason for African products not to arrive at the *limes*, but they did not, or rather their volume is inconsiderable. This fact has led me to propose that the formation of the *limes* by Vespasian and the concession of *ius latii* to *Hispania* are related. The information one can gather from the epigraphy of the amphorae also allows for the hypothesis that some regions of *Baetica*, in certain moments, had defined relations with other determined regions of *Germania*. We still cannot answer too many of the questions we have asked ourselves, for instance, who was in charge of those precise relationships and how were they organized, but, at least, we were able to propose those questions.

The election of Trajan as emperor was influenced by the 'Spanish clan', as is well known, but I want to stress here that his rival, Curvatus Maternus, was also Spanish, which proves, in my opinion, the determining role of *Hispania* and its men in the organization and good use of the Roman Occident, and, consequently, the outstanding role of its elites. It was those Spanish emperors who allowed the rise of yet another province, *Africa*. The Roman World was unable to develop new models of production, so the only means of increasing production was the exploration of new lands. Trajan and Adrian instigated the agricultural occupation of *Africa* and, in my opinion, tried to use in *Africa* the same model of municipal development that was set in *Baetica* by Vespasian. The municipal and economical development led Africans to power in Rome. By the end of the Spanish dynasty, the struggle for power happened among Africans, Clodius Albinus and Septimius Severus. I sustain that Severus' violent reaction against the Spanish and Gauls has a marked economic interest, which marks the decline of the western provinces.

Concluding remarks

Augustus created an Empire with precarious conditions, using his own resources in order to maintain a weak administration, trying to create a balance among the interests of the people, of the those involved in agriculture, and of the merchants, so tells us Suetonius (*Aug.* 42, 3). This balance grew impossible as the administrative mechanisms grew larger and consumed a big portion of the state's resources. A state unable to create new models of production, this is how I have interpreted the continuous proscriptions and condemnations of wealthy individuals; not as a proof of the paranoid illnesses of the emperors, but as inherent needs of the state's administrative mechanisms. This can be demonstrated in the accusation against Sextus Marius or the confiscations of property by Nero in *Africa*. Pliny the Younger (*Pang.* 29, 5) tries very hard to demonstrate that in Trajan's times the old balance between

the interests of the state and those of private parties was recovered. But the state that Augustus created carried within it the seeds that would transform it profoundly. We can affirm that, from Severus onwards, the state served only the state itself.

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