

The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World. Edited by WALTER SCHEIDEL, IAN MORRIS, and RICHARD SALLER. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xv + 942. Cloth, \$225.00. ISBN 978-0-521-78054-7.

This book is a landmark. Despite the explosion of research in the economic history of ancient times, there is nothing comparable. Articles and monographs have poured out—to give just a few recent titles in the latter category, all also published by Cambridge, which appears to be the major player here: Peter Bang, *The Roman Bazaar* (2008); Sitta von Reden, *Money in Ptolemaic Egypt* (2007); Neville Morley, *Trade in Classical Antiquity* (2007). There have also been general or thematic collections, gathering up papers quite various in approach, e.g., Walter Scheidel and Sitta von Reden, *The Ancient Economy* (Routledge, 2002) and Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne, *Poverty in the Roman World* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). But no single volume has attempted to take stock, consolidate findings, and suggest where research should go next, as this one does.

The starting point for much of this recent work, whether acknowledged or not, was Moses Finley's *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley, 1973, based on his Sather Lectures of the previous year), whose thesis it may be helpful to summarize here. Finley, beginning his analysis with Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, provocatively argued that economics was not just a modern discipline but a modern concept, and that to invoke its terms in exploring ancient society was to falsify. Not even numbers were to be allowed: the ancients did not have economic statistics, nor should we pretend to be able to generate them. Instead, literary sources were to be examined for what they reveal on such topics as "orders and status" or "masters and slaves." Finley found similar values expressed in Greek and Latin texts, and these values were inimical to economic thinking. It was unnecessary, therefore, to look at archeological evidence for agricultural estates to discuss investment strategies: Pliny's letters show that there never could be any of note. What emerged from Finley's book was a general model of a society driven by concerns of status, a model that attempted to account for the main phases of Greek and Roman history for over a millennium.

It took a while for Finley's work to have its full impact, for ancient historians, compared to historians of the modern world, came to economic topics late (although understandably so, given the state of the evidence). But as this began to happen, dissatisfaction was voiced, in particular by scholars looking at Roman society, with Finley's view that the performance of ancient economies could not, and need not, be measured. Perhaps in fact it could—by looking at "proxy" data such as the number of shipwrecks found in Mediterrana-

BOOK REVIEW

nean waters, for instance. And as such data was scrutinized, the methods and language of modern economics suddenly seemed relevant. Thus, for instance, after looking at archeological evidence for olive production in Roman North Africa, Robert Bruce Hitchner argued that “significant growth was achieved in the olive production sector of the Roman economy,” and this in turn raised the possibility of long-term growth in the economy as a whole.¹

But what would actually count as “significant” growth? Does it have to be growth *per capita*, or is aggregate growth sufficient? Such problems, at the center of scholarly debate today, are prominently showcased in this new Cambridge economic history. Taking inspiration from Nobel laureate Douglas North and the so-called New Institutional Economics, the editors asked their contributors to examine both the structure and the performance of ancient economies. Structure, defined by North (in words quoted by the editors, p. 1) as the “characteristics of society that are basic determinants of performance,” includes not just such Finley-ite concerns as political institutions and ideology, but also demography and technology. Performance, in turn, entails answering questions such as: How much is produced? What are the costs of distribution? What is the standard of living? This final question haunts this volume, and humanizes it. As Morris points out, in a particularly rousing chapter on “Early Iron Age Greece”, “It is the economy’s ability to make people’s lives better that gives economic history its point” (p. 220).

This focus on structure and performance structures the contents of the volume’s 28 chapters. After the Introduction, a preliminary part looks in general terms at “Determinants of Economic Performance,” with chapters on ecology, demography, household and gender, law and economic institutions, and technology. One might have expected more on questions of morality and ideology, and on the state’s role in issuing money, but the six chapters themselves make for very worthwhile reading. They are packed with information, yet take provocative stances, raising countless important theoretical concerns (e.g., the problem of transaction costs, expounded marvelously in the chapter by Bruce Frier and Dennis Kehoe, “Law and Economic Institutions,” pp. 113–43). At least part of the satisfaction these chapters provide may lie in the fact that research on “structure” (as opposed to “performance”) is further along, or rests on more tractable evidence.

The volume’s subsequent sections look at performance, as well as structure, across time and space. Here the evidence is variable—many chapters open with an acknowledgment of the lack of data

¹ Hitchner’s paper, “Olive Production and the Roman Economy: the Case for Intensive Growth in the Roman Empire,” is easily found in Scheidel and von Reden, eds., *The Ancient Economy*, pp. 71–83 (quotation from p. 79).

BOOK REVIEW

(e.g., pp. 333, 487, 673)—and this has determined the structure of the sections. For “Classical Greece” (Part III), there are separate chapters on production, distribution and consumption; and “The Early Roman Empire” (Part VI) employs the same categories, while adding a chapter on the state. The other parts (“Early Mediterranean Economies and the Near East,” “The Hellenistic States,” “Early Italy and the Roman Republic” and “Regional Development in the Roman Empire”) focus on some or all of the same categories for a particular era or region (e.g., the Aegean Bronze Age, or Roman Egypt), while a final chapter, “The Transition to Late Antiquity,” focuses on the 3rd century AD.

A chapter on the Phoenicians and Carthaginians in particular would have been welcome. One might also feel reservations about the division of the Roman chapters along the traditional lines of Republic/Empire. A topic such as distribution might better be examined by looking at continuities and disruptions across the longer course of Rome’s imperial activity. Harris’ marvelous chapter on “The Late Republic” (pp. 511–39) is crammed with information and insight, but because it stops in 31 BC, a potentially major episode in economic history is largely neglected. The civil war confiscations and annexations of new provincial territories that filled the coffers of the dynasts allowed a major unexpected wave of capitalization, above all in the creation of dozens of new colonies to settle veterans, crucial for the subsequent development of the west.

While it is impossible to summarize each chapter, something can be said about what emerges from the volume as a whole. The main challenge in looking at economic performance in ancient times (as many contributors note) is the lack of good evidence. Archaeology is brought in repeatedly for its proxy data, and should earn an even greater role in years to come. There are the much beloved shipwrecks (see, e.g., pp. 202–3, 267–70, 572–3) and the by now familiar techniques of landscape archaeology (see, e.g., p. 493). But the contributors hope that more will be learned from the study of skeletons (e.g., pp. 222–5, 607–9), from chemical analysis of the provenance of ceramics and metals (e.g., pp. 159–60, 179, 202, 264–5), or even from examination of the Greenland ice cores for traces of atmospheric pollution (e.g., pp. 547–8, 621). One desideratum with this sort of data is to find ways to test it in a more controlled fashion (the fascinating graphs tabulating “mammal bones per century” of Italy and the Roman provinces, pp. 613–14, for instance, could be tested against numbers of excavations or, ideally, total population, slave and free).

Other solutions to the evidence conundrum include the use of comparative materials and theory (especially compelling in demographic matters, since the findings of biology often transcend historical time and place) and also of modeling, with the help of social

BOOK REVIEW

sciences: if one can determine, say, the logical relationship between population growth and economic change, then with some ideas about one variable, a prediction can be made about the other and tested. Willem Jongman, for instance, in his remarkable and beautifully written “The Early Roman Empire: Consumption” (pp. 592–618) ingeniously develops a model that uses the relationship of slave-prices to the cost of free labor to predict how prosperous individual citizens might have been (pp. 601–2).

For all the progress on display in this volume, however, one still might wonder just how precisely the performance of ancient economies will ever be measured. Already in the *The Ancient Economy*, Finley warned about incipient “number fetishism” among ancient historians. But in fact, by the standards of economics, there are if anything fewer numbers in many parts of this volume than one might expect.² [[2]] To focus only on the Roman sections: contributors, to their credit, admit major areas of ignorance, e.g., “It is still hard to assess the overall scale of the Roman economy” (p. 546) and “It is exceptionally difficult to estimate the size of the urban population at any date” (p. 578). But there are also vague statements, e.g., “In Gaul, during the first century AD, villas inspired by Italian models dotted the landscape” (p. 556) or “The industry [eastern Roman ceramics] appears to have experienced a “big boom” in Augustan times” (p. 682). Two more: “Investment in irrigation could also raise productivity substantially” (p. 553) and “Archaeological evidence indicates that mining was conducted on a widespread basis in many regions of the Roman empire, and mining generated significant revenues for the state and for private individuals” (p. 566).

Yet if the results of this exercise are occasionally depressing or dull, the fervent hope is that this volume will itself soon have to be rewritten. And for now, it will be the indispensable starting point for all new research. A consensus emerges in it that scholars must be thinking about ancient economies, rather than about *the* ancient economy, with periods of expansion and contraction, and within different areas, which had different structures—and all of this not necessarily tied to grand political narrative (the Antonine Plague, for instance, is repeatedly invoked by contributors, pp. 37, 616, 700, etc.). Overall, in the Greco-Roman world as a whole, there was obviously extensive growth for about a millennium, beginning in 800 BC, with the real possibility of very slowly rising, but rising nonetheless *per capita* consumption. That growth, both extensive and intensive, urge the editors in their introduction, must be taken seriously.

But the even bigger question, still unresolved, is why there was never the far more dramatic breakthrough of modern times. Is the divergence to be connected to the history of ideas? Finley tried to

² *The Ancient Economy*, p. 25.

BOOK REVIEW

approach the problem that way, but he might have been looking at symptoms of the problem rather than at its causes. It could, after all, turn out that demographic factors were more in play: if population-size does not increase significantly, it may be hard to create the surplus that supports innovation in non-agrarian sectors of the economy. This is not a purely academic question. In a world in which hundreds of millions still live in poverty, in which much economic growth may be jeopardizing the planet, and in which still other growth has proved to be built on quicksand, tackling the questions of economic history matters more than ever. The past can never provide simple solutions for present problems, for—as historians know best—the world is always changing, and in ways contemporary actors are often blind to. Furthermore, the historian's primary job is to recover the past and to explain it. But this volume also shows that ancient historians have a part to play in the debates of other disciplines, such as economics, by identifying what variables were and were not relevant to growth in the Greco-Roman world.

And so this new history is at the cutting edge of classical studies for another, paradoxical reason: it moves resolutely beyond post-modernism with its musings on the impossibility of recovering the past, and looks back to the idea of philosophic history—that history may prove a source of principles applicable to many times and places. Those who wish to write such history, as rigorously as possible, will have to master now not only the ancient evidence but also the theory of social scientists. It is a great challenge.

JOSIAH OSGOOD

Georgetown University