Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity – Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance
JAIRUS BANAJI
Reviewed by PETER SARRIS

The history of the Mediterranean world in late antiquity, roughly from the third century AD through to the seventh, has, in many ways, been transformed over the course of the past forty years. A period once regarded as no more than an unedifying postscript to the classical glories of Greece and Rome has, instead, come to be seen in ever more positive terms. This academic phenomenon has been particularly pronounced within the English-speaking world, where the development of the field can largely be ascribed to the work of two scholars: A.H.M. Jones and Peter Brown. The publication in 1964 of Jones’s monumental study *The Later Roman Empire – A Social and Economic Survey*, described at the time as ‘the Jones report on the later Roman empire’, substantially opened up the field to an Anglophone readership. ¹ Jones’s ability to paint ‘broad-brush’ history without losing control of the specificity and variety of the facts in which his analysis was rooted bears favourable comparison with such triumphs of continental scholarship as Marc Bloch’s *Feudal Society*. At the same time, what proved to be Jones’s novel emphasis on the success with which Roman emperors of the fourth century overcame the social, economic and military crises that had beset the Empire in the third cast the development of late-antique state structures in a radically different light. Peter Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity* – first published in 1971 – pioneered a parallel reconsideration of the cultural history of the world that was once Rome. Just as, on Brown’s model, late-antique intellectual and religious evolution represented the culmination of the Classical past, so too did late-antique political culture represent a building upon, rather than an abandonment of, what had gone before, a process that was to find its fullest flowering in the sophisticated urbanity of the palatial culture of the Abbasid Caliphs of eighth-century Baghdad. Brown’s enticing account turned inside-out his readers’ mental parameters of the late-antique world, just as the Islamic conquests of the seventh century had overturned that world’s political and military frontiers.

¹ Brown 1967, pp. 327–43.
Since the 1970s, it has been Brown’s cultural emphasis, rather than Jones’s social, economic and institutional one, that has most influenced scholarship, and which has most set the tone for late-antique studies. This has, at least in part, been due to wider historiographical trends. The emergence of the ‘linguistic turn’ as an obligatory point of reference for historians, and the vogue for varieties of structuralist and poststructuralist forms of analysis, led to a more general veering towards cultural history on the part of professional historians in the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, the ascendancy of postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s created an atmosphere that was deeply inimical to the study of economic history, with its supposedly necessarily positivist assumptions.

This relative neglect of late-antique economic history can certainly be seen to have hindered historical-materialist approaches to the period. Given the character of late antiquity as an age of transition, the question of the development of late-antique state structures, governing classes and social and economic systems is necessarily of great comparative interest to historians operating within the historical-materialist tradition. It represents a potentially fruitful field of research for those concerned with constructing a taxonomy of historical societies, for those interested in understanding how and why societies change, or for those concerned with the related issue of ‘modes of production’.

In a sense, this is one of the major reasons why the publication of Jairus Banaji’s *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity – Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance* should be so warmly welcomed – it marks a major and significant return to late-antique economic history. Moreover, it is the work of a scholar of broad ranging and sympathetic interests, one who knows precisely what is important and why. Banaji reconnects us to Jones. Indeed, what appears to have led Banaji in this direction was his encounter in the early 1980s with the greatest work of one of A.H.M. Jones’s most gifted and stimulating pupils, Geoffrey de Ste Croix, whose *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* Banaji describes himself as having read ‘with, like everyone, obvious awe, but with a sense of latent dissatisfaction at what seemed, still, a traditional picture of late antiquity’.

For de Ste Croix, the history of the later Roman Empire was characterised by an ever more pronounced intensification of the exploitation of the peasantry, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the population of the Mediterranean world at this time. On de Ste Croix’s model, this intensity of exploitation rendered the rural population at best apathetic to the fate of Rome. Whether or not one agrees with de Ste Croix’s analysis of the response of the peasantry to the foreign invasions of the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, there is, in fact, little if anything in Banaji’s book that contradicts de Ste Croix’s core claim as to the intensification of exploitation. Rather, if de Ste Croix’s work spurred Banaji on to undertake his study, the real