The Global Roman Countryside: Connectivity and Community

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1 Introduction

How were the rural populations of Italy integrated into the changing economic structures of the Roman period? To what extent did cities and urban populations drive change? When, where, and by whom was investment made in infrastructure? What was the impact of economic development on rural communities? Such questions about the Roman past have also been asked about other historical periods. For example, evaluating the impact of expanding capitalist economies on the integration of the agrarian empires and peasant populations of the 18th century AD, historians have come to contrasting conclusions.¹ One group has drawn attention to the evolution of a ‘dual economy’, whereby urban populations pulled away socially and economically from rural populations, leaving the latter isolated and stubbornly poor. Conversely, exponents of World Systems Theory have argued that it was precisely the integration of these rural communities into the industrializing economy that created their economic dependency and underdevelopment. The significance of this example is that, in trying to answer very similar questions about rural integration, historians of more recent periods with access to more and better quality data, have failed to find agreement. From the outset, this is a useful reminder of the scale of the challenge involved in the study of Roman rural integration.

Fast forward 250 years to the present. Scholars studying the industrial and heavily urbanized contemporary world have focused relatively little attention on rural economies and their integration, concentrating instead on concepts such as the ‘global city’. Indeed, globalization and rural studies have been seen as more or less mutually exclusive: cities are the drivers and loci of globalization, while rural landscapes are the collateral damage: de-peasantization, emigration, and environmental destruction. The policies which promote globalization and the integration of rural communities are particularly contentious. Is

¹ See Bayly (2004, 410).
more globalization part of the solution: bringing investment, improved infrastructure, better health and education, and new market opportunities? Or is more globalization the problem: undercutting peasant farmers, creating market dependency, stimulating rural-urban migration, and degrading the environment?

Recognition of this urban bias in globalization studies has led a number of scholars to develop a stronger rural perspective. The present chapter draws on studies which have sought to ‘ruralize’ the study of contemporary globalization and explores these ideas in relation to the Roman past. The suggestion that studies of the modern world—and, especially, of globalization—may be of value for understanding pre-modern times is controversial; but it should be noted that a number of existing studies of Roman and other pre-industrial societies have already incorporated some of the vocabulary—and even concepts—of globalization. At the very least, then, explicit exploration of these ideas in relation to Roman rural integration may help to expose underlying assumptions; it may also identify connections between aspects of existing research, help reformulate questions, or open new avenues for investigation.

To this end, the first half of this chapter explores the notion of the ‘global countryside’ as a possible approach to the rural integration in Roman Italy. The second half takes two specific social and economic themes—connectivity and community—through which to explore in greater detail how the archaeological evidence for rural integration might be reinterpreted.

2 The Character of the ‘Global Countryside’

The notion of ‘Roman globalization’ has been around for at least a decade and a half, and continues to gain popularity. Some scholars have drawn loosely on the language of globalization (including as a synonym for Romanization); others have gone further and sought explicitly to apply the underlying theoretical concepts. Debate on this issue cannot be reviewed here, suffice to say that globalization should not be taken as an attribute unique to the contemporary world, but rather as a series of trends—such as time-space compression and relativizing perceptions of self and others—which can be traced back into the past and which varied in scale and intensity. There are two key advantages of

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2 E.g. Witcher (2000).
3 E.g. Hitchner (2008); Pitts and Versluys (2015).
4 See papers in Hodos (2017).