T Kerig / A Zimmermann (eds.). Economic archaeology: from structure to performance in European archaeology. Habelt. Bonn. 2013. Pp. 285−292

THE HELLENISTIC TO ROMAN MEDITERRANEAN: A PROTO−CAPITALIST REVOLUTION?

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With a series of papers and an accessible synthetic book (1973), Moses Finley made a highly−influential case for the Greek and Roman economy as socially and culturally controlled and lacking mechanisms comparable to modern economics and business. The Ancient Economy was assuredly pre−capitalist and inefficient, fragmented and incapable of incorporating the vital elements of research and development in its technology, or accounting and financial planning in its development. However, since the 1970s, this model has been eroded by several critiques. Greene (1994, 2000) has made a powerful case for the Roman Empire as a medium for the generalised diffusion of previously localised technologies, enabling sustainable growth and welfare to reach unparalleled levels. Kron (2002) and Jongman (2007, 2009) have shown through econometrics that Roman performance in many types of production as well as quality of life also progressed to Early Modern levels. Re−evaluation of textual sources suggests that the later Hellenistic and Roman business world was well on the way to effective international capitalist practices. Finally, archaeological evidence, neglected by Finley, has revealed a Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean where colossal movements of goods and services were carried out on an ever−increasing scale. The implications of this revolution in our understanding of the ancient economy will be investigated in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

The scale of socio−political and economic life enlarged immensely after the conquests of Alexander the Great, creating a number of extensive Greek kingdoms from the Aegean into the Middle East, a process taken even further with their successor, the Roman Empire. This expansion marked the end of economic and political barriers between the innumerable previous states of the region, as citizenship of local towns opened up and furthered the mobility of those with entrepreneurial ambitions. The *koine* or community of Hellenistic culture led on into the even wider Roman *oikumene*.

Mass migration of Greeks and later Italians to colonies as farmers, soldiers, merchants and financiers was followed by a reflux of integrated peoples. Members of the Italian middle and upper classes could invest in estates, commerce and industry in an internationalising way – a form of globalisation. But Roman domination, although bringing welcome peace to Mediterranean peoples, was also driven by the economic self−interest of the conquerors. Pliny the Elder wrote (Natural History 14.2): “Everyone is aware that as a result of the world being united under the majesty of the Roman Empire life has improved thanks to trade and the sharings of peace”. Paterson views the development of provinces as less to do with the actions of the Roman government than with the closely−associated Roman business community, “hundreds of individuals who had their eyes on the main chance” (Paterson 1998: 150). The Roman politician Cicero comments on Sicily (Verr. 2.2.6) that it offers great opportunities for profit, where Roman citizens can travel to become rich through carrying out business; some can set up financial deals to derive an income whilst remaining in Rome, others can settle down there and run agricultural or pastoral estates or organize commerce on the spot.

The two consecutive periods we are focussing on in this paper are noted for growing disparities of wealth, with the bourgeoisie and upper class heavily investing in commercial agriculture, shipping, banking and industry. The intense nature of these activities has become clearer from the last generation of scholarship (Davies 2006). In parallel, the available wealth and productive potential in favoured areas of growth was becoming ever vaster. As Greene (1994, 2000), Jongman (2007, 2009) and Kron (2002) have shown, the breakdown of boundaries and the increased mobility of people in these empires led to the diffusion of a package of locally accumulated technologies and knowledge, including water control in both the semi−deserts and temperate regions, advanced mining technologies, improved breeds of domestic animals and plants, heavier ploughs, safer drinking water, as well as access to consumer goods now becoming more internationally marketed and cheaper. All this meant that prosperous areas had healthier and more numerous populations and more disposable income for tax and trade (Kron 2005). Tellingly, the1st century AD author Julius Frontinus comments that the Egyptians made useless pyramids, the Greeks much−admired but also useless monuments, whilst the Romans made innumerable and necessary aqueducts (cited in Doukellis et al. 1995: 209).

THE MODEL OF DISPLACED PROSPERITY

Archaeological and textual realities appear however, to undermine the apparent success−story of the new states or *koines* dominated by a few or one power: the case study from central Greece (Bintliff and Snodgrass 1985, 1988) shows that, as in much of southern Italy, a Late Hellenistic decline lasts well into the Early Roman Empire. One answer to this paradox is not absolute decline but a redirection of population and economy to new growth, such as a giant metropolis at the Roman provincial capital of Corinth (Alcock 1993). This is partly confirmed by my map of divergent regional growth patterns in the Aegean (Bintliff 1997a).

Most intensive survey projects in the 1980s−early 1990s were carried out in the south−central mainland. The long−term picture these surveys revealed was remarkably similar and supported ancient sources: a Classical−Early Hellenistic flourishing of town and country, followed by a decline in Late Hellenistic to Early Roman times. However, subsequent synthesis of accumulating extensive and intensive surveys covering the whole of Greece confirms other indications from historical sources and shows that regional growth and decline patterns were more varied than previously thought. Many regions are strikingly out−of−phase with each other in their development, in contrast to the more consistent set of regions which were the subject of the major early surveys: they represented a ‘core’ of precocious take−off and, perhaps not coincidentally, an early decline. The decline of most of these 'heartland' landscapes is complemented by the emergence of important north and north−west Greek states. In Late Hellenistic and Roman times, the island of Crete also enters a major growth phase in town and country (Harrison 1998), a situation paralleled in the northern Peloponnesian region of Achaea (Petropoulos and Rizakis 1994). The Romans also reoriented the map of Greece by encouraging new nodes of trade through new cities or re−founded cities on the major routes between Rome, the Adriatic coasts and Greece and along the routes to the eastern provinces (Rizakis 1996).

However, the model of displaced prosperity brings two serious problems for the historian. Firstly, in Imperial situations, why is prosperity not brought to all the provinces? Other empires, such as the Ottoman Empire (Inalcik et al. 1997), used centralised management to try to restart stagnant local economies. It seems the Late Hellenistic and Roman state model had some other functions in mind and this becomes an insightful problem.

Secondly, the aforementioned Alcock model of redirection to new growth areas fails in a central aspect, as the new growth nodes were at a far lower level of population and urbanism than previously, as can be seen in the Aegean, with the new Roman urban foundation of Nicopolis and the revived colonised city of Corinth. Nicopolis was created by Augustus through moving surviving Greek inhabitants from many surrounding towns and villages. To the south of Nicopolis, Lang (1994) records urban centres with a total walled area of 700 ha for Classical−Hellenistic times. By Early Roman times, no towns survive apart from Nicopolis: they are replaced by villages and villas. To the north of Nicopolis, in a region where 70 towns were destroyed and their inhabitants enslaved by Rome, the Early Roman settlement system consists of villa−estates and small nucleated settlements, with only two towns having survived (Doukellis et al. 1995, Murray 2003). However, Nicopolis is estimated at only 130 ha. Thus, the evidence appears to indicate a catastrophic decline in urban populations for north−west Greece, which Nicopolis failed to compensate for.

Corinth, capital of Roman southern Greece, is a genuine colony of Italians introduced by Caesar. It is given the enormous size of 625 ha by Alcock, based upon the Archaic−Classical walls (Alcock 1993). In fact, using the Archaic−Classical city wall as a guide to Roman Corinth is inappropriate, since we now know from Romano's urban and rural survey that the new colony had an entirely different plan (Romano 2003, Romano, Corinth Excavations website; pers.com). The Roman colony was set out at c. 240 ha, but seems to have been re−planned on a diminished scale (some 140 ha) within a few generations to match real population needs. In Late Roman times, less than half of the settlement seems still in urban use (Slane and Sanders 2005). In conclusion, Roman Corinth was probably a third the size of its Classical predecessor.

The key to these divergent trends lies in recent rethinking of Late Hellenistic and Roman economies and the role of the states concerned. Large Hellenistic states and the even larger Roman Empire were centrally concerned with income to support the army, the bureaucracy and the food supply of the largest cities. These needs could be met through tapping the entire provincial system's surplus production, without the administrative costs that attempting to manage the local economies of all the thousands of little towns and their territories involved. Most importantly, the success, strength or decline of a city and its countryside was primarily the concern of local elites to whom regional management was essentially delegated, rather than that of central government. Of course kings and emperors or provincial governors could intervene to offer provincial cities aid in crisis or grant a facility such as an aqueduct, but these cases are exceptional and in some cases may be a response to a patron−client relationship between local elites and the court of the governor or of the emperor (Étienne et al. 2000). The kingdom of Macedon, as its later successor−state Rome, had always been run by an elite of wealthy families and the primary interest of these states was to protect the economic interests of this ruling class.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ELITES AND "*LAISSEZ−FAIRE*"

There is a growing realisation that the trend in the Hellenistic world, and even more so in that of Rome, was to allow these regional societies to be run by wealthy landowners, merchants and bankers, and other entrepreneurs (Rizakis 1996). It was largely their activities and interests that drove the imperial economies. If a town lacked energetic elites, it declined or stagnated. In turn, wealth creation may often have been met by specialist production that did not necessarily stimulate high populations as producers or or consumers within its associated region. A mosaic of wealth, poverty, dense and low population across the map of these states posed no problem and was a consequence of a new economic system with a very strong emphasis on *laissez−faire*. This imperial mosaic of prosperity and of key export regions is increasingly being characterised as a proto−capitalist economy.

Let us note other evidence of the new mentalities: at Pella, the capital of the Hellenistic kingdom of Macedon, a definite redirection of citizen−activity from politics and cult towards commerce is marked by a new importance of business premises in urban spaces.

The immense agora at Pella has a limited area devoted to public buildings and is dominated by shops and workshops dealing in pottery, terracottas, metal objects and foodstuffs (Siganidou and Lilimpaki−Akamati 2003). Moreover, an emphasis on market production by larger landowners and other wealthy sectors is marked by the distribution of large estates to the elite population as the Macedonian kingdom expanded its territory (Adam−Veleni et al. 2003). The powerful city−state of Hellenistic Rhodes is run by a class of commercial families (Gabrielsen 1997). Furthermore, it has been shown that the level of monetisation in Greece was increasing from Hellenistic to Roman times (Davies 2006, Grandjean 2006). This increase, stimulated by rising levels of market exchange, linked regional with interregional business transactions and was largely driven by the needs of the new proto−capitalist class (Paterson 1998).

The island of Delos provides key evidence for the new economic climate (van Berchem 1991, Étienne et al. 2000). Between 167 and 88 BC, Delos was donated to Athens by the Romans but existed as a free port to assist Roman merchants and became one of the most prosperous commercial centres in the Mediterranean. It represents an early intimation of the way Roman power would remove old boundaries to human migration and the circulation of goods, as well as demonstrating the key role played in the future Empire by entrepreneurial bankers and traders. Italians were perhaps dominant in Delian commerce, followed by Athenians and then various Eastern communities, whilst freedmen and even slaves were very active in business for wealthy patrons. Symbolic for all these developments was the Agora of the Italians: the largest complex on the island, more than 5000 m^2, with statues of Roman magistrates, a public bathhouse and vast open and porticoed spaces for social and economic interaction. It had little room for traditional religious structures, but appears to be devoted to the new god of international business.

Urban clubhouses proliferated in Hellenistic and then Roman times, especially for particular professions, and increasingly as venues for foreign merchants and businessmen exploiting the wider economic horizons opened up by Empire. Delos offers several examples of this, including a large complex built for traders and shippers from Berytus (Lebanon), combining warehouses, offices, assembly−rooms, accommodation and a shrine (Stewart 2006). A house excavated in the Skardhana quarter of Delos is particularly illuminating, not least because it gave evidence normally unavailable outside desert environments such as Egypt (Étienne et al. 2000). Thousands of seal impressions used for closing contracts on papyrus were found in a chest burnt when the island was sacked. Names include Roman magistrates, dignitaries of a major Near Eastern kingdom and public seals of cities in Asia Minor, in other words, financial deals on a vast international scale. It is suggested that the house−occupant may have been an international banker or lawyer concerned with business contracts. The relatively shallow berths available for boats at Delos have also encouraged the suggestion that the island's commercial community was largely virtual, with commercial deals made on land whilst the bulk products remained on board in waiting ships.

Nothing marks the intensification of interregional movement of goods better than the chart of (essentially) west and central Mediterranean shipwrecks, where a logarithmic rise and fall can be dated from the 2nd century BC to the end of the 2nd century AD (Davies 2006). Corinth, for example, had 85% of its storage and transport amphorae as imports (Slane 2003). Moreover, from the Hellenistic era onwards, pottery became mass produced and more homogeneous (Hayes 1991), at the same time as the distribution areas of key production centres vastly increased. Blake (1980) notes that the even wider distribution effectiveness of Roman ceramic centres would only be paralleled in the 19th century reach of Western factory products.

In Hellenistic and Roman times, Greek towns in general and Greek houses in particular, constitute evidence of a new type of materialism, individualism and consumer display, where patron−client relations were negotiated in semi−public homes, in which creators of wealth were linked to local and international business opportunities (Westgate 2000, Bintliff 2010).

Roman businessmen, especially the upper−income group called *negotiatores*, formed a major predatory group from the last two centuries BC in the Mediterranean, lending money to weakened cities and buying up estates on a large scale as well as setting−up craft workshops and commercial networks (Paterson 1998, Rizakis 2001). In Greece, by the Early Empire, they had created a single ruling−class controlling the region through intermarriage with Greek magnates. In the Greek countryside, during Roman times, commercialisation of agriculture was marked by the massive rise of villas over independent peasant farms (Bintliff and Snodgrass 1985, Alcock 1993, Bintliff et al. 2007).

An interesting new aspect in our rethinking of Greek and Roman economy is a new understanding of the distinctive nature of the mature Roman town. The normal city state in the Aegean Greek world saw the majority and perhaps as much as 70−80% of regional populations living in towns and 20−30% of the populations inhabiting rural settlements (Cherry et al. 1991, Jameson et al. 1994, Bintliff 1997b). In contrast, the Roman Italian model which seems to have been exported abroad to regions such as the Aegean was the reverse, with Roman cities often accommodating just 20−30% of the regional population, consisting largely of wealthier middle to upper class occupants and service industries (Bintliff, de Graaf and de Ligt, unpubl. res.). The puzzle of a shrunken but prosperous Corinth or the Roman traveller Pausanias's positive comment on the prosperity of the shrunken town of Thespiae can be explained by the urban prosperity of a small but wealthy elite population of which Italian businessmen form a significant part. These businessmen were the type of people who where self−promoted by a new class of realist but retro−classicizing art (Fullerton 2000).

As the Hellenistic and Roman empires reached their limits and largely ceased to expand, export dominance from the conquering centres declined and provinces began to produce their own artefacts and agricultural products. This led to what Paterson (1998) has termed 'an economy of substitution' or competitive entrepreneurial distribution of similar products, aiming to squeeze out rivals through improved distribution of key products such as oil, wine, ceramics and fish preserves. Multinational businesses of today are a not an unreasonable parallel, although successful Roman export zones were made up of innumerable middle− to large−scale producers.

To conclude, older views, famously presented in Moses Finley's classic study *The Ancient Economy* in which Hellenistic and Roman economies were set far apart from capitalism and modern economics (Finley 1973) are yielding to a proto−capitalist, 'globalist' perspective (Paterson 1998, Rizakis 2001, Davies 2006), where significant changes in the first era led to even more dramatic transformations in economic behaviour under Rome.

NOTE

For a fuller discussion of this topic see Bintliff JL. 2012. The Complete Archaeology of Greece. London and New York: Wiley−Blackwell. The research for this paper benefitted from research funds made available by the Belgian Scientific Research Foundation.

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