Col·lecció INSTRUMENTA 42

ECONOMIC EVIDENCE AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF URBAN SPACE IN LATE ANTIQUE ROME

Paul S. Johnson

Universitat de Barcelona

Publicacions i Edicions

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Barcelona 2012

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1ª edición: Barcelona, 2012

Director de la colección: José Remesal.

Secretario de la colección: Antonio Aguilera.

Diseño de la cubierta: Cesca Simón.

CEIPAC
http://ceipac.ub.edu

Generalitat de Catalunya. Grup de Recerca de Qualitat: SGR 95/200; SGR 99/00426; 2001 SGR 00010; 2005 SGR 01010; ACES 98-22/3; ACES 99/00006; 2002ACES 00092; 2006-EXCAV0006; 2006ACD 00069.

DGICYT: PB89-244; PB96-218; APC 1998-119; APC 1999-0033; APC 1999-034; BHA 2000-0731; PGC 2000-2409-E; BHA 2001-5046E; BHA2002-11006E; HUM2004-01662/HIST; HUM200421129E; HUM2005-23853E; HUM2006-27988E; HP2005-0016; HUM2007-30842-E/HIST; HAR2008-00210.

MAEX: AECI29/04/P/E; AECI.A/2589/05; AECI.A/4772/06; AECI.A/01437/07; AECI.A/017285/08.

Composición y maquetación: Sergi Calzada.

Portada:

Impresión: Gráficas Rey, S.L.

Depósito legal:

ISBN:

Impreso en España / Printed in Spain.

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Acknowledgements

This work has benefitted greatly from the advice and assistance of a number of individuals; I am indebted to all of them for their time and persistence in support of my research. In particular I must thank Dottoressa Lidia Paroli for her assistance in negotiating the bewildering array of possibilities provided by a city such as Rome and selecting a suitable dataset from amongst the myriad excavations undertaken within the city, and for her unflagging support and reassurance that I was breaking new ground and not merely replicating research already being carried out by Italian scholars. Dottoressa Laura Venditelli of the Museo Nazionale di Roma: Crypta Balbi provided me with encouragement, assistance and working space in the museum to conduct the practical aspects of this study. The many Italian colleagues who have assisted me with access to material and advice in the study of excavated assemblages in Rome deserve thanks and recognition, in particular Sergio Fontana, Cristina Gagliardo, Helga di Giuseppe, Manuella Paganelli, and Marco Ricci all deserve my most sincere gratitude for simplifying the process of data collection, being generous with their time and for making available to me their experiences of excavating and working with the material from the sites studied.

This project began as research for my PhD at the University of Southampton which was partly funded by a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. I have benefited greatly from the advice and guidance of my supervisor Professor Simon Keay whose continued support has been of inestimable value, as has the constructive advice and criticism of other members of staff and research students within the Department of Archaeology at the University of Southampton during the time I was there. In particular, I would like to thank Proffessors David Peacock and Matthew Johnson for advice and comments received during the course of writing the thesis upon which this work is based. In addition I would like to thank my examiners, Professor Peacock and Professor Ian Haynes for constructive criticism of the thesis and the encouragement to follow this project through to publication.

During the course of this project I spent a considerable time at the British School at Rome (in part as Raleigh-Radford Rome Scholar) and am grateful to the School, the then-Director, Professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, former Assistant Director (Archaeology) Doctor Helen Patterson, and Librarian, Valerie Scott for their support of this project by providing me with access to the resources of the BSR. Both they and the other scholars, residents and members of staff at the BSR provided a welcoming and stimulating scholarly environment within which to pursue my research. These research visits were supported by the AHRC, the Faculty of Arts of the University of Southampton and by the BSR itself.

I am also indebted to the editor of the Collecció Instrumenta, Professor José Remesal Rodríguez, for commenting on an early draft of this volume and providing guidance and advice from an academic perspective. In addition, I am grateful for the comments and suggestions of the anonymous reviewer for the improvement of the final version of this work.

This work has benefitted from many frank and enlightening discussions with colleagues and contemporaries in Southampton, Cambridge and Rome among other places and I would like to thank all those individuals, too numerous to mention by name, whose comments (off-hand or otherwise) have helped to me to formulate and refine the ideas contained in this text. All errors to be found within it, naturally, remain my own responsibility.

Preface

Simon Keay
University of Southampton / British School at Rome

It gives me great pleasure to write the prologue to this book. For many years, CEIPAC and the Universitat de Barcelona under the inspired direction of José Remesal Rodríguez have published a remarkable range of monographs in the *Col.leció Instrumenta* series that have taken provincial interdependency in Classical antiquity as its academic theme, and which have included a number of volumes dealing with the City of Rome, most notably *Monte Testaccio* Vols I-V.

Economic Evidence and Changing Nature of Urban Space in Late Antique Rome by Paul Johnson, is an innovative study that focuses upon the relationship between the importation of amphora-borne foodstuffs, their distribution and discard within the City and what this tells us about changing uses of urban space between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD. There have been a number of archaeological studies of late antique Rome in recent years, most notably *Roma dall'antichità all'alto Medievo* I and II, as well as a long tradition of studies that have focused upon the pattern of imports to the City. However the relationship between imported foodstuffs and the City as an urban unit has not been so well served.

This book, therefore, turns away from a study of the importation of amphorae as an index of the degree of commercial dependence of the City upon external food sources, and uses them instead as a measure of changing patterns of use of a range of buildings, and by implication urban space. Following a careful definition of the objectives of the book, the study begins (Chapter 2) with a review of earlier studies of the supply of foodstuffs to Rome, in particular the *annona*. It then moves on (Chapter 3) to look closely at our data sources for the late antique period, most notably imported

amphorae, epigraphic and historical evidence for the supply of foodstuffs to the City. In Chapter 4 Johnson's attention then shifts to the City itself, where he summarizes our understanding of the late antique topography. This is followed by four key chapters. Chapter 5 focuses upon theoretical issues relating to the significance of ceramics in the archaeological record. In Chapter 6, Johnson spells out the methodology that he adopts for quantifying amphorae in order to map the changing use of urban space in Rome. He makes the valuable point that they need to be interpreted as waste and directs attention towards the depositional issues inherent in undertaking a study of this kind. This is the core of the thesis and his approach has considerable potential for understanding the patterning of the large quantities of ceramics that are so typical of urban landscapes of the late antique period. In Chapter 7 he discusses the twelve sample sites from across the City and a summary of the material found at each of them; detailed summaries of the data are provided in Appendix D. The study then concludes with two chapters. The first of these adopts a measured approach to the interpretation of his results (Chapter 8), with the use of a Geographical Information System for mapping trends in the densities of amphorae across the urban landscape. The second (Chapter 9) reflects upon his choice of approach and discusses the implications of the results for our understanding of the re-use of urban space in late antiquity.

This is the first time that the spatial context of ceramics from the City of Rome has been a subject of study. When one remembers the sheer volume of material that is discovered every year on rescue and research excavations in Rome, and the challenge that it presents both to ceramologists and those responsible for its storage, it acts as a timely reminder that no matter how problematic these quantities are, this approach holds a huge potential for our understanding of the changing nature of the *urbs*.

The research that underpins this book was completed in 2008, and while it has not been possible to fully update this book with all of the more recent relevant works published on the City, the arguments expounded therein are unaffected. The interest in Roman urbanism that spurred the author to embark on this subject remains unabated. Since 2008 Johnson has maintained close associations with the universities of Southampton and Cambridge. He has held prestigious research fellowships, notably the Raleigh Radford Scholarship at the British School at Rome, and more recently a Marie Curie Fellowship on the Radio-Past Project, and has undertaken extensive geophysical survey work and excavation in Italy, Portugal and the UK. He is currently researching into other late antique centres in the western Mediterranean.

1. Introduction

This study addresses questions about the nature of food supply within the urban centres of the Late Empire and the changing socio-political environment of Late Antiquity[1]. The supply of staple foodstuffs was such a key component in the economy of the Roman Empire that it impacted upon almost all aspects of Roman life in some way. This study shows the distinction between economic and social practice to be demonstrably false and counterproductive to understanding the complexity of life in Late Roman urban spaces[2]. The demonstration of this distinction is achieved by making evident the value of economic evidence in the interpretation of social activity and the fundamental importance of economic activity to urban life. This study creates a framework and a methodology for the interpretation of socio-economic life in the Late Roman world through analytical techniques applied to a largely ceramic-based corpus of data. The methodology employed, and results of this study have the potential to fundamentally alter our approach to the study of life in Late Antique cities.

The primary focus of this research is a group of ceramic assemblages from the city of Rome relating to the period between the 4th and 6th centuries A.D. A methodology has been developed and refined in order to answer the specific questions outlined below. Though Rome was the centre of its empire for centuries and has frequently been used as a yardstick for understanding the archaeology of the provinces, it is perhaps the least typical urban centre within the Empire and surprisingly little is known about many facets of everyday life in the city. Until recently, the focus of excavators on large public monuments and the continuous occupation of the city from antiquity to the present day has left us a rich but heavily biased archaeological record. The combination of this preoccupation with monumental

[1] For the purposes of this research, 'Late Antiquity' is taken to refer to the period between the 4th and 6th centuries A.D.
[2] The Late Roman period can be defined as beginning in the mid 3rd century A.D. and ending with the abdication of Romulus Augustulus in A.D. 476.

remains and the persistent notion of a perceived "decline and fall" in historical and archaeological research until recent years has left the study of more mundane activities, such as the physical distribution of the *Annona* and waste disposal, in Late Antiquity very much on the periphery of academic discourse. These traditional notions of a declining city in the Late Antique and Early Mediaeval periods are not supported by the archaeological evidence which is slowly becoming available and represent one of several entrenched perspectives to which this research will offer alternative interpretations.

1.1. Aims of the research project

One of the most striking features within the archaeological record of the city of Rome is the widespread presence of waste deposits in the Late Antique and Early Mediaeval periods. This phenomenon is well known in principle but poorly understood in the details and represents an as-yet under-utilised source of evidence for understanding the way in which urban spaces were occupied and used in the Late Roman period. There is a significant quantity of ceramic material contained within these deposits; through a contextual and quantitative study of this material an insight into these patterns of occupation and abandonment, use and disuse can be obtained. Such deposits have been recorded on a number of sites within the city but although the majority of the excavations were completed some time ago, the process of publication has only recently begun. These ubiquitous sources of archaeological material offer a rich source of evidence for addressing economic and socio-political questions pertaining to urban life in the Late Empire, however, to date, they have been given insufficient attention by archaeologists and historians trying to understand the nature of urban life in Late Antiquity. The availability of these data now enables archaeologists to develop and prioritise new research frameworks that focus on *how* and *why* goods were being moved around the city, as opposed to simply assessing which goods were present within the limits of the urban area.

One of the fundamental questions pertaining to changes in the fabric of the urban landscape in Late Antiquity is, how can we understand the locations of and means through which the urban authorities were disposing of the detritus (i.e. the ceramic containers) of the *Annona* oil supply and through this to understand the means of distribution of the foodstuffs. The significance that the large scale of the supply of imported foodstuffs has for notions of a declining Late Antique population within the city is worthy of attention. Similarly, the effect of the disintegration of the Western Empire as a political unit in the 5th century upon the continued supply of these goods to the Capital is equally important and both are questions which this research will address. Both are significant in challenging preconceived notions of the scaling down of urban life between the High Empire and Late Antiquity. This study demonstrates that data which are essentially economic can be suited to answering questions pertaining to the socio-political organisation of life in Late Roman urban spaces and can provide a means of understanding the changes in the imperial, administrative, monumental, religious, and residential urban fabric during this transitional period.

1.2. Justification of the research project

The justification for this research relies on a single supposition, upon which the conclusions and validity of this thesis rest: as the most basic of human needs, the provision of food to a population—especially an urban population unable to meet its own subsistence requirements—must remain the most pressing concern of any governing body. This acknowledgement of the need to supply the urban population of Rome is well documented in respect of the Roman government and is a large part of the background to this study which will be discussed fully in a later chapter of this work. Whilst there is little direct evidence for the goods concerned, there is a significant, but vastly underdeveloped,