



Francqui Foundation Conference

Long-Term Quantification in Ancient Mediterranean History

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Sir Moses Finley's 'cultural turn' on the ancient economy has been the dominant paradigm of the last few decades: for social and cultural reasons the ancient elite failed to develop an economic mentality and was unwilling to engage in trade and manufacturing. As a result, these sectors of the economy remained small and marginal. No system of interconnected markets developed and thus the economy did not grow. That the ancient economy did not in fact perform very well was taken for granted, and subsequent discussion remained largely limited to explanations for this elite mentality or investigations of the limits to that mentality. Equally, there was broad consensus that the ancient economy was one where modern economic theory did not apply (even Finley's critics never opened a textbook of economic theory). Finally, there was widespread distaste for quantification, based on the one hand on Finley's insistence that collecting accurate statistics was not part of the ancient economic mentality, and on the other hand on, I assume, a philologist's romantic dislike for numbers.

I have argued elsewhere that ancient historians have been wrong to turn their back on economic theory. I also think they were wrong not to investigate empirically the actual performance of the ancient economy before they developed their explanations for its economic failure. Are we really so sure that nothing much changed between archaic Greece, Augustan Rome, and late antiquity, or even the early Middle Ages? In recent years some (mostly economists) have indeed tried to reconstruct Roman GDP and per capita incomes, and though I admire their intellectual ingenuity, I am also concerned since the underlying data really are not very good for such estimates of absolute levels of performance. Moreover, these reconstructions tend to lump data from different periods into one composite and thus necessarily static picture. However, economic growth (if there was any) is precisely a process of change over time.

As an alternative tactic, and in the footsteps of the new economic history of modern times, I have in recent years begun to construct time series of aggregate archaeological datasets. These only rarely give us absolute performance levels, but often they graphically demonstrate that there were large changes over time. Antiquity was not a world of the *longue durée*, where nothing ever changed, and where the mass of the population never escaped from a precarious life near subsistence.