



# Francqui Foundation Conference

## Long-Term Quantification in Ancient Mediterranean History

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The aim of this paper is to put into perspective past scholarship on quantification in ancient history, and to sketch some possible trends for the future. It tentatively summarises the main trends and ‘turns’ in such scholarship since the Second World War, making connections between history, archaeology and economics.

It explores the reasons why long-term studies are expected to grow in number, and then focuses on quantification. Quantification has every chance of being more and more widely used in ancient history, for four main reasons: 1) it is comparatively new; it is supported by 2) a massive production of new data from the archaeology as well as 3) a spectacular development of scientific tools; 4) in addition, quantification is no longer seen simply as a modern technique for investigating problems (or to enable one to ‘lie with statistics’); it has become recognised as a topic of investigation itself.

Considering long-term quantification in ancient economics, it is worth quoting the final sentences of the introduction to the recent Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World: ‘This emerging account of the Greco-Roman economy, we believe, is an advance over twentieth-century interpretations. It improves on substantivist approaches by providing crude statistics on economic performance, but it also goes beyond both sides in the old primitivist-modernist debate by developing general theoretical models of ancient economic behavior and putting them in a global, comparative context. It recognizes that classical antiquity saw one of the strongest economic efflorescences in premodern history, but keeps this in perspective, refusing to confuse the ancient economy with the modern. In short, it takes seriously Douglas North’s injunction to explain the structure and performance of economies through time’ (Morris, Saller & Scheidel 2007: 11-12). In this light, I offer some comments about 1) primitivists and the use of numbers, 2) New Institutionalism (its roots and its present success), and 3) long-term comparative studies.

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