CHAPTER 1

The Benefits of Market Integration: Five Centuries of Prosperity in Roman Italy

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1 Rome in World History

Roman history does not sit very comfortably in the modern study of history. Many ancient historians do not work in History departments, but in Classics departments, and the same applies to classical archaeologists. Thus, there is real history, and there is ancient history. There is real archaeology and there is classical archaeology. These distinctions do indeed involve a value judgment, where ancient history and classical archaeology are of the inferior kind. And to be honest, there is, or perhaps rather was, some truth in that. Traditionally, both ancient historians and classical archaeologists have been conceptually and methodologically less sophisticated than modern historians or pre-historical archaeologists. They did not and often still do not engage in the wider debates on world history or the nature of historical writing. They are often still stuck in the self referential universe of classical civilization. But where does that classical civilization fit in larger narratives? Why does it matter that we know about it, rather than about the histories of other peoples in the world? Is there a special reason, and if there is, are we telling the right story?

For centuries, and ever since the Renaissance, ancient civilization, and ancient Rome in particular, was a civilization to admire. And that was not for nothing. Imagine what it was like to live in Renaissance Rome, with some 35,000 people in the ruins of a city that had once housed 1 million. Roman civilization not only gave Europe a religion, but also a sophisticated legal system, examples of architectural style, literature, philosophy, and the art of modern warfare. This is not to deny the unique contribution of mediaeval culture and society, but we must acknowledge the importance of classical examples in the shaping of post-mediaeval European culture and society.

The admiration for antiquity lasted largely unchallenged until the Industrial Revolution, when, for the first time, antiquity’s achievements were unequivocally surpassed. They were surpassed technically, economically, or militarily with modern warfare such as in the American civil war and the advent of the machine gun. Within half a century life expectancy in the more advanced
nations roughly doubled, resulting in major population growth: during the nineteenth century, world population almost doubled. With the rise of modern art, antiquity also lost its cultural appeal. Politically, the rise of socialism and mass democracy mark a similar watershed. In short, antiquity was truly left behind, to become a subject for antiquarians.

It was the achievement of French historians of the *Annales* school and of British historical demographers like Peter Laslett and Tony Wrigley to demonstrate that the preindustrial past is indeed a foreign land, and a world we have lost. The man who most clearly underscored this for classical antiquity was Moses Finley: antiquity was not like the modern world, far from it. The strength of his analysis was always that it was deeply rooted in his interest in and commitment to the modern world; his interest in the rise of the modern world was fed by an uneasy mix of Marxism and Weberian sociology. So, in contrast to modern historians such as Tony Wrigley who emphasize the essential discontinuity represented by the Industrial Revolution, Finley was inspired by Marx, Weber and Sombart to locate the roots of modernity in the earlier rise of the mediaeval commercial bourgeoisie.¹ For them, modernization was a much longer and drawn out process rather than a sudden break with the past.

As a consequence, classical antiquity was relegated to the role of primitive precursor, and its economic history became one of what it was not: it lacked interdependent markets, and trade and manufacturing were of limited importance because they were mostly local and small-scale. The explanation for that was a social and cultural one: overriding cultural norms prevented the elite from participation in trade and manufacturing, leaving these to social outsiders like freed slaves. As a result, trade and manufacturing had to do without elite capital investment. Not only did they, therefore, remain small, but there was also little technical innovation outside the world of the military. Again, Finley’s explanation was a cultural one: without an economically rational commercial bourgeoisie there was no interest in innovation. As a result, there was no economic growth. So not only was there no Smithian growth, but there was no technology-led growth either. The elite remained a land owning elite, extracting rents from a landed property that was managed quite traditionally, and without an eye for technical improvements or economic efficiency. These were land owners with a rentier mentality and not a business mentality. On the institutional side this underdevelopment was matched with an underdeveloped financial and monetary system.