The goal of this book is to probe the significance of local exchange in the economic life of Late Antiquity by focusing on inland regions not readily exposed to sea-borne commerce. These regions found it more difficult to participate in inter-regional trade because of high transport costs involved in moving goods either by river, or especially by road, in comparison to those moved by sea. Our conference held in London in 2010 sought to bring together papers presenting evidence of either production or exchange in regions that were either entirely landlocked, or which had both coastal and inland regions which could be compared. Thus, the relative significance of local versus interregional commerce might be revealed, suggesting which was more important as a motor of prosperity in different regions. The invited authors have engaged with this agenda to varying degrees. Some writers have stuck closely to evidence without speculating much about the economy; others have presented pertinent but fragmentary data sets which must be regarded as provisional; a few disagree with some of the premises of the conference, but for good solid reasons. Many have not respected a split between production and exchange, again with some justification. The papers of Fentress, Bessard, Evans, Bonifay and Vokaer have addressed the problématique of the meeting most closely, but all papers have a great number of pertinent observations to make.

In devising this conference, I intended to try to rebalance the study of the economy away from the now well-attested interregional trade in bulk agricultural goods, affecting littoral regions around the Mediterranean, which was driven either by political or commercial imperatives. Rather, the meeting sought to showcase and explain the vitality of inland regions marginal to both processes. I personally have never been entirely convinced of the explanatory power invested either in the Mediterranean
annona or in interregional commercial exchange, as generating the levels of prosperity seen under Roman rule. Yet, several of the contributors to this book—notably the historians Whittow and Sarris—still stress the role of the state, or still feel obliged to argue forcefully for the significant role of private trade against a model of fiscal dominance. Whilst to them the debate over the role of the state is still warm, to me it is not. The strength of ceramic evidence for trade across the non-fiscal axis of Africa and Syria is an incontrovertible argument against the dominance of the state, whilst the prosperity of many inland regions, outside this Mediterranean system, speaks against dependence on sea-borne trade. Thus, the time seems right to try to assess the relative significance of local commercial or political exchange versus interregional activity, through a careful consideration of field survey, excavation and ceramic data.

The regional specialists writing in this volume have begun this process, though far from all agree with my pre-conference premise. Bowes and Fentress imply that rural prosperity, in their sub-regions, does not owe much to the direct impact of the annona, whether that supplying Rome or that supplying Trier. Yet, both of them accept the significance of taxation and government expenditure in the economy, and see a substantial role for the state in generating economic activity. This might be in organising supplies for the army, on a regional basis, which in Britain is attested by many classes of pottery, or in Syria is attested by one amphora type. As such, the power of taxation and state spending as an economic stimulus is confirmed, even within regions. Such directed exchange might have led to the parallel development of private commerce, as is proposed by Vaccaro, following others, for the West Mediterranean, or it might not, as in most of Britain. Even the presence of social differentiation and patronage afforded by the agents of the state (the provincial government) might produce rural prosperity and villa building, if Bowes’ analysis of central-western Spain is correct. Thus, the state can be a key stimulus, even in

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3 Not annona: Bowes (this volume) 192–99. On the impact of provincial government for Bowes and Fentress see n. 19 below.

4 Organising army supplies, in Britain: see Evans (this volume) 422–26; in Syria: see Vokaer (this volume) 578–81.

5 Imperial annona providing the stimulus for massive private commerce: Vaccaro (this volume) 249–51; entertained in Izdebski (this volume) 341–42. This is a much more positive role than commerce simply piggy-backing on state ships.