Discussion

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Abstract

The paper offers a critical appraisal and discussion of the theme of the session, based on the papers contained in this section. Correspondences are identified across different cultural contexts and they are tied back to the broader debate about the nature and jurisdiction of early states.

The state has a long history of being essentialized, when not idolized, as an institution in Western European political thought. At least since Niccolò Machiavelli made it the center of his theoretical edifice,[1] the presence of the state has been considered an indispensable precondition for any number of complex social traits, such as urbanism, professional armies, literacy, laws and, case in point, money.[2] For centuries, European scholars and politicians embedded within early modern monarchies, budding nations and, later, colonial empires have naturally tended to project the nature and attributes of their own polities back onto much earlier stages of state development. Rome, in particular, was identified as a model of all-powerful and all-encompassing political structure, under whose aegis highly regulated collective institutions would emerge and thrive.[3] Specifically in the area of economy and exchange, influential theorizations envisioned a rigid top-down state-centered taxation system as the primary driver of development.[4] Interestingly, a widespread skepticism about the economic rationality of premodern Mediterranean people[5] went hand-in-hand with a firm belief that a state like the Roman one had a tight control on production, exchange and, consequently, money. In parallel, the long tradition of classical numismatics, with its interminable catalogues of dies, types, moneyers and emperors, further contributed to cement an institutionalized notion of coinage, one in which the seigniorage of the state was absolute and unquestioned.

It is only in recent decades that monolithic views of ancient states have begun to be taken apart and deconstructed, making room for more nuanced formulations.[6] The essential issue concerns the nature and reach of early political aggregations, especially vis-à-vis other power structures within the emerging polities. Lineages, clans, social and religious groups and other corporate entities can operate, at least in part or at times, outside the direct control of the state.[7] Occasionally, they might even work explicitly against it. Elite families promoted strife, attempted coups and carried out assassinations, sometimes prompting a temporary collapse of the political machinery. By the same token, they could perform functions that are traditionally considered exclusive prerogatives of the state: for instance waging private wars, or administering their own internal justice. Seen in this perspective, the progressive institutionalization of money (or the absence of this phenomenon) should not be

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automatically seen as a proxy of the degree of political centralization displayed by a polity. There is a multitude of disparate scenarios in which different kinds of money can be produced and used. The very appearance of money, whether in the form of minted coins or not, should be seen as just one of many facets that economic behaviors can take. As it is convincingly argued in the introduction, subscribing to classic formalist dichotomies, like the one between money as token vs. money as commodity, or the one between coined metal and bullion, is ultimately not helpful, and impossible to implement incontrovertibly in any case. In a similar way, barter vs. money exchange or, in terms of the whole economy, market-driven vs. socially embedded are further examples of polar oppositions that cannot but ultimately obscure the rich complexity of actual behaviors.[8]

There is, therefore, a promising convergence between deconstruction of classic state theory and of formalist economic analysis that has the potential to shake entrenched certainties and yield important new results. The papers collected in this session provide a fascinating cross-section of economic phenomena in this sense and, taken together, make a powerful case for a context-sensitive, unpreconceived approach to this set of problems. Perhaps not surprisingly, first millennium BC Italy receives the lion's share of the attention. This particular context is indeed eminently well suited to the illustration of the issues outlined above, precisely because in it money and state formation are blatantly uncoupled. Western central Italy in particular witnessed the emergence of dozens of city-based states that displayed a number of sophisticated traits, such as monumental construction, long-distance trade, constitutional reforms, a degree of literacy and much else, and yet for many centuries largely ignored the option of coinage (but not that of money), despite the widespread diffusion of the latter among peer neighboring Greek cities. It is clear from this regional trend, of which Rome is but one example, that states did not require minting as a *sine qua non*, just like, later in the case of Germany (as discussed by Wigg-Wolf, above), minting did not require state-level organization. Central Italian early polities, I have argued elsewhere, were in a sense "weak" states, dominated by powerful landed lineages that jealously retained many of the prerogatives they had had before the urbanization process.[9] It makes sense that they were particularly unwilling to reify their political union by minting coins bearing the name of the political abstraction to which they only gingerly adhered.

Merav Haklai's paper is a perfect illustration of how, even when early central Italian states underwent constitutional reorganizations that revolved around wealth classes, coinage was far from indispensable. Whatever might be our assessment of the historical reliability of the narrative about Servius Tullius,[10] there is a general consensus that timocratic systems were common in the region long before coinage was introduced. Bronze weights were allegedly used to determine wealth classes, to levy fines and in other ways, with little evidence that the state was in any way involved in the production of ingots or even in controlling their quality. It needs to be remembered that weight standards could not be guaranteed by any independent authority, so that even the weighing of metal would have necessarily been a socially embedded act. States could try to enforce weights, but each actual transactional application would be determined by the forces at play. Furthermore, it appears unlikely that patrimonies were actually kept in this form, given the predominance of land and livestock as forms of accumulation. The hundreds and thousands of kilos of bronze described in the texts would only materially appear when they were needed to pay a fine or make a major purchase. A context-dependent picture of this kind is also supported by the work of Andreas Murgan, which focuses specifically on the limited record of bars and other pieces of metal that are attested for this period from archaeological findings. Once again, the picture is far from uniform, and it does not map well onto the known distribution of state governments. Bronze bars and other pieces were used without a clear pattern in tombs, votive offerings and craft-oriented hoards. No state role in their production or measurement is visible to us, nor any evolution towards more complex forms. Indeed, in one rare case of an inscribed piece, a sanctuary seems to be involved as a possible issuer, again underscoring the fluidity of money production and circulation at the time. It makes clear that states did not have a monopoly on the creation of marked currency.

The transition to coins in Italy is the focus of other contributions in the session. Marleen Termeer's case study retraces in the same deconstructionist perspective the emergence of coinage in the Roman state during the third and second centuries BC. What emerges clearly is that even at a time when a massive supra-ethnic territorial empire was coming together in Italy, tight state control on coinage was still not an absolute prerequisite. Indeed, a variety of *ad hoc* solutions to specific needs seem to have been routinely adopted. The value of coins was not guaranteed by the new empire, nor was their circulation tightly linked to its expanding political and military control. This is perfectly in line, by the way, with broader new theories about the nature of Roman expansion in Italy.[11] Nicholas Borek's paper, in a way, offers an illuminating counterpoint by looking at what was happening on the Greek side a few centuries before. The metrological analysis of hoards from southern Italy shows that, even in contexts where coinage was well established and states appeared to guarantee it, the actual practices around money were not necessarily all that different from what was happening further north. In many hoards, coins were clearly treated as lumps of metal that were only as valuable as their actual, rather than their nominal, weight. Despite striking them with beautiful dies, the issuing states could not determine how silver pieces were used, or what value was attributed to them in the different contexts in which they were used. This is particularly significant when one considers the paradigmatic role that has generally been attributed to Greek city-state governments as pioneers of moneying authority. If not even these states had a tight grip on currency use, one can only imagine what would happen everywhere else in the Mediterranean.

Elon Heymans indeed takes us to the eastern shores to see how interesting patterns are detectable in the use of silver between the Bronze and the early Iron Age. Here, it is remarkable that second millennium BC states show little evidence of wanting to standardize the use of money in any way, Ingots and bars are rare and heterogeneously combined with metal scraps of all kinds. It is instead at the transition with the first millennium, in a moment of global crisis and political destructuration, that steps are taken towards a more universally shared practice of using silver pieces as money. The relationship with the state, in other words, is not only loose as in the other cases, but it is actually somewhat reversed in this particular instance, which of course is the one that sets the stage for the first introduction of struck coinage anywhere. So once again, in a highly significant historical context, the equation between state and money is falsified. A parallel conclusion can be drawn from the study of coinage in Germany and Gaul by David Wigg-Wolf. Expertly contrasting the situation in two northern peripheries of the Roman Empire, the paper offers incontrovertible evidence that articulated coinage systems could exist without strong state agency. The German case is particularly significant given the looseness of the prevailing local political structure at the time. The proximity to the Roman frontier was obviously a factor, but silver Roman denarii and their imitations were found deep into the region. Again, both in Gaul and in Germany, the social use of money varied by context, ranging from monetary exchange to hoarding and ornamentation. Political control, either Roman or local, had little role in shaping local practices.

With remarkable coherence in spite of the variability in time, space and context, the papers collected here together make a strong case for questioning the commonly assumed direct link between state and money. Both terms of the equation are in fact undergoing deconstruction, leading to the dissolution of any direct causal links. Behaviors connected with money, in this light, appear difficult to categorize narrowly, or to predict. In a way, at each economic transaction the rules of the game had to be renegotiated and redefined, and cannot be taken for granted. Money can be accepted at face value or at its weight, social and symbolic codes may be layered in, but they will not be necessarily espoused by all the participants. Early states not only have very limited tools at their disposal to determine or influence these kinds of behavior, but it is even doubtful that they would have any interest in doing so. Typically, their regulatory action was tentative and focused on other areas, primarily having to do with political interaction amongst elites, with military command and with the creation of public spaces. Even in those contexts in which money played a central role, such as the determination of wealth classes, the levying of fines or the adjudication of auctions, early states had to accept that people would count and produce money in a variety of forms. No objective mechanisms existed—not even in terms of weight standardization—so that each transaction would need to be individually negotiated and would always be open to controversy and possible conflict.

Our understanding of the nature of early states has been changing in many other areas. Money was not an isolated Achilles' heel of those early polities. There were a number of areas in which their power was limited and open to dispute. A few examples from early Italy will suffice. Their monopoly over legal violence within the city was impinged on by customary punishments within lineages and by elite unruliness in general. Outside the city, private wars could be waged and the public commands often devolved into warlordism.[12] The real jurisdiction of the legal system was limited to a sort of arbitration between powerful aristocrats, who could decide to ignore its outcome. Gentilicial cults challenged the theoretical predominance of public ones.[13] The state as a whole could be "revoked" by powerful factions who considered mobs, coups, political assassinations and outright civil war as perfectly legitimate options when the results of the constitutional game were deemed unacceptable.[14] The list could go on. The point is that there can be no surprise that a fairly peregrine and abstract concept like that of money was not treated with more adherence to rules by elite participants in early states. They naturally applied to it the same ambivalence and pragmatism with which they looked at any other civic institution of the time. In their innovative perspective, therefore, the papers on money collected here make a very significant contribution to the deconstruction of classic ideas of state, as well as to the creation of a new, more context-sensitive and socially embedded vision of early political and economic transactions.

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Notes

[1] Hörnqvist 2004.

[2] E.g. Service 1975; Haas 1982; Claessen – Oosten 1996.

[3] Terrenato 2019, 1–31.

[4] Hopkins 1980; van Wees 2013.

[5] A stance known as economic primitivism; e.g. Finley 1973.

[6] E.g. Yoffee 2005.

[7] Blanton – Fargher 2008.

[8] See the contributions in Humphrey – Hugh-Jones 1992.

[9] Terrenato 2011.
[10] Smith 1997; Vernole 2002; Martínez-Pinna 2009.
[11] Terrenato 2019.
[12] Drogula 2015.
[13] Fiorentini 1988.
[14] Massa-Pairault 2014.

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