

BOOK REVIEW

Gift and Gain: How Money Transformed Ancient Rome. By NEIL COFFEE. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Hardcover, \$78.00. ISBN 978-0-190-49643-2.

When Roman economic historians talk about the need for quantification, they probably don't have word frequency ratios in mind. But perhaps they should. Coffee's new book offers a different perspective on the economic crises of the late Roman Republic by focusing not on transactions *per se* but on how our sources talk about them.

In the introductory chapter Coffee argues that gift-giving was particularly important in Roman culture but came into conflict with "commodity culture." He divides "Rome's culture of exchange" into four periods: Foundation (early Rome); Adaptation (the middle Republic); Exploitation (the late Republic); and Separation (the early Empire). Coffee charts the developments of these periods in part by measuring word use over time. He claims this "provides a uniquely clear indicator of changing values across the culture" (17).

In Part II, which consists of a single chapter ("Looking Forward from Archaic Rome"), Coffee suggests "Archaic Roman culture would have made space for a suspension of commercial transactions in favor of gift-giving" (26). However, the lack of much contemporary evidence makes this difficult to establish.

Part III examines the middle Republic. In Chapter 3 ("Adapting the Law in the Age of Cato") the author argues that Rome's growing prosperity in the late 3rd and early 2nd century brought about "rapid commercialization" (46), which threatened the city's long-established gift culture. In response the Romans passed laws regulating aspects of reciprocity such as gratuitous contracts. In the following chapter ("Ideological Flexibility: Cato and Ennius"), Coffee suggests that in the early 2nd century "commerce had not yet been fully conceptually subordinated to farming and other gentlemanly activities" (51). The plays of Plautus and Terrence support this view, Coffee argues in Chapter 5, by providing "a view of the dynamics of gift and gain as understood by a broader Roman public" (61). The author is particularly interested in the uses and meanings of the words *lucrum* and *liberalitas* here, along with *avaritia* in the following chapter, which turns

to the Gracchi. He suggests that the Gracchi “were attempting to institutionalize... a notion of collective generosity as a counterbalance to the greed that had blossomed in a climate of greater financialization and trade” (84). Coffee also attributes the rise of more “personal” images on Roman coinage in the 130s to the desire of the elite to “foster social connections” by means of money (85).

Part IV, on the late Republic, is the book’s largest section, consisting of five chapters. In Chapter 7 (“Crooked Generosity in the Late Republic”) Coffee notes an interesting trend: greater use of the words *pecunia*, *aes alienum*, *avaritia*, and *liberalitas*. He suggests that in this period “the concept of generosity” was abused (90) thanks to the prevalence of bribery (by means of gifts and loans). Chapter 8 (“Cicero between Justice and Expediency”) discusses Cicero’s defense of “traditional Roman gift giving” (107) in the *De officiis* while Chapter 9 (“Sallust and the Decline of Reciprocity”) uses Sallust to examine “the socioeconomic culture of late Republican politics” (109). Chapter 10 (“Caesar’s Wicked Gifts”) focuses on what Coffee views as Caesar’s manipulative generosity which led to the “hollowing out [of] Roman gift ethics” (126). The final chapter in this section (“Atticus: Banker, Benefactor, Paragon”) considers Atticus. Coffee argues that Atticus presented a more virtuous model of generosity since he sometimes gave assistance to those from whom there was little reason to expect any eventual reciprocity and he rejected opportunities to gain power.

In Part V Coffee turns to the early Empire. Chapter 12 (“Prying Worlds Apart: The Augustan Response”) examines how Augustus tried and failed “to restore Roman gift culture” (139). The following chapter focuses on Seneca’s *On Benefactions* and particularly the problem of ingratitude. Coffee concludes that Seneca’s “prescription for the ailing Roman gift culture is itself an acknowledgment of defeat” (164).

Part VI consists of a brief final chapter (“Halfway to Modernity”). Coffee suggests that it was Rome’s combination of “a strong traditional culture of reciprocity with increasingly robust commerce” which led to “pronounced internal conflict” (171).

On the whole, this monograph is a well-written account of Roman conceptions of exchange but what remains unclear to this reviewer is the extent to which the views of largely elite authors reflect the rest of society and the broader economy. Nevertheless, this is an important contribution which will be of considerable interest to Roman economic historians who want to look beyond market exchange.

DAVID HOLLANDER

Iowa State University, dbh@iastate.edu