

The consumer city revisited: the *vicus* and the city

C. R. Whittaker

Moses Finley's study of the ancient city in 1977 embraced the Bücher–Sombart–Weber thesis of the consumer/parasite city¹ — as in fact Collingwood had done some 30 years earlier² — by laying stress on 4 essential features:

1. The ancient city unlike the mediaeval had no separation of function between town and country (Bücher)
2. The ancient town relied on the products of outside agricultural labour for its existence (Sombart)
3. The major income for urban consumers came from rural rents, not from commercial enterprises (Weber)
4. The commodity production of towns was essentially petty (Finley).

Against this thesis (simplified here for the sake of brevity), since 1977 have arisen 3 main attacks:

1. from archaeologists, like Pucci and Morel, who have argued that major changes in production of fine pottery — Campanian, *parois fines*, *terra sigillata* — and in its export coincided with the major growth of towns, beginning from the 2nd c. B.C.³ Some have gone on to include other urban 'industries', of which there is evidence on inscriptions and reliefs — fullers, dyers, weavers and smiths, etc. — which supposedly developed to service the countryside.⁴

2. from Keith Hopkins, who has developed a theory of the city in two parts. Towns, he argues, were vital units in the tax cycle of the Roman empire, firstly, because they paid out money in cash to rural producers in exchange for basic produce, thereby enabling farmers to pay their taxes; and secondly, because they purchased this cash from the beneficiaries of the central state by the sale and export of articles of manufacture. High levels of artisan production and trade, therefore, paid for the town's consumption needs.⁵
3. A third model has been proposed by Wachter and others of whom the most recent is Leveau, that the city is to be regarded as the 'organiser' of the countryside. The latter has attacked the concept of parasitism on the grounds that it implies decadence.⁶ Both Wachter and Leveau argue that the city was necessary for the organisation and redistribution of rural surpluses — in Wachter's words, "an essential prerequisite to prosperous farming", since it was "the first to adopt new ideas and techniques".

Let me take these alternative models in reverse order:

The Wachter–Leveau model

To the Wachter–Leveau model of the town as organiser, I have little to add to what Goudineau said in 1983. Leveau, he showed, was simply mistaken in thinking that the theory of consumption in the city, as developed by Finley, had any association with decline.⁷ Insofar as I understand the model of the

1 Finley 1981, 3-40 is a reprinting of the original article published in 1977. Full references to the works of Bücher, Sombart and Weber are given there.

2 Collingwood and Myres 1937, 198.

3 Pucci 1983; Morel 1981.

4 E.g. Wachter 1974.

5 Hopkins 1978, 1980.

6 Wachter 1974, 71-72; Leveau 1983.

7 Leveau et Goudineau 1983. Leveau cites in his support Marx's and Engels' view, expressed in the *German ideology*, that the division of labour between the industrial town and the agricultural countryside heralded the decay of society. This could be interpreted to mean that, when the ancient town was a net consumer, it was in a healthy state — a view supported by Engels in the *Anti-Düring*, where he imagined a utopian ruralisation of industry and production. It has to be said, however, that in developing their thesis of "the antagonism between town and country", Marx and Engels had almost no interest in pre-mediaeval society, since they were preoccupied with the effects of post-feudal capitalism which had concentrated productive forces in urban centres.