INTRODUCTION

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The sixth century, edited by Richard Hodges and William Bowden (Leiden, 1998) was the first product of the collective work of Group 3 of the 1993-8 European Science Foundation project, The Transformation of the Roman World. We initially intended it to be the first of three volumes on “Production, distribution and demand” with a second on the seventh century and a third on the eighth-ninth. In the end, however, we opted for a single volume as our post-Roman reference point, focussed on the eighth century, or, rather, the “long” eighth century of 680-830, a period which seemed to us to have both a general homogeneity and a long enough span to allow for the pinning down of differences. The memory of the intermediate period, 600-80, has not entirely left us: Simon Loseby, in particular, has written his article in this volume as a sequel to his sixth-century article, which enforces consideration of the seventh century; and of course several others have used that century as a starting-point for their analyses. All the same, the eighth century is in the foreground in this book. After an introductory chapter by John Moreland on current problems in the theory of exchange, we move roughly from North to South, beginning in Denmark and ending in Syria-Palestine. Our aim throughout has been to illustrate the problems of eighth-century production, distribution and demand in each region as a separate entity, which has to be seen in its own terms, not those of other regions and centuries. Comparative issues are, however, picked up in the conclusion. We intended, when planning this book, to use the eighth century as the focus for a discussion of what one might call the “post-transformation” period, so that we could see what had actually changed, in production, distribution and demand, after the definitive end of the Roman world-system. We think and hope that some of this aim has been achieved.

We have pursued this theme for five years of our lives, in (roughly) twice-yearly meetings located all across Europe and the Mediterranean, in Birka, Tunis, Mérida, Lausanne, S. Vincenzo al Volturno, Strasbourg, Ribe, Isernia, Istanbul and, finally, Utrecht. Until Isernia
in 1997, our group leader was Richard Hodges; when he had to bow out, I took over, with the remit of guiding the present book to completion. The group itself gradually changed composition, and in fact only four of the contributors to this volume were there at the start; furthermore, our two eastern Mediterranean contributors, John Haldon and Alan Walmsley, were invited at a late stage and did not come to group meetings at all. But it has to be said that the slow evolution of the membership of the group did not upset the unity and cumulative nature of its deliberations; like George Washington’s axe, it maintained its identity throughout. Much of the credit for this is due to the charisma of Richard Hodges’ leadership, and the quality and intensity of his Problemstellung; I feel that my role has simply been to routinise Richard’s charisma in the two years following. The rest of the credit is due to the group members themselves, who kept their eye on the main issues throughout, and whose collective discussions never failed to leave each of us feeling enthusiastic about returning to work on the project as we caught the flights home. The ESF project indeed fully succeeded in one of its primary tasks, to create an international community of scholars, which has continued to exchange ideas, and will—I hope and expect—go on doing so.

Participators in this book also included four scholars who had to withdraw at the final stages, for various reasons, Sonia Gutiérrez, Federico Marazzi, Paolo Delogu and Leslie Brubaker. Their contributions will be greatly missed by readers. It must be said, nonetheless, that the drafts they presented to the group sessions, and their active contributions to group discussions, inform the intellectual framing of the book quite as much as do the contributions that made it to press. We owe much of the group’s cohesion to them too.

I would also like to thank Vuokko Lepistö-Kirsilä for her calm and constructive direction at the ESF end when I began my tenure of Group 3 leadership, Julian Deahl of Brill for his similar calm and helpfulness at the editorial end, Marios Costambeys for his able translations of two articles, and my co-editor Inge Lyse Hansen for picking up all the slack.

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