

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

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Andrew Wilson (ed.), *Trade, Commerce, and the State in the Roman World. Oxford studies on the Roman economy.* Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xxi, 656. ISBN 9780198790662. \$145.00.

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Preview

[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review]

This book is the fourth in a series of conference proceedings organized by the editors as part of the Oxford Roman Economy Project (OxREP). After an introduction, the book is divided into three sections, one on the state and institutions, one on trade within the empire, and one on trade across the frontiers.

Wilson and Bowman's introduction presents their view of the current state of scholarship on Roman trade and the importance of the state. They are confident in the new, optimistic perspective that has emerged recently. Unfortunately, in clearing away the old arguments of the twentieth century, they neglect one of the most important of the twenty-first: the extent of economic integration. While few now would endorse a minimalist view of long-distance trade, real questions remain about the integration of areas off the main trade routes and the relative importance of macro-regional versus empire-wide trade. Instead, they ask to what extent trade was market-driven and how the state impacted trade in various ways. In synthesizing the contributions to the volume, they offer some answers to their questions. The state had a major influence on commerce through the establishment of common institutions, the construction of infrastructure, and the efforts to supply privileged consumers. State influence precludes the description of the ancient economy as simply market-driven, but substantial private trade coexisted with imperially controlled exchange and performed quite well for a preindustrial economy. Wilson and Bowman rightly insist on the importance of extra-imperial trade and demonstrate its significant contribution to the state's revenues. They do not address its significance for the rest of the Roman economy and its integration with intra-imperial networks, which only demonstrates how little extra-imperial trade has influenced debates until now. Hopefully this volume will inspire others to address these questions.

The contributions in Part I highlight the extent of the state's involvement in commerce. Bowman argues that the total tax burden was higher, on the order of 15–20%, than the one propounded in the “low-tax regime” model. This higher burden has implications for the taxes-and-trade model, but, since some unquantifiable portion of the extra taxes in Bowman's model would remain in the region from which the taxes were raised, the precise effect is uncertain. Adams reveals how the state closely controlled the shipment of public grain down the Nile while making use of private ships. Although there is no

certain evidence for a piggy-back trade, its existence seems likely, as do return cargos from Alexandria. It is unfortunate that Adams discusses no archaeological evidence here. Sirks advances a somewhat speculative argument that *publicani* might have made productive loans from the vast cash reserves they controlled.

The first section also produces the impression that state actors had a generally positive view of commerce. Most explicitly, Lo Cascio argues that interventions in the market were meant to ensure the normal workings of supply and demand against distortions caused both by speculators seeking to raise prices and by political forces pushing them down. Sirks shows that Roman law was quickly adapted to facilitate trade across long distances and with non-citizens following Roman expansion.

Finally, the state also facilitated complex credit arrangements, thereby multiplying the money supply. Sirks reviews the legal instruments for credit, and Kay's analysis of credit crises in the first centuries BCE and CE reveals the scope and importance of the credit system. Kay and Sirks also illustrate the limits of the state's positive influence. Sirks suggests that, if his argument about the lending power of the *publicani* is correct, the state's takeover of tax collection could have cut off an important source of credit and contributed to the economic crisis of the third century. Kay describes the state's response to credit crises as almost invariably detrimental. What these state actions have in common is a failure to understand economic systems. The laws and interventions that Sirks and Lo Cascio describe facilitate individual transactions. Credit crises, on the other hand, are systemic. They result from a web of interrelated transactions. The lack of economic theory in the ancient world made it very difficult for state actors to comprehend the system as a whole, so their responses to systemic crises were ineffectual.

The state is less consistently present in Part II on trade within the Empire. The picture that emerges is of the state as a player in a larger economy with a unique ability to mobilize resources, but always acting within the context of a larger set of economic exchanges. Harris describes how the state controlled certain forests for its own purposes, but most of the demand for wood was met through local- and regional-scale trade. Russell shows how the Empire's extravagant use of exotic stones coexisted with a more modest, private use of exotic, decorative stone. Foy's analysis of glass, while focused on private trade, reveals that the state was involved in the production of *unguentaria*. In his overview of African pottery, Bonifay argues that state-directed trade can explain only some of the distribution patterns observed. Similarly, Reynolds' impressive synthesis of large-scale pottery assemblages across the Mediterranean shows that regional divisions visible in the Byzantine period had their roots in earlier close-regional trade networks. Papi's rehabilitation of Mauretania Tingitana, which can no longer be seen as an underdeveloped appendage of Baetica, includes descriptions of large military granaries, but much more impressive is the evidence for massive exports of grain, oil, and fish products and the long history of pre-Roman Mediterranean integration. Fulford focuses most closely on the state's economic activity. He argues that procurators supplied the nodes of the *cursus publicus* in Britain with Gallic *terra sigillata* that then entered the private market, preventing the emergence of a British *terra sigillata* industry. In the process, however, he also points out that the output from some centers circulated only in private markets. Therefore, while it was uniquely powerful, the state was one economic actor among many.

The other impression to emerge is of the great complexity of trade. Foy describes local, medium, and long-distance exchanges at every stage of the glass production process, from trade in sand and natron to slabs of raw glass to finished products. Reynolds details how different products travelled along different trade networks at different scales and how these shifted over time. These networks could overlap geographically without

necessarily mixing. So, for example, the Black Sea goods that flowed through the Aegean to the West bypassed Butrint, but the city did receive Aegean cookwares and ESB. Roman intra-imperial trade was complex, and the state was partially but significantly involved in many different sectors.

Part III, on trade across the frontiers, demonstrates the vitality of overland and maritime trade across Rome's eastern and southern frontiers, especially in the first two centuries CE. Trade across the northern frontiers is excluded because the editors see it as relatively insignificant (pp. 16–17).

Graf brings together the available evidence for overland trade between China and Rome, arguing for its significance alongside maritime trade. This chapter is an ambitious undertaking. On his own admission, a proper account would require the collaboration of multiple regional experts. Since I am currently employed by just such a project, I asked my colleagues for their opinions on this chapter.¹ While Graf's handling of the Palmyrene evidence is strong, his lack of familiarity with other regions will be evident to specialists. He makes several geographical errors, but the larger issue is, perhaps, unavoidable in a chapter such as this. Despite acknowledging the need to situate long-distance exchange within a holistic understanding of the various societies across Asia (p. 448), the groups he discusses become, in the end, mere intermediaries between China and Rome (p. 507). Graf is surely correct that silk travelled across overland routes in significant quantities, but to fully grasp why and how it made the journey and how that changed over time is beyond the scope of this contribution.

The next three chapters treating maritime trade are narrower in scope and written by scholars with an intimate knowledge of the evidence they handle. Tomber and Nappo both argue for the continuing vitality of trade between Rome and India in the second century CE. Nappo's analysis of Roman coins as an object of trade draws attention to a less commonly considered way in which state actions had economic impacts. Tomber's analysis of archaeological remains in Egypt's eastern desert highlights a seeming paradox. Despite the immense revenue derived from maritime trade with India, the state invested little in the infrastructure of the Red Sea ports. Davidde's chapter might contain a solution. Her underwater survey of Qana', on the southern Arabian coast, revealed no port architecture, but it did identify mooring stones in the middle of the harbor to which ships could be tied.

The final chapter in the book is Andrew Wilson's description of Saharan trade. Field work in southern Libya conducted from the late 1990s to 2011 has completely upended the old consensus. The discovery of copious amounts of Roman material scattered across many sites in the Sahara now proves that trade with the inhabitants of the desert thrived especially from the late first through the third century CE. Political relations between Rome and the Garamantes seem to have been important influences on the volume of trade, and there is some indication that Flavian activity in the Sahara provided an initial stimulus to sustained, large-scale exchange; but the precise role of the state remains murky.

Like its predecessors from OxREP, this volume contains a wealth of valuable interventions in debates about the Roman economy. The synthesis of recently discovered or compiled archaeological material, often by scholars responsible for its initial production, makes this book invaluable to economic historians. The inclusion of materials that are usually marginalized and the insistence on the importance of extra-imperial trade are themselves important steps forward as well. Any collection of scholarship on the Roman economy should contain this book.

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Notes:

1. [Beyond the Silk Road](#) funded by the ERC and under the direction of Professor Sitta von Reden.

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