

Coin circulation and the integration of the Roman economy

Christopher Howgego

Inter-regional exchange

The medium- and long-distance movement of goods on a considerable scale, over and above a localized peasant economy, was a feature of the Roman world. The ceramic record is unambiguous.¹ Not only were particular fine-wares distributed very widely, in some cases throughout the Roman world and beyond, but on Mediterranean sites the percentage of imported pottery, as opposed to local wares, is impressively high. Even coarse wares might travel between regions. The distribution of ceramic containers (amphorae) provides archaeological testimony to transfers of agricultural produce, most notably of wine and olive oil. The systematic transfer of foodstuffs is implicit in the need to feed the major conurbations and troop concentrations, and also in the regional diversity and inter-annual variability which is characteristic of Mediterranean agriculture.² Apart from foodstuffs, even heavy goods such as decorative marbles had an empire-wide distribution.³ The large-scale movement of raw metals is implied by the uneven pattern of sources throughout the empire, and has left evidence in the form of ingots lost in transit.⁴ Trade with the east (Arabia, India and, presumably to a lesser extent, China) was on a substantial scale.⁵ This implies a significant level of inter-regional exchange within the empire, both directly (to distribute such exotic goods to the élite throughout the empire) and indirectly (if the external trade of the empire was substantial, it is implausible that internal trade was minimal). Finally, it may be noted that the technology of transport was adequate to support the type of substantial inter-regional movement of goods and commodities mentioned so far.⁶

As regards coinage, the familiarity of the system means that surprise is rarely registered at the extent to which coin production was centralized for an area as vast as the Roman empire. It takes only a moment's thought about the scale and distance of the transfers of bullion and coin implicit in centralized production to evoke that surprise.⁷ Of course, centralization should not be overstated. For most of the principate the eastern half of the empire supplied its own base

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- 1 D. P. S. Peacock, *Pottery in the Roman world: an ethnoarchaeological approach* (London 1982); id. and D. F. Williams, *Amphorae and the Roman economy* (London 1986); M. Fulford, "Economic interdependence among urban communities of the Roman Mediterranean," *World Archaeology* 19.1 (1987) 58-75; G. Woolf, "Imperialism, empire and the integration of the Roman economy," *World Archaeology* 23.3 (1992) 283-93.
 - 2 K. Hopkins, "Economic growth and towns in classical antiquity," in P. Abrams and E. Wrigley (edd.), *Towns in societies* (Cambridge 1978) 35-77; id., *JRS* 70 (1980) 101-25; id., "Models, ships and staples," in P. Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker (edd.), *Trade and famine in classical antiquity* (Cambridge 1983) 84-109; P. Garnsey, *Famine and food supply in the Graeco-Roman world* (Cambridge 1988).
 - 3 J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Marble in antiquity: collected papers of J. B. Ward-Perkins* (H. Dodge and B. Ward-Perkins, edd.) (London 1992).
 - 4 F. Laubenheimer-Leenhardt, *Recherches sur les lingots de cuivre et de plomb d'époque romaine dans les régions de Languedoc-Roussillon et de Provence-Corse* (Paris 1973); Cl. Domergue, *Les mines de la péninsule ibérique dans l'antiquité romaine* (Rome 1990) 617, index s.v. lingots.
 - 5 L. Casson, *The Periplus maris erythraei* (Princeton 1989) 35; id., "New light on maritime loans: P. Vindob. G. 40822," *ZPE* 84 (1990) 195-206; C. Howgego, *JRS* 82 (1992) 5-6.
 - 6 K. Greene, *The archaeology of the Roman economy* (London 1986) 17-44.
 - 7 As pointed out by F. Millar, "Les congiaires à Rome et la monnaie," in A. Giovannini (ed.), *Nourrir la plèbe: actes du colloque tenu à Genève les 28/29.ix.1989 en hommage à Denis van Berchem* (Schweizerische Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft 22).