

Tamara Lewit, *Agricultural Production in the Roman Economy A.D. 200–400*. British Archaeological Reports, International Series, Band 568. Tempus Reparatum, Oxford 1991. VI, 261 Seiten.

The title of Lewit's book scarcely does justice to its theme, which is to challenge the long-held view that "the third and fourth centuries were a time of economic crisis and collapse" (p. 1). Lewit identifies four aspects of this alleged crisis; widespread rural impoverishment as a result of which the amount of land under cultivation decreased rapidly; a destruction of the free peasantry and the growth of "proto-feudal" estates; political insecurity and a decline of productivity which crippled trade, reducing it to local exchanges with the larger estates reverting to subsistence production; inflation, overtaxation and the general economic malaise and political chaos leading to a decline of towns. It is Lewit's contention that all of these ideas are derived from the study of historical and legal texts and that the archaeological evidence not only fails to support such views, but positively contradicts them.

The core of the book is her attempt to test the alleged decline in agriculture against the evidence of archaeology; her theory being that it is possible to reconstruct the state of late Roman agriculture by studying the excavated remains of rural sites. The difficulty of obtaining reliable excavation reports for many parts of the Empire restricts her detailed discussion to Italy, Gaul, Spain and Britain; and even for Italy she has to rely on field surveys rather than excavations for most of her information. Unfortunately, as she says, the size of the estates themselves cannot be established with any degree of certainty, and so she concentrates on the remains of their main buildings, the "villas" of common parlance, although Lewit generally avoids the term. She sees the size of these buildings as reflecting the size of the estates themselves, and their condition as indicating the condition of local agriculture at that time; assumptions which would not be accepted by all archaeologists. Changes in their condition – improvements, abandonment etc. – can then be plotted against a time scale divided into half-centuries, and used to measure the state of agriculture in that general area. As a result it is possible to talk of X% of sites in a regional sample being in use in a particular period; Y% showing signs of improvement in the same period, and so forth.

The problems inherent in such an approach are considerable. Lewit is suitably cautious in her selection of sites, usually requiring ones where the full size of the main establishment is known and where a variety of dating evidence is available; the dangers of dating on coins alone being fully appreciated. However, study of her gazetteer suggests that she has included sites where the standard of recording fell well short of her ideal standard, and in some cases we cannot be sure that the site was fully investigated either in area or in depth. Nor is such material easily turned into a statistical form; the uncertainties of interpretation and often of dating, particularly for excavations undertaken before 1950, are considerable. Unfortunately the histories of the sites which form her sample are only given in a very summary form in her gazetteer and their reinterpretation would be a major project. The data, once assessed, is presented in a series of simple graphs and pie-diagrams, but the connection between the gazetteer and the diagrams is not easily bridged.

It is inevitable that such an approach will result in a very broad picture, and, at times, a confusing one. Nor is Lewit's interpretation of her own statistics always as rigorous as it should be. Thus her figures indicate an almost universal, and for some areas a very dramatic, fall in the number of sites occupied in the second half of the third century. In North Gaul, for example, the occupation level falls to 45% of its earlier maximum, in Belgica to 43%, and even in Italy to 57% (p. 27). Such figures would appear to offer strong support for an agricultural and economic crisis in the late third century, but such a conclusion does not accord with Lewit's thesis. In consequence she has to deny her own material, suggesting that "this drop in occupation may not be a genuine picture of the situation in the later third century. The figures may be influenced by the misinterpretation of sites which are falsely supposed to have been destroyed in this period". Such a conclusion may well be correct, but if so it suggests that a methodology which produces such a glaring error for the late third century may be equally at fault for other periods.

What her material appears to indicate is that there was a marked difference between the level of continued occupation of villas and other rural sites in those areas which were exposed to barbarian attacks in the later third century (Northern Gaul, Belgica and Northern Spain), and those which were largely immune from them (Britain, Southern Spain and Southern Gaul, p. 29). Her final conclusion on this period, that there was little decline or abandonment in the third and fourth centuries, "with less than one fifth of sites declining or abandoned in most regions at any period", masks some very striking changes in the regional pat-

terns. Nor is a fall of 20% in the agricultural production of what was largely a subsistence economy a minor change; it would cause a major crisis in any modern state and could not fail to have affected the Roman economy. Whether one believes that Lewit has shown that such a fall did occur depends on whether one accepts her basic methodology. To the present reviewer it remains an interesting but unproven theory with more problems than she has appreciated, many of which derive from the ambiguous nature of so much of the archaeological evidence.

The later chapters are partly intended to fill the gaps left by her concentration on the western provinces, and partly to explore other aspects of the subject. Her summary of the agricultural problems of the remainder of the empire is very brief, and her conclusion, that they too show no sign of an agricultural decline in the late empire, is based on clearly inadequate evidence.

The short discussion of the trade of the period confirms that there was considerable movement of agricultural products, mainly shown by the distribution of amphorae. But her attempt to use Diocletian's Price Edict to illustrate other items of trade fails to appreciate the many pitfalls which that document presents to the unwary commentator.

The final section considers the literary evidence on which the idea of a decline in the economic activity of the later empire was originally based. Many of her criticisms of this are undoubtedly valid; her comments on some of the early Christian writers are particularly apt, but others are less easily disposed off. One of the key questions is whether the barbarians who were settled within the empire were given land which had been deserted by its original owners, or land which had not previously been under cultivation. If the former, then it provides proof that quite large areas of land had gone out of production. Here the panegyricists are vital to the discussion for they specifically state in some cases that it was deserted land which was involved. Lewit solves this difficulty by denying their reliability, arguing that the hyperbole which they so often use makes them suspect at all points. But were they? Must we reject all that they say because they were panegyricists, and, true to their trade, they lauded emperors? It is a complex question which deserves a deeper discussion than it gets.

There can be no doubt that the traditional view which saw the late Roman world as a period of catastrophic decline in agriculture and trade has been overstated, but the counter view as advanced by Lewit goes too far in the opposite direction. Her statistical evidence, although a brave effort to take a new approach to the problem, cannot be regarded as conclusive, and her discussion of the literary and legal evidence is often unconvincing. Nor are her arguments helped by the use of special pleading when the evidence fails to support the desired conclusion. A more dispassionate approach to the subject would have given greater validity to her work.

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