‘A STARVING MOB HAS NO RESPECT’
URBAN MARKETS AND FOOD RIOTS IN THE ROMAN WORLD, 100
B.C. – 400 A.D.¹

By
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Introduction

“One may not hoard in the Land of Israel those products which are basic commodities such as wines, oils, flours and fruits [...] During a year of drought one should not even hoard a *kab* of carobs since it introduces a curse into the prices.”²

The Talmudic texts of Roman Palestine contain many such prohibitions; in general, it was not allowed to export or resell food or to profit from dearth. Although one recent commentator dismisses these laws as the Rabbinic view of an economic utopia, which does not reflect any economic reality, they do reflect a common feeling about what is right and wrong in dealing with matters of food supply.³ The fear of dearth and high prices, which lies at the heart of such regulations, is widespread in Antiquity. “Give us our daily bread” should be taken literally. Christianity developed its own tradition regarding food supply. In his *Sermons*, Augustine (354-430 A.D.) wrote that hunger was man-made and not caused by bad weather. Hence, if there was hunger, somebody was to blame.⁴ For most of the populace of Rome and other cities, whose living standards were low at best of times, a sudden rise in food prices would recall memories of hunger and starvation. The members of the ruling elites intervened in the market and regulated market supply, primarily to avoid dearth. Why did the elite go to such length to avoid ‘a curse into the prices’? Sometimes, when confronted with a shortage of food, the masses of the cities rioted. Why did they riot?

¹ The food supply in the Graeco-Roman world has not failed to attract scholarly attention in past decades and there is no need to repeat all data and arguments here. While trying to substantiate my main arguments concerning the urban response to market failure, the following paper inevitably ignores many points of debate. I hope to discuss these issues and other topics in more detail later. Meanwhile, for brevity’s sake, references will be limited mostly to publications later than P.D.A. Garnsey, *Famine and food supply in the Graeco-Roman world. Responses to risk and crisis* (Cambridge 1988). For further references, see Garnsey’s comprehensive work.

² T Avodah Zarah 4(5):1. Quoted from Z. Safrai, *The economy of Roman Palestine* (London 1994), 310.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Augustine, *Sermons* 25.4.

Thompson's 'moral economy'

In 1971, E.P. Thompson published his seminal essay, titled 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century'.⁵ Previously, food riots were commonly regarded as instinctive responses to hunger, simple reactions to a direct stimulus. In his study of food riots in eighteenth century England, this view was rejected by Thompson as "crass economic reductionism" and as not explaining adequately either the complex nature of motive and behaviour of those people rioting or the function of food riots themselves. Far from being simply responding to hunger, the tumultuous crowd consciously behaved according to well-established ideas and objectives. Although deprivation or even hunger may have aroused food riots, more important is that the people responded to the feeling of being treated outrageously by farmers and traders. Rioters in eighteenth century England felt legitimised "by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs; and, in general, that they were supported by the wider consensus of the community".⁶ If the food market did not provide sufficient food to all, or at least not at a price regarded as 'just', it did not operate according to their norms of what was right and the people therefore had a right to take matters into their own hands. Their beliefs were "grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, or the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor".

According to Thompson, the traditional beliefs of the masses of the eighteenth century concerning food supply largely stemmed from governmental measures in previous centuries.⁷ Between 1580 and 1630, the Crown empowered local magistrates to search the stocks of grain of landowners and merchants, to enforce the sale of at least part of this grain on the market and to ensure that the grain market functioned in a way as to ensure a moderate price. Though these laws fell into abeyance during the later seventeenth century, they remained firmly fixed in the collective memory of the English people. When during the eighteenth century the magistrates failed to act upon these former measures in times of dearth, the people felt they had a right to take matters into their own hands and do what the government failed to do. Hence, during the eighteenth century riots, the

⁵ *Past and Present* 50 (1971), 76-136.

⁶ *Ibidem* 78.

⁷ *Ibidem* 107 ff.

tumultuous crowd did not behave haphazardly, but punished the offending landowners and traders, searched the stocks in barns and granaries, and often sold what they found at a 'just' price. Killings, however, hardly ever occurred.⁸

In a later publication, Thompson welcomed, although not wholeheartedly, the application of his concept beyond its original context to include "cultures whose moral premises are not identical with those of a Judeo-Christian inheritance".⁹ This paper intends to be one such application. The roots of European traditions, as of Christianity itself, partly lie in the Graeco-Roman world. John Bohstedt, one of the most persistent opponents of Thompson's moral economy, agreed that "rioters acted on the basis of moral judgements about markets".¹⁰ He disagreed, however, with Thompson's specific explanation of the nature and origin of the rioters' beliefs. According to Bohstedt, the beliefs of the rioters did not originate in official regulation, but had a much more general background: "rioters seemed to be simply taking the most direct approach to their manifest problem of high prices". The causal relationship between riot and regulation are compared to the 'chicken-and-egg' question. While it is agreed by Bohstedt that the people's actions were aroused in times of dearth by offences to what they believed to be the 'morals' of the food market, these beliefs were much more general and less specific than Thompson's concept. Bohstedt's words regarding early modern England may also be true regarding market regulation and food riots in the ancient world: "Probably riot and paternalist regulation were a political chicken and egg, emerging *pari passu* as markets and trade developed."¹¹ The 'moral economy' remains a valuable analytical concept, which directs ancient historians to some of the

⁸ The bibliography on the 'moral economy' and food riots has become very extensive indeed. The following titles may be cited as of particular interest to ancient historians: Louise A. Tilly, 'The food riot as a form of political conflict in France', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 1 (1971), 23-57; J. Stevenson, 'The "moral economy" of the English crowd. Myth and reality', in: A. Fletcher and J. Stevenson, eds., *Order and disorder in early modern England* (Cambridge 1985), 218-238; H.-D. Löwe, 'Teuerungsrevolten, Teuerungspolitik und Marktregulierung im 18. Jahrhundert in England, Frankreich und Deutschland', *Saeculum* 37 (1986), 291-312; J. Bohstedt, 'The moral economy and the discipline of historical context', *Journal of Social History* 26-1 (1992/93), 265-284; M. Gailus, 'Food riots in Germany in the late 1840s', *Past and Present* 145 (1994), 157-193; B. Sharp, 'The food riots of 1347 and the medieval moral economy', in: Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth, eds., *Moral economy and popular protest* (Basingstoke 2000), 33-54; J. Bohstedt, 'The pragmatic economy, the politics of provisions and the 'invention' of the food riot tradition in 1740', in idem, 55-92.

⁹ E.P. Thompson, 'The moral economy reviewed', E.P. Thompson, ed., *Customs in common* (London 1991), 345.

¹⁰ Bohstedt 1992/93, op. cit. (n. 8), 265.

¹¹ Bohstedt 2000, op. cit. (n. 8), 78, 80.

questions they should ask about food riots in the Graeco-Roman world: Who were the targets of food riots in the towns and cities of the Roman world? What beliefs lie at the basis of the ancient rioters' actions and what were its relations to official regulations and the views of central and local governments? The question whether there was a 'moral economy' of the ancient crowds, and whether the ruling elite shared these attitudes, is important for our understanding of the rights and obligations of the various members of Graeco-Roman society in dealing with the urban food market.

The ancient world cannot match the hundreds of food riots in eighteenth-century England that were analysed by Thompson. Historians of the Graeco-Roman world may wish to follow the example of Thompson, but the ancient sources are much more limited in number and scope than those of early-modern Europe. The courts left no archives for modern historians to study, and there was little reason to commemorate riots on stone. There was, moreover, every reason for local authorities to conceal such events from their Roman overlords, since the latter disliked disturbances. Dio Chrysostom (c. 40 - after 110 A.D.) reminded the people of the town of Prusa (Bithynia, modern Turkey): "Just as relatives denounce to the teachers the children who are too disorderly at home, so also the misdeeds of the communities are reported to the proconsuls."¹² We have to make do with sparse mentions in the literary sources, sometimes in contemporary speeches and letters, more often in later works of historiography.

Remarkably, Athens has left no evidence of food riots, and neither has the Greek or Hellenistic world in general. Lack of evidence cannot explain the silence regarding Athens: authors like Xenophon or Aristotle, let alone Demosthenes or Lysias, are very interested in the city's food supply. Regarding the Hellenistic states, however, the case is different. As Garnsey states: "the evidence is predominantly epigraphic and weighted towards the successful resolution of food crises rather than their less cheerful aspects." However, Garnsey assumes that riots were rare events in the Hellenistic age, since euergetism "could usually be relied upon to ward off both starvation and unrest".¹³ However, the ancient elite never had the economic capacity to ward off shortages, although they could shift the impact somewhat. An argument from silence is inadmissible in this case. Moreover, the ancient sources paint a distorted, or rather incomplete picture. Ancient historiography is largely about the deeds of great men in the field of war and

¹² Dio Chrysostom 46.14.

¹³ Garnsey 1988, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 30.

in the public domain of urban politics. Inevitably, we will read most about those food riots that had any relationship to statesmen and grand politics. However, this makes the few other instances even more interesting.

The following section distinguishes food riots in Rome and those in the cities of the Roman Empire. Interestingly, Garnsey's "impression is that peaceful protest was much more common than riot, and that only in the city of Rome itself in certain periods was the food riot a phenomenon of any significance".¹⁴ The first statement might be true, but lack of evidence does not allow its substantiation. In any case, the latter is a far more significant form of communication between the rulers and the ruled, both in the capital itself and in the lesser towns and cities of the Roman Empire.

Something should be said, however briefly, about governmental intervention in the urban markets during the Roman era. The measures taken by the government concerning the food supply of the capital were largely aimed at solving one way or another the lack of a sufficiently stable supply of corn to reduce price volatility, which is symptomatic of the weakness of the market in the Roman world. On the one hand, the corn dole and the importation of tax-corn did not so much regulate the corn-market as to bypass it. The steady provision of cheap (or even free) corn to part of the city's consumers reduced their dependency on the market and thereby weakened the impact of supply shocks on market prices. On the other hand, privileges to traders tried to improve the performance of the market by providing added incentives to corn merchants to supply the city of Rome. In order not to endanger market supply, the price of corn was not permanently fixed. Roman authorities were much less directly interested in the food supply of the provincial towns and cities. Nevertheless, Roman officials intervened regularly in local affairs. In all other respects, the market intervention on behalf of urban consumers and the instruments that were available to the local elite had probably not much changed in Roman times in comparison to the classical or Hellenistic Greek world.¹⁵ In times of dearth, benefactors and officials used available stocks or bought corn on their own or the city's expense, and made corn available to at least part of the urban population in order to limit the impact of supply shocks. Urban magistrates controlled the price of bread, but usually not the price of corn. Price volatility remained a prime concern for local authorities. However, the presence of Roman authorities significantly altered the workings of market intervention. Firstly,

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Likewise, Garnsey 1988, op. cit. (n. 1), 266.

the Roman emperor controlled huge amounts of corn and on occasion made these stocks available to provincial cities. Secondly, urban rulers and their subjects could count on the intervention of provincial governors, who had the power and authority to force traders, landowners and neighbouring communities into compliance.

Food riots in Rome and Italy

Despite regular market intervention and ad hoc measures, prices would sometimes rise and the system would seem to fail in the eyes of the common people. The satirical novel of Petronius provides an interesting, though fictional example of how dearth could lead to rumours and urban unrest. One of the characters, Ganymedes, is made to exclaim:

“You go talking about things which are neither in heaven nor earth, and none of you care all the time how the price of food pinches. I swear I cannot get hold of a mouthful of bread to-day. And how the drought goes on. There has been a famine for a whole year now. Damn the magistrates, who play ‘Scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours’ in league with the bakers. So the little people come off badly; for the jaws of the upper classes are always keeping carnival. I do wish we had the fellows I found here when I first came out of Asia. [...] I remember Rafinius [...] You could trust him [...] So at that time food was dirt-cheap. Buying a loaf of bread for an as, it took more than two to eat it. One sees an ox’s eye bigger now!”¹⁶

The novel is set in southern Italy in Petronius’ own time, i.e. mid first century A.D. Clearly, Petronius refers to price fixing by way of establishing the weight of bread. Parallels of this practice may be found in the city of Ephesus in antiquity and in early modern cities throughout the early modern era. In their discussion of prices fixed by the *agoranomoi* of the city of Ephesus, Garnsey and Van Nijf point out that the price of a loaf of bread was fairly constant, while the weight varied. They rightly conclude from this feature that in Ephesus, the price of a loaf of bread was regulated by varying its weight.¹⁷ Petronius seems to imply that the price was fixed continuously:

¹⁶ Petronius, *Satyricon* 44.

¹⁷ P.D.A. Garnsey et O.M. van Nijf, ‘Controle des prix du grain à Rome et dans les cités de l’empire’, *La mémoire perdue. Recherches sur l’administration romaine* (Rome 1998), 311 f.

when a man like Safinius had been aedile, a small sum bought a lot of bread; during the present shortage, it is smaller than the eye of an ox. Obviously, the bakers were instrumental in fixing the weight of a loaf of bread, but, as Ganymedes complains, nowadays, aediles are in league with the bakers. Contemporary graffiti in Pompeii reveal the close connection between *aediles* and bakers: "Please elect Gaius Iulius Polybius aedile. He has good bread."¹⁸ During his tirade, Ganymedes makes the following remark: "If we had any spunk in us he [the magistrate] would not be so pleased with himself. Nowadays people are lions in their own houses and foxes out of doors" (*Sat.* 44). This is clearly a reflection of how rumours and dissatisfaction with public officials could lead to unrest and rioting.

Naturally, rioters aimed their actions at those people they thought responsible for ensuring an adequate supply. This feature is common of food riots in the city of Rome throughout Antiquity, although late Republican crowds directed their anger at different people than their imperial or late-Roman counterparts. During the highly contentious first century B.C., food riots were part of the political unrest that was rife in the city of Rome. Nevertheless, these riots were genuine food riots.¹⁹ In 75 B.C., a mob, which, according to our source, was worn down by scarcity, attacked the consuls, which had to take refuge in the house of one of them.²⁰ In 67 B.C., rioters threatened the Roman Senate, because the senators hesitated to give Pompey the wide-ranging powers that were necessary to deal with the pirates who threatened the city's corn supply.²¹ Ten years later, on two occasions, tumultuous crowds again demanded full power for Pompey, this time to deal directly with the corn supply of Rome.²² During the civil war against Sextus Pompeius, food shortages arose in the city because of hostilities. Hence, the population demanded restoration of peace.²³ Although not strictly Republican, one may add the riot of 22 B.C., during which rioters threatened to burn the senators alive if they did not hand the *cura annonae* to Augustus.²⁴

¹⁸ CIL IV, 429.

¹⁹ Cf. Garnsey 1988, op. cit. (n. 1), 31, 206 ff. See also D. Cherry, 'Hunger at Rome in the late Republic', *Echos du monde classique* 37, n.s. 12 (1993), 449 f.

²⁰ Sallust, *Historiae* 2.45 M.

²¹ Cassius Dio 36.24.2 f. Cf. Plutarch, *Pompeius* 25.1.

²² Cicero, *de domo sua* 1 ff; Cassius Dio 39.9.2 f. Cf. Plutarch, *Pompeius* 49.4 ff.

²³ Appian, *De bello civili* 5.67 f; Cassius Dio 48.31.1 ff. Cf. Suetonius, *Augustus* 16.1; Cassius Dio 48.18.1.

²⁴ Cassius Dio 54.1.3 f.

Rioters aimed their violence against the people who they thought were responsible for taking the necessary measures, which meant throwing stones at the consuls in 75 B.C., at the senators in 67, 57 and 22 B.C. and at Octavian and Mark Antony in 40 B.C. Food supply and food riots were a public affair. Hence, riots often took place in the theatre or during political gatherings.²⁵ Although some politicians used food riots to aid their own cause, rioters acted upon their own initiative and had their own agenda. In his speech concerning the troubles in 57 B.C., Cicero carefully distinguishes between the role of Clodius in stirring up violence and the genuine unrest among the “people of Rome”, who acted upon the legitimate fear that high prices would lead to hunger. If Pompey could give them low prices and shipments to the city of Rome, then Pompey was their man.²⁶ These instances show that politics and food riots were indissolubly connected in many ways, but not simply in the sense that food riots were instruments of political leaders to put pressure on the government.

In his account of the riots of which Octavian and Mark Antony became victim, Appian (d. 160s A.D.) refers to attacks on the houses of the rich. Previously he made mention of similar actions of the Roman mob:

“The mass of the people in Rome openly denounced the war and the victory, because the grain was kept under guard for the soldiers. They broke into the houses in search of food, and carried off whatever they could.”²⁷

The huge number of soldiers that were kept under arms during the civil wars undoubtedly depleted the stores that were available for the city of Rome. However, while the provisioning of the soldiers fuelled the agitation among the Roman populace, the rich had little to do with it and were not to blame. A not historic but nevertheless interesting account of the strained relations between the wealthy and the poor in Rome in 492 B.C. in the works of Dionysius of Halicarnassus sheds additional light on this kind of mob violence:

“Their hatred did not lead to any irreparable mischief as often happens in like disorders. For on the one hand the poor did not

²⁵ Cassius Dio 39.9.2; 48.31.4.

²⁶ Cicero, *de domo sua* 6; 16. Also, Plutarch, *Pompeius* 27.2.

²⁷ Appian, *De bello civili* 5.34. Cf. 5.18.

attack the houses of the rich, where they suspected they should find stores of provisions laid up, nor attempt to raid the public stores.”²⁸

Dionysius would not have deemed it necessary to mention what he thought had not happened in early Rome, if this had not provided a striking contrast to the unrestrained violence of his own time, i.e. the late first century B.C. As far as we know, the victims whose houses were plundered were not held responsible for the shortages in any way. In late Republican Rome, it seems, dearth and high prices were sufficient to legitimise the plundering of civilian and public stores.

Food riots continued in Rome after the restored order of the Principate had succeeded the anarchy of the late Republic. I cannot agree with Garnsey, who writes, “the impression given by the sources is that public disorder of this kind was a peripheral phenomenon under the Principate as opposed to the late Empire.”²⁹ Riots were probably much more common than the few instances recorded in our sources, as is indicated by Suetonius, who writes that Augustus only used freedmen to repress unrest in the city of Rome when fires occurred or when the price of food had risen.³⁰ Nevertheless, neither Suetonius nor the other authors mentions one particular instance of serious rioting during the reign of Augustus, although one historian mentions “commotion in the city ... until the scarcity of grain was at an end” in A.D. 6.³¹

The riots reflect the political changes in Rome from the first century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. The evidence does not support Garnsey’s opinion that the nature of the popular response changed at the end of the Republic: “riots became almost obsolete and demonstration the standard response, once power was concentrated in the hands of one man.”³² Because the emperors became the ones who were ultimately responsible for the food supply of the city,³³ they became the targets of tumultuous crowds, who made use of public appearances of the emperors to make their complaints known. Tiberius was jeered at in the theatre because of high food prices,

²⁸ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 7.18.3. Cf. Garnsey 1988, op. cit. (n. 1), 175.

²⁹ Garnsey 1988, op. cit. (n. 1), 241.

³⁰ Suetonius, *Augustus* 25.2.

³¹ Cassius Dio 55.27.3.

³² Garnsey 1988, op. cit. (n. 1), 31.

³³ Interestingly, the Roman populace feared shortages when Nero left the city. Tacitus, *Annales* 15.36.4.

while a crowd on the forum, who threw pieces of bread at him, physically threatened Claudius. As in late republican times, rioters used the public domain to urge the emperor to lower the prices.³⁴ More than a century later, the audience in the theatre accused Cleander (d. 189 A.D.), a freedman of Commodus, who had been given free rein in the city of Rome by the emperor, of abuse of the city's food supply. A mob that tried to persuade the emperor to eliminate Cleander, were violently attacked by soldiers. The resulting bloodshed eventually led to the freedman's downfall. His head was publicly displayed to placate the Roman populace.³⁵

After a long silence in our sources,³⁶ it is only in mid fourth century A.D. that Ammianus Marcellinus provides us again with a detailed picture of events in the city of Rome. Ammianus Marcellinus regularly remarks on the endemic and violent nature of rioting in the streets of Rome: "a thing which constantly happens in Rome".³⁷ During shortages in contemporary Milan, Ambrose informs us, the populace regularly demanded the expulsion of foreigners and destitute peasants, who had fled from the countryside, as happened in Rome.³⁸ Ammianus sees the *praefectus urbi* as the one who was ultimately responsible for the city's provisioning, remarking for instance regularly on a prefect's administration that there were supplies in abundance.³⁹ Hence, angry crowds of food rioters did not direct their actions on the emperor anymore, who had all but disappeared from the political stage in Rome, but at the *praefectus urbi*. The prefects' responses differed: one prefect had a man, whom he recognised as a ringleader of the crowd, arrested and flogged in public, at which the rioters dispersed. Another prefect pleaded innocence and threw himself at the mercy of the violent mob, holding out his infant sons to arouse their pity.⁴⁰ In 364/5 A.D., the prefect Symmachus incurred the wrath of the city's populace:

"After some years had passed, they set fire to Symmachus' beautiful house in the Transtiberine district, spurred on by the fact

³⁴ Tacitus, *Annales* 2.87; 6.13.1; 12.43; Suetonius, *Claudius* 18.2. Cf. Suetonius, *Augustus* 70.2.

³⁵ Herodian 1.12-13. Cassius Dio 73.13.1 ff says that the troubles were caused by the grain commissioner in order to cause the downfall of Cleander.

³⁶ According to the *Historia Augusta*, *Alexander* 22.7, the Roman populace requested a reduction in the price of pork and beef during the reign of Alexander Severus (222-235 A.D.), but it is unclear whether this event was a real riot. *Historia Augusta*, *Alexander* 22.7

³⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus 26.3.6. Cf. 14.6.1; 21.12.24.

³⁸ Ambrose, *De officiis* 45 ff; Ammianus Marcellinus 14.6.19; 28.4.32.

³⁹ Ibidem 21.12.24; 26.3.6; 27.3.11.

⁴⁰ Ibidem 15.7.3 ff; 19.10.1 ff. Cf. Ambrose, *De officiis* 46.

that a common fellow among the plebeians had alleged, without any informant or witness, that the prefect had said that he would rather use his own wine for quenching lime-kilns than sell it at the price which the people hoped for.”⁴¹

Tumultuous crowds were not only roused by high corn prices, but also by the high price of wine. Wine, it must be recognised, was an important part of the ancient diet. Already during the reign of Augustus, the Roman populace had complained about the high price of wine, only to be reminded by the emperor of the excellent water supply his son-in-law had built.⁴² Wine had not been an important issue of the city’s administration before the third century A.D. From that century onwards, wine was regularly distributed to the Roman populace. In the 350s and 360s, the price of wine had become just as sensitive as the price of bread, leading to several riots.⁴³

Summing up: from the first century B.C. until the fifth century A.D., the sources indicate that the high price of bread (and later wine) regularly caused tumult among the populace of Rome. The urban poor would have been threatened by starvation if high prices continued too long or occurred too often. Nevertheless, a shortage of wine does not cause hunger, and starving people do not use bread to throw at the emperor. Rioters responded primarily to what they perceived to be injustice, not to hunger. Rioters became sufficiently outraged to put the emperor to flight, to cause bloodshed in the streets of Rome and to burn the house of the city’s highest administrator. They acted in the strong belief that the city’s leading men – whether these were senators, emperors or prefects – were responsible for the conditions on the food market. As far as we know, their demands were not revolutionary: appoint Pompey or Augustus, eliminate Cleander, make peace, improve shipments, fill the granaries, etcetera. However, rioters not only urged statesmen to act on their behalf. They also attacked the houses of the rich and plundered their stores. Remarkably, corn merchants and bakers do not occur at all in the accounts of riots in Rome. The possibility must be admitted that our literary sources might not have been sufficiently interested in rioters’ condemnation of the bakers’ greedy dealings or in attacks on

⁴¹ Ammianus Marcellinus 27.3.4. His successor’s house was almost burned down as well. Ibidem 27.3.8.

⁴² Suetonius, *Augustus*. 43.1. Wine and olive oil were distributed, at first during scarcities, later regularly. *Historia Augusta*, *Antoninus* 8.11; *Septimius Severus* 18.3; *Alexander* 22.2; *Aurelianus* 48.1; 48.5. Cf. *Aurelianus* 35.2 (pork).

⁴³ Ammianus Marcellinus 14.6.1; 15.7.3.

merchants' property. However, the silence in the sources may be significant in the sense that it reflects not lack of interest, but the rioters' perception of bakers and corn merchants as mere instruments of the governments' care of the city's food supply, and not the one's primarily to blame.

Food riots in the Greek East

The Greek author Philostratus (late second, early third century A.D.) provides us with two interesting examples of urban food riots in the Greek East of the Roman Empire. In his *Life of Sophists*, he mentions briefly that a riot arose in the bread-sellers' quarter of the city of Athens. The angry mob almost stoned to death the famous second century A.D. sophist P. Hordeonius Lollianus, who, as *strategos* of Athens, was responsible for the food supply of the city at the time. The cynic philosopher Pancrates, Philostratus tells us, managed to calm down the riot by observing laconically that "Lollianus sells words, not bread".⁴⁴

Because of the intervention by the miracle-worker and prophet Apollonius of Tyana, whose biography Philostratus has written, the same author provides us with a more detailed narrative of a food riot in the town of Aspendus (Pamphylia, modern Turkey) in the first century A.D. Apollonius, when visiting Aspendus during his travels in the eastern half of the empire, found its population in dire straits, because

"the rich men had shut up all the corn and were holding it up for export from the country. Consequently an excited crowd of all ages had set upon the leading magistrate, and were lighting a fire to burn him alive."⁴⁵

Without saying a word, because he was observing a vow of silence, Apollonius managed to ask the magistrate what was the matter. The magistrate answered that he had done no wrong, but that several landowners, whom he then mentioned by name, kept the corn under lock and key. Apollonius could just stop the crowd from making towards the accused landowners' estates. Instead, he made them send envoys to fetch these men. Once arrived in town, the landowners were so much impressed by

⁴⁴ Philostratus, *Vitae Sophistarum* 526.

⁴⁵ Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 15.

Apollonius' statement, which the magistrate read aloud, that "they filled the market-place with corn and the city revived".⁴⁶

A riot in the town of Prusa provides some significant parallels. In the late first century A.D., one of the leading citizens of this town was the wealthy landowner and orator Dio Chrysostom. As one of his orations informs us, Dio Chrysostom was threatened by the populace, together with an unnamed neighbour, to be "stoned or burned to death".⁴⁷ His defence sheds interesting light on the accusations against him and his neighbour:

"No man is more blameless than I am in connection with the present shortage. Have I produced the most grain of all and then put it under lock and key, raising the price? Why, you yourselves know the productive capacity of my farms – that I rarely, if ever, have sold grain, even when the harvest is unusually productive, and that in all these years I have not had even enough for my own needs, but that the income from my land is derived exclusively from wine and cattle. Nay but, some one may claim, though I lend money, I am unwilling to supply it for the purchase of grain. There is no need for me to say anything on that score either, for you know both those who lend money in our city and those who borrow."⁴⁸

In both cases, the market was depleted of corn, which in the case of Prusa explicitly caused high prices, which led to outrage among the rioters. The mobs of the Greek cities were extremely violent (although in the above cases no lives were actually lost): the Athenian sophist was almost stoned to death, Aspendus' leading magistrate almost burned alive, while Dio Chrysostom had to fear either fate. Both Dio Chrysostom and the landowners of Aspendus were accused of hoarding corn, which raised the price. According to the rioters, it was objectionable for wealthy landowners to profit from a stressed market situation or, even worse, to cause dearth in the first place. Instead, landowners had an obligation to supply the local market. For the same reason, the assembly of a Lydian town condemned a citizen to be

⁴⁶ Ibidem. See regarding the wider context of the story, J.J. Flinterman, *Power, paideia and pythagoreanism. Greek identity, conceptions of the relationship between philosophers and monarchs and political ideas in Philostratus' Life of Apollonius* (Amsterdam 1995), 111 f.

⁴⁷ Dio Chrysostom 46.4; 6; 11.

⁴⁸ Ibidem 46.8.

publicly whipped, because he had exported corn during a shortage.⁴⁹ The horizons in the world of the poor were near indeed. As a rich citizen, Dio Chrysostom is blamed for not lending money to purchase corn. It is unclear whether this meant money for a community fund or for individual consumers. However, it is clear that a wealthy citizen should provide money to the community in response to dearth. In general, the rioters in Aspendus and Prusa demanded direct measures from the local elite to improve their market situation: corn on the market and, in the case of Prusa, money to buy it. In Athens and Prusa, the crowd perceived town officials to be a suitable target for their demands, while also Dio Chrysostom was a leading citizen and member of the council of Prusa. Neither in Philostratus' account, nor in Dio Chrysostom's oration do the operatives of the market – corn merchants, local traders, millers and bakers – ever come into view.

Finally, food riots in mid-fourth century A.D. Antioch (Syria) involved members of the imperial family, which makes these cases more like Rome than like Athens, Aspendus or Prusa. In 354 A.D., when Gallus was staying in the city of Antioch, he ordered a lowering of prices, “at an unseasonable time, since scarcity threatened”. When the leaders of the senate of Antioch protested, he almost executed them all. The people of Antioch beseeched him to see to the food supply of the city. Gallus, however, refused. After the situation had deteriorated, the lower classes, “driven by hunger and rage”, set fire to the houses of leading citizens and subsequently mutilated and killed a local governor. Ammianus Marcellinus stresses that Gallus behaved unlike “leading men whose widely extended power sometimes cures local troubles”.⁵⁰ It seems, therefore, that the populace of Antioch could have expected his assistance when they approached him with their request. His refusal undoubtedly added to their outrage.

Less than ten years later, the emperor Julian visited Antioch. “When I arrived among you, the populace in the theatre, who were being oppressed by the rich, first of all cried aloud, ‘Everything plentiful, everything dear!’” According to his own account, Julian responded in the expected manner: he urged the rich to supply the market, but to no avail. He then fixed “a fair price” for all goods and had tax-corn imported from neighbouring regions. However, while grain became plenty, all other goods, like wine and olive oil, disappeared from the market. Julian incurred the hatred of the people of Antioch, but he blamed the wealthy citizens for the continuing problems,

⁴⁹ Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 17.

⁵⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus 14.7.2 ff. Cf. Julian, *Misopogon* 370c.

since they secretly sold their goods for inflated prices.⁵¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, although an admirer of Julian, provides a different point of view. He emphasises that Julian, like his brother Gallus, tried to enforce a lower price, “although sometimes, when this matter is not properly regulated, it is wont to cause scarcity and famine”.⁵² One is reminded of the price-edict of Diocletian, which unsuccessfully fixed the price of food and many other goods and services.⁵³

The emperor was perceived to be the greatest power on earth; hence, he was the man to seek help from. As in Rome, a public location like the theatre was the place to do so. As Ammianus’ remark and Julian’s response show, the rioters from Antioch were not addressing the wrong persons. When disappointed by the outcome of their request, however, the rioters unleashed their anger on lesser men: leading citizens’ houses were burned and a local governor was killed. The urban populace regarded a plentiful supply of the market as no mere favour; it was their right. The urban populace was entitled to a fair share of the harvest of the local landowners, which meant that market supply was to be plentiful and not to be manipulated by the rich to their advantage. In general, it was the obligation of the imperial and local rulers to see to a sufficient market supply. As in the smaller towns of the Greek East, failure even justified killing in the eyes of the ancient crowd.

The ‘moral economy’ of the ancient elite

Ancient rioters acted upon very strong notions of what was right and wrong regarding matters of food supply. The question remains, whether the ideas about the obligations of landowners and rulers and about the workings of the market were held in common by the urban masses and their ruling elite. The ancient sources contain numerous statements about the moral aspects of food supply, which reflect the attitudes the wealthy citizens of the Roman world were supposed to have. Whether the orators, historians, philosophers and their social peers actually lived up to their creed is at first of little interest; what concerns us here are the morals of the ancient elite, not their actions.

The morals of the urban elite are explicitly addressed by Philostratus, whose hero Apollonius of Tyana clearly sympathises with the hungry crowds of Aspendus. The tears of the crowd, the groaning of the old men and the presence of women and children affect him deeply. He censures the local

⁵¹ Julian, *Misopogon* 368 ff; Libanius, *Orationes* 18.195.

⁵² Ammianus Marcellinus 22.14.1 f.

⁵³ AE 1973, 526b = H. Freis, (Hrsg. und Übers.), *Historische Inschriften zur römischen Kaiserzeit von Augustus bis Konstantin* (Darmstadt 1994), nr. 151.

landowners with the following words: "The earth is mother of us all, for she is just; but you, because you are unjust have pretended that she is your mother alone."⁵⁴ In other words, the landowners are only caretakers of the earth's products; since the earth is for all, all are entitled to its harvests. By withholding from the populace their share of the harvest, the wealthy farmers are offending the morals of the urban market.

Figures of authority in the Roman Empire continued to hold and publicly acclaim similar notions about the obligations of landowners. In the fourth century A.D., pagans and Christians agreed on these matters, as opinions, which were expressed by the emperor Julian and Ambrose, bishop of Milan, show. As we have seen, the emperor Julian was confronted in 362 A.D. with the outcry of the people of Antioch, "who were being oppressed by the rich". He tried to persuade the leading citizens "that it is better to despise unjust profits and to benefit the citizens and the strangers in your city".

"When I saw that there was truth in the outcry of the populace, and that the pressure in the market was due not to any scarcity but to the insatiate greed of the rich, I appointed a fair price for everything, and made it known to all men. [...] What did your rich men do? They secretly sold the corn in the country for an exaggerated price, and they oppressed the community by the expenses that private persons had to incur."⁵⁵

In the end, Julian confesses, he was disappointed by the ungratefulness of the city's population. However, he remarks, "I thought it was my duty to assist the mass of the people who were being wronged."⁵⁶

Julian's contemporary Ambrose did not only possess religious authority as bishop of Milan, as a Roman senator and son of a praetorian prefect he belonged to the ruling elite of the Late Roman Empire. In a treatise on the duties of the clerics, he dealt with the obligations of landowners. Agriculture, he wrote, is a noble source of wealth. However, a landowner should be satisfied with the rightful earnings that the fertility of the soil and his labour offered. He censured those farmers who fraudulently raised their profits by pretending harvests had failed and by withholding nature's produce, which

⁵⁴ Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 15.

⁵⁵ Julian, *Misopogon* 368c ff.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem* 370b.

was intended for all, from consumers. Such profits, he concluded, are at the cost of the common good.⁵⁷ In words that are reminiscent of those of the pagan Philostratus, Ambrose reminds his readers that the produce of Mother Earth is meant for all.⁵⁸

It is agreed by these authors that landowners had a moral obligation to use their harvests, which were as much nature's produce as their own, to the benefit of the community. Since the people were entitled to a fair share of the crop, landowners were not allowed to sell it at the highest possible profit. It was a sign of greed to manipulate the market in order to increase profits. Even the wealthy landowners had to abide by the notion of the 'common good' and the morals of the urban market.⁵⁹

Moreover, one often comes across the notion of a 'just' price.⁶⁰ Whether a price is 'just' or not is not simply determined by its level, but rather by what is perceived as the rightful operation of the market. Not surprisingly, market failure is often blamed on the immoral actions of the landowners and corn merchants, such as hoarding or export in the face of local dearth. Invariably their motive is *avaritia*, i.e. greed.⁶¹ The fourth century Christian author Asterius, addressing the personification of Avarice, writes: "You fill the land with brigands and murderers, the sea with pirates, the cities with riots ..."⁶² This passage serves as a reminder that at the time riots were more common than the few instances in our sources. Because the morals of the market were sometimes violated, it was recognised by the urban elite that the local market required supervision. Dio Chrysostom, for example, censures his audience that their violent behaviour was no proper conduct. "It is necessary to take steps to make it cheaper", but supervision "is the course of sensible human beings and in this no one will oppose you."⁶³ Similarly, the famous price-edict of the emperor Diocletian publicly asserted that low prices were best ensured by curbing the avarice that was, according to the emperor, the source of all economic problems.⁶⁴ Hence, governmental

⁵⁷ Ambrose, *De officiis* 37 ff.

⁵⁸ Ibidem 45. On the development of christian thought about social justice, R. McMullen, *Enemies of the Roman order. Treason, unrest and alienation in the Empire* (Cambridge MA. 1966), 181.

⁵⁹ The religious laws of ancient Palestine offer a further important source of attitudes towards the food market. See recently, Safrai 1994, op. cit. (n. 2), 309 ff.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Athenaion Politeia* 49.3. Cf. Julian, *Misopogon* 368d; Libanius, *Orationes* 18.195.

⁶¹ Lysias 22.15; Demosthenes 56.7 f; Cicero, *de domo sua* 11; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 15; Julian, *Misopogon* 368c ff; Libanius, *Orationes* 18.195; Ambrose, *De officiis* 41. Also V.J. Rosivach, 'Some economic aspects of the fourth-century Athenian market in grain', *Chiron* 30 (2000), 61.

⁶² Quoted from McMullen 1966, op. cit. (n. 58), 345.

⁶³ Dio Chrysostom 46.10; 14.

⁶⁴ AE 1973, 526b = Freis 1994, op. cit. (n. 53), nr. 151, 16.

intervention in the food market was perceived and publicly advertised as a necessity in order to guarantee the proper operation of the market.

The communication between the urban populace and the elite

One particular question is stimulated by Thompson's analysis of 18th-century riots: to what degree were the notions held by the urban masses influenced, maybe even determined, by the market intervention of the authorities and by the ideas that the central and local authorities expressed concerning the morals of the market. In classical Greece, food supply had been a concern of the *polis*, the whole community of citizens, and it is often addressed as such in honorific inscriptions and in the orations of Demosthenes and other authors.⁶⁵ The numerous inscriptions of Roman provincial rulers and local elites offer insight into the communication between officials and their subjects in Roman times. Four examples should be sufficient to make this point.

The *agoranomoi* of Ephesus publicly advertise their achievements regarding a 'plentiful' and 'just' market, which was achieved, it is stressed, through their intervention.⁶⁶

Another inscription contains the decision by the provincial governor Antistius Rusticus, whom the councillors of Pisidian Antioch in 93 A.D. asked to intervene in their market. He is called 'patron of the city' because he took care of its corn supply. We are told that the *duoviri* and council of the city had approached the Roman governor because of a dearth and that they requested him "to provide an opportunity to purchase for the populace". He saw to it that private stocks above personal needs were sold and thus supplied the market.⁶⁷ As one of his measures, he determined a maximum corn price, because – as he publicly proclaimed – "it is very unjust to profit from the hunger of a fellow-citizen".

In the late second century A.D., the conduct of the bakers in Ephesus led to unrest among the populace. All our information we owe to the inscription that made public the decision of the provincial governor in this matter. Despite their behaviour, the bakers were not punished, the governor says, because that would not be in the city's interest. What exactly had incited the populace to riot, remains in the dark. However, it seems likely, that the bakers' disregard for market regulations caused rioting of sufficient scale to

⁶⁵ Demosthenes 20,30; 50,59; 56,7; Sylloge³ 304 (c. 325 BC); IG II² 903 (175/4 BC). See also Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.6.13; *Poroi* 3.4; Aristotle, *Rhetorica* 1.4.11.

⁶⁶ Garnsey et Van Nijf 1998, op. cit. (n. 17), 307.

⁶⁷ AE 1925, 126 = Freis 1994, op. cit. (n. 53), nr. 65.

warrant the intervention of the provincial governor in this urban conflict. The governor ordered them to adhere to the city's regulation, which had been proclaimed for "the common good".⁶⁸

A law from the emperor Hadrian concerning his favourite city Athens regulated the marketing of fish.⁶⁹ Hadrian probably issued this law while holding a local magistracy.⁷⁰ The inscription containing this law is damaged and thus difficult to interpret and date, but the main issue seems to be the limitation of the role of middlemen on the fish market: "When traders sell the same ware three times, it rises prices." Most significantly, the inscription contains the following order: "Inscribe this letter in stone and have it displayed in Piraeus in front of the market."⁷¹ Thus, the public was kept well informed of governmental policy.

Such inscriptions left no doubt about the emperors' and provincial governors' opinion of the proper workings of the market. These examples show that the urban food supply is publicly addressed as a moral issue that concerned the whole community. The effect of these public statements was dual: they strengthened the authority of the rulers by advertising their exertions on behalf of the community and legitimised the notions of the populace regarding a properly functioning market.

"A starving mob has no respect"

Keeping in mind the conditions of the urban food market in Roman times, it is not surprising that Tacitus depicted the 'mob' of first century A.D. Rome as continuously preoccupied by the price of bread. Tacitus provides the following example from the years of Civil War in 68 and 69 A.D., when a false rumour was spread that the governor of Africa was holding back the corn shipments that were meant for Rome.

"Since the grain ships for Rome were now detained by the severity of the winter, the common people at Rome, being accustomed to buy their food day by day and having no interest in public affairs

⁶⁸ *Inscr. Magn.* 114 = SEG IV 512 = Freis 1994, op. cit. (n. 53), nr. 112. Cf. Diocletian's price-edict, issued on behalf of the 'common good'. AE 1973, 526b = Freis nr. 151, 5. Cf. Garnsey 1988, op. cit. (n. 1), 259. See also P.Oxy. XLII 3048 (246 A.D.): "so that the city [Oxyrhynchos] can have its nourishment and the public necessities can be fulfilled".

⁶⁹ Olive oil: IG II/III² 1100 = SEG XV 108, XXI 501 = Freis 1994, op. cit. (n. 53), nr. 85. Fish: IG II/III² 1103 = Freis nr. 89. Cf. M.T. Boatwright, *Hadrian and the cities of the Roman empire* (Princeton 2000), 91 ff.

⁷⁰ Boatwright 2000, op. cit. (n. 69), 57 ff; 91 f.

⁷¹ IG II/III² 1103 = Freis 1994, op. cit. (n. 53), nr. 89.

save the grain supply, believed in their fear that the ports were closed and the convoys of grain held back.”⁷²

Hence, both the masses, as the food riots show, and the ruling elites, as witnessed by their market intervention, displayed deep concern for the level of food prices. In Rome as in other towns and cities, the main purpose of market regulation was to ensure that the market operated in such a way that supply was plentiful and prices low. Rioters demanded nothing else but a plentiful supply and the proper operation of the market. State authorities and local rulers were held responsible and rulers had accepted the responsibility for the workings of the food market. The process that led to the common acceptance of obligations by the rulers and expectations by the ruled was complex and possibly beyond the scope of our sources to unravel.

While the rulers of the city of Rome and of the towns and cities in the Greek East were guided by notions of what was right and wrong regarding the food market, they were also pragmatists. Regarding a dearth in Rome in 492 B.C., Dionysius of Halicarnassus states that:

“The consuls ... took great care to supply the city plentifully with both grain and other provisions, believing that the harmony of the masses depended on their well-being in this respect.”⁷³

This remark is clearly anachronistic for early-republican Rome, but Dionysius provides a very clear and direct statement that statesmen perceived the corn supply as a means to keep the masses quiet.⁷⁴ Plutarch leaves no doubt that Cato the Younger proposed an extension of the corn dole as a political move against Caesar. Nevertheless, Plutarch describes it as “an act of humanity and kindness”. It seems that moral obligations and political gain were not mutually exclusive.⁷⁵ The first century A.D. poet Lucan provides a very hostile parallel in his *Pharsalia* (3.55), which is an epic account of the Civil War of the years 49-48 B.C., which was won by Caesar, whom Lucan heartily despised.

⁷² Tacitus, *Historiae* 4.38. Cf. Procopius, *Bella* 5.25.11: “Since they were all men who worked with their hands, and all they had was what they got from day to day...” Cherry 1993, op. cit. (n. 19), 439 ff offers some estimates of the cost of living in late Republican Rome.

⁷³ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 7.20.

⁷⁴ Cf. Aristophanes, *Wasps* 715; Tacitus, *Annales* 1.2.1.

⁷⁵ Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 26.1. Cf. *Caesar* 8.4; *Moralia* 818d. Likewise, H. Kloft, H., ‘Das Problem der Getreideversorgung in den antiken Städten. Das Beispiel Oxyrhynchos’, in: H. Kloft, ed., *Sozialmaßnahmen und Fürsorge. Zur Eigenart antiker Sozialpolitik* (Horn 1988), 153.

Caesar “turned purposeful to peace and plans for snaring the affections of the hare-brained mob, assured that above all things the price of bread determines hate or favour: hunger alone makes cities free, and power’s buying fear when it feeds the people apathetic – a starving mob has no respect.”⁷⁶

The general acceptance of a ‘moral economy’ in the ancient world may partly originate in the notion of the city-states as communities of citizens sharing in the resources of the *polis* or *civitas*, which was still the ideal adhered to by Plato.⁷⁷ The development can best be traced in the Greek world, but we may assume that the Italic communities developed along similar lines.⁷⁸ In the archaic age, the power of the aristocrats was based on their control of the land, but it depended also on their capacity to allocate the resources that were required to ensure the survival of their dependants. Economic position and social role were indissolubly connected. However, in the classical period there was “an essential tension in the *polis*, with the interests of the economically dominant group coming into conflict with the interests of the state”.⁷⁹ In the classical *polis*, the authority of the ruling elite largely depended on their ability to provide food and other resources for their community. As the nature of society changed, and it did so most of all in the large cities that emerged along the Mediterranean coast, direct social ties between the elite and the masses disappeared. Food riots may be seen as a reflection of this development, as the urban masses had lost the close ties with a few families, but had gained independence and communicated now in a different way with authorities. By explicitly and publicly making the city’s food supply their obligation, the urban and imperial elites also made themselves the natural target of the discontented populace. The continuous experience of market intervention by the authorities and emergency measures by the wealthy citizens (in an official capacity or not) legitimised

⁷⁶ Lucan, *Pharsalia* 3,53 ff. Cf. Juvenal’s “bread and games”, *Satires* 10,81; Sallust, *Epistula ad Caesarem* 1.7.2.

⁷⁷ Plato, *Nomoi* 847e.

⁷⁸ See discussion and references in T. Cornell, *The beginnings of Rome. Rome and Italy from the Bronze Age to the Punic wars (c. 1000 – 264 BC)* (London 1995), 242 ff.

⁷⁹ P.D.A. Garnsey and I. Morris, ‘Risk and the polis. The evolution of institutionalised responses to food supply problems in the early Greek state’, in: P. Halstead and J. O’Shea, eds., *Bad year economics. Cultural responses to risk and uncertainty* (Cambridge 1989), 101. See also P. Halstead, ‘The economy has a normal surplus. Economic stability and social change among early farming communities of Thessaly, Greece’, *ibidem*, 77 ff. See also on the political origins of the corn dole in Rome: P. Erdkamp, ‘Feeding Rome or feeding Mars? A long-term approach to C. Gracchus’ *lex frumentaria*’, *Ancient Society* 30 (2000), 53–70.

and reinforced the notion that the leading families and representatives of Roman power – in Rome, primarily the emperor himself – were the ones to blame when the system failed.

Conclusions

Thompson's concept of a 'moral economy' proves valuable as an analytical tool of behaviour, ideas and communication in the Roman world. In their communication with the authorities of city and empire, rioters in Roman cities acted upon their notions of 'right' and 'wrong' regarding the urban food supply. These notions were shared and strengthened by the ruling elite, who publicly addressed the urban market as a moral issue that concerned the 'common good' of the community. However, the form these riots took was not solely determined by governmental regulation, in contrast to Thompson's conclusions regarding eighteenth century English riots. While ancient magistrates sometimes requisitioned food stores during shortages,⁸⁰ and thus may have legitimised plundering of civilian stocks by the urban mob, Roman authorities never encouraged local officials to be stoned to death or their houses burned. This feature makes food riots in Roman times unlike eighteenth century English food riots and may support Bohstedt's argument that food riots were based on more general ideas than Thompson allowed. In the end, the urban populace's sense of outrage and their fear of hunger determined the violent nature of food riots in ancient cities.

The ruling elite of the Roman world, which was a land-owning elite, agreed with their subjects on the morals of the market. Food riots did not stem from a fundamental difference of opinion between the populace and 'liberal' statesmen, as was the case at the height of rioting in eighteenth century Europe.⁸¹ The literary spokesmen of the elite – expressing themselves in language that Thompson would label 'paternalistic' – confirm a 'moral economy' that was not governed by profits, but by obligations. Interestingly, market regulation was always to the advantage of the urban populace; it was never in the commercial interest of the land-owning class.⁸² Though trade customs were levied as a source of state finances, import restrictions in order to keep out competition were unknown in Antiquity. During the Principate, there was indeed no need for such a policy, because

⁸⁰ For instance in Pisidian Antioch in 93 A.D.: AE 1925, 126 = Freis 1994, op. cit. (n. 53), nr. 65. Also in Oxyrhynchos in 191 A.D. (P. Oxy. XLVII 3339) and 246 A.D. (P.Oxy. XLII 3048). Cf. Thucydides 8.90.5; Cicero, *de domo sua* 25.

⁸¹ K.G. Persson, *Grain markets in Europe, 1500-1900* (Cambridge 1999), 151 ff.

⁸² Cf. Suetonius, *Augustus* 42.3.

their landownership offered the ruling elite sufficient economic security. A recent analysis of Pliny's letters has shown that "his overriding concern was to maintain the level of income adequate for his social obligations".⁸³ The attitudes of the elites of the ancient world were not only governed by economic considerations of profit, but at least as much by their aspiration of social eminence. The urban food supply constituted an important opportunity to gain and hold the respect and 'harmony' of the masses. In this sense, morals and pragmatism went hand in hand. Riots in antiquity seem not to have triggered a violent response from the authorities, except when the masses threatened to interfere in an unstable political situation, as in the Civil War of the early 30s B.C. and during the reign of Commodus. The ruling elite in the provincial towns and cities did not have any troops at their disposal to deal with mass riots. Their Roman overlords, moreover, expected them to rule their communities by influence and authority, while they supported prominent cities by subventions of corn and access to external markets. The ruling class of wealthy landowners realised that their social status depended largely upon their ability to act as benefactors and protectors of their communities. Faced with the possibility of a food riot by a violent mob, it was often opportune to live up to one's creed and to make sure that market supply was plentiful and the price 'just'.

Nijmegen, The Netherlands, January 2002

⁸³ Recently, D. Kehoe, *Investment, profit and tenancy. The jurists and the Roman agrarian economy* (Ann Arbor 1997), 25 ff (quote from p. 28). See also D. Kehoe, 'Investment in estates by upper-class landowners in early imperial Italy. The case of Pliny the Younger', in: H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg *et al.*, eds., *De agricultura. In memoriam Pieter Willem de Neeve (1945-1990)* (Amsterdam 1993), 214-237.