

Assessing Regional Wealth in Late Roman Pontos

We often talk about the booming economy of the Roman Eastern Mediterranean in the fifth and sixth centuries CE, but what do we mean by this? And how do we compare the late Roman economy to the Roman Empire in second century CE, a period which was also very prosperous? This paper uses a recent archaeological field survey in Turkey, the Avkat Archaeological Project in Pontos (2007-2010) as a case study to examine the problem of assessing regional wealth in the Roman Empire.

Avkat is located between Çorum and Amasya in Northern Turkey. It was a Roman village that was promoted to city status in the early sixth century CE by the emperor Anastasius (491-518). In addition to successfully identifying the site as the Roman city of Euchaita, the project examined the material culture of Avkat and its hinterland to see how it changed over the Roman period (Haldon et al. 2015). We were particularly interested in whether the prosperity of the fifth and sixth centuries was visible in the archaeology and whether there was any sign of the change in status from village to city visible on the ground.

The field survey produced evidence of a number of different archaeological markers for wealth (including pottery imports, building styles, and subsistence strategies) that changed over time. Pottery imports were always on a small scale, but show continuous contact with other parts of the Roman world including the west coast of Anatolia. The late Roman period was the best represented in terms of the number of ceramic finds. There was also an increase in the number of inscriptions in the late Roman Empire and of dateable buildings, especially churches, some ornamented with an unusual palmette capital very different from the Corinthian capitals used on the south and west coasts. There is thus substantially more archaeological evidence for the fifth and sixth centuries than for the second century at Avkat.

Whether more archaeological evidence correlates to more prosperity is a much more complicated problem than collecting the field data. Numerous field surveys in the eastern Mediterranean have found that the late Roman period is over-represented numerically in the ceramic finds (Pettegrew 2007; Quercia et al. 2011). Similarly, the process of Christianization introduced churches, a new and distinctive architectural form, into most villages in the Empire by the end of the fifth century (Elton 2006, 2013). Establishing a simple economic model of Roman villages and cities from first principles allows us to test the assertion that a particular period was economically successful. This model can take into account not only material remains but also archaeologically hard-to-see elements such as Roman tax structures and subsistence strategies. A model, no matter how rudimentary, will enable us to discuss changes in the wealth of Avkat between the second and fifth centuries using a common framework based on economics rather than on visible archaeological material.

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