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978-1-107-10194-4 - Exploring the Economy of Late Antiquity: Selected Essays

Jairus Banaji

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EXPLORING THE ECONOMY OF LATE ANTIQUITY

This collection of essays, by leading historian Jairus Banaji, provides a stimulating rebuttal to the prevailing minimalism in late antique studies. Together, they strike a balance between the wide lens and more specialised discussion, expanding on the perspective and argumentation laid out in an earlier book, *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity* (2001). Successive chapters discuss the scale of the late Roman gold currency, the economic nature of the aristocracy, the importance of trade, relations between state and ruling class and the problem of continuity into the early Middle Ages. A substantial introduction pulls together the themes of the book into a coherent synopsis, while the preface clarifies the broad aims behind the study. The book as a whole deploys a wide range of sources in various languages and is intended for ancient historians, students of late antiquity and economic historians more generally.

JAIRUS BANAJI is Research Professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He has published on a wide range of subjects and very different periods, and his last book, *Theory as History* (2010), won the 2011 Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize.

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Preface

In the past three decades a wide range of disciplines and subdisciplines from numismatics and monetary history to ceramics, Byzantine papyrology, late antique/medieval archaeology and cultural and religious history have converged to revamp the history of the fourth to seventh centuries into a general picture of what Bryan Ward-Perkins has called ‘the new Late Antiquity’. Since nothing in history stays new for long, this may not be the best expression to use to demarcate the model of a fascinating and vibrant period in human history, but it refers and is intended to refer, clearly, to the watershed that separates Rostovtzeff from the kind of history and archaeology that saw a profusion of new scholarship especially from the 1980s on. Even as late as 1973 when Finley published *The Ancient Economy*, there was not a glimmer of the notion that late antiquity might be worth looking at in its own terms rather than the sombre images of the abridged paragraph that ends the (first edition of his) book. In 1969 Fausto Zevi and André Tchernia had published a seminal piece of research on the cylindrical containers at Ostia that were manufactured in the Sahel (Tunisia) and carried massive quantities of olive oil and other commodities to markets elsewhere in the Mediterranean.¹ And of course Peter Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity* appeared in 1971. What both works suggested in rather different ways was a world bubbling with vastly more energy, certainly ‘less depleted by catastrophe’ and more sophisticated and interesting for all sorts of reasons than whole generations of scholars had led themselves and others to suppose.

‘Late antiquity’ has thus become one of those great continents of history opened up to exploration only relatively recently. Moreover, historians of late antiquity have never had a wider range of resources to work with than in the past decade or two, with the explosion of archaeological sources

¹ F. Zevi and A. Tchernia, ‘Amphores de Byzacène au Bas-Empire’, *Antiquités africaines* 3 (1969), 173–214.

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and a huge and rapid proliferation of secondary literature throughout the subject. Yet in one sense they remain *less* certain than ever about these centuries and it is worth noting this uncertainty because it resonates with ambiguity. Bryan Ward-Perkins constructs a narrative in which the collapse of Roman power inaugurates centuries of ‘dramatic decline in economic sophistication and prosperity’,² whereas in Michael McCormick’s recent work the ‘fall’ of Rome is rapidly succeeded by the Middle Ages and a new surge of creativity, and this already by the fifth or sixth centuries.³ It goes without saying that both scholars are talking about the west, the same set of territories over an identical time span.

Historians of late Rome have been well known to vacillate between two more or less distinct images of the late empire, either applauding its novelty and dynamism, as Mazarino famously did in the 1950s, or foregrounding the mammoth state and its insatiable appetites, an ‘omnipotent and obtuse colossus’⁴ that stamped out the last traces of any economic vigour or capitalist drive (*philargyria*) Roman society may once have possessed. Thus when, in a seminal paper published in 1969, one medievalist argued that ‘when the empire collapsed it released the tax-paying millions of western Europe from a paralysing oppression’,⁵ he expressed a view that stems from the idea, widespread in more conventional narratives, that the late Roman state absorbed a *disproportionate share of the national wealth* in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. This was basically A. H. M. Jones’s view of the late empire, but its chief failing is that it radically misrecognises the subtle ways in which what Nicolas Oikonomidès called a ‘curious mixture of free enterprise and state intervention’ worked in reality and over a very long span of centuries. To take one rather dramatic example of this complexity, in a paper written shortly before she died in 2008 Angeliki Laiou had to point out that ‘In the *Book of the Eparch* ... the entire regulatory system is geared to free labourers and free manufacturers and traders.’⁶ So this was not an economy where the state owned absolutely everything, not a *state* economy in the strong sense of that term;

² B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005), p. 183.

³ J. R. Davis and M. McCormick, ‘The Early Middle Ages: Europe’s Long Morning’, in *The Long Morning of Medieval Europe: New Directions in Early Medieval Studies* (Aldershot and Burlington, 2008), pp. 1–10.

⁴ Peter Brown in his review of Jones and characterising the latter’s depiction of the state.

⁵ A. R. Bridbury, ‘The Dark Ages’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 22 (1969), 526–37, repr. in *The English Economy from Bede to the Reformation* (Woodbridge and Rochester, 1992), pp. 43–55 (at p. 50).

⁶ A. Laiou, ‘The Byzantine City: Parasitic or Productive?’ in *Economic Thought and Economic Life in Byzantium*, ed. C. Morrisson and R. Dorin (Aldershot, 2013), no. XII, pp. 1–35, at 6.

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indeed, far from it. Nor was it one in which private interests played a marginal role. Nothing undermines that notion more decisively than the unfettered domination of the fourth-century aristocracy over the City of Rome itself. But aristocracies did suffer major upheavals at various times and places between the fifth and seventh centuries and eventually disappeared even in the Byzantine heartland where the rupture is most marked by the emergence of a more militarised landed elite, the ‘great families of the middle Byzantine period’, in the eighth century.⁷ These transformations were protracted over centuries and of course the whole debate has been about how much of a catastrophe they represented.

The ‘mammoth state’ view is simply the form that minimalism has tended to take in late antique history, the extreme position of *denying autonomy to economic forces* and seeing the late antique economy as an economy held together, essentially, by the state.⁸ However, before saying what the chapters that follow set out to do in response to this and related ideas, it may help to start by listing the distinct varieties of catastrophism that permeate the historical literature on the end of Rome.

There are at least four that can be usefully listed, since each implies a different procedure of historical deduction and projects a distinctive set of emphases. 1) *The end of the Roman economy in the west*. The most powerful articulation of this variant is Bryan Ward-Perkins’s book *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*. He postulates a ‘slow decline’ starting in the fifth century and continuing into the seventh as successive regions were disrupted by invasion and their economies destroyed by the shock of external events. The catastrophe here is the dismemberment of the Roman state and the economic consequences of that. 2) *The Italian crisis*. This version, unsurprisingly, attracts mainly Italian scholars, both Roman and medieval (Carandini, Delogu), and a great deal of the argumentation is framed in terms of longer-term demographic collapse, settlement change and urban crisis. Italy’s permanent economic decline becomes a sort of concentrated image of the wider economic decline. 3) *End of the Mediterranean exchange system*. This is the prime version to be found in Chris Wickham’s work and probably commands near-universal assent. But even if we argue that

⁷ C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005), p. 236.

⁸ Minimalists who ‘characterize everything pre-industrial as primitive’ (M. W. Frederiksen, ‘Theory, Evidence and the Ancient Economy’, *JRS* 65 (1975), 164–71, at p. 171) will naturally have an even bleaker picture of late antiquity. Catastrophism is not confined to their ranks, however. Late antique catastrophists can be modernists when it comes to the late Republic and early empire, but deeply pessimistic when they look at changes from the third century on. Rostovtzeff and Carandini are perfect examples of this combination.

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Mediterranean-wide exchange networks broke down by stages starting as early as the fifth century, the final crisis is postponed to the end of the seventh century/early eighth. This is, moreover, the weakest form of catastrophism or not catastrophism at all *unless*, like Pirenne, one argues that pan-Mediterranean links were abruptly severed ‘from the middle of the 7th century’ by the Arab inruptions.⁹ Finally, 4) *Catastrophe flips* (*‘very sudden negative change’ or rapid collapse*). The great advantage of this form of catastrophism (Ken Dark, also Wickham) is that it can work as a description of local situations with no logical requirement that it must extend to any wider scale than that, such as the whole of the western empire. A maximal version of this model would count as the strongest (and probably least tenable) form of catastrophism, and basically it is some picture of this sort that underpinned much of the earlier, mainly pre-war historiography that lacked any real notion of late antiquity as a period (Weber, Rostovtzeff, Walbank).

It is not my intention to deny that each of these models or forms of description contains *some measure of truth*. The Roman economy *did* end in the western provinces (even if Roman-style estates certainly survived and Roman law left its permanent imprint on later social relations). Italian landscapes *were* gradually and in the end even dramatically transformed (though not everywhere), and Italian urban prosperity receded to a low point in the eighth century.¹⁰ Major trading centres of the western Mediterranean ‘vanished off the commercial map’, as David Abulafia tells us,¹¹ and the Roman-imperial exchange system was radically reconfigured between the late seventh and ninth centuries. Catastrophe flips did occur in provinces like Britain that saw a sudden collapse of the Roman state. *And so on*. I also agree with the position averred by Ward-Perkins that ‘there is a real danger for the present day in a vision of the past that explicitly sets out to eliminate all crisis and all decline’.

The aim behind these essays is not to deny these undeniable moments of truth but, with less sense of orthodoxy perhaps, (1) to defend the *sophistication* of ancient economic behaviour against a minimalism that downgrades it irredeemably; (2) to argue strongly for the sheer scale and *resilience* of the late antique economy against an oversimplified catastrophism; and (3) to canvas the need for historical models that can *integrate* ancient and medieval economic history the way Mickwitz dreamed of doing.

⁹ H. Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, trans. B. Miall (London, 1939) p. 165.

¹⁰ Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 644–56.

¹¹ D. Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (London, 2014), p. 256.

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A word about each of these strands of argument may well be in order by way of an extended preface. In terms of the more classic periods of Roman history (the Republic and early empire) minimalism is probably linked to the idea that Roman society was largely dependent on slave labour and that slaveholders were incapable of a rational organisation of labour, let alone of any wider economic rationality.¹² This view denies any rational core to the Roman economy, by which I mean quite simply the Roman obsession with money-making (*quaestus, lucrum*), whether we describe this as ‘capitalist’, ‘quasi-capitalist’,¹³ ‘entrepreneurial’ or in some other more neutral way. This aspect is strikingly evident in so many ways, from the remarkable sophistication of Roman commercial law and the sorts of business organisation it allowed for¹⁴ to the purely economic dimensions of Roman control of the Mediterranean, Rome’s capacity for organisation and technical inventiveness, the obsessive rationalisation of labour that runs through the agricultural writings,¹⁵ etc. It is not in the least surprising that historical sociologists like Runciman should have characterised the Roman economy (Rome’s ‘mode of production’) as *capitalist*; ‘in every respect’, as he says, except for its ostensible lack of any widespread employment of free labour.¹⁶ Of course, this position has failed to win assent because it states its case too starkly. A more complex approach can still be structured as follows.

The advent of mass production in Rome’s ceramic industries (the transition from craft-based to industrial modes of production reflected in the emergence of a widely distributed black-gloss ware dubbed Campanian A), which first appeared as early as the last two decades of the third century BC,¹⁷ was both driven by a desire for economies of scale¹⁸ and bound

¹² Contrast Oakes in his study of American planters, J. Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (New York, 1990), p. 54.

¹³ W. V. Harris, ‘Production, Distribution, and *Instrumentum Domesticum*’, in *The Inscribed Economy*, ed. W. V. Harris (Ann Arbor, 1993), p. 189.

¹⁴ F. Serrao, ‘L’impresa in Roma antica’, in *Impresa e responsabilità a Roma nell’età commerciale* (Pisa, 1989); A. Di Porto, ‘Il diritto commerciale romano’, in *Nozione formazione e interpretazione del diritto dall’età romana alle esperienze moderne*, vol. III (Naples, 1997), pp. 413–52.

¹⁵ See my reference in Banaji, ‘Modernizing the Historiography of Rural Labour: An Unwritten Agenda’, in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. M. Bentley (London and New York, 1997) to ‘such basic features of Roman estate organization as the continuous monitoring of labour costs, careful attention to optimal gang size (Columella, *RR* 1.9.7ff.), use of sample checks to control the intensity of labour, or formulation of performance standards to help owners define efficient manning ratios’ (pp. 89–90).

¹⁶ W. G. Runciman, ‘The “Triumph” of Capitalism as a Topic in the Theory of Social Selection’, *New Left Review* 1/210 (1995), 33–47, at p. 37.

¹⁷ A. Carandini, *L’anatomia della scimmia: La formazione economica della società prima del capitale* (Turin, 1979), pp. 192–3.

¹⁸ M. Picon ‘Production artisanale et manufacturière à l’époque romaine: À propos de *L’Histoire brisée* d’Aldo Schiavone’, in *L’économie antique: Une économie de marché?*, ed. Y. Roman and J. Dalaison

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up with export markets that presupposed an extensive operation of commercial capital.¹⁹ Stated in a more general way this means that Italian domination of the Mediterranean at the purely *economic* level was founded not just or even primarily on ‘Roman imperialism’, but, in more specific and concrete ways (and perhaps more interestingly), on revolutionary changes in the scale of production, an increased industrial use of slavery and the enhanced grip of large-scale commercial enterprises whose networks straddled international markets. Rural estates (*villae*) producing wine, olive oil and so on were a sort of agrarian counterpart of these ceramic factories. These were all features that impressed Rostovtzeff no end. On the other hand, these were only the ‘dynamic’ sectors of the economy and Simon Swain is quite right in saying that ‘no widespread capitalism emerged’.²⁰ This, arguably, is how we can and should *both* recover the affinity between the Roman world and our own thoroughly capitalist one as well as mark the distance that separates them. It is one way of breaking down the myth of the Chinese wall separating ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’.

Did the Roman passion for business simply evaporate, then?²¹ Were business groups and elites of various kinds not active throughout the centuries of late antiquity, now on the wider scale of a more provincial empire and one founded on a solid gold currency?

Catastrophist views of the period certainly imply this. But the extraordinary *volumes* of coinage and expanding *circulation* of gold both suggest otherwise. Moreover, Sasanian silver production shows that the surge in monetary economy was a feature more generally true of the late antique world, and not just of the Roman empire. Several chapters demonstrate the truly impressive scale on which both coinages circulated, most intensively within core regions but over vast geographical areas in any case. It would be not a little strange to imagine that the private economy withered at the precise moment when there was a massive surge in levels of monetary activity. Though Mickwitz himself never explicitly suggested that the Republic’s tradition of aristocratic/upper-class involvement in business

(Paris, 2008), pp. 191–214, at 202–3 (on strategies more typical of industrial than craft-based producers).

¹⁹ J.-P. Morel, ‘La produzione della ceramica campana: Aspetti economici e sociali’, in *Merci, mercati e scambi nel Mediterraneo (Società romana e produzione schiavistica, vol. 11)*, ed. A. Giardina *et al.* (Rome and Bari, 1981), pp. 81–97, at 92–3; the best account.

²⁰ S. Swain, *Economy, Family, and Society from Rome to Islam* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 168, later adding, ‘the fact there was no general capitalism in antiquity does not mean there was no capitalist mentality’ (p. 174), which I presume means that there were always a fair number of capitalists around!

²¹ Cicero, *Pro Sulla* 58: *negoti gerendi studium*, about the Campanian banker P. Sittius, cf. R. Syme, *Sallust* (Berkeley, etc., 1964), p. 101.

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continued vigorously into the late empire, that perspective is certainly implicit in his argument that the *private* sector was the key driver behind the monetary economy of the fourth century.²² Both the introductory essay and some of the chapters below are meant to show why we shouldn't see the public/private dichotomy as a zero-sum game and why it makes more sense to allow for a fluid integration between the two sectors, one that worked and manifested itself differently at different times and in different regimes (notably including the Umayyads and what Patricia Crone in *Slaves on Horses* calls their 'affinal state').

The thrust of this second strand of my argument is to *contest a simplistic reading of economic history in terms of 'political and military difficulties'*. The temptation to engage in a reading of this sort is strong because a lot of late Roman economic history (more indeed than any other period of Roman history) is written largely as a narrative of the state, so that the economy, inevitably, is framed as an extension of politics, moulded and driven by the state and crucially vulnerable to its crises.²³ This, it seems to me, is the wrong way of mapping the economy of the Roman world, because it focuses too narrowly on the demands and characteristics of state economy and does so not least because the bulk of our sources are documents emanating either directly from the state (the law codes) or from the interactions of taxpayers and the state (a lot of the papyrological evidence). There is a *huge* disproportion between this type of documentation and what survives in terms of private records from, say, the purely civilian and business sectors of the economy. To take an obvious example; there is a strikingly complete absence of any papyrological material from Alexandria, the commercial hub of the eastern Mediterranean, a major banking centre and a veritable base of what must have been a thriving 'private economy' generating hundreds of business papers (contracts, accounts, correspondence, etc.) on a daily basis. Of course, the same is true of the private records and papers of merchant diasporas *all over the Mediterranean* and deep into the hinterlands where traders and trading firms were active. This is precisely where the gap between the written sources and the ceramic evidence is most strident and extreme. What, for example, would be the

²² G. Mickwitz, *Geld und Wirtschaft im römischen Reich des vierten Jahrhunderts n. Chr.* (Helsinki, 1932), ch. 5.

²³ The classic instance of this is a paper by Michael Hendy, 'From Antiquity to the Middle Ages: Economic and Monetary Aspects of the Transition', in *De la Antigüedad al Medioevo, Siglos IV–VIII: III Congreso de Estudios Medievales* (León, 1991), pp. 323–60, where he ends by suggesting that the economy of late antiquity is probably best seen as an 'example of a categorical type of economy', presumably state economy.

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impact on our vision of the economy if a late antique equivalent of the Cairo Geniza were discovered somewhere? Or if the powerful shipowners of Alexandria had left us with serial records of tonnages and merchandise similar to the records of the *Casa de Contratación* in Seville? It scarcely bears thinking about!

Finally, about the need (for *economic* historians) to break down the artificial divisions between late antiquity and the Middle Ages. If, as Perry Anderson says, ‘the birth of *capital* also saw ... the rebirth of antiquity’,²⁴ it really would be counter-intuitive to argue that this happened as a purely legal and cultural inheritance without the remanence of *economic* institutions and practices that reflected the more subtle and magnetic ways in which ancient and late antique legacies were absorbed by Byzantium and Islam respectively and passed on, through them, into a wider medieval world that was being pushed into full throttle as the Levant trade picked up in the tenth century and the commercial revolution gathered momentum. Venice would become the incarnation of a vigorous mercantile capitalism that straddled the rest of the Middle Ages,²⁵ down even to the sixteenth century. In the same way, it seems to me, the ‘strong Byzantine influence on Italian commercial and maritime institutions’²⁶ that historians have often drawn attention to implies a major element of continuity (one of those Braudelian *permanences*) between the Middle Ages and late antiquity. To direct research to these strands or elements of continuity is not tantamount to espousing some abstract, much less radical continualism. If the third quarter of the seventh century signalled a serious decline in the vitality of Marseilles as a major port, there are certainly enough signs that the seventh century *retained* much of its vitality at this level. Carthage was still trading actively with monasteries in Rome and with the Byzantine capital late into the century,²⁷ and early Islamic hoards from Spain suggest that ‘merchants still traversed the length of the Mediterranean in the eighth century’.²⁸ Of course, the eighth century is more medieval than it is late antique, a world that has spun away from its Mediterranean core, dominated in the west by the Carolingians and their

²⁴ P. Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1974), p. 422.

²⁵ G. Cracco, *Società e stato nel Medioevo veneziano (secoli xii–xiv)* (Florence, 1967).

²⁶ R.-H. Bautier, *The Economic Development of Medieval Europe* (London, 1971), pp. 67–8.

²⁷ In Marseilles itself excavations at the place Jules-Verne show that ‘activity continued ... into the later seventh century or even the early eighth’, S. T. Loseby, ‘Marseille and the Pirene Thesis, II: “Ville Morte”’, in *The Long Eighth Century*, ed. I. L. Hansen and C. Wickham (Leiden, 2000), pp. 167–93, at 172.

²⁸ D. M. Metcalf, ‘Monetary Recession in the Middle Byzantine Period’, *Numismatic Chronicle* 161 (2001), III–55, at p. 134.

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northern orientations, further east by the new foundation of Baghdad, seat of an empire whose ‘wealth and interests ... poured eastwards’.²⁹ It is the *eighth-century gap* that historians and archaeologists will have to plug and will doubtless do so, gradually.

The essays deploy a fairly wide range of sources across the book as a whole, but I have desisted from any discussion of these *as sources*, especially those in Arabic that form the basis of Chapter 8, as this would require a very different book. The sheer cosmopolitanism of late antiquity is to me its most attractive feature, not least in intellectual and elite circles, both religious and secular. Ammianus Marcellinus wrote one of the longest and most brilliant histories of the empire in Latin but ‘as a Greek’.³⁰ At the other end of late antiquity, a Christian Arab sat down to write his *Defence of Holy Images* at a Muslim court in the final years of Umayyad rule.³¹ And between these framing images (Ammianus travelling west; John of Damascus taking on the Byzantine iconoclasts) lies the extraordinary spectacle of the last Sasanian king being buried by the bishop of Merv.³² The chapters that follow are premised on this conception of ‘late antiquity’ as culturally and politically diverse – Sasanian and Umayyad as much as it was late Roman and Byzantine.

The bibliography is avowedly select, gathering mainly those items that I myself have found both illuminating and helpful, even when, of course, I disagree with some of them. The list includes works not especially related to late antiquity or the ancient world but which contribute decisively to our understanding of economic history and the many levels at which it can be pursued.

²⁹ P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971), p. 202.

³⁰ Amm. Marc. 31.16.9.

³¹ P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity A.D. 200–1000* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 397–9.

³² Al-Ṭabarī, *The Crisis of the Early Caliphate (The History of al-Ṭabarī, vol. xv)*, trans. R. Stephen Humphreys (Albany, 1990), p. 89, calling the bishop *muṭrān* (metropolitan) of Merv.

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Chapter 2 was published as 'Mickwitz's Modernism: The Writings of 1932–36', in *Gunnar Mickwitz (1906–40) nella storiografia europea tra le due guerre*, edited by Mika Kajava (Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae, volume 34) (Rome, 2007).

Chapter 3 was published as 'State and Aristocracy in the Economic Evolution of the Late Empire', in *Production and Public Powers in Classical Antiquity*, edited by E. Lo Cascio and D. W. Rathbone (Cambridge: The Cambridge Philological Society, 2000).

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