

H.-J. DREXHAGE/H. KONEN/K. RUFFING, *Die Wirtschaft des Römischen Reiches (1.–3. Jahrhundert). Eine Einführung*. Studienbücher. Geschichte und Kultur der Alten Welt, hrsg. von Karl Strobel. Akademie-Verlag, Berlin 2002. 400 pp., 12 Abb. und Tafeln.

For more than two decades Hans-Joachim Drexhage has kept the small journal “Münstersche Beiträge zur Antiken Handelsgeschichte” alive with admirable energy. The Journal has published a wealth of articles on almost every aspect of trade in the Graeco-Roman world. It has made a significant contribution to the study of the ancient economy and a lively research environment has sprung up around it. Together with two of his younger colleagues, Heinrich Konen and Kai Ruffing, Drexhage is now presenting a broad textbook synthesis of the economy of the Roman empire. The book is intended to offer students an introduction to the area, but is also written as a comment on current debates. There is much in it to interest the more experienced, student as well as scholar.

The book falls into two main parts. The first half contains a survey of the Roman economy, the second a broad and interesting selection of sources in German translation to illustrate the themes presented in the synthesis. The decision to include original evidence, in translation, improves the value of the work as a teaching tool considerably. So does the inclusion of a substantial number of papyri in the selection. Papyri contain some of the most detailed evidence extant for ancient economic activity and ought not to be neglected by ancient historians. Indeed, Drexhage has done much to improve our awareness of the value of papyri for the study of Greco-Roman economic activity. It is, for instance, only from Egyptian papyri that some kind of study of prices in the Greek and Roman world is possible, as Drexhage has reminded us in his “Preise, Mieten/Pachten, Kosten und Löhne im römischen Ägypten bis zum Regierungsantritt Diokletians” (St. Katharinen 1991).

“Münstersche Beiträge” has been characterised more by detailed empirical studies than attempts at conceptualisation and theorising. This has both been the strength and weakness of the Journal. The same goes for the book which explicitly proceeds from an anti-theoretical position. The authors programmatically declare that “Dem möglichen Vorwurf, eine positivistische Arbeit geleistet zu haben, sehen wir gelassen entgegen, weil gerade in der Auseinandersetzung mit der antiken Wirtschaft Theorien und Theoreme mit vielen Quellen kollidieren” (p. 11). And, they continue, “Das Ziel dieser Darstellung soll nicht sein, einen neuen theoretischen Entwurf zum Charakter der kaiserzeitlichen Wirtschaft vorzulegen. Vielmehr haben wir uns darum bemüht, auf der Grundlage *aller* zur Verfügung stehenden Quellengruppen Aussagen zu liefern, ohne diese einem Modell zuzuordnen” (p. 21). Such caution and distrust of generalised statements on the nature of the Roman imperial economy is more easily explained than justified. The recent very heated debates on the competing models

of Roman economic history makes it understandable why one should like to plead despair and seek refuge in the comforting, but illusory, safety of the ancient evidence. Historical sources are not self-explanatory; they must be interpreted. This is particularly difficult in the ancient case where the evidence is so much more fragmented and haphazardly preserved than for later periods. "Without a theoretically grounded conceptual scheme", as Finley once remarked, "the thin and unreliable evidence lends itself to manipulation in all directions, without any controls" (Ancient History. Evidence and models [London 1985] p. 18). The alternative to models and systematical discussion of concepts is not empirically certified truth, it is commonsensical prejudice and half-digested *a priori* theories. This is a crucial lesson which students in particular should not be denied. At any rate, ancient economic history is not short of empirical studies; they abound. What it does lack, are more attempts to develop our conceptual and interpretative framework to keep our steadily expanding store of data together.

Fortunately, the book makes a greater contribution towards the latter project than the authors promise or are willing to admit. The reader is not treated to a discussion of the Roman economy in out-dated antiquarian and philological fashion. Drexhage and his collaborators are well informed of the ways economic history is practised in other fields. This has, for instance, brought them to dedicate a whole chapter to the question of "Lebensstandard", an interest which they incidentally share with the pioneering work of Cambridge historians such as Peter Garnsey (Food and Society in Classical Antiquity [Cambridge 1994]), and a chapter on "Dienstleistungen", where subjects such as prostitution, education and entertainments are included. The solid base in economic history also enables the authors to treat the 3<sup>rd</sup> century crisis with greater precision than is often done. The crisis is shown to be more political and fiscal than economic in nature. Many parts of the empire prospered or experienced stable conditions for much of the "dark" century. In total, the synthesis has been composed from 8 chapters: "Einführung", "Staat und Wirtschaft", "Die Landwirtschaft", "Handwerk", "Handel", "Banken und sonstige Dienstleistungen", "Lebensstandard", "Das dritte Jahrhundert". They are all characterised by a rich and thorough coverage of conditions around the empire. Much information has been successfully joined in these chapters. The result is much more than a simple textbook, it is a very able and competent economic history survey, sometimes even with a refreshing choice of subjects.

It is the aim of the authors to challenge the view of the Roman economy developed by A. H. M. Jones and M. I. Finley, among others, as too negative. Drexhage et al. consistently attempt to show that there was more economic activity in the Roman world than allowed by the "primitivist" school. Not least on the basis of a thorough knowledge of archaeological data, the authors are able to present an image of a steadily expanding agricultural

economy. In many respects, they conclude following Pleket, the Roman economy bears comparison with medieval and early modern European societies (p. 20).

This observation is undoubtedly true and would not, in broad terms, have been denied by Finley, nor by Jones. Indeed, their project should be seen as an attempt to bring the study of the ancient economy into line with the experience of other pre-industrial societies (cf. M. I. FINLEY, The use and abuse of history [London 1986] chapter 6). This meant to place agriculture, rather than trade, at the centre of any understanding of the economy, caution against the frivolous use of labels such as capitalism and bourgeois entrepreneurs and a warning against seeing modern economic policies and phenomena lurking behind every sort of economic activity in the ancient world. Strangely, this is frequently, also by the current authors, seen as a purely theoretical venture. But, surely, none was ever more empiricist in his approach than A. H. M. Jones. His magnum opus, The Later Roman Empire, 284–602 (Oxford 1964), is still unsurpassed in the breadth and scope of the mastery of the ancient evidence, so copiously cited in footnotes. It was intelligent questioning of the ancient material which led him to doubt the modernising constructions of great predecessors such as Rostovtzeff. Furthermore, it was the very theoretically minded pupil of Jones and Finley, the recently deceased Keith Hopkins who produced one of the strongest and most influential alternatives to the "primitivist" understanding of the Roman economy. In the article "Taxes and trade in the Roman Empire" (Journal Roman Stud. 70, 1980, 101–25), Hopkins suggested that the empire experienced a phase of moderate growth and developing markets. Ironically, it is precisely this position which Drexhage, Koenen and Ruffing come closest to while the other pupil of Jones, Richard Duncan-Jones has challenged Hopkins' assertions vigorously, insisting on the low level of activity from an empiricist position (e.g. Structure and scale in the Roman economy [Cambridge 1990]).

All this serves to remind us that the discussion on the character of the Roman economy is not a question of theorists against empirically working scholars. This leaves the question of the scale of economic activity in the Roman empire. But that is, unfortunately, a dead end. In the absence of even the most basic and rudimentary statistics, discussions about the exact level of trade or production are bound to go on endlessly without resolution. A glass, half empty to some, will appear half full to others. At all events, excessive focus on the scale of activities is likely to divert attention from the key issue which from the very beginning was a question of the particular nature of the Roman economy within the broadly comparable field of pre-industrial societies. Finley argued that ideology, social structure and the form of the state all combined to shape ancient economic activity in very different patterns than those produced by the incipient capitalism of some early modern European societies. This argument is still essentially unshaken and one wishes that the authors would have kept this more in mind when constructing their presentation.

A good example is the chapter on the state and the economy where the constant inclination of the authors to make “more” of the economic experience of Rome occasionally misleads. The chapter is formed as a discussion seeking to detect, at least, the rudiments of imperial economic policies. It is an informative survey of diverse phenomena such as road-building, market interventions, servicing of trade, coinage and the state budget. It was a key contention of Finley that economic thought in the ancient world was conducted within a household framework. The *Oikonomikos* of Xenophon was typical in this respect. Good husbandry, a notion that aimed at the preservation of the household rather than economic efficiency pure and simple, was the standard on which people acted. The economy was not perceived as an independent subsystem whose individual components the state should monitor, manipulate and regulate in detail in order to increase national wealth. The latter approach only developed as a result of mercantilist doctrine and classical political economy. The ancient state, therefore, did not have economic policies in our sense of the term (M. I. FINLEY, *The ancient economy*<sup>2</sup> [London 1985] chaps. 1 and 6). This is important to keep in mind when interpreting the ancient experience. While conceding that caution is needed, the authors nonetheless insist: “Man sollte sich aber nicht scheuen, die Eingriffe mancher Kaiser als Elemente einer von dem Streben nach Prosperität geleiteten ‘Wirtschaftspolitik’ zu charakterisieren” (p. 33).

The effects of this conviction may be glanced from the analysis of the Roman imperial coinage offered by Drexhage, Konen and Ruffing. The composition of coin populations shows great similarities across the various provinces. Issues of individual emperors appear to have been present in comparable quantities all over the empire.

How is this uniformity to be explained? The authors conclude that: “Die Schwankungen im Geldangebot waren demnach nicht ein lokales Phänomen, sondern monetäre Entscheidungen in der Zentrale Rom hatten eine reichsweite Wirkung. Ob man deshalb von einer echten ‘Geldpolitik’ sprechen kann, müssen die Forschungen der nächsten Jahre ergeben. Wir sind aber nach dem derzeitigen Stand geneigt, den Verantwortlichen in Rom aufgrund von praktischen Erfahrungen zumindest Kenntnisse über die Zusammenhänge zwischen Geldmenge und Preisniveau zu unterstellen” (p. 40).

The image which the authors conjure up of a Roman state trying to control price developments empire-wide by manipulating the coin supply is not only purely hypothetical, it is also unlikely. For a start, it would require the Roman government to have monitored prices across the provinces in considerable detail and furthermore collected this information in a centralised ‘statistical’ bureau with a view to form decisions of withholding or releasing coin in any given area. None of this ever happened. In late antiquity when the Roman state did begin to collect detailed information on prices, at least in some

provinces, it was to control local commutation and remuneration rates for taxes and requisitions (cf. E. LO CASCIO in *Atti dell’Accademia Romanistica Costantiniana. XII Convegno Internazionale* [Perugia-Spello 1998] pp. 121–136). The practice, in other words, was grounded in the concrete needs of the Roman treasury. Rather than speculating about abstract policies, designed to shape the Roman economy at large, the explanation should attempt to locate the interprovincial similarities in the coin population firmly within the practical concerns and objectives of the Roman state. The one overriding item of expenditure in the provinces was the army. The similarities in the composition of provincial coin populations can, above everything else, be explained as a reflection of military expenditure (R. P. DUNCAN-JONES, *Money and government in the Roman Empire* [Cambridge 1994] 178–79). It was, as the authors also agree, the maintenance of the army, Rome and the provincial administration that preoccupied the imperial state.

Policies of the imperial state should be explained by its concrete interests and concerns rather than by abstract economic goals which had not even been formulated in antiquity. Good husbandry included taking care that estate lands were cultivated. This was a concern of the emperor, too. Agricultural production supplied the bulk of imperial taxes. Emperors, therefore, had an interest in seeing the agricultural potential of his realm being utilised. This did not usher in elaborate policies to develop agriculture across the empire. That was beyond the capacity of the very restricted state apparatus. But emperors did adopt a number of limited strategies, Drexhage, Konen and Ruffing are right to insist. Tax concessions were offered, at least in some areas, to people who brought new land under cultivation during the start-up period. During years of famine, the imperial authorities sometimes reduced or remitted tax demands to prevent producers becoming impoverished and marginal lands from falling out of cultivation. This is all well described in the book. But again, the authors attempt to push further and detect more elaborate economic policies adopted by the emperors to shape economic production within the empire in greater detail.

Characteristic is the interpretation of Domitian’s unsuccessful attempt to restrict the cultivation of wine as aiming to solve “eine Überproduktionskrise” and protecting Italian wine-growers against increasing provincial competition (p. 71–72). But this is not quite what Suetonius reports about the incident (Dom. 7.2). In reaction to a year of abundance of wine and shortage of grain, Domitian decided to curtail the cultivation of wine in order to enable more lands to come under grain in the future. The problem was not too much wine, but too little grain. Domitian’s measure was, effectively, intended to ensure crucial food-supplies for the cities of the empire and thus protect the “moral economy” of his realm (on the ‘moral economy’ of urban food-supplies in antiquity, cf. most recently P. M. ERDKAMP in L. DE BLOIS/J. RICH [eds.], *The transformation of economic*

life under the Roman Empire [Amsterdam 2002] 93–115, inspired by the model study of E. P. THOMPSON, *Customs in Common* [London 1993] chap. 4). The fact that nothing was done to implement the measure afterwards, is a sure indication of the relatively limited understanding, within governmental circles, of the empire as an economic system. Emperors might act in omnipotent fashion and decree how things ought to be in a kind of grand symbolic gesture, probably provoked by the situation in Rome or Italy at most. But, in practice, they often had very little notion of the practicality of such decisions within the economy at large or their necessity for that matter.

Careful attention to concepts is not an enemy of empirical observation; it is a precondition, which puts a check on our interpretative imagination. Thus it helps to place phenomena within their proper historical context and frame our discussions with greater precision. The book, in spite of the authors' assertions to the contrary, does in fact perform such operations occasionally. For instance, at the beginning of chapter 3, dealing with agriculture where it is stated that it was the most important sector in the economy, that most people were employed here and that it provided the surplus on which the rest of the economy existed (p. 59). What follows is a very useful and informed survey of much recent research, not least archaeological, documenting a steady expansion of the cultivated area during the first few centuries of the imperial monarchy. Again, the authors are most interested in 'developed' economic phenomena. It is the larger estates and commercialisation that attracts their attention; and they take a very, probably unduly, optimistic view of grain yields.

On the other hand, phenomena such as subsistence production are only mentioned very briefly and in passing. This is a choice which it is difficult to understand. The chapter concludes with a section on the endemic risk of failed harvests and famines. These would not have been substantially worse than in later historical periods, as the authors correctly argue. But they would still have been important phenomena that no peasant could afford to ignore. This makes it indispensable to include the functioning of the subsistence sector within the general portrait of the agricultural economy. Various strategies of subsistence production served to cushion the peasant majority against the shocks of unpredictable climatic variations, but also limited the extent of the marketable surplus substantially. One would also have thought that demographic questions had deserved more consideration than the few scattered, cursory remarks they receive. The size and composition of the population has been of crucial importance in every agricultural economy. It is, for instance, probably in demography we should seek an explanation for the difference in standard of living which the authors identify between east and west in the penultimate chapter of the book. Though appearing less affluent (fewer and smaller cities), the North Western part of the empire probably enjoyed higher average living standards than the richer looking

East (p. 191). Higher population densities made agricultural land a much scarcer resource in the latter part of the empire. Peasants, therefore, had to work harder, had less access to more expensive products such as meat and could probably be pressed harder for rent by their landlords. A more consistent attention to theory and conceptualisation would have enabled the authors to present a more rounded and integrated image of the agricultural economy in the Roman world; it would have provided the student readership with a clearer understanding of the pressures, limitations and mechanisms governing pre-industrial agricultural production.

There is no reason to labour the point further. Similar sorts of considerations apply to the other chapters of the book. But this should not be allowed to detract from the fact that there is much of value in the analyses of the individual chapters. Chapter 4 presents an interesting survey of manufacturing industries in the empire. Emphasis is placed on the small scale of most operations and the household organisation of production (p. 103). The question of the possible existence of putting-out system is also brought up on the basis of Egyptian evidence (p. 111). Chapter 5 deals with trade and constitutes the most successful part of the book. The chapter proceeds from the theoretical observation that "an dieser Stelle muss nochmals hervorgehoben werden, dass die Landwirtschaft die Grundlage der kaiserzeitlichen Wirtschaft darstellte. Es ist daher unstrittig, in der Distribution landwirtschaftlicher Produkte die wichtigste Funktion des Handels zu sehen" (p. 119). This reveals a rare and very sharp understanding of the position of trade in the Roman world which many have failed to reflect on. Most trade, as the authors remind us, took place within the local or nearer regional area, such as the village or closest market-town. It was only a relatively limited, but far from insignificant part as the authors are right to insist, which entered wider distribution networks. These more wide-ranging networks are then treated subsequently, including trade with the Germanic north. In their discussion of trade the authors also include themes such as monopolies, social organisations, customs duties and transport costs. One does not have to agree with every conclusion the authors reach to recognise the sophistication of this chapter.

Chapter 6 then presents a brief survey of the service sector in the economy, rightly admonishing the reader to remember that its size would have been very limited compared with today's world. Chapter 7, as treated above, then discusses the problem of living standards, before chapter 8, presenting a revisionist picture of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century crisis, concludes the survey.

It is time to sum up. The book contains much expert discussion of Roman economic phenomena. It is a valuable economic history of the Roman empire. But its strengths lies more in surveying the results of a vast amount of recent research and in presenting central debates in the field than in the work of synthesis. The presentation of the Roman economy would have gained in strength had more attention been paid to the theoretical

aspects of “the historian’s craft”. Conceptualisation is a precondition of all synthesis. It is unfortunate that Drexhage, Konen and Ruffing have shied away from this part of their task. Undoubtedly the claim to present the ancient evidence “wie es eigentlich gewesen”, as opposed to empty theoretical speculation, will appeal to many historians. But one does not reach historical truth, free of anachronism, simply by sticking to the sources. One must also impose controls on the interpretation of the evidence. Here the authors have frequently substituted a one-sided determination to take a more “optimistic” view of the Roman economy for the necessary theoretical analysis. This sometimes produces misleading judgments and omissions, as argued above. Theoretical reflection does not obstruct historical truth, it enables us to establish the limits of the probable and identify with greater clarity the context of interpretation. History students, therefore, ought not continue to be taught to see theory and evidence as irreconcilable opposites; the two are inextricably linked.

This review has focused attention on arguing such questions of principle, but only because Drexhage, Konen and Ruffing’s book deserves a serious response. It represents an important and welcome new contribution to the study of the Roman economy. I have no doubt that their book will constitute a useful teaching tool, but due to the language mainly for German students. The accompanying selection of translated sources is excellent; the survey is informative and digests a wealth of results and will certainly stimulate discussion.

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