“COMPARATIVE APPROACHES TO THE ROMAN IMPERIAL ECONOMY”

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“An agrarian empire between market and tribute: towards a comparative history of trade in the Roman empire”

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The study of the ancient world, as the idealised precursor of the modern West, has all too often been driven by apologetic motives. This bias is also reflected in the wish to defend the sophistication and accomplishments of the Roman economy. In this regard, Classics faces the same problem as other disciplines trying to understand complex, agrarian, pre-capitalistic societies. We seem to be lacking the means to conceptualise the economies of such societies in a convincing manner. This problem is particularly pressing in the case of extensive, agrarian empires such as the Ottoman, the Ming and the Mughal empires. In all of them, impressive levels of trade testify to the advanced nature of their economies. At the same time, they compare unfavourably with early modern European economies, and are frequently characterised as predators. This raises the possibility that our conventional, eurocentric comparative framework is fundamentally flawed and needs to be replaced. In my paper, I propose to view those empires, including the Roman empire, as part of an alternative historical trajectory which provides an appropriate context for unbiased institutional comparisons that will help us appreciate their dynamics from a less eurocentrist perspective. The potential gains of this approach are illustrated by some examples drawn from Mughal India to cast new light on the Roman economy.

“Female slaves: production and reproduction in the Roman economy”

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Females slaves, their labor and child-bearing, are central to arguments about the sustainability of the slave system in parts of the Roman empire. In the past, historians have claimed that Roman slave owners strongly preferred male slaves for most jobs and that the sex ratio of the slave population was therefore heavily weighted in favor of
males. Recently, the demographic consequences of a significantly unbalanced sex ratio over centuries have been worked out and shown to be improbable. In the absence of systematic empirical data for the numbers and location of female slaves, this paper will examine the legal and literary evidence for Roman conceptions of the production and reproduction of female slaves. Roman literary and legal evidence shows, not surprisingly, that the domestic occupations typically associated with female slaves were depreciated and thought of as unproductive and even wasteful. In the view of Roman male authors, real production was associated with rural estates worked by male slaves. It was assumed that those male slaves were supported by the domestic work of female slaves, but legal texts also assume slave families (wives and children) who did no work. This organization of the slave workforce stands in contrast with plantations of the Antebellum South, where female slaves were conceived of as fractions of male fieldhands and constituted a larger proportion of the field labor than males. Despite the depreciation of domestic, female labor, the prices for female slaves point to an awareness that their labor did in fact have value. Yet, the price structure through the life course also suggests that the reproductive value of female slaves was higher relative to their productive value than in the Antebellum South.

“Demographic change and economic development: the case of Roman Egypt after the ‘Antonine plague’”

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Unlike historians of more recent periods, students of the Roman economy have traditionally ignored the relationship between demographic and economic change. Because of the unparalleled amount of quantifiable documentary evidence surviving on papyrus texts in Roman Egypt, this region offers unique opportunities for exploring this important issue. During the early Roman imperial period, Egypt experienced population growth and strong urbanisation. In the 160s and 170s CE, Egypt and many other parts of the Roman empire were struck by a devastating epidemic – probably smallpox – which has been shown to have depopulated individual communities and interrupted economic activity. This paper addresses the question of whether this catastrophic event, by alleviating mounting population pressure, raised real wages and furthered intensive growth in a similar way to the Black Death in medieval Europe. Over the last few years, some circumstantial evidence in favour of this proposition has begun to emerge. This paper attempts the first systematic analysis of real wages and rents in Egypt during the century following the epidemic. Despite abiding uncertainties, this survey lends further support to the assumption that demographic contraction led to some limited and temporary improvement of living conditions, albeit on a smaller scale than in the late Middle Ages.