Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-63279-9 - Trade in Classical Antiquity
Neville Morley
Excerpt
More information

CHAPTER 1

Trade and the ancient economy

In the early second century BCE a ship arrived at the urban harbour of Pisa, having made its way up from North Africa via Sicily and Campania. Before it could be fully unloaded, however, it collided with part of the harbour structure, probably during a storm, and sank rapidly; at least one member of the crew went down with the vessel, along with some of the animals that made up an important part of its cargo. Over the years, tides dispersed most of the remains; the entire harbour became silted up and then forgotten until 1998, when preliminary construction work on a new regional headquarters for the Italian State Railway brought the complex back to light. Along with other harbour structures, and at least another fifteen vessels ranging in date from the third century BCE to the fifth century CE, archaeologists uncovered the damaged pier and some of the large timbers of the ship that had crashed into it, along with fragments of its cargo and the personal effects of its crew, and some human bones (Bruni 2000).

As in most ancient shipwrecks, the bulk of the finds were pottery. The ship had been carrying Graeco-Italic wine amphorae from the Campanian region, which provide the main evidence for its date, and Punic amphorae from North Africa that may, to judge from the number of pigs' shoulder bones found in the wreckage, have contained preserved pork joints. Other pottery found on board included four *thymiateria*, moulded terracotta incense burners, reinforcing the North African connection, along with black-glazed crockery from Volterra and two painted vases from Iberia. The contents of the amphorae may have been part of the crew's provisions rather than destined for trade; the ship's main cargo seems to have been livestock, since the archaeologists uncovered numerous bones in the wreckage, including those of three horses and a young lioness.

What does a shipwreck like this tell us about trade in classical antiquity? The answers that would be given by different historians vary widely – including the possibility that the ship had little to do with 'trade' as it is generally understood. It depends on the questions that we ask of such evidence, and, more importantly, on our assumptions about the nature of the ancient economy, which provide the context in which we interpret such a find. At the most basic level, we can simply note that particular objects were being moved from one area of the Mediterranean to another; and many historical accounts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that deal with trade do focus on compiling lists of 'the objects of trade' as an end in itself. Such accounts relied more or less exclusively on literary evidence; when Pliny the Elder noted that, for example, Spanish wool was renowned for its pure black colour, it indicates that at the very least the wool was known outside its region of origin and probably was shipped into Rome (*Natural History* 8.190–3). H. J. Loane's *Industry and Commerce of the City of Rome* (1938) used such evidence to compile long lists of imports; drawing on Pliny (*NH* 8.53) and on historical accounts (including *SHA Hadr*. 19.5), she concluded that 'an import of considerable bulk that came with regularity to the urban docks were animals for the games at Rome' (1938: 55). Lions are said to come mainly from North Africa, with some from Syria; the first recorded import was in 186 BCE. The shipment of such animals was important enough to appear in iconography; a sarcophagus of the third century CE depicts a ship coming into port with three cages on deck, each containing a lion (Toynbee 1973: 61). Through the Pisa excavation, archaeology confirms and illustrates the literary record, with the import of a lioness in a ship that certainly came from North Africa and was probably Punic in origin, dating to not long after the trade is said to have begun.

THE GREAT DEBATE

The limitations of this approach to the subject are obvious; it is what M. I. Finley referred to as 'reportage and crude taxonomy, antiquarianism in its narrowest sense' (1985: 66). The literary evidence for the movement of goods is almost entirely confined to a few great cities such as Rome, Alexandria and Athens (in this context, the Pisa wreck offers a useful indication that the practice of holding wild-beast shows spread to other cities quite soon after their institution in the capital). Further, such an approach tells us little or nothing about the significance of such traffic; it cannot give any indication of its frequency (the sources note the exceptional, whether an exceptionally exotic import or some exceptionally lavish games, not the everyday), nor of its profitability or contribution to the urban economy relative to other goods, nor of its development over time (since it is necessary to draw together every fragment of evidence from every period). Historians of more

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-63279-9 - Trade in Classical Antiquity
Neville Morley
Excerpt
More information

recent periods can draw on detailed records of imports and exports on a year-by-year basis, charting the fortunes of a city's economy and even those of individual merchant families; ancient historians are left with the bald statement that Rome sometimes imported lions from Africa. Finley again: 'every statement or calculation to be found in an ancient text, every artefact finds a place, creating a morass of unintelligible, meaningless, unrelated "facts"' (1985: 61).

Such lists of imports have, however, acquired greater significance when incorporated into wider discussions of the development of the ancient economy as a whole. Taking a broader geographical and chronological perspective raises different questions: not whether we can chart the frequency and economic significance of the movement of a particular good to a particular location, but whether we can chart the development of 'trade and commerce' through the increasing frequency and diversity of traffic of all kinds. Shipments of lions to Italy are not important in themselves but rather as an indicator of the scale of movement of more basic goods – the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, which the sources record because of its exceptional nature while ignoring the vast amount of less glamorous activity taking place across the Mediterranean. A society which regularly transports lions from Africa to Italy must be one in which trade has developed to an impressive degree, across the empire. This is the picture of ancient commercial activity offered, for example, in M. I. Rostovtzeff's *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*:

> In the second century, the commerce of Gaul and with it agriculture and industry reached an unprecedented state of prosperity. To realize the brilliant development of commerce and industry in Gaul, it is sufficient to read the inscriptions in the twelfth and thirteenth volumes of the *Corpus* [*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*] and to study the admirable collection of sculptures and bas-reliefs found in the country . . . The inscriptions of Lyons, for example, whether engraved on stone monuments or on various items of common use ('*instrumenta domestica*'), and particularly those which mention the different trade associations, reveal the great importance of the part played by the city in the economic life of Gaul and of the Roman Empire as a whole. Lyons was not only the great clearing house for the commerce in corn, wine, oil, and lumber; she was also one of the largest centres in the Empire for the manufacture and distribution of most of the articles consumed by Gaul, Germany and Britain. (Rostovtzeff 1957: 165–6)

One might reasonably label such an approach to the ancient evidence as 'optimistic'. It is more commonly characterised as 'modernising', in so far as historians like Rostovtzeff not only identify a high level of economic activity in the Hellenistic and Roman periods but unselfconsciously regard it as basically comparable to more recent economic activity – 'the modern development, in this sense, differs from the ancient only in quantity and not in quality' (Rostovtzeff 1926: 10; cf. Hopkins 1983a; Cartledge 1998; Morley 2004: 33–50). 'Trade' as an activity is largely taken for granted as the expression of a natural human instinct to exchange goods and pursue profit; the movement of goods is automatically assumed to entail the involvement of professional merchants, the more successful of whom came to play a significant role in the politics of their societies and to influence the commercial policies of ancient states. Once the role of trade and traders in ancient economic development has been charted, the key question becomes that of the reasons for antiquity's failure to take the final step and become a fully modern economy:

> Why was the victorious advance of capitalism stopped? Why was machinery not invented? Why were the business systems not perfected? Why were the primal forces of primitive economy not overcome? They were gradually disappearing; why did they not disappear completely? To say that they were quantitatively stronger than in our own time does not help us to explain the main phenomenon. (Rostovtzeff 1957: 538)

This view of antiquity can be, and has been, criticised on numerous points. For the 'primitivists', following writers like Weber and Finley, the ancient economy was qualitatively as well as quantitatively different from the modern: not only was there less trade, but it was a different kind of trade, with a different relationship to other areas of society. Classical antiquity was a pre-industrial agrarian society in which the vast majority of the population lived barely above subsistence level; the consequent lack of mass demand, coupled with the high costs of transport, meant that the only goods worth trading were high-value, low-bulk luxuries for the wealthy elite and their dependants (animals for the games clearly fall into this category). Many goods were in fact not traded but 'redistributed' by agents of the state or the nobility; the lioness at Pisa may have been a gift from one aristocrat to another or obtained on commission, rather than being an object of market trade. Traders were poor, dependent, foreign and socially marginalised; ancient states had no discernible commercial policies other than ensuring that they received sufficient food supplies; and trade was always an insignificant part of the economy – even at the height of the Roman Empire one can scarcely imagine many people making a living from transporting lions. The main question from this perspective is not the failure of antiquity to 'take off' into modernity but the lack of any significant economic development; this may be attributed, among other things, to the absence of economic rationality – social status rather than profit was the main goal of human activity – or the dominance of slavery in the economy, or the particular nature of the ancient city as a centre of consumption rather than production.

The problem with this long-running debate – the reason why it has yet to be resolved, and why historians are becoming increasingly frustrated with it (see Morris 1994) – is that the available evidence is inconclusive, because the interpretation of any individual example depends on prior assumptions about the nature of the ancient economy. An example of a trader becoming a member of his city council (*SEG* XVII 828, a 'councillor and shipowner' from Nicomedia in the province of Bithynia, in modern Turkey) can always be proclaimed as the tip of the iceberg, suggesting that there were many others like him whose epitaphs have not survived, or dismissed as an exception. The absence of clear evidence for the involvement of any senatorial families in commerce can be taken at face value as evidence that they did not exist, or explained – with supporting material from early modern Europe – as the natural result of the Roman elite's suspicion of trade: anyone in that position would naturally seek to disguise the commercial origins of the family fortune (D'Arms 1981; cf. Whittaker 1985).

The great advances in archaeology over the last few decades, especially in the analysis of the forms and fabrics of pottery and the excavation of shipwrecks, and the enormous quantities of material that have been collected and classified, have made surprisingly little difference to this debate (Peacock and Williams 1986; Greene 1997). The ability to identify the points of origin of different pottery containers now makes it impossible to deny that some goods were being moved around at least some areas of the ancient Mediterranean in impressive quantities. Even in the eighth century BCE, for example, 'SOS' amphorae from Attica (named after the decoration that appears on the necks of some of them), probably containing high-quality olive oil, are found in Crete, Cyprus, Sicily, Italy and Spain, while the remains of tens of thousands of Italian Dressel 1 wine amphorae dating to the second and first centuries BCE have been recovered from the River Saône in Gaul (Johnston and Jones 1978; Tchernia 1983). The archaeological perspective is both chronologically and geographically variable, something that is due partly to local conditions of preservation and discovery: a shipwreck is more likely to be noticed – and is easier to excavate – along the south coast of France than off the coast of North Africa, so that shipwreck data are biased towards the north-western Mediterranean, and differences between regions or periods may reflect the nature of the evidence rather than the level of traffic (Parker 1992). Similarly, goods that were transported in more or less indestructible pottery containers are far more visible than perishable goods such as textiles or grain carried in sacks, although it is widely accepted that pottery often rode piggy-back on other cargoes and so can serve as a proxy for other items (see Fulford 1984: 135–6 on grain imports into Roman Britain). The movement of livestock, whether animals or human slaves, is almost completely invisible. For all these uncertainties, however, archaeological evidence is far more copious and far less susceptible to bias than anything to be found in the literary sources.

The problem arises when one tries to go beyond acknowledging the existence of inter-regional connections and the widespread distribution of goods to assess their economic significance. Briefly, archaeology shows that goods are being moved, but rarely by whom, or in what context. No historian would now follow Finley's wholesale rejection of archaeological evidence, on the basis of the fact that thirty-nine sherds of *terra sigillata* scattered over a 400-metre area on the Swedish island of Gotland were eventually found to belong to the same bowl (1999: 33), but it is difficult to refute Whittaker's equally sceptical argument that the distribution of wine amphorae in the Roman period might simply represent aristocrats moving their own produce between different estates rather than market trade (1989). Such redistributive practices are certainly recorded and conform better to what we know of ancient values and ideology than does market trade; modernisers of course reply that the literary sources which disparage trade are the product of the landed elite and cannot be assumed to be representative of all sectors of society. Tens of thousands of pottery sherds confirm their belief in the high development of ancient commerce, but they are insufficient to dismiss the arguments of the primitivists as to why trade could not have been large-scale or economically significant in a pre-industrial society with limited demand (Tchernia 1989).

TRADE AND MODERNITY

Despite the unbridgeable differences in their perspectives on what antiquity was like, which are often reinforced by very different conceptions about how it should be studied, primitivists and modernisers do share a number of important assumptions. In the first place, there is now general agreement that antiquity was predominantly an agrarian society, even if disagreement remains on the significance of this point. As Cartledge puts it:

> Primitivists tend to be trying to explain how the 98% of Greeks 'economized', that is, secured a bare livelihood within the framework of the ideally (yet rarely)

self-sufficient *oikos* or household; whereas the modernizers focus instead on the 2% of exceptions for whom macro-economic activity at a regional or international level was the sole or primary source of their wealth. (1998: 6)

However, this is not simply a matter of emphasis and scholarly preference; rather, it is central to what both sides regard as the crucial question, whether antiquity should be considered 'modern' or 'not-modern'. This approach rests on a number of related assumptions, each of which is also found in modern discussions of economic structures and in particular in discussions of 'economic development' in the Third World (see Hill 1986). The first is that this dichotomy is indeed the right way to think about economic systems: the industrialised, capitalist West represents the only feasible model for successful economic development, so that the choice is between 'modernity' along western lines and non-modern stagnation. Secondly, it is assumed that the modernity of an economy should be understood primarily in terms of the place of trade within it, rather than in terms of, say, production or patterns of consumption. 'In order to understand the ancient economy, we need to know the part played in it by trade and traders' (Hopkins 1983a: ix); when western governments and financial institutions advise Third World countries on 'modernisation' – or attach conditions to financial aid packages – these invariably involve shifting production towards marketable goods rather than subsistence crops and the removal of restrictions on the market (see Stiglitz 2002). Trade is regarded as a natural human impulse, so that its development is assumed to be inevitable once 'impediments' are removed. In considering pre-modern societies, what is assumed to matter is their resemblance to a particular version of the history of the emergence of the modern economy, in which trade is given a central role.

According to this account, which owes a great deal to Max Weber, trade played a crucial role in the emergence of the late medieval city as a politically independent institution; the separation of town and country then fostered the development of a distinctive mentality emphasising rational decision-making and valuing the accumulation of wealth, and the emergence of a new class of men who put this into practice through their entrepreneurial activities (Weber 1958; Braudel 1982; a critique in Holton 1986). The imperatives of trade and the capitalist mentality then drove the European expansion across the globe in search of new and cheaper sources of merchandise and, increasingly, new markets for the products of Europe; it underpinned the Industrial Revolution as the mediator between demand and supply, providing the incentive for innovation and investment; it continues to be the lifeblood of the world economy, supporting the global division of labour that ensures that resources are exploited as efficiently as possible (see Wallerstein 1974, 1980).

Many elements of this account have been questioned, but that is beside the point; this version remains the yardstick against which antiquity is regularly, if often only implicitly, measured in the primitivist–modernising dispute. This implicit comparison not only explains the prominence of trade in the argument, but also some of the particular (if not peculiar) characteristics of the way that trade is discussed. For example, the question of whether aristocrats were involved in trade or whether traders ever joined the political elite may appear tangential to arguments about the economic importance of ancient trade, but it is driven by a comparison with the late medieval trading cities of the Hanseatic League, ruled by merchant families and hence, according to Weber, the breeding grounds of the 'Protestant ethic' that drove the development of capitalism (1992). On the basis of this historical comparison, modernisers like Rostovtzeff tend to assume without question that traders will develop and promulgate their own set of bourgeois values; primitivists, on the other hand, downplay the significance of trade because there is little trace in antiquity of any alternative ideology to that of the landed elite. Unless the wider intellectual context is taken into account, both arguments seem largely beside the point. The same can be said of the debate about whether ancient cities were centres of consumption or production, or about the existence of a narrowly defined 'economic rationalism'; vital questions if one assumes that the choice lies only between 'modern' and 'not-modern' and that later medieval and early modern Europe are the only valid models of developing modernity, but otherwise a distraction from more productive questions.

The third assumption underlying this debate, which does not always sit comfortably with the second, is that 'trade' needs to be understood in terms of the modern ideal – driven solely by the profit motive and market forces, unfettered by social or political constraints, encompassing every aspect of material existence – rather than any historical or contemporary reality. This leads both modernisers and primitivists to build arguments around some allegedly clear distinctions, the implications of which are unexamined and taken for granted: public and private, luxury and staple, self-sufficiency and economic rationality. For example, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3, it is simply assumed that only trade in staple goods had real economic significance; luxury trade is regarded as intrinsically superfluous and trivial, despite the importance of non-essential items such as spices, tea and sugar in the development of trade in the early modern period. Only pure profit maximisation is accepted as economically rational, so that self-sufficiency (which may be a perfectly rational strategy) is dismissed as unproductive; the involvement of the state in any activity is assumed automatically to work against the possibility of proper economic development. Perhaps the most problematic distinction is that between the economic and the social; it is certainly a valid criticism of modernising approaches that 'the economy' was not an entirely separate sphere of human activity in antiquity (see Finley 1999: 17–34) – but this is equally true of the present day. The fact that ancient trade was influenced by concerns with social status and other cultural factors does not mean that it was therefore not really an economic activity.

One of the aims of this book is to explore and break down some of these distinctions, and to identify what distinguished trade in classical antiquity not only from the modern world but from other pre-modern societies. The contrast between ancient and modern represents one way of identifying issues that may need to be addressed, but it is not an end in itself. Rather as the World Bank refuses to consider whether alternative approaches to economic management might be more appropriate in some cases than their doctrine of free trade (bearing in mind that most western countries followed wholeheartedly protectionist policies while they were building their industrial bases: Madeley 2000; Stiglitz 2002), so ancient historians have tended to fall into a dichotomy of modernity or stagnation, rather than considering whether different pre-modern societies might have their own dynamics of development and laws of motion. The primitivists are clearly correct in their insistence on the need to understand ancient trade in the context of a pre-industrial, predominantly agrarian society with limited technical resources and strict limits on the possibility of increasing surplus production (Wrigley 1988). However, the modernisers are right to focus on the 2 per cent of activity that was not wholly devoted to subsistence: the ways in which the surplus production of ancient society was mobilised, managed and consumed – including the role of trade and traders – is one of the key things that distinguishes antiquity from other pre-industrial agrarian societies. To consider trading activity simply as a 'veneer' on the vast mass of subsistence-orientated activity begs the question: would classical antiquity have taken the same form and developed in the same manner if there had been no system for the widespread distribution of material goods?

DEFINITIONS

However, this does itself beg a further question, insofar as so much of the primitivist–modernising debate involves arguments about which activities can appropriately be labelled 'trade'. Trade is clearly a form of exchange, in which goods are passed from one person to another, but it is not the only form. Anthropologists have distinguished between reciprocity, redistribution and market exchange (trade) as different modes for the distribution of goods within a society (Polanyi 1957); one of the most important contributions of the primitivist school has been to emphasise the crucial role played by both reciprocity (the exchange of gifts) and redistribution (whether by powerful individuals or by states) in the ancient economy, where the modernisers tended to regard any form of exchange as trade. However, too narrow a definition of trade can be as misleading as an excessively broad one; if the label 'trade' is, for example, restricted to 'the purchase and movement of goods without the knowledge or identification of a further purchaser' (Snodgrass 1983: 26) then it was indeed a rare phenomenon through much of antiquity – but is it correct to insist that only the activities of independent professional traders should count as 'trade', excluding the case of a farmer like Hesiod transporting his own goods to market (*Works and Days* 618–94)? At the other end of the scale, is there a meaningful distinction to be drawn – presumably on the basis of scale of activity – between 'trade' and 'commerce'?

For some purposes, such distinctions are extremely important. The cultural meaning of exchange from the perspective of the actors involved is usually affected by the 'social distance' between them – that is, the Greeks and Romans did regard gift exchange between friends as clearly different from obtaining goods through the market, even if in practice the distinction was not always clear-cut (Sahlins 1972; von Reden 1995a: 2–3). The extent to which exchange activities in a given society involved some full-time specialist traders can be an important indicator of their degree of development. In other instances, however, the distinction between market trade and other forms of exchange may be less significant. In an agrarian economy with high transport costs, evidence for the movement of any goods over significant distances, through whatever mechanisms, is interesting, raising questions about the way that this portion of the agricultural surplus is being deployed and about the implications of the development of 'connectivity'. The environmental structures that create conditions of scarcity and the uneven distribution of resources, thus creating a need for exchange, are common to the different forms of exchange that are developed; so too the patterns of consumption and desire that determine the value of the objects involved. For much of this book, I shall be considering the broad subject of 'distribution', encompassing all the different ways in which this may be managed; later chapters will pay more attention to the distinction between trade and other forms of exchange – above all because this distinction