Back to M. I. Finley's ancient city: town and country, landowners and the rest at Pompeii

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MIKO FLOHR and ANDREW WILSON (edd.), *THE ECONOMY OF POMPEII* (Oxford Studies on the Roman Economy; Oxford University Press 2017). Pp. xvii + 433, figs. 86, tables. ISBN 978-0-19-878657-3.

Is Pompeii a good place to think about the ancient city and the ancient economy? This volume makes a strong case that Pompeii — more precisely, the cluster of Vesuvian sites, including Herculaneum and the innumerable villas and minor sites which go under the name of 'Pompeii' — offers a series of insights of unusual value into the workings of the ancient economy. A new generation of projects over recent decades has immeasurably improved the quality of the evidence available, and Pompeii is ready to return to mainstream thinking in the debates about the ancient economy as a whole. M. I. Finley might have disagreed: he made a strong case (but this is already half a century ago) that we should cease to focus on individual cities and think more broadly about the typology of the ancient city. Specifically, he was reacting against the attempts of T. Frank and M. Rostovtzeff to use Pompeii to suggest a flourishing commercial sector and a growth of a *bourgeoisie*. In many ways the Oxford Roman Economy Project initiated by A. K. Bowman and A. I. Wilson, with its emphasis on the quantitative rather than the theoretical, is set up to challenge the Finleyesque view of the ancient economy and theory of the consumer city. As the editors make clear in their introduction, the book aims to show precisely that the study of the individual city is illuminating.

Among the contributors to this volume there is little dissent on this, but the one partially Finleyesque voice that is given a platform is that of W. Jongman. As he explains in the final paper looking back to his doctoral thesis written under Finley and H. W. Pleket, his mission was to reconcile the archaeological evidence of Pompeii with the theoretical framework offered by Finley. This he achieved by a pessimistic reading of the then-available evidence, though he claims to have turned the Finley model on its head by using, rather than rejecting, modern economic theory. In the light of the contributions to the present volume, Jongman concedes that Pompeii was far more prosperous than he once thought, concluding, rather desparingly, that what makes Pompeii of limited use as a data-set is its chronological limitation. Yet, as M. Flohr and Wilson point out in their introduction, what the recent wave of excavations beneath the A.D. 79 levels makes possible is precisely to see Pompeii as a town changing over the course of at least seven centuries. Where Jongman has a point is that one cannot demolish a theory simply by throwing data at it. One must also interrogate the rationale of the theory. For the editors, the problem is that ancient cities were so diverse that it makes no sense categorising them as a single type of 'consumer city'. But Finley was well aware of that diversity, and to him it was no problem. For him, the central issue was that, however diverse, ancient Greek and Roman cities (*poleis/civitates*) were characterised by a common relationship between town and country, one that did not hold true in the Middle Ages. Cities were dominated by a landowning élite, who spent their surplus in the cities, whether on public munificence or private indulgence; and though this consumptive spending may have generated the sort of trade and craft we witness in Pompeii, the dominance of agriculture and the ideology that went with it inhibited the development of an independent urban economy, which in that sense remained parasitical. One can count as many fulleries, flour mills or bank loans as one likes, but they will not dent this theoretical proposition.

This is why the most useful theoretical contribution of the book, for my money, is that of D. Robinson (chapt. 8). Rather than seeing a disjunction between the behaviour of the élite in the country (which they exploit without embarrassment to extract profit) and the city (where they spend their profits to extract political status), he suggests — in my view convincingly — that the behaviour of the élite in town and country was strictly parallel. The agronomists, from Cato onwards, show the landowners adapting their behaviour to maximise profit, and acting through agents, slaves and freedmen, who actually do the work (only in fantasy does a Scipio wield the mattock in person). In the countryside, production and consumption sit alongside each other without embarrassment: the *pars urbana* of the villa of San Rocco at Francolise acquires its luxurious bath suite at the same time that new presses are installed in the *pars rustica*, and the visitor must walk past the farmyard to enter the grand reception areas (251). By a parallel trajectory, the élite in the town seize the commercial sector's opportunities for profit. Like Cicero, they invest in apartments and shops; moreover, they are happy to have these sources of profit surround their residences. Against the perverse suggestion of A. Maiuri (rejected by numerous authors here) that commerce in Pompeii grew after the great earthquake and in consequence of an exodus of the élite, excavations shows a flourishing commercial sector extending back to the 2nd c. B.C. The Casa del Fauno, which cheerfully incorporates shops into its façade of that date, confirms that the élite were not squeamish about such profit.

But that gives us a different model of town/country relations that would repay further thought. Instead of a landowning élite that spends rural profits in the town, we have an élite that is invested simultaneously in rural and urban property, and seeks to maximise its profits from both. The rural and the urban overlap (flour mills and ovens have always been the most identifiable form of commercial activity in the town of Pompeii). In antiquity, in contrast to mediaeval Europe (in so far as any contrast with the 'Middle Ages' is valid), we find an exceptional degree of integration of rural and urban, not separation. Does this impede the emergence of an independent urban economy? Or does it benefit economic growth, because the integration of urban and rural is in fact positive?

What is impeded is the emergence of a distinctive urban *bourgeoisie*. On this, Finley had a point. What Pompeii documents in some detail (and from a multiplicity of sources, epigraphic as well as archaeological) is the presence of a substantial body of people who can meaningfully be described neither as 'élite' nor as 'poor'. Flohr and Wilson suggest (16) that "whether we want to call these households 'middling groups', 'middle class', or something else does not matter". But terms do matter if they smuggle in other assumptions. In *The ancient middle classes*[1] E. Mayer argued that this middling group was both distinctive from the élite in deriving its wealth from commerce, not the land, and culturally distinctive in embracing an ideology and set of cultural choices that set them apart from the élite. If 'middle class' means economically and culturally distinctive, then it makes a big difference — and is in conflict with Robinson's picture of social and economic integration of town and country.

Here Flohr's statistical analysis of house size (chapt. 2) is highly pertinent. When I attempted to analyse distribution of house size, room numbers and decorative features some 30 years ago,[2] I had to work from a small-scale and not-always-accurate printed map of the site; even generating the statistics for a few samples from Pompeii and Herculaneum was an uphill struggle. Now that plans are digitized and a range of analytical tools is available, the job can be done more reliably for the entire site of Pompeii (I continue to think it would have been worth including Herculaneum as a control). The results in no way contradict my own findings. What is striking is that house sizes, whether calculated from footprint or numbers of rooms, represent a continuum from smallest to largest. There is no cut-off point at which one can meaningfully speak of "an elite". The top 5% of households are larger and larger, with more and more signs of luxury; the bottom 50% of households are all pretty small, with few signs of luxury. But that leaves the intervening 45% of households of middling size, which also have their fair share of signs of luxury (here [80] estimated by the presence of panel-paintings). Yet before one leaps to the conclusion that the 50% of small households lived in a 'different universe', one must recall that they are largely the shops that are incorporated into the façades of the larger houses: they are the units from which the wealthy who owned them were extracting profit, the absence of panel-paintings merely indicating that landlords did not invest in luxuries for their tenants. It is this, if anything, which impedes the emergence of an independent urban economy and a *bourgeoisie*. If shops and workshops (which number over 500) are owned largely by the wealthy and run by freedmen and slaves, they remain in the grip of the same individuals who owned the land.

1 See my review of Mayer in *JRA* 26 (2013) 605-9.

2 A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton, NJ 1994) 65-90.

But do the landowners themselves form a distinguishable élite? Here the findings of F. De Simone (chapt. 1) are revealing. By plotting the known farmhouses on the N slopes of Vesuvius, he demonstrates that most farms must have had fewer than the 100 *iugera* (25 ha) of a Catonian villa. By another calculation, the storage capacity of the wine *dolia* in any villa indicates the minimum number of hectares it would have to cultivate under vines: the range is from 6 to 15 ha. The sheer density of villas in the landscape around Pompeii makes it clear that no one had a very big holding. The richest will have owned a multiplicity of *fundi* rather than much bigger plots. But this observation is hard to reconcile with the idea of a small number of very rich landowners dominating the town. Just as there were numerous commercial properties spread across the town, none particularly large and certainly not on the kind of 'industrial' scale once fantasised by W. Moeller (here Jongman's strictures still hold good), so there were numerous agricultural plots spread across the landscape, of varying size but none particularly big. That means that the big landowner, as Pliny's *Letters* illustrate, had to run his multiple properties either through tenants or through dependent managers (*vilici*). In town and country alike, the rich could spread their risks across a large and varied portfolio.

But then we are back to the people in the middle. On what basis do we assume that, among the owners of numerous small plots of land, some formed an élite class of rich landowners easily distinguishable from the smaller landowners? That there was a vertiginous gap between the richest and poorest, Pompeii vividly illustrates. But that does not mean that there was a systematic gap between the rich as a group and the rest. If in town there was a continuum of property sizes, that might reflect a continuum of wealth distribution. Not, of course, that the distribution of urban property sizes will have corresponded either to the distribution of population among the properties or to wealth among the population: the richest will have been not those simply who owned the biggest properties but also the most — the large house with the penumbra of numerous commercial and rental properties around it. Nor should we imagine that the poorest all lived in the smallest houses. Since far more people, especially slaves, could live in a large *domus* than in a single-roomed *taberna*, it follows that far fewer than 50% of the population can have lived in the smallest 50% of properties. It could well be that more people lived in the largest 10% of houses than the smallest 50% of properties. And of those who lived in the largest houses, because of the omnipresence of slaves we must assume that more inhabitants were unfree and poor than free and rich.

What Pompeii makes it possible for us to witness is a society in which rich and poor, urban and rural, were deeply enmeshed. One way of measuring this entanglement is to use D. Esposito's approach to painters' workshops (chapt. 9). Art history long ago developed the skills necessary to recognise different hands at work in one room, or the same groups of hands at work in different houses. Esposito can show that the way a room was decorated by 3 or 4 painters working in parallel as a team presupposes a significant degree of organization and hierarchy within the workshop. But he also shows that the same workshops which decorated the grander houses decorated a larger number of modest ones, and that those workshops which decorated private houses also worked on public buildings, pointing to "very complex social dynamics in which public and private spheres intertwined and influenced each other" (285). The workshops depended for their survival as much on lower-level commissions as on big projects for élite houses and country villas or public spaces. In this sense, the decoration of numerous modest houses (and he points out [263] that "almost all houses in Pompeii had some form of painted decoration on their walls") was not a mere spin-off or 'trickle-down' of the luxurious tastes of the élite; it was part of the common cultural currency of the society as a whole, public and private, richer and poorer.

How they were enmeshed is illustrated by three remarkable dossiers of 'business' documents: that of Caecilius Iucundus from Pompeii itself; the dossier of the Sulpicii from just outside Pompeii; and the wooden tablets found in 8 Herculaneum houses which G. Camodeca is slowly but brilliantly re-reading (the recent and welcome appearance of the first volume of his *Tabulae Herculanenses* makes some of his findings accessible).[3] In the volume under review

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3 G. Camodeca, *Tabulae Herculanenses. Edizione e commento*, I (Rome 2017)..

two authors, K. Verboven and W. Broekart, make excellent use of these archives, especially that of the Sulpicii. Verboven's illuminating discussion of currency and credit underlines how transactions enmeshed in complex and sophisticated ways people of very different statuses: we find the Sulpicii doing business with imperial freedmen and slaves, or the otherwise unknown Cominius Primus from Herculaneum doing business with a prominent consular and the aunt of a future emperor (Trajan) (365). The entanglement is made the more complex by paper transactions that allowed a debt to be passed to a third party, and a web of credits and debits offset. This is simultaneously a highly monetised society (as the contributions of S. J. R. Ellis and R. Hobbs confirm) and one in which bankers and intermediaries like the Sulpicii played a crucial rôle in making trust lubricate commercial relationships. Part of the success is, of course, Roman law and the system of justice, but as Broekart well shows, people preferred to avoid going to court if possible, settling matters by private arbitration but in the public locations subject to public scrutiny.

The vast number of coins (*c*.33,000) found in Pompeii — and until recently quite inadequately catalogued — has always invited attempts to draw conclusions about the local economy. Hobbs had analysed the *c*.1500 coins found in the excavations by the Anglo-American project of *insula* 1 of *Regio* VI, and here (chapt. 11) repeats his findings. One of his observations, that coins are predominantly found in the commercial spaces of shopfronts, is radically questioned by Ellis, who draws attention to the fundamental importance of archaeological context (chapt. 10). A somewhat smaller, though still impressive, number (1039) was found in the excavations of two *insulae* flanking the *via Stabiana* by the *Porta Stabia,* but, as Ellis shows, although most of these coins were indeed recovered from commercial areas, they were found in the backfill used in building and levelling operations, and cannot be seen as casually dropped by those engaged in trade. The correlation with commerce is therefore misleading. It is a pity that Hobbs offers no reply to this rather devastating objection, their incompatible points of view being left juxtaposed. Yet though Ellis's observation in one sense leads to a disappointment — that we cannot normally use coin finds from below A.D. 79 levels as an indicator of the activities in those spaces —, we are still left with some important conclusions about the change in the monetary economy over time. On Hobbs' analysis, the coins recovered from stratigraphic excavation, which are predominantly of very low value and very badly worn (unsurprisingly, given their abandonment in building rubble), come from three sources: Republican Rome, Massilia (the most familiar type being the butting bull), and Ebusus (with variants on the type of Bes), or local imitations of the last two. Excavation of the Bar of Amarantus (I.9.11) had produced the same result, with a startling dominance of Ebusus and pseudo-Ebusus types, studied by C. Stannard.[4] In the case of the Porta Stabia *insulae* excavated by Ellis, the chief horizon in which the building work that produced these finds was occurring was the Augustan. As a result, we are left with a startling contrast between the sort of coins and small change in circulation before and after Augustus. Augustan monetary reform ensured an abundant supply of all denominations, which surely will have facilitated trade at a local and at a Mediterranean-wide level. The small change of Ebusus and Massilia indeed points to Pompeii's contacts in the W Mediterranean in the 2nd c. B.C., but also to the absence of a universally-accepted single currency. It is hard not to conclude that the prosperity visible in Pompeii even at a low and local level was facilitated not merely by the prosperity of Puteoli but by the utility of currency reform.

Those who dislike a 'primitivist' view of antiquity tend to take comfort from any sign that life was not, after all, entirely grim. E. Lazer's analysis of the skeletal remains of Pompeii (chapt. 5) concludes (153) that the results are "at odds with those of scholars like Jongman and Scheidel, who have argued that people in the Roman era, especially those who lived in urban environments, suffered high and unpredictable levels of mortality". But her cautious discussion reveals that the osteological evidence of Pompeii is badly compromised by its treatment and history of study. Even at Herculaneum, where skeletons are found entire (and not

4 C. Stannard, "Monete dello scavo stratigrafico della Casa di Amarantus I.9.11-12," in T. Giove (ed.), *Pompei. Rinvenimenti monetari nella Regio I* (Studi e materiali 16; Ist. Ital. di Numismatica, 2013) 377-87.

disarticulated and sorted by bone type, as at Pompeii), the results of various analyses are contradictory and sometimes fantastical.[5] This is an area in which much more up-to-date scientific study is needed. But the warning needs to be given that showing that ancient Pompeians were shorter or taller than modern Neapolitans of some period can really prove nothing. We know that the demographic impact of modern medicine has been transformative: it does not matter whether ancient Pompeians were better or worse fed, taller or shorter than people of any subsequent period. But what is of enormous interest is to understand better just what their diet was like, and above all the range of difference between individuals of different gender and status.

Here E. Rowan's study of sewers and diet (chapt. 4) proves rewarding. She puts her study of the archaeobotanical remains from the Herculaneum sewer in context with smaller groups of domestic refuse from Pompeii and concludes that "middling and even lower socio-economic groups were purchasing food at a level above subsistence and had enough funds occasionally to purchase more expensive goods such as black pepper" (122). Just as the houses and their decoration point to a continuum of prosperity, so the remains of diet indicate that good food was not limited to an 'élite'. That is not to forget that slaves will have enjoyed a far more limited and impoverished diet than their owners — a story the skeletons might tell more eloquently if fully studied. In particular, we may note the predominance of fishbones among the food remains of both the Vesuvian cities — which can be no surprise at seaside towns. One implication is the importance of the local fishing industry. This would only have importance at a local level (since fresh fish without refrigeration cannot be exported), were it not for fish salting and fish sauce production, of which there is abundant archaeological evidence going back to the 2nd c. B.C. That allowed not only the exporting of *garum* by Umbricius Scaurus and his like, but the diffusion of fish diet across society: while the rich may have enjoyed a fine sea bass, the poor could still flavour their dishes with anchovies. Contrasts between rich and poor remain, but a fishing industry that can make use of its entire catch down to the smallest sardine or bogue can benefit from a diversified market.

The wealth and diversity of Pompeian evidence makes it an exceptional window on antiquity, but enormous methodological problems continue to dog those who wish to extract usable data to understand the economy. N. Monteix (chapt. 7) correctly underlines that Pompeii is no time-capsule, and that the evidence is often compromised and hard to interpret. He has devoted much energy to understanding wool processing in *officinae lanifricariae*, and has found himself in lively debate with Flohr on the issue in the pages of this journal.[6] Here he uses the debate to show (221) the significant variation in modern estimates — from 13 to 24 — of how many such establishments there were. He is right that our evidence is inherently compromised and difficult to use. The French School under P. Bogard has done formidable work re-assessing the workshops of Pompeii and especially (thanks to Monteix) of Herculaneum. The conclusion is not only that much more work needs to be done, but that it should be aimed not at generating unreliable statistics but at understanding better the entire chain of interlinked production and commerce that characterises both towns. The dangers of reliance on unreliable statistics are illustrated here only too clearly by N. Ray, who attempts to apply multivariate analysis to the different categories of finds from a dozen Pompeian houses (chapt. 3). His data derive from P. M. Allison who, as his Table on 92 reveals, reached the conclusion that half of these were unoccupied, largely unoccupied, or only partially occupied at the time of the eruption.[7] If that is the case, no amount of sophisticated analysis can make comparison meaningful.

Pompeii was a busy place, with a complex network of connections both internally and externally. E. E. Poehler (chapt. 6) uses GIS in an attempt to analyse the network of internal connections, though, as he concedes (191), this understates the importance of the external connections represented by the city gates. He also underlines the difficulties caused by our uncertainty about the population of the town (discussed also by Flohr on 54). A spectacular

5 See A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Herculaneum: past and future* (London 2011) 130.

6 M. Flohr, "The textile economy of Pompeii," *JRA* 26 (2013) 53-78; N. Monteix, "The apple of discord: fleece-washing in Pompeii's textile economy. A response to M. Flohr," ibid. 79-87.

7 P. M. Allison, *Pompeian households: an analysis of the material culture* (Los Angeles, CA 2004).

new piece of evidence, published by M. Osanna in *JRA* 31 (2018) 310-22, is the inscription from an anonymous tomb outside the Porta Stabia. It commemorates a prominent member of the élite who celebrated his coming of age with a public feast on 456 *triclinia*, each large enough for 15 persons. At last we have a potential number, of 6840 people. It is unlikely to have included women and small children, and surely did not include slaves, so we must surely multiply up to a figure well north of 10,000. But the error is to suppose that, whatever the figure, it represented those living within the city walls. The concern with numbers of urban inhabitants is a modern one. It is surely a consequence of the integration of town and country (*polis/civitas*) that for the ancients the important figure will have been those, both urban and rural, who were members of the city (i.e., citizens). To fail to invite those resident in the country to a great coming-of-age feast would have been a social blunder. We must return to thinking of town and country as an integrated whole.[8]

To M. I. Finley we owe a number of fundamental insights that have stood the test of time: one is the integration of town and country; another is the fundamental rôle of slavery not only as an engine of the economy but in determining what it meant by contrast to be free. This volume can help us to build on those insights while — I would suggest — abandoning the idea that the city, be it Pompeii or any other, depended on an élite of landowners who ignored and impeded commerce, and who were entirely separate from the rest of the population.

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8 See A. Wallace-Hadrill, "Counting Pompeians," in M. Maiuro, with G. D. Merola, M. de Nardis and G. Soricelli (edd.), *Uomini, istituzioni, mercati. Studi di storia per Elio Lo Cascio* (Bari 2019).