

Revisiting the 'problem' of *agri deserti* in the Late Roman Empire

Cam Grey

Probably in late 444, Valentinian III issued a law detailing a sales tax to be levied henceforth upon all transactions. By way of preface, he acknowledged the parlous state of the army, the gravity of the military threat facing it, the inability or unwillingness of landholders to meet the indictments currently levelled upon them, and the fiscal travails under which merchants and traders already laboured.¹ This text is one among many which bemoan the military and financial exigencies faced by the western Roman empire in the middle of the 5th c., and scholars have long debated the extent to which these crises of security and taxation can be extended also to encompass agricultural production. On the one hand, it has been argued that, in the West at least, barbarian invasions, civil conflict, an escalating tax burden and the collapse of inter- and intra-regional trade-networks ushered in a period of economic decline which matched the disintegration of the Roman bureaucratic and administrative machinery.² On the other, it has been suggested that, in spite of the rhetoric of decline evident in legal and literary sources, the changes in settlement patterns evident from the archaeological evidence need not necessarily be interpreted as indications of widespread abandonment of the countryside brought on by an all-encompassing economic and demographic crisis.³

It is not my intention here to engage directly with this debate, which the foregoing represents in deliberately broad and over-simplified terms; rather, it is to explore one phenomenon which is implicated in the discussion, the relationship between tax practices and economic structures in the Late Roman Empire. In this context, there can be no doubt that civil conflict and barbarian settlement led to economic upheaval and disruption of the fiscal system in some circumstances, although one must be wary of painting an over-generalized picture.⁴ However, it is useful analytically to detach the fate of the pan-Mediterranean economy of the Roman Empire and the Roman system of taxation in the various barbarian kingdoms of the 5th and following centuries from the phenomenon of agricultural production at the micro-level.⁵ To this end, I focus on agrarian practices in the Late Roman world between the end of the 3rd and the middle of the 5th c. In particular, I emphasize tensions that existed between these practices and the imperial tax system that emerged with the fiscal reforms of the Tetrarchy. These tensions can be seen in the phenomenon of *agri deserti*, fields which are identified in the legislation as not providing revenues to the Fisc (imperial treasury).

It was long held that the lack of fiscal productivity of these fields could be attributed to a lack of economic productivity, and connected to exhaustion of the soil, flight by cultivators, and depopulation of the countryside.⁶ In more recent scholarship, this interpretation has undergone some revision. The current *communis opinio* is that legislation concerning *agri deserti* in the

1 *Nov. Val.* XV (between September 11, 444 and January 18, 445). All dates are A.D.

2 See, most recently, Ward-Perkins 2005, particularly 39-43, 54-56, 124 and 128. Also, with more caution, Wickham 2005, 10 and 81-84.

3 Note, among others, the surveys of Lewit 1991/2004; van Ossel 1992; van Ossel and Ouzoulias 2000. But see also Wickham's measured criticism (2005, 81-82) of adherents to the view that there was almost no change between the Roman and post-Roman worlds.

4 Christie (1996, 256-58 and *passim*) notes intimations of both crisis and continuity in the writings of Late Roman authors. Wickham (2005, 84, 520 and 523) acknowledges confusion and crisis, but also emphasizes longer-term processes and notes heterogeneity of experiences throughout the Mediterranean world.

5 For the transformation of tax systems and trade networks in the late-antique and Early Mediaeval world, see the recent surveys, with extensive references, of McCormick 2001 and Wickham 2005, and the briefer comments of Ward-Perkins 2005. Note also Christie 1996, who seeks with caution to separate fiscal and agricultural phenomena in Italy.

6 The early scholarship on the subject is summarized by Clausen 1925, 243-53 and 294-317. For a recent brief restatement, see Bottiglieri 1994, 57-58 and 96-98.