

## Analyzing Urbanism and Agrarian Change in the Roman Empire

In this paper, I examine the methodologies by which historians can analyze the transformations in the rural economy that supported the Roman Empire's flourishing urban culture. Although there is no certainty about population estimates in the ancient world, in his recent overview of Roman urbanism (2011), Andrew Wilson suggests that the Roman Empire supported an urban population of about seven million, thus between seven and twelve percent of the empire's overall population (estimates vary from about 60 million to 100 million). This was a degree of urbanization unmatched in most parts of Europe until the early modern period (Maddison 2007: 40-43). The growth of Roman cities depended on generating substantial surpluses from the rural economy and creating mechanisms to transfer these surpluses to the cities. In view of the high degree of stratification of wealth in the Roman economy (Scheidel and Friesen 2009), it seems clear that understanding the relationship between urbanism and agrarian change requires analyzing the economic choices of elite landowners, not just senators and equestrians, but also the members of the local city councils throughout the empire. A major difficulty, however, is to develop a methodology with which to interpret economic planning in the broader context of Roman legal and social institutions.

In recent years, historians have made increasingly sophisticated use of comparative methodologies to analyze economic relationships in the Roman world. These methodologies are drawn from the modern debate about legal and economic institutions, especially in the fields of law and economics and the new institutional economics (Frier and Kehoe 2007; Bang 2009). In the view of Francesco Boldizzoni (2011), however, such methodologies are inappropriate for understanding pre-modern economies, since they interpret "wealth maximization," which he views as a modern social value, as normative and explanatory for all historical societies. Instead

of applying contemporary economic theory to explain the economic history of past societies, Boldizzoni emphasizes the importance of understanding economic choices as ‘embedded’ in the underlying social values of a society. Although Boldizzoni’s focus is on early-modern Europe, he is not sparing in his criticism of ancient historians who use comparative methodologies, wondering “why people trained as classicists have this fascination for economics” (79). Boldizzoni makes a legitimate point in emphasizing that historians must account for the particular historical factors that influence economic choices in past societies, but as I will argue, the methodologies of law and economics and the new institutional economics do provide a valuable way to analyze economic relationships in the Roman world. Boldizzoni’s approach risks falling into an error similar to the one that he attributes to historians whose methods he criticizes, that is, to assume that sentiments expressed by upper-class writers were normative across society.

I will seek to demonstrate the usefulness of economic approaches to analyzing the Roman agrarian economy by examining the economic planning of landowners in diverse periods and locations, including in late Republican and early imperial Italy, and in Egypt under the Principate and in late antiquity. There can be no doubt that the economic choices made by Roman property owners were influenced by social values, such as the prestige of owning land, and a mistrust of commerce as a source of income, as Boldizzoni would suggest. At the same time, I will argue that landowners developed strategies for managing their wealth that represented rational strategies to pursue carefully defined economic goals, ones that were adapted to the basic constraints imposed by the Roman economy, or any pre-modern economy. These constraints include a narrow range of options for investing substantial amounts of wealth and the imperfection and volatility of markets for agricultural products (Erdkamp 2005). The economic

preferences of upper-class landowners, for their part, exercised a great deal of influence on the Roman government's of legal policies surrounding the rural economy, in particular those affecting farm tenancy.

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