

Introduction

APPROACHES TO THE ROMAN ECONOMY

The French historian Fernand Braudel has written an impressive three-volume survey of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries entitled *Civilization and Capitalism* (1981–1984); volume one bears a particularly significant title: *The structures of everyday life: the limits of the possible*. Nowhere in the volumes is there any historical narrative, for it is Braudel's belief that history consists of an understanding of the interrelationships between an endless series of factors which make up the ever-changing structure of life, and impose the limits which condition the form of human actions and institutions.

It remains for me to justify one last choice: that of introducing everyday life, no more no less, into the domain of history. Was this useful? Or necessary? Everyday life consists of the little things one hardly notices in time and space. (op.cit. 29)

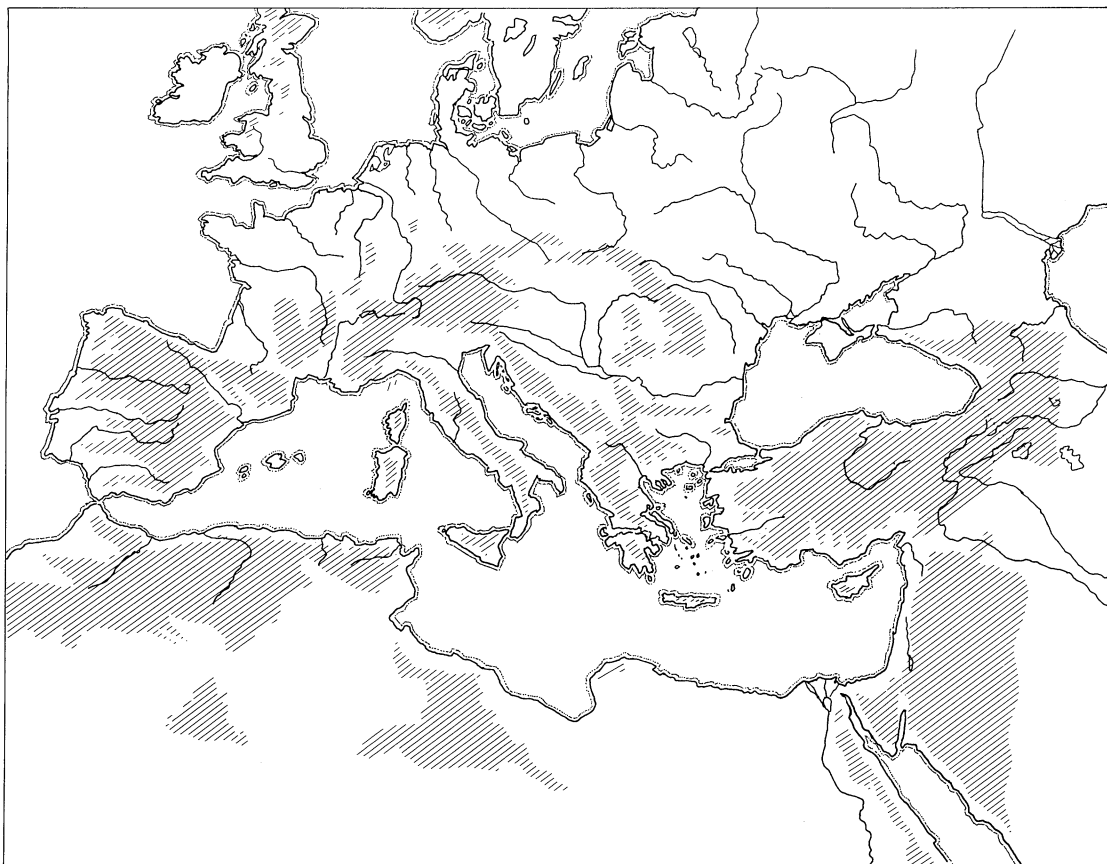
Braudel describes these everyday themes of material culture as 'parahistoric languages – demography, food, costume, lodging, technology, money, towns – which are usually kept separate from each other and which develop in the margin of traditional history' (ibid. 27). He relies largely upon written evidence for his books, but the aspects of life to which he has devoted such detailed attention are very much those which interest archaeologists, notably those like diet, lifestyle, and the significance of everyday objects. In some respects, Braudel has conducted retrospective anthropology from written sources.

The related disciplines of sociology and anthropology have also changed the terms upon which the past may be approached. Historians and archaeologists have long recognised that their ideas spring from their own limited experience of and information about the world; anthropology

provides an opportunity to counteract these limitations by examining different lifestyles and institutions in widely differing environments. Ethnography concentrates on the study of the material culture and artefacts of people; thus, a combination of anthropology, ethnography, archaeology and history should make up an ideal battery of research tools for investigating the Roman empire, particularly its economy. There is an attractive convergence between the thinking of Braudel and that of ethnoarchaeologists like Binford or Hodder, who believe that small items of everyday life, such as burial practices or forms of pottery and metal objects, reflect wider aspects of society, for instance social structure and religious beliefs. This is comforting for archaeologists, who have no choice other than to study these material traces; in historical periods, they have the added luxury of being able to compare the implications of archaeological research with the written evidence for the peoples involved (Binford 1978; Hodder 1982).

The limitations of archaeology

Archaeology uses fieldwork and excavation, and the comparative study of sites and objects to compile information about the past. In pre-historic periods there is nothing else; in historical times such studies must be fully integrated with evidence from written sources. A growing number of scientific techniques assists archaeologists in their task. Thus, to study agricultural systems, there are methods of locating, recording and excavating the sites of farms, studying the bones and plant remains recovered, and analysing the potential of the soils in relation to the geography of a settlement pattern. Populations can be studied from skeletal remains, which reveal traces of their diet, diseases and mortality. Technology

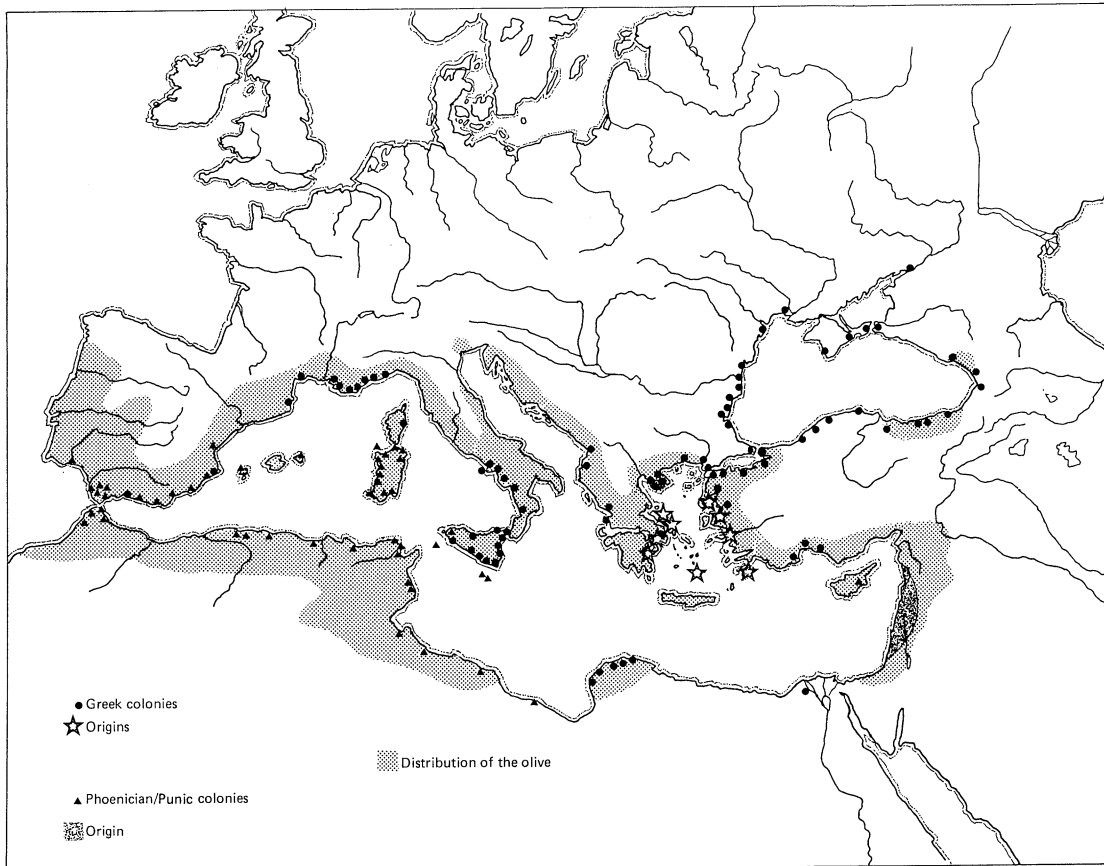


can be investigated by means of analyses of metals, building stone or pottery, and trade can be detected from the distribution of artefacts away from their sources. All of this information can be placed into the general context of the climate and other prevailing environmental conditions.

What archaeology cannot do is achieve certainty. All of the known sites and artefacts are merely a surviving sample of what once existed – and not necessarily a representative sample. Thus, it may be dangerous to generalise the results of particular studies from one region to another, or from one century to the next. This uncertainty and a suspicion of scientific gadgetry has no doubt convinced many historians that the results of archaeology can be used only when they happen to illuminate a safely established historical point, or to provide a picturesque illustration for a publication. This book is aimed in part at historians of all periods, in the hope that archaeology can be examined in its own right, and that its results can be judged in a fairly familiar

1. The territory which eventually formed the Roman empire contained much hilly and mountainous land (the shaded area exceeds 500m), particularly around the Mediterranean. To the south and east lay deserts, but to the north lay Britain, Gaul and the fertile plains bounded by the Danube and the Rhine. The fundamental differences between the core provinces and the periphery have profound implications for the economy of the empire, particularly where transport and agriculture are concerned. (Audio-Visual Centre, University of Newcastle upon Tyne).

historical setting. Conversely, prehistoric archaeologists may like to examine how their subject fares in a period which has abundant written records. Finally, all students of economic history should benefit from gaining a better perspective on the ancient world, and realise the complexity of a period which, in works devoted to more recent centuries, is usually dismissed in a brief opening chapter full of easy generalisations.



THE STUDY OF THE ROMAN ECONOMY

Justification

Most accounts of the Roman empire, like those of other periods, follow a rigid historical arrangement, and concentrate upon political and military history, derived primarily from documentary sources. Some chapters on the army, towns, villas, trade and similar themes tend to appear around half way through such books, often physically dividing the early empire from the late. They may well have the atmosphere of an interval, to which light relief may be added by the use of attractive illustrations of Roman ruins or photogenic artefacts. However, some writers have gone out of their way to write specifically social or economic histories, for which the political and military events form a framework for events or processes of more fundamental significance. Whether ancient or modern periods are involved, this approach is open to accusations of determinism – the reduction of the rôle of individuals in favour of amorphous trends of which they were unwittingly a part.

2. Pre-Roman Mediterranean civilisations: from the eighth to the sixth centuries BC, Greek and Phoenician or Punic cities almost encircled the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, from homelands around the Aegean and the Levant. It is noticeable that they coincide to a large extent with the areas of 'Mediterranean polyculture' (the cultivation of cereals, grapes and olives). This combination of crops seems to have been an important element in the development of civilisation (Chapter 4). Rome was not yet distinguishable from other settlements in Italy, and until c.500 BC it was overshadowed by the Etruscans, who occupied much of northern central Italy. (Audio-Visual Centre, University of Newcastle)

Still more dangerous is the possibility of seeing a single factor as explaining vast historical processes – slavery, money, agriculture or climate are ready candidates.

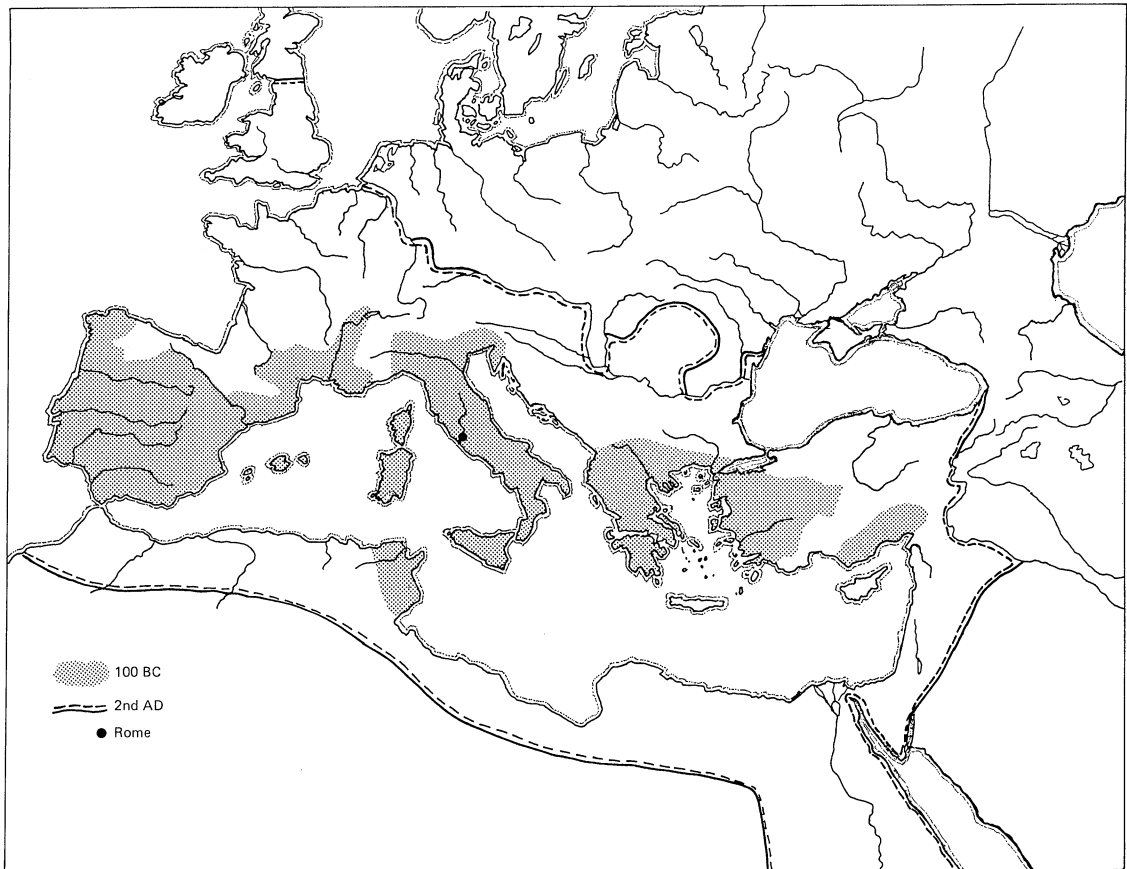
Different ages choose different interpretations of the past, which may reflect the aspirations or

fears of their own times rather than any historical reality. Unfortunately, the preoccupations of historians are usually only made clear by the application of hindsight. In the latter half of the twentieth century, sociology and economics have reached a commanding position in the interpretation of the contemporary world, and exert a powerful influence over political decision-making. However, post-war hopes that explanation would lead to understanding and thus to control of the processes involved have diminished in the 1970s and 1980s.

Naturally, historians and archaeologists have been influenced by this atmosphere, and social and economic explanations of the past have multiplied in relation to more traditional political accounts. One of the first rules of scholarship is to assess the biases to be expected in the opinions of writers, whether ancient or modern; thus, to understand the development of attitudes to the Roman economy, it is necessary to examine the backgrounds of the writers involved. Michael

Rostovtzeff's *Social and economic history of the Roman empire* was first published in 1926; the author was a Russian émigré with direct experience of the Russian Revolution and American capitalism;

3. The expansion of Roman power began slowly after the end of Etruscan superiority around 500 BC; it became more rapid in the fourth century, and the whole Italian peninsula came under Rome's control by 264 BC. By 146 BC, Rome had taken possession of Sicily, Corsica, Sardinia, and parts of Spain and north Africa, as a result of three wars with Carthage. Further provinces were acquired in Greece and Asia Minor by 100 BC, and by AD 50 the whole of the Mediterranean coast was in Roman hands, as well as most of Europe up to the Danube and the Rhine. The maximum extent of the empire was reached in the second century AD, when it stretched (in modern terms) from Scotland to Egypt, and from Morocco to south Russia. Most of this territory remained intact until the fifth century AD. (Audio-Visual Centre, University of Newcastle)



Tenney Frank, editor of the five-volume *Economic survey of ancient Rome*, lived through the Wall Street crash and the great Depression of the 1920s; Moses Finley, a long-term student of the interaction of social, economic and political affairs, reacted against the excessive optimism of the 1960s in his published series of lectures *The ancient economy* (1973).

The rôle of archaeology

The study of history has been an essential component of economics for several centuries, in order to provide a sufficient time perspective for the identification of long-term trends, and the analysis of causes and effects. This situation is a close parallel to the current view of archaeology held by many American exponents, who regard it as the 'past tense' of anthropology. In the nineteenth century, a blend of archaeology and anthropology provided the inspirations for theories of social evolution, notably those of Engels and Marx, based on the advance of technology and its economic consequences. Because of its emphasis on 'modes of production', Marxist thinking and contemporary anthropological research continue to provide fertile ground for the development of historical and archaeological thought. However, the weighty political implications of Marxism or other schools of economics place a great burden upon historians, archaeologists and anthropologists – the accuracy of the information upon which they are based is absolutely critical. Here, archaeology can play an important rôle in bringing its full range of investigative powers to bear upon periods or problems for which historical documentation is inadequate.

An excellent example of the potential of archaeology is the study of early medieval Europe and the Mediterranean, a period which involved the economic effects of the end of the Roman empire and the rise of barbarian kingdoms in the west, and Islam in the east. For half a century, debate centred upon the propositions of Henri Pirenne that the economics and thus the actions of Europe were conditioned by the impact of the Arabs. The comparatively small amount of evidence – most of it documentary – was simply rearranged by different protagonists. However, the accumulation of archaeological evidence has been growing ever faster, and is now of sufficient quality and quantity for there to be a real opportunity to test existing and new theories. The books produced by

Hodges and Whitehouse (1982; 1984) demonstrate the new direction that early medieval archaeology and history have taken. Unlike the static number of surviving historical documents, the archaeological information will continue to grow, and cannot be ignored by any historian of that period. The immediate impact of archaeology in the Roman period is proportionately smaller because of the greater number of contemporary historical sources, but the principle remains the same: archaeology can provide new information about existing questions, and illuminate aspects of Roman life which were never recorded or whose documents have failed to survive.

If early medieval archaeology seems of marginal relevance, perhaps the potential of industrial archaeology may be more convincing. One of the classic questions of economic history concerns England's Industrial Revolution. Did society produce the revolution, or technology? Was there in fact a sudden revolution, or a more gradual evolution? Many detailed questions of technology, demography and agriculture cannot easily be answered from inadequate historical sources, particularly if a long-term view back into the Tudor or even medieval periods is required (Hodges 1973). However, these are just the kinds of issues which archaeology may profitably explore, as Platt's (1978) survey of medieval England demonstrates.

Finally, the relevance of an archaeological study of the Roman empire may be called into question; I believe that justification is straightforward. One profound issue is the assessment of Roman technology and agriculture, with related aspects of military activity and urbanisation. The improvements in the understanding of such issues brought about by archaeological information are fundamental to further interpretation of their social implications. A concerted effort on behalf of many disciplines is necessary to advance the understanding of the economy of the Roman empire. The thinking exercises involved in the task can only be of benefit in a world of differential economic development, technological and demographic change, and varying relationships between states, societies and their economies. Perhaps there is as much to be learned from the question of why the Roman empire did not experience an Industrial Revolution as why eighteenth-century England did.

MODELS OF THE ROMAN ECONOMY

There has been a sudden growth in interest about ancient economies amongst ancient historians, stimulated to an extent by Finley's *The ancient economy* (1973). It has resulted in several notable publications which have made the progress of the study accessible to a wide audience; archaeologists neglect the development of thinking at their peril. In particular, Keith Hopkins has not only advanced the discussion of the Roman economy, but has conveniently summarised the position which research had reached by the early 1970s – the 'new orthodoxy' (1983, xi–xiii). His publications have the added benefit of being set out in the form of discussions of models, which make the differences between assumptions, evidence and implications comparatively clear. The most concise statement of Hopkins' views appears in his introduction to a collection of papers, *Trade in the ancient empires* (Garnsey *et al.* 1983, ix–xv). Hopkins' model is an extension to the 'new orthodoxy' established by M. I. Finley and A. H. M. Jones, whose view of the economy can be summarised fairly briefly.

The Finley/Jones model

Finley and Jones reacted against the 'modernizing' tendencies of historians like Rostovtzeff, who made simplistic equations between aspects of antiquity, such as towns or coinage, and their modern counterparts. Against the tendency of archaeology to study manufactured and traded goods like pottery or metalwork, they both stressed their view that agriculture was the dominant form of economic activity in the Roman empire.

Agriculture was pre-eminent, but most of its products were consumed locally, not traded. With a few exceptions like Rome or Alexandria, towns were where rich landowners lived, and provided centres for administration and state religion, modest crafts and local markets. They were centres of consumption, financed from taxes and rents, rather than trade or industry. Inter-regional trade was small in volume, because of poor transport and the lack of specialisation resulting from the uniform farming conditions which existed around the Mediterranean. Because there was no mass-market, the small amount of long-distance trade that did exist was restricted to luxuries. Traders and craftsmen were modest in their operations, and of low social

status; any who did make fortunes promptly bought land, and became 'respectable' landowners to whom commerce was a side issue. Land brought status, and status involved displays of wealth by private consumption and expenditure on public benefactions – never productive investment.

While accepting the basic validity of the Finley/Jones model, Hopkins has introduced a significant modification. He contends that there was genuine economic growth, which increased surplus production by means of political change, and technical or social innovations (1978; 1983, xiv–xv). The period of growth was the late first millennium BC and the first two centuries AD; its results were felt in production, consumption and trade. Hopkins' proposition that there was a trend towards greater surpluses is set out in seven clauses (*ibid.* xv–xxi) which provide a useful framework for the examination of the relevance of archaeology to the study of the economy of the Roman empire.

- 1 Agricultural production rose, and more land was cultivated. Hopkins notes the relevance of pollen analysis and the study of settlement patterns. Here, archaeological evidence is of profound and growing significance.
- 2 Population in the first two centuries AD was greater than 1000 years earlier or 500 years later. A combination of literary evidence and archaeological research into settlement and mortality is relevant here.
- 3 A greater proportion of workers was involved in non-agricultural production and services, both in the towns and countryside. Excavation of rural and urban workshops and the study of their products is important here.
- 4 High division of labour promoted increased production, and a high-point in the distribution of luxuries and more mundane goods occurred in the first two centuries AD. Very detailed quantified archaeological studies of finds from occupation sites, and centres of manufacture of items like pottery or brick (particularly those where items were stamped with workers' names) can allow exploration of this clause (*fig. 4*).
- 5 Production *per capita* rose, in both agriculture and other spheres, as a result of a wide range of stimuli including taxation, slavery, business practices, prolonged peace and technical devel-

opments. The application of archaeology is limited to the last of these factors.

- 6 The intensity of exploitation increased because of the amount and proportion of production which was diverted in the form of taxes or rents. Evidence for this must rely primarily on documents and inscriptions.
- 7 In core-provinces, the levying of money taxes, which were spent on the frontiers (to pay armies) or in Rome (for state activities), stimulated long-distance trade, means of transport, production of goods for sale, the use and volume of coinage, and the importance of towns. Archaeology can assist in the study of each of these results of taxation and expenditure, although literary evidence is needed to establish the level and nature of taxation.

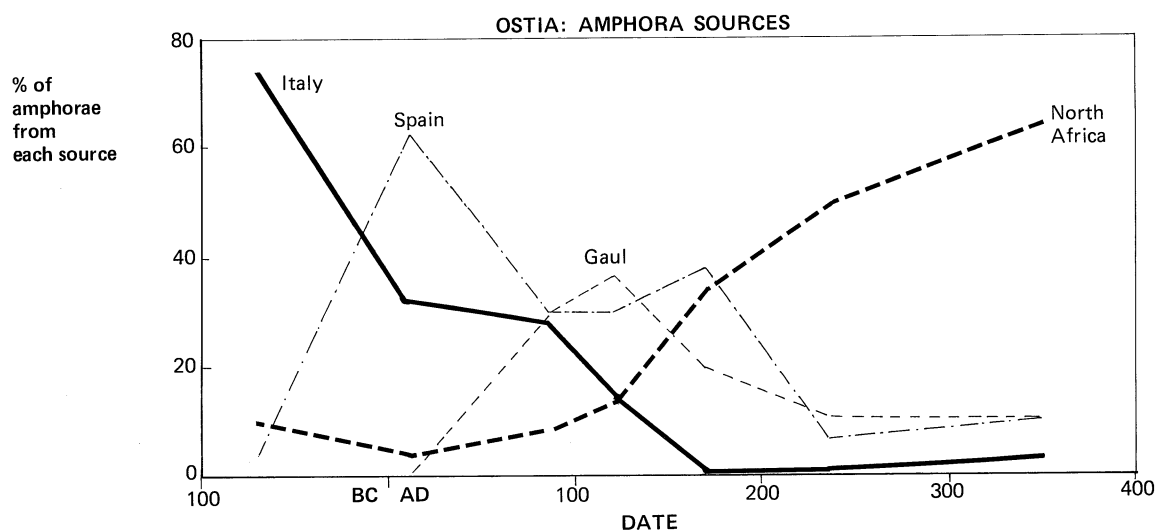
Thus, it can be seen that archaeology has a major part to play in the analysis of at least five out of Hopkins' seven clauses. Clause 7 is undoubtedly the most important element in Hopkins' proposition, and he has devoted detailed articles to the effects of Roman taxation and expenditure (1980; 1983b). It demands a more optimistic view of Roman economic activity than Finley or Jones were prepared to allow, without in any way destroying their model, and furthermore implies a clear rôle for archaeology:

Above all we need to know the volume and value of trade in the classical world. We need to know what was traded and the routes along which food, goods and metals flowed. How much did the volume,

value, content and direction of trade change over time and between regions during classical antiquity? (1983, xxi)

Lest archaeologists are over-eager to heed this call for their valuable and growing sources of information, Hopkins displays a perceptive caution over the use of archaeological studies (*ibid.* xxii) which centres upon the problem of generalising from those goods such as pots which survive well, to those such as textiles which do not: 'The answer to

4. A good example of the value of archaeological evidence is provided by the classification and quantification of amphorae (large clay containers) from excavated deposits of different dates in Ostia, the port and town at the mouth of the river Tiber, for they reveal the changing pattern of Rome's exports and imports. Most amphorae of republican date, when Italian exports still flourished, were from Italy itself. In the first century AD, large quantities of oil, wine and fish sauce were imported from Spain and Gaul, whilst north African amphorae became increasingly important from the second century, reaching a dominant position after AD 200. The results of this study correlate closely with changing patterns in the location of shipwrecks in the western Mediterranean (Parker 1984). Thus, archaeology on land and under water can be integrated with historical evidence about Italian and provincial agriculture and trade, but, unlike the literary evidence, the quantity of archaeological evidence is growing rapidly. (Audio-Visual Centre, University of Newcastle; based on data from Panella 1981 68–69 tav. 15 and Carandini and Panella 1981 491, fig. 29.1)



this question is surprisingly critical for the study of the ancient economy'. The tendency of archaeology to rely more and more upon scientific aids and mathematical methods makes it harder for historians without archaeological training to answer this question. One of the most important objectives of this book is to increase the critical awareness of the workings of archaeology amongst non-archaeologists.

Literary evidence

Historians may find that the chapters which follow pay scant attention to literary sources. In defence, it may be pointed out that Frank's *Economic survey* (1933–1940) ran to five volumes whilst paying comparatively little attention to archaeology. Translations of important authors such as Pliny the Elder or Columella are readily available, whilst inscriptions are considered in Frank's volumes. A detailed commentary on all of the major Roman texts which concern the economy, incorporating all of the relevant archaeological information which qualifies their validity, would be a long-term undertaking for a well-financed team of scholars.

FURTHER READING

The development of the ancient Greek economy forms an important background to this chapter; see Finley's collection of papers on this theme (1983), and Austin and Vidal-Naquet's *Economic and social history of ancient Greece* (1977). The latter is a source-book containing translations of documents and inscriptions; equivalents for the Roman empire are Lewis and Rheinhold (1966), and Levick (1984), which is wider in scope than its title, *The government of the Roman empire*, implies. Crook's *Law and life of Rome* (1967) provides a useful perspective on the setting of the economy.

The study of the economy has developed steadily since archaeological information has become available for study and recognised as an

important source of information. Frank published *An economic history of Rome* in 1927, before editing a vast five-volume *Economic survey* which appeared from 1933–1940. Rostovtzeff's *Social and economic history of the Roman empire* (a sequel to a study of the Hellenistic world) appeared in various editions and languages from 1926 before the definitive English version of 1957. It contains lavish illustrations of artistic and archaeological evidence relating to its theme.

The more critical post-war view of the economy is represented by a number of significant papers by A. H. M. Jones, gathered together in a single volume in 1974. Mossé's *The ancient world at work* (1969) and Finley's *The ancient economy* (1973) rounded off this phase, but Frederiksen's review of the latter (*J. Rom. Stud.* 1975) should be read for a different perspective. Duncan-Jones attempted to wring some quantitative evidence out of the Roman sources (*The economy of the Roman empire* (1974)), while remaining in the Jones/Finley camp. Martino's *Storia economica di Roma antica* contains detailed footnote references to ancient sources, as well as good guides to relevant modern publications at the end of each chapter.

The impact of the economic anthropology contained in *Trade and market in the early empires* (edited by Polanyi and others in 1957) is most clearly seen in the daunting but illuminating *The shape of the past* by Carney (1975), whilst rumbling discontent about the use of ancient literary evidence is epitomised in Hopkins' 'Rules of evidence', a review published in 1978, the same year as his *Conquerors and slaves*, which made full use of a sociological approach to Rome and its economy. Finley's challenging pessimism over archaeological evidence stimulated a series of Cambridge seminars by ancient historians and archaeologists, some of which make up *Trade in the ancient economy*, edited by Garnsey *et al.* in 1983; this book demonstrates the vigour of the subject in the 1980s.