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# World-systems analysis and the Roman empire

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Archaeologists are necessarily historians of the *longue durée*. Romanists, in particular, concern themselves with patterns and phenomena that are immensely extensive in space and in time. But the very scale of the enterprise poses special difficulties: it is not easy to find appropriate ways of describing, let alone analysing, such subjects.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Immanuel Wallerstein's masterpiece, *The Modern World System* (1975, 1980)<sup>1</sup>, has already proved a source of inspiration to many archaeologists (e.g. Frankenstein and Rowlands 1978, Ekholm and Friedman 1982, Rowlands *et al.* 1987, Bloemers 1988, Champion 1989), especially those working on the ancient civilisations of the New World (Schortman and Urban 1987, e.g. Pailes and Whitecotton 1979, Blanton and Feinman 1984, Dincauze and Hasenstaub 1989). But Wallerstein's analysis of the extension of capitalism has been most often applied to pre-capitalist periods in a manner that runs directly contrary to his own conception of world history. This paper is intended to review Wallerstein's own propositions regarding the world before capitalism and to examine these propositions in the light of the experience of the Roman empire. My results suggest some general conclusions about pre-capitalist world-systems, and the ways in which Wallerstein's thesis may be profitably applied and developed by archaeologists and historians of antiquity.

## World-systems in world history

*The Modern World System* is a neo-marxist analysis both of the dynamics of capitalism and of the structures produced by those dynamics from the 15th c. to the present day. Like Marx, Wallerstein has not been directly concerned with earlier periods (Schneider 1977, McGuire 1989, 42-43). But his work inevitably includes an account of them, partly out of the need to locate capitalism in world history and to explore its roots therein. But antiquity serves another purpose in the work. Wallerstein, again like Marx, uses the ancient world as a means of pointing out what was specifically modern and particular to capitalism. Pre-capitalist world-systems illuminate, by contrast, the nature and originality of capitalism.

Archaeologists will search Wallerstein's works in vain for detailed analyses of the ancient world. But fortunately (and again like Marx) Wallerstein is remarkably up-to-date in his accounts of the ancient world. As will become apparent, his accounts form the basis for fruitful analysis of pre-capitalist periods.

What is the Wallerstein thesis? Briefly, it runs as follows. Until recently in world history, most human social activity has been carried out within mini-systems, loose groupings of small numbers of people. Such communities were unstable and relatively short-lived. But in the last few millennia, world history has been dominated by the rise and fall of much more extensive phenomena — world-systems. A world-system may be defined as 'a unit with a single division of labour and multiple cultural systems': crucially they unite very large populations, spread over wide distances, and they are comparatively stable.

Wallerstein distinguishes two kinds of world-systems, those united politically (world-empires) and those which depended on economic ties alone (world-economies). Most world-economies were rapidly

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<sup>1</sup> All references in this paper are to works by Immanuel Wallerstein unless otherwise indicated. The development of his ideas may be followed in the first two volumes of his analysis of the rise of capitalism (1975, 1980) and in his collected essays (1979a). *Review* (1977- ), the Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center, is devoted to social analysis through a worldsystems approach. *Political economy of the world system, Annuals* (1978-) publishes the proceedings of conferences on similar themes, and collections of papers devoted to world-systems analysis of particular topics appear in the series *Explorations in the world economy* (1983- ) (Beverly Hills). Two collections of archaeological studies on this theme have recently been published (Rowlands *et al.*, 1987; Champion 1989).