

The Rural Foundations of The Roman Economy. New Approaches to Rome’s Ancient Countryside from the Archaic to the Early Imperial Period: Introduction

Peter Attema – Günther Schörner

Since the 1960s, excavations, survey and environmental studies have generated a wealth of data on the countryside around Rome north and south of the Tiber. Data pertain to rural settlement types ranging from the small farmstead to the large villa, and regard non-urban burial grounds, production facilities, such as pottery kilns, smithies and quarries, as well as infrastructure and field systems. Also, a growing interest can be noted in such important issues as crop choice, manuring, land reclamation and land degradation. In combination, this wealth of information, often still unconnected, can inform us on the functioning and performance of the Roman economy in a crucial period of Rome’s rise to power during the Archaic and mid-Republican periods. It can also be used to investigate its subsequent development during the Late Republican and Early Imperial period within the expanding Mediterranean economic network of that period.

The aim of the session “The Rural Foundations of The Roman Economy. New Approaches to Rome’s Ancient Countryside from the Archaic to the Early Imperial Period” was to bring together methodologically informed, data-driven studies that shed light on the drivers and performance of the Central Italian rural economy during the Archaic to Imperial period.¹ The session was accepted as part of the theme “Methodology: Survey archaeology, natural sciences, quantification”, one of the overarching themes defined by the organizers of the 19th International Congress of Classical Archaeology on Archaeology and Economy in the Ancient World. The original session was split up chronologically with a set of papers reflecting on the Archaic and Mid-Republican period first and then followed by a set of papers focusing on the Late Republican and Imperial periods. However, for the publication we have chosen to start with papers offering a broad synthetic perspective and to zoom in afterwards on case studies of regional and local relevance.

The first paper by José Ernesto Moura Knust (Instituto Federal Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro) entitled “Far from the Walls. Explaining Rural Settlement Dispersal within Roman, Mediterranean and Global Frameworks” advocates to view Roman rural settlement not as a unique phenomenon but rather as part of a Mediterranean-wide historical process that requires a Mediterranean or even global historical framework for explanation. According to Knust, factors that should be taken into account are climate, connectivity leading to exchange of agricultural technology (including tools and crops), commercialization, and demographic pressure. In such an explanatory framework he sees agricultural intensification as the main driver leading to dispersed rural settlement in the ancient world, although in world history nucleated scenarios (as in the medieval period) occur as well.

The second methodological paper by Stephen Collins-Elliot (University of Tennessee) focuses on the application of computational methods to data mined from *Forma Italiae* publications. His focus is on the economy of the Suburbium of Rome; he aims to study this topic not only in terms of the increase or decrease of (classes of) rural sites but also in terms of production, trade and consumption, using amphorae and items pertaining to craft production (textiles, glass, ceramics, iron). His pilot study shows the potential of aggregating data for categorical data analysis even if data were produced with different field and artefact collection methods.

The third contribution by Peter Attema, Tymon de Haas, Gijs Tol and Jorn Seubers raises the potential of integrated datasets from archaeological survey for economic and demographic analyses of the Roman rural landscape. The paper presents the database that has been created for the Pontine Region, south of Rome, holding data of over 30 years of field survey. The paper reviews analyses that were done with this data. In addition, the paper presents the current initiative by a consortium of universities to make their respective databases part of one overarching structure – The Roman Hinterland database – geared at socio-economic and demographic analyses of the Suburbium of Rome writ large. The databases that are currently being merged concern the Suburbium project database created by Sapienza University, the Tiber Valley Project database of the British School at Rome (with partners based at the universities of St. Andrews and Durham), and the Pontine Region Project database created at the Groningen Archaeological Institute (with affiliated researchers at the universities of Melbourne and Leiden). Attention is drawn to such fundamental issues as site classification and dating.

The fourth contribution is by Alessandro Launaro, and is submitted as an extended abstract with reference to with reference to a paper recently published in the *Journal of Roman Archaeology* (Launaro, A., & Leone, N. (2018). A view from the margin? Roman commonwares and patterns of distribution and consumption at Interamna Lirenas (Lazio). *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 31, 323–338. doi:10.1017/S1047759418001356 (with N. Leone). In it, the author updates us on the results of the Interamna Lirenas survey in the Liri valley in South Lazio, a Roman town and its hinterland located in the border zone between old Latium and Campania. Launaro poses the problem of reduced archaeological visibility of archeological landscapes due to limited presence of imported pottery in the early Imperial Period, as is the case with Interamna in both town and countryside, and how the study of common wares may substitute a picture of economic decline with one of stable regional relevance instead.

The fifth contribution, by Veronika Schreck and Günther Schörner of the University of Vienna, investigates the economic relationship between the Roman town of Empoli and the rural site of Molino San Vincenzo in the valley landscape of the rivers Pesa and Orme in present-day Tuscany. The focus of the paper is on the analysis of an urban archaeological context from Empoli that yielded a huge amount of unstratified pottery. A sophisticated analysis of the pottery assemblage proved instructive for understanding the different ratios between local production and imports in comparison with

the pottery from Molino San Vincenzo, a location more remote from the main infrastructure.

With respect to the topic of archaeological visibility of rural landscapes and the agrarian practices taking place in them, the sixth paper by Anna Maria Mercuri et al. shows the important contribution archaeobotanical studies can make to understanding local rural economies. The study of pollen, plant macroremains, charcoal, fungi and other faunal remains may reveal aspects of the farmed landscape at different scales as well as the environmental conditions in which farming took place. Such information may range from the actual crops cultivated in the fields to their on-site processing. The Roman Peasant Project, directed by Kimberly Bowles, forms the framework for the following paper. The close collaboration between the palaeobotanists of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and the international group of archaeologists working in the project proved fundamental to understanding the function of a range of small rural find spots found in the archaeological survey, some of which were excavated.

Two papers presented in the session have not evolved in contributions. One was by Gabriele Cifani of the Università degli studi di Roma "Tor Vergata" on the rural economy of early Rome. In his paper, Cifani discussed the excavations of a number of rural buildings recently investigated in the suburb of Rome as historical documents to reconstruct the economy of Rome and central Tyrrhenian Italy in the Archaic period. During the sixth century BC there was a significant population increase in Etruria and Latium, as revealed by the rise in the number of archaeological sites and the beginning of the systematic production of wine and olive oil. Survey data testify to this new territorial organization; for the first time, scattered open sites appear at some scale. Archaeological evidence further suggests an agricultural strategy beyond one of mere subsistence, and is comparable to the ones recorded in the contemporary rural landscapes of Etruria and Greece. Olive and wine cultivation imply the evolution of land property rights, a greater sophistication of the agricultural sector in terms of culture and organization, the need for a more specialized labor force, and the growth of an entangled economy. Simon Stoddart (University of Cambridge) talked (also on behalf of Letizia Ceccarelli), about the incorporation of rural settlement into the Roman world and production on the frontier between Etruria and Umbria. Recent work, in collaboration with Marco Amadei, Jeremy Bennett and Nicholas Whitehead, concerned the potential frontier between Etruscan Perugia and Umbrian Gubbio, which lies close to the watershed north of Montelabate (Perugia). Systematic field survey on the Gaslini estate has established an interesting local trajectory for the incorporation of a probable Etruscan enclave on the left bank of the Tiber into the Roman world. Within the immediate area of Montelabate only three sites, Civitella Benazzone, Civitella d'Arna and Col di Marzo appear to have been occupied in the Etruscan period. Excavations at the small and naturally defended center of Col di Marzo suggest an occupation from the fifth century BC until the first half of the third century BC. Incorporation within the Roman political orbit first led to a complete abandonment of the area. Gradually from the late first century BC onwards,

small farmsteads began to be inserted, reaching a peak in the early Imperial period. The excavation of a kiln complex close to Montelabate itself suggests the economic motive for this demographic shift that occurred in two distinct phases from the first until the fifth century AD. In the first phase, the local landscape was part of a network of wine supply for the major population of Rome and the local market for over two hundred years. This led to the production of flatter bottomed amphorae suitable for shallow draft river craft which could have navigated the Tiber from a point just below the site. The gentle slopes of the low hills of the Apennines were highly suitable for wine and olive production, whilst also offering clays of reasonable quality, limestone for temper, and plentiful wood supplies for firing the kilns. In a second stage, the kilns were employed for the production of tiles and coarse wares, serving a local economy. From the study of this small region this paper provided insight into the microeconomics of the Roman empire.

The session as a whole was successful as it succeeded to relate different scales of inquiry into the Roman economy over a long period from the Archaic period well into the Imperial period with a sharp focus on the suburbium of Rome *sensu lato*. It showed how important it is that we test existing historical and archaeological models on the rural economy of Rome and its hinterland with (aggregated) data derived from landscape archaeology. At the same time, these also need to be corrected by empirical research on micro-regional landscape archaeological research and excavation on individual rural sites. In the developing era of ‘big data’ we need to keep a neat balance between quantitative abstraction and qualitative observation.

Wim Jongman, in his concluding paper ‘The voice of the silent majority: Archaeological surveys and the history of the Roman countryside’, reflects on the papers presented at the conference and published in this volume. He emphasizes the important role that archaeological data from archeological landscape survey and excavations of rural sites play in the current debate on the nature of the Roman agricultural economy, and how this debate should connect with the comparative historical debates of preindustrial economies and societies.

Notes

¹ Panel 11.1: The Rural Foundations of The Roman Economy. New Approaches to Rome’s Ancient Countryside from the Archaic to the Early Imperial Period was organized by Peter Attema (University of Groningen), Gabriele Cifani (Tor Vergata, Rome), Günther Schörner (University of Vienna) and was held on Wednesday, 23 May 2018, 09:00–13:30.