

Walter Scheidel, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xiii, 443. ISBN 978-0-521-72688-7 (Paperback). \$39.99, £23.99.

Were people in the past like us? Or were they, on the contrary, desperately foreign? Many great controversies in the historiography on pre-modern societies ultimately seem to boil down to the issue of similarity or difference. Was the past a foreign country, or was it just a less complex, less developed version of our own world? And if the (pre-modern) past was indeed a very foreign place, then what precisely did this 'foreignness' consist of? For well over a century now, ancient historians and classical archaeologists have been passionately debating such questions with relation to the economies of ancient Greece and Rome (with 'us' in this debate referring to western Europeans anytime from the later medieval period onwards). Whereas in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Eduard Meyer and Michael Rostovtzeff could still argue for essential similarities between the ancient world and (early) modern Europe, ever since the publication of M.I. Finley's *Ancient Economy* in 1973 the foreign, non-capitalist character of 'the ancient economy' has often been stressed.

With the recent appearance of Peter Temin's *The Roman Market Economy* (Princeton University Press 2012) and Emanuel Mayer's *The Ancient Middle Classes* (Harvard University Press 2012), however, for the Roman world at least, the pendulum seems to have swung the other way again: we now have a picture of the empire as one large integrated market economy (Temin), where an enterprising 'bourgeois' middle class of artisans, traders and (financial) service providers seems to have been the engine of commercial dynamism and growth, as well as of cultural and artistic production (Mayer). So, were the Romans after all 'just like us', at least in socio-economic terms?

As Walter Scheidel's *Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy* very effectively succeeds in making clear to its reader, the debate on this crucial question is far from over. Yet, as the contributions in this volume also make clear, that debate is no longer one in which a 'modernizing' vision of Rome is necessarily contrasted with a 'primitivist' model stressing (commercial) underdevelopment. Rather, the choice, as Scheidel points out in his excellent introductory chapter, is between two views of pre-industrial economic complexity: one in which the Roman state is thought to have provided favorable background conditions (e.g. a road network, safe sea routes, a regulated currency system, a unified legal framework) for an expansion of trade and the increasing integration of markets, and another in which stress is placed on government redistribution, tribute-exaction, elite rent-taking, predation and slavery as engines of economic development (but not necessarily growth), including the formation of markets. We might add a third, 'ecological', perspective, of which Scheidel himself is a prominent proponent, where economic outcomes are linked to long-term population movements, disease environments, nutritional status and regional ecological variability (see e.g. P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*). This perspective too crops up occasionally in the *Companion*, notably in Scheidel's piece on physical well-being (Chapter 15).

The volume is organized thematically and consists of five parts: 'Theory', 'Labor', 'Production', 'Distribution', and 'Outcomes', with each part containing several chapters, including, in Part V on 'Outcomes', a chapter by Simon Loseby on 'post-Roman economies.' It also includes a concise bibliographical essay focused on further reading, and comes complete with its own website offering supplementary data and discussion to some chapters (see <http://web.stanford.edu/~scheidel/CCRE.htm>). By far the longest section of the volume is Part IV on 'Distribution', a reflection, no doubt, of the strong focus on exchange in the debate concerning the ancient economy. Part I: 'Theory' opens with a wide-ranging discussion of Roman economic thought by Gloria Vivienza, who concludes with the observation that Romans possessed 'a certain awareness of how to construct economic arguments (...) even though it was not theorized' (39). Scholars, then, are faced with two options: they can either use the ancients' own views of agriculture, manufacture, trade and finance as their point of departure in reconstructing 'the ancient economy' (as Finley did), or make use of modern economic theory. Recent research has decidedly favored the latter option, as do many of the contributors to this *Companion*. This is evident from Peter Temin's chapter on the application of (neoclassical) economic models and techniques to ancient history, and from Richard Saller's discussion of human capital formation, in which he provides the telling guesstimate that 'at any given time, perhaps one-half of one percent of the [empire's] population over the age of five were receiving basic education', which constitutes 'a fraction of the levels seen in the least developed countries today' (84). If investment in human capital is indeed as important to economic growth as economists have argued in recent times, Saller's guesstimate at the very least provides some food for thought for the latter-day modernizers among Roman economy scholars.

It is to Scheidel's credit as an editor that he does not try to gloss over the continuing controversy on almost every aspect of the Roman economy, but rather uses his *Companion* to bring the conflicts out into the open, to the benefit of the uninitiated reader. Thus, for instance, Geoffrey Kron in his chapter on food production (of which a fuller version can be found on the volume's accompanying website) and Scheidel in his chapter on physical well-being offer wildly divergent interpretations of skeletal material from Roman Italy (and elsewhere) as an index of Roman living standards. Whereas Kron argues that Roman Italian mean height was equal to that of Italian males just after World War II, a finding which he interprets as indicative of 'a high standard of health and nutrition' (156), Scheidel finds that mean stature declined during the Roman period in comparison with the preceding (Iron Age) and subsequent (Medieval) periods, a trend which he views as compatible with a Malthusian scenario of high population density resulting in a prevalence of (qualitative) malnutrition and infectious-disease related mortality (evidenced, *inter alia*, by markers of developmental stress on Roman-period skulls). There is also an interesting tension between Temin's chapter on the application of neo-classical economic theory to Roman history, where he stresses economic integration through the expansion of trade and markets, and Peter Fibiger Bang's insistence on conquest, violence and rent-seeking by the state as factors integrating the empire in his chapter on predation. Slightly contrasting images of important aspects of the Roman economy are also drawn in Scheidel's chapter on slavery and Dennis Kehoe's chapter

on contract labor, while Andrew Wilson's chapter on raw materials, energy and technology offers a nice counterpoint to Saller's stress on human capital. The continuing vitality of the debate is best brought out, however, in Chapter 14, appropriately entitled 'a forum on trade', where various specialists (an archaeologist [Andrew Wilson], three historians [Bang, Paul Erdkamp and Neville Morley] and an economist [Morris Silver]) provide brief summaries of their respective and contrasting views on this most contentious issue in Roman economic history.

Other chapters are similarly debate-focused. Sitta von Reden offers a fine chapter on money and finance, emphasizing the scale and complexity of Roman monetization and financial intermediation, while Colin Adams presents an interestingly revisionist interpretation of Roman transport, arguing against older views that stressed its relative inefficiency. Cameron Hawkins, in his chapter on manufacturing, ingeniously argues that Roman manufacturers had no need of the hierarchically structured framework of the modern western business enterprise, because flexible networks (such as professional *collegia*) composed of numerous small-scale units far better suited the structure of consumer demand and the labor market situation with which Roman artisans saw themselves confronted. Paul Erdkamp, in his chapter on urbanism, stresses rural underemployment as a crucial factor in Roman urbanization, and emphasizes the non-reciprocal economic relationship between the (mostly) rural-based food producing sector and the (mostly) urban-based non-food producing sectors, arguing that ultimately 'the urban economy was founded on the basis of [the landowning elites'] social and political entitlement to the produce of others' (261). These two chapters in particular, along with the contributions by Bang (his chapter on predation and his addition to the forum on trade) succeed very well in bringing out the 'otherness', that is, the historical specificity of the Roman economy.

Overall, the *Companion* clearly shows how the debate on the Roman economy has been enlivened and reinvigorated by the analysis of new types of source material, often archaeologically-derived, and by a more sustained application of theories and models from a variety of other fields (e.g. economics, demography, ecology), as well as by a distinctly comparative focus, most visible in the work of Bang, Scheidel and Erdkamp. It offers a stimulating introduction to recent research and debates on the Roman economy for students and scholars alike, especially when read in conjunction with the recent *Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (which was co-edited by Scheidel and offers a chronological account), and should really be on the bookshelves of anyone interested in ancient economic history or in the economic development of pre-modern societies more generally.

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