

Roman pottery: models, proxies and economic interpretation

Kevin Greene

A long-running debate about the relative primitiveness or modernity of the economy of the Greek and Roman world was re-invigorated between the 1960s and 1980s.¹ M. I. Finley remained sceptical about archaeological evidence,² but K. Hopkins (1980) saw its potential for testing his model of the Roman economy. Since then, archaeological fieldwork has generated growing quantities of potential economic evidence, especially from the Mediterranean core of the Roman empire, and the scope for its interpretation has been increased by books with much wider perspectives.³ Economic aspects of the empire were included in the new edition of *CAH XI*,⁴ and a volume of the *Cambridge Ancient Economic History* covering this period is in preparation. Such publications demonstrate the need for a critical understanding of material evidence that goes well beyond my book *The archaeology of the Roman economy* (1986).⁵ This paper will include a consideration of the first theoretically-reflexive Roman archaeologist, R. G. Collingwood, before examining the diverse themes which pottery has been expected to illuminate over the last two centuries. I will then examine methods used in extracting economic interpretations from raw archaeological data, and look closely at model-building and the concept of 'proxy evidence'. Examples of the use of ceramic data for economic interpretation in recent volumes of *Britannia*, *JRA* and the specialist ceramic periodical *Acta Rei Cretariae Romanae Fautorum (ActaRCRF)* will be examined before I suggest possible ways forward.⁶

G. Storey has recently (2004, 106-9) reminded us that the debate between 'primitive' and 'modern' interpretations of the economy of the Roman empire cannot be wished away, since it encapsulates fundamental differences in outlook. It has become conventional to represent Finley and M. Rostovtzeff as opposite poles, and to compare them with their substantivist/formalist equivalents in economic anthropology, but this conceals intriguing differences in their concepts of social evolution. Hopkins appeared to solve the primitive/modern problem by substituting model-building for polemics, and his sociological background gave his taxes-and-trade model (1980) a cachet of scientific respectability. Many writers position themselves on the theoretical map by expressing their proximity to Finley, Hopkins, or others.⁷

The rôle of material evidence in archaeology and anthropology was enhanced by the model-building and hypothesis-testing approaches of 'processual' or 'New' archaeologists such as L. Binford (1964) or D. Clarke (1972). Hopkins offered the same optimism, and gave archaeological evidence a clear rôle in refining his model.⁸ Post-processual archaeology undermined

1 E.g., Garnsey, Hopkins and Whittaker 1983.

2 Finley 1965, 41: "We are too often the victims of that great curse of archaeology, the indestructibility of pots"

3 E.g., Horden and Purcell 2000, Mattingly and Salmon 2001 or Woolf 1998.

4 Bowman, Garnsey and Rathbone 2000.

5 This book failed to address the theoretical problems involved in converting material evidence into economic interpretation.

6 Space does not allow discussion of amphorae, whose study is governed by the products that they contained; Bats (1988, 16) likewise restricted his cultural study of pottery from Olbia, Provence to "La vaisselle céramique ... Et non pas la céramique en général".

7 E.g., Carandini 1989, 521: "Le posizioni sostenute in questo scritto sono più vicine a quelle di M. Rostovzev che a quelle del suo maggior contraddittore M. Finley"; Poblome 1996, 92: "Trade in antiquity should be evaluated or re-evaluated by means of regionally based archaeological projects that retain the fundamental value of the ideas expressed by M. I. Finley, A. H. M. Jones and K. Hopkins".

8 Hopkins 1983, xxi: "Above all we need to know the volume and value of trade in the classical world. We need to know what was traded and the routes along which food, goods and metals flowed", with comments in Greene 1986, 14-15.