STRUCTURE AND SCALE IN THE ROMAN ECONOMY

RICHARD DUNCAN-JONES
Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge

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# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of figures</strong></td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of tables</strong></td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preface</strong></td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of abbreviations</strong></td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART I TIME AND DISTANCE</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Communication-speed and contact by sea in the Roman empire</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Trade, taxes and money</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Separation and cohesion in Mediterranean trade</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Stability and change</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART II DEMOGRAPHY AND MANPOWER</strong></td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Age-awareness in the Roman world</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Roman life-expectancy</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Pay and numbers in Diocletian’s army</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART III AGRARIAN PATTERNS</strong></td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Land and landed wealth</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 The price of wheat in Roman Egypt</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART IV THE WORLD OF CITIES</strong></td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 The social cost of urbanisation</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Who paid for public building?</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Contents

**PART V TAX-PAYMENT AND TAX-ASSESSMENT**  

12 Taxation in money and taxation in kind  
13 Land, taxes and labour: implications of the *iugum*

**Appendices**

1 Coin-hoard statistics  
2 Dated building evidence  
3 Totals of dated papyri by regnal year  
4 Small army units and garrisons under the late Empire  
5 Existing interpretations of the Beatty figures  
6 The *iugum* in Epiphanius

**Bibliography**

**Index**
FIGURES

1 Time-lapse in days between emperor’s death and first Egyptian evidence of his successor (examples showing seasonality)  page 10
2 Time-lapse in days between emperor’s death and first Egyptian evidence of his successor (counter-seasonal evidence) 11
3 Time-lapse in days between death of emperor and first Egyptian evidence of his successor (plotted by year) 12
4 Time-lapse in days between sending-date and date of receipt of edicts sent to Africa, AD 313–414 (n = 17) 19
5 Time-lapse in days between sending-date and date of receipt of edicts sent to Africa, AD 313–414 (n = 17) (shown by year) 20
6 Time-lapse in days between sending-date and date of receipt of edicts sent to Italy from Illyricum, AD 319–359 23
7 Spain: emperor-dated inscriptions per reign-year (CIL II) 60
8 Syria: inscriptions per reign-year dated by local era (AD 14–217) 61
9 Italy: building dedications per reign-year (imperially financed building excluded) (Jouffroy data) 62
10 Italy: imperially financed building dedications per reign-year (Jouffroy data) 62
11 Lepcis Magna: dedications per reign-year (IRT) 63
12 Sabratha: dedications per reign-year (IRT) 64
13 Thugga: building dedications per reign-year 65
14 Volume of Egyptian documentation by ten-year periods, AD 2–281 (Bureth): citations of the emperor dated by year 68
15 Documentation in Egypt: number of documents (approximations by Julian year) 69
16 Volume of Egyptian documentation under Hadrian (approximations by Julian year) 70
Figures

17 Volume of Egyptian documentation under Antoninus Pius (approximate totals by Julian year) 70
18 Volume of Egyptian documentation under Marcus Aurelius (approximate totals by Julian year) 71
19 Annual denarius-output, AD 161–179: Marcus Aurelius (graph A) and Lucius Verus (graph B) (coin-totals from Reka–Devnia hoard) 74
20 Tombstone age-reporting: male ages of death in the Cirtan colonies 82
21 Ligures Baebiani: estate-values (N = 57) 131
22 Veleia: estate-values (private estates) (N = 46) 132
23 Overlapping sector of estate-values at Ligures Baebiani and Veleia: Ligures Baebiani 133
24 Overlapping sector of estate-values at Ligures Baebiani and Veleia: Veleia 134
25 Volcei: farm-units (N = 36) 135
26 Lamasba: units of water-entitlement (N = 78) 136
27 Magnesia: units of ownership (N = 67) 137
28 Hermopolis: estate-areas (N = 198) 139
29 Rulings by emperors in extant legal sources: average number per reign-year 169
TABLES

1 ‘Last appearance’ and ‘first appearance’ in Egypt (AD 54–222) page 9
2 ‘Counter-seasonal’ fast timings 10
3 Arrival of news analysed by zone within Egypt 13
4 Last appearances in Egyptian documents shown by place of death of emperor 15
5 Double-dated edicts sent to governors of Africa 18
6 Edicts sent to the governors of Egypt and Africa 22
7 Transit-time (days) in the double-dated edicts: summary 23
8 Average time-lapse for news reaching Venice c. 1500 25
9 Emperors with known date of death (AD 54–222): latest reign-datings in Egyptian sources 27
10 Time-interval between earliest Egyptian reign-dating and death of previous emperor (AD 54–235) 28
11 Representation of Trajan RIC 147 in different hoards 41
12 Distribution of signed lamps 50
13 Spearman correlations between distribution of six signed lamp-marques in ten regions north of the Mediterranean 51
14 Spearman correlations between six signed lamp-marques in ten regions north of the Mediterranean 53
15 Representations of FORTIS indexed to its representation at Aquileia 55
16 Diffusion of ‘southern’ marques 57
17 Inter-annual variation in the volume of emperor-dated documents 71
18 Lycian funerary inscriptions by date (AD 162–171) 73
19 Denarius-totals at Reka-Devnia in ‘low-output’ years under Marcus (AD 161–169) 75
20 Age-reporting by Aurelius Isidorus 80
21 Other conflicting age-declarations in Egypt 80
22 Age-heaping by individual Egyptians who declare their age 81
Tables

23 Ages ending in 5 as a proportion of ages ending in 0 (range 23–82) 82
24 Male social differences 84
25 Female social differences 84
26 Age-rounding by freedmen and slaves 85
27 Sex-differences in age-rounding by region 86
28 Sex-variation in age-rounding within smaller groups 87
29 Regional variation in Roman age-rounding from funerary records 87
30 Local variation in citizen age-rounding in Africa and Numidia 89
31 African age-rounding in the largest local sample in each zone 89
32 Age-rounding in later European evidence (ages 23–62) 90
33 Age-rounding and illiteracy in twentieth-century censuses 90
34 Correlation between coefficients for age-rounding and illiteracy 91
35 Survival-rates in Ulpian 97
36 Implied survival-rates at standard age-thresholds 97
37 Median life-expectancy I 98
38 Median life-expectancy II 99
39 Ulpian's figure compared with two model life-tables: median life-expectancy at specific ages 99
40 Median life-expectancy at age twenty 102
41 Revised interpretation of payments in P Beatty Panop 1–2 112
42 Estate-sizes and component-valuations at Veleia 127
43 Land-registers illustrating differentiation of property-sizes 130
44 Gini coefficient related to sample-size 140
45 Overall area and the largest estates 141
46 Wheat prices by century (private transactions in lower Egypt) 146
47 Number of surviving legal citations per reign 169
48 Financing of dated town buildings in Africa 184
49 Manning-ratios in Roman agricultural writers 206
50 Some units in the Notitia and their fort sizes 217
51 A.H.M. Jones's interpretation of the Beatty payments 218
Introduction

This book explores central areas of the Roman economy, and ways in which they connect and interact.

In a vast and unwieldy domain like the Roman empire, the speed of communication by sea and the number of shipping movements were obviously important for the processes of government as well as for the economy. What we know of message-speeds is usually disjointed. But more systematic results can be gained from Egyptian documents, which provide thousands of precisely dated coordinates identifying the emperor in power. When the emperor changes, the coordinates can show how soon this essential fact became known in one of Rome’s eastern provinces, and how long the news took to spread inside the province. The results in the period when the evidence is fullest mainly suggest dependence on commercial shipping, with news getting through faster the more closely its date happened to coincide with two main shipping movements in the year. Seasonal differences are very striking in the pattern from the Flavians onwards, and the arrival of news apparently depended on a limited number of shipping-links. The transit-times of government decrees sent to Africa under the later Empire again suggest two main shipping movements during the year (chapter 1).

This has some relevance to inter-regional trade. Can substantial trade flows be inferred by arguing that government taxation drew money out of provinces with large tax bills to an extent which only increase in trade could have corrected? Coin-finds in different parts of the empire, although cited in support of this model, do not show homogeneous characteristics when their composition is studied in any detail (chapter 2). And a re-examination of the format of Roman provincial taxation produces only limited support for the assumption that direct taxes in the provinces were generally levied in money (chapter 12). It remains uncertain whether imperial taxes can have changed the underlying character of Mediterranean trade, and whether they created a positive commercial stimulus. The find-patterns of Roman lamps identified by brand-name (drawing on the survey by Harris (1980a) show groupings within regions and separations between regions which, as far as they go, argue for a pattern of local trading zones rather than a single national market (chapter 3).
Introduction

Although evidence in the first chapter suggests slower contact by sea by the Late Empire, presumably because of fewer shipping-links, systematic evidence for economic change within the period of the Principate is difficult to run to earth. Dated series of town monuments show provincial responses to change of emperor and to changes in imperial policy more readily than responses to economic change. But denser information from papyri and coins suggests responses to discrete economic events, one of them the plague under Marcus Aurelius, reflected here in ways which are not immediately demographic (chapter 4).

The second part of the book is directly concerned with demography. The large samples of ages at death provided by Roman tombstones show numerical distortions which can readily be measured. The distortions vary in systematic ways which have direct social interest. But the degree of distortion tends to be so high as to suggest that many individuals had little effective grasp of their own age (chapter 5). This largely undermines any attempt to measure Roman life-expectancy from tombstone-ages. But Roman demographic evidence is not limited to age-reporting by the individual. One of the exceptions is the complete list of the town council of Canusium in southern Italy in the early third century. The ages of town councillors on tombstones show much less numerical distortion than most of the tombstone age-evidence. Analysis of the totals for office-holders in the Canusium list provides some pointers to life-expectancy within the local aristocracy in a south Italian town (chapter 6). A further chapter, concerned in a broader sense with manpower, derives totals for army units which provide indications of the size and make-up of the Diocletianic army, and seriously modify previous conclusions (chapter 7).

The third part of the book concentrates on the agrarian economy, first examining one of the central dossiers of commodity prices, the Egyptian prices for wheat. These show recognisable seasonal and regional variation, and a slow long-term upward movement, which accelerates very sharply at the end of the third century. They thus reflect another axis of change within the economy of the Principate (chapter 8). The companion chapter considers private landownership, and examines the violent economic contrasts that are implied in lists of Roman landowners and their properties.

The focus in the fourth section is the cities where landowners often lived, and the impact which office-holding and compulsory local spending had on owners of property (chapters 10 and 11). The shape of the surviving evidence tends to suggest a mounting crisis, with increases in the friction of Roman urban institutions on the propertied class. But although some inherent difficulties can be identified, chronological skewness in the surviving juristic evidence is so great that any cumulative change or deterioration in this area during the Principate remains difficult to establish.
Introduction

The tax burden represented by local offices and liturgies, though often serious enough in itself, was only part of the fiscal liabilities of the owner of property. The final part of the book is concerned with state taxes and the format of taxation. The complex of indirect taxes evidently held considerable importance as a source of government revenue in cash, as in some later pre-industrial empires. But collection of direct taxes in kind continued on a large scale (chapter 12).

The mainstay of assessment for land-taxation in many provinces under the Late Empire was the iugum or plough-unit. A fuller examination of the evidence implies that the iugum was also being used early in the Principate, and establishes its size at something close to a standardised measure (chapter 13). The results argue against seeing major discrepancies between the tax-rates of different provinces in the Late Empire. They also have important demographic implications, because the redefined iugum brings the ratio of manpower to land-area in tax-lists of the Late Empire close to ratios of the Principate, instead of being much lower as previous works have argued.