

William V. Harris, *Rome's Imperial Economy. Twelve Essays.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xiv, 370. ISBN 978-0-19-959516-7. \$150.00.

This book includes 12 major contributions (“essays”) to the study of the Roman economy, written by William V. Harris since 1980. While some of these essays originally appeared in volumes that are not easily accessible, three were previously published in the well-known *Journal of Roman Studies* and two are chapters from the *Cambridge Ancient History* and the *Cambridge Economic History of the Greek and Roman World*, respectively. One essay (ch. 2) is published for the first time here.

Modestly described by the author as “fragments for some future Rostovtzeff to throw into the furnace as raw material for a new synthesis” (11), these essays cover key aspects and issues of the Roman economy, all of which remain current and often debated today. In the first part of the introduction (1–7), Harris outlines the organization and format of this book, alluding to some problems entailed by such a collection of reprinted works. Thus, he left the essays essentially unchanged, even where the debate has moved on and he himself no longer fully agrees with his original approach. Instead, each reprinted article is complemented at the end by brief comments on subsequent debates and research and by some bibliographical updates; these vary in length and depth for the different essays (from a few sentences to several pages). This is an elegant and overall successful solution even if one had wished for more substantial revisions and addenda in some cases. Another problem, however, arises when reading this collection as a book from front to back, namely the considerable amount of overlaps and repetitions between the different essays. Although Harris was obviously aware (p. 1, n.1) of this problem, apparently it still could not be avoided entirely or amended by eliminations.

The second part of the introduction (7–11) offers, *in nuce*, a succinct assessment of the state of research on the Roman economy. What Harris recognizes as “unfinished business” (7) in his own research, are, in fact, major gaps in research on the Roman economy in general. He lists three large problems, namely the impact of technological improvements on productivity for a significant number of people; environmental changes and their influence on the economy; and the development of the economy between Diocletian and Justinian, or rather even the Arab invasions.

The 12 following essays are arranged according to six large topics, termed structures (ch. 1–2), slavery (ch. 3–4), production (ch. 5–6), trade (ch. 7–9), money (ch. 10), and overviews (ch. 11–12). Thus, all central aspects of the Roman economy are addressed, except for agriculture and pastoralism.¹ While this thematic organization, at the expense of a strict chronological order (which would have assimilated this book more to the “Bildungsroman” mentioned in Harris’ first paragraph, p. 1), is largely successful, it may have motivated the inclusion of two somewhat ill-fitting (and comparatively short) chapters. Chapter 6 (“Production, Distribution, and *Instrumentum Domesticum*,” 147–152) is not a self-contained essay, but the conclusion to an edited volume with references

¹ Cf. the key sections of Jean Andreau’s recent synthesis, *L’économie du monde romain*, Paris: Ellipses, 2010.

to other contributions in that volume, which are not fully comprehensible here. Harris himself expresses doubts about the arguments presented in his study on “Trade and the River Po” (ch. 8, 188–197), but still includes this article without extensive comments (regarding, for example, comparative studies on other rivers and on river transport in general).

The excellent new chapter on “Poverty and Destitution in the Roman Empire” (chap. 2, 27–54) is a welcome addition to an ongoing debate.² It is also representative of Harris’ general approach to the Roman economy, namely a global perspective. Thus, he asserts that “the whole Roman Empire has to be our subject, and sometimes even a still wider area” (6), whereas a focus on Rome and Italy, often favored because of the available evidence, would lead to skewed views and results. While one may object that in-depth analyses on local and regional levels are equally important and ideally should complement the empire-wide perspective, Harris’ approach yields intriguing results for an assessment of poverty in the Roman Empire. He attempts to answer the basic question, “whether those who were able to work could support themselves and, if they were not solitary, their households” (32). Contrasting Italy and the provinces, as well as urban and rural settings, he discusses key parameters, including subsistence needs (requiring quantification and thus necessarily difficult to assess), labor market, and inheritance patterns. He convincingly argues against a minor “conjunctural poverty,” as proposed by some scholars, and instead for a significant “structural poverty” that would have affected the provinces much more than Rome and Italy, and the countryside more than towns. This rather dire picture would be confirmed by the phenomenon of child abandonment, practiced primarily for economic reasons,³ and by the absence of efficient empire-wide counter-measures to diminish the “impact of destitution prior to the advent of mass Christianity” (33).

This is not the place to discuss in due detail all other essays, most of which are well known in scholarship on the Roman economy and have sparked vivid debates, offering perspicacious arguments and challenging long-standing assumptions. These essays altogether make this an insightful, inspiring book, which provides both an excellent introduction to the Roman economy for students and a sophisticated and convenient overview of central problems and discourses for scholars. The only factor that may impede the befitting wide distribution of this book in public as well as private libraries, let alone its appropriate use as a textbook in classes, is its price—currently \$150.00 for a (roughly) A5-sized book that includes, with the exception of three small grayscale maps, only text, about a quarter of which is accessible to students and scholars online for free.

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² See, for example, the joint AIA/APA colloquium at the annual meetings in 2012 on “Finding Peasants in the Mediterranean Landscapes,” which aimed at assessing the economic status of peasants in the Greek and Roman worlds from a historical and archaeological point of view.

³ For a detailed discussion of this topic see W. V. Harris, “Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994) 1–22.