



Francqui Foundation Conference

Long-Term Quantification in Ancient Mediterranean History

Geoffrey Kron (University of Victoria, Canada), *Comparative evidence and the reconstruction of the ancient economy: Greco-Roman housing and the level and distribution of wealth and income*

In many pre- and early industrial economies, housing has generally ranked just behind food as one of the most significant charges on the income of all but the wealthiest classes in society. Moreover, even today, housing, along with real estate, constitutes the bulk of most families' personal wealth, and the construction industry not only represents a significant segment of the economy, but also provides a valuable indicator of the pace of economic growth.

Although modern social scientists have used the evidence of housing as a useful proxy for the distribution and level of income in poorly documented societies, and archaeological evidence permits us to reconstruct housing standards for Greeks and Romans from a wide range of social classes in considerable detail, ancient economic historians have only begun to exploit this critical evidence. Ian Morris has argued for a dramatic improvement in Greek living standards between the 9th and the 4th centuries B.C. based upon the increase in the size and cost of housing. Moreover, Wolfram Hoepfner and Ernst-Ludwig Schwander have argued for the social and political significance of the striking egalitarianism in Greek housing. For Rome, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill and Paul Zanker have analyzed housing at Pompeii and Herculaneum, pointing out the existence of a large and relatively prosperous middle-income group. For the most part, however, such studies have failed to move from impressions to a full quantification of their results. Even Wallace-Hadrill's superb study, which was based upon a carefully compiled survey in which he analyzed his sample to yield fascinating and valuable statistical evidence, left a number of possible avenues of analysis unexplored and eschewed quantitative, as opposed to impressionistic, comparisons with other cultures or historical periods.

In this paper I will examine a number of archaeological samples of Greco-Roman housing as an indicator of the housing, wealth and income distribution in a number of pre- and early industrial cultures. This housing evidence is consistent with the evidence which I have already collected for Greco-Roman mean heights and agricultural productivity, and suggests that the distribution of income in both Greek and Roman society was likely to have been significantly more egalitarian than in most pre-industrial cultures. To cite just one implication of this research, I will argue that the estimates of per capita GDP for the Roman empire proposed by Goldthwaite, Temin, Maddison, Scheidel & Friesen, and by Milanovic, Lindert, & Williamson will need to be adjusted significantly upwards.