

BOOK REVIEW

Shopping in Ancient Rome: The Retail Trade in the Late Republic and the Principate.
By CLAIRE HOLLERAN. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
Pp. xv + 304. Hardcover, £68.00/\$125.00. ISBN 978-0-19-969821-9.

Recent years have seen a number of significant discussions of the economy of the Roman World. (Cf., for example, W. Scheidel, I. Morris, and R. Saller, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge, 2007); A. K. Bowman and A. I. Wilson, eds., *Quantifying the Roman Economy: Methods and Problems* (Oxford 2009); W. Scheidel, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy* (Cambridge, 2012); and P. Temin, *The Roman Market Economy* (Princeton, 2013).) Research has focused on the relationship of the city of Rome to its sources of supply through long-distance trade and the institution of the *annona*. A notable absence from these studies has been a discussion of the mechanics of selling goods or retail. This omission is due not only to inadequate evidence but also the lack of an ancient equivalent of “shopping” per se.

It is a welcome development, therefore, to see the recent publication of two books that address this issue: Peter Fibiger Bang’s *The Roman Bazaar* (Cambridge, 2008) and Claire Holleran’s volume. In contrast to Bang’s comparative approach with Mughal India, Holleran’s approach is more traditional: although drawing upon research on more recent histories of shopping to offer a comparative study of retail, her study is firmly based on an extensive knowledge of epigraphic, legal, literary and archaeological evidence. Her focus is the City of Rome itself drawing on earlier excavations and the Severan Marble Plan, as well as archaeological evidence from Pompeii, Herculaneum and Ostia. Holleran begins with a brief history of retail (12–22) focusing on the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A short discussion of the relationship between production and retail (23–61) serves to establish the social and economic parameters within which the succeeding chapters are based.

The second chapter (62–98) examines the relationship of “wholesalers” and “retailers”—distinctions that were blurred in antiquity and subjective based on scale rather than substance. Several locations served for the redistribution of goods: the emporia on the River Tiber (for example, the Porticus Aemilia and the Horrea Galbana); at the gates of the city (enabling the seller to evade the customs duties levied on goods entering the city, the *ansarium* and *foricul(i)arium*); and the commercial fora.

Tabernae are amongst the most visible features of the commercial life of ancient towns such as Pompeii or Ostia and it is unsurprising, therefore, that Holleran turns to these sites in the third chapter (100–57). The chapter explores the role of *tabernae* as shops, workshops or producers, bars and food vendors, offices for public and private businesses and as housing. The sale of goods could also take place in public spaces (*fora* or *macella*) or markets (*nundinae* and *mercatus*) (159–92). Goods could also be purchased from street vendors or *institores* (194–231). Street vendors have been overlooked in previous scholarship and their ephemeral character means that the evidence is scarce and problematic. Holleran uses a variety of pictorial and other evidence to show that street vendors were an important feature of the urban economy—echoing Henry Mayhew’s study of London in the 1840s.

Chapter 6 (232–57) explores elite attitudes towards acquisition and the expenditure of wealth. Despite the importance of self-sufficiency in the ideology of the Roman elite Holleran shows that they were willing to acquire goods through both private (gifts, inheritances, from their own estates) (241–5) and public channels (luxury goods purchased in *macella* and the *Saepta*, auctions, book-sellers) (245–55).

A brief concluding chapter (258–65) emphasizes the importance of the retail trade to the urban economy. Retail took many different forms both fixed and itinerant with shops, workshops, markets, as well as street vendors and merchants at the docks or gates of the city. This diversity reflects not only the range of commodities available but also the social values that lay behind patterns of consumption. The resulting picture is of a complex system responding to the needs of both supply and demand.

Although aspects of Holleran’s book have been the subject of previous studies (notably shops, bars and markets), this is the first attempt to offer a systematic treatment of the selling of goods and its role in the Roman economy. It is testimony to the value of Holleran’s research that it inspires debate and will

prompt future scholarship to look beyond commodities and focus instead on the mechanisms of the ancient economy. It is a work to be applauded for its innovation, scholarship and depth and will long remain required reading on the urban economies of the ancient world.

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