

# A view from the margin? Roman commonwares and patterns of distribution and consumption at Interamna Lirenas (Lazio)

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There can hardly be any doubt that goods moved in large quantities and over great distances under the Roman empire. This awareness is borne out of a long tradition of archaeological research attesting to the widespread distribution of specific categories of material culture across the full expanse of the Mediterranean and beyond.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon has been interpreted as a more or less direct result of Rome's military expansion and the fundamental political unification which came with it, bringing about unprecedented conditions which favoured trade and exchange.<sup>2</sup> Scholarship has often stressed the rôle played in this by 'institutions': the spread and adoption of a common set of laws, currency and units of measure, fostered by a relatively long period of internal peace and political stability, would have boosted the economic performance of the empire to levels that had not been witnessed before and would not be seen again for many centuries.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the notion of 'efflorescence' has sometimes been employed to describe and explain the kind of economic growth to which this process might have contributed.<sup>4</sup>

The historical significance of this phenomenon of Mediterranean exchange has long been recognised and its broader implications acknowledged even by scholars who are known for their forceful reaction against 'modernist' interpretations.<sup>5</sup> This awareness has gone hand in hand with a considerable improvement in our understanding of Roman material culture, especially in consideration of the range and scale of its production, distribution and consumption patterns,<sup>6</sup> with much effort being devoted to uncovering more

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1 N. Morley, "The early Roman empire: distribution," in W. Scheidel, I. Morris and R. Saller (edd.), *The Cambridge economic history of the Greco-Roman world* (Cambridge 2007) 570-91; more general considerations about Mediterranean connectivity in P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The corrupting sea: a study of Mediterranean history* (Malden, MA 2000).

2 K. Hopkins, "Rome, taxes, rents and trade," in W. Scheidel and S. von Reden (edd.), *The ancient economy* (Edinburgh 2002) 190-230; id., "The political economy of the Roman empire," in I. Morris and W. Scheidel (edd.), *The dynamics of ancient empires: state power from Assyria to Byzantium* (Oxford 2009) 178-204.

3 N. Morley, *Trade in classical antiquity* (Cambridge 2007) 55-78 and 105-6.

4 E.g., A. Zuiderhoek, "Introduction: land and natural resources in the Roman world in historiographical and theoretical perspective," in P. Erdkamp, K. Verboven and A. Zuiderhoek (edd.), *Ownership and exploitation of land and natural resources in the Roman world* (Oxford 2015) 11. The notion of economic 'efflorescence' was first presented and discussed in J. A. Goldstone, "Efflorescences and economic growth in world history: rethinking the "Rise of the West" and the Industrial Revolution," *J. World Hist.* 13.2 (2002) 323-89.

5 E.g., M. I. Finley, *The use and abuse of history* (London 1975) 117: "The intrusion of genuine (commercial) trade, on a considerable scale and over very great distances, into the Greco-Roman world had a feedback effect on peasant markets and the rest to such a degree as to render the primitive models all but useless".

6 A. Wilson, "Approaches to quantifying Roman trade," in A. Bowman and A. Wilson (edd.), *Quantifying the Roman economy* (Oxford 2009) 213-49, provides a good overview on the nature, problems and potential of this wide and varied array of evidence. Further discussion may be found in the contributors to "A forum on trade," in W. Scheidel (ed.), *The Cambridge companion*