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Keith Hopkins

Excerpt

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I

**CONQUERORS AND SLAVES:
THE IMPACT OF CONQUERING AN
EMPIRE ON THE POLITICAL ECONOMY
OF ITALY**

THE ARGUMENT

At its height, the Roman empire stretched from the north of England to the banks of the river Euphrates, from the Black Sea to the Atlantic coast of Spain (see map). Its territory covered an area equal to more than half that of continental USA and it is now split among more than twenty nation states. The Mediterranean was the empire's own internal sea. Its population is conventionally estimated at about fifty to sixty million people in the first century AD, about one fifth or one sixth of the world population at the time.¹ Even today this would be considered a large national population, difficult to govern with the aid of modern technology. Yet the Roman empire persisted as a single political system for at least six centuries (200 BC–AD 400); its integration and preservation surely rank, with the Chinese empire, as one of the greatest political achievements of mankind.

The main subject of this chapter is the impact of acquiring an empire on the traditional political and economic institutions of the conquerors. Most of this story is well known. I shall not try to give yet another detailed chronological account. Instead I have selected certain repeatedly important elements in the process of conquest (such as the militaristic ethos of the conquerors, the economic consequences of importing two million slaves into Italy, the shortage of farming land among the free poor) and I have attempted to analyse their relationships to each other. This involves going over familiar territory, if sometimes by unfamiliar paths. Roman history can be profitably studied from several viewpoints which complement each other.

The acquisition of a huge empire in the last two centuries before Christ transformed a large sector of the traditional Italian economy. The influx of imperial profits in the form of booty and taxes changed

¹ For estimates of world population, based on backward extrapolation and on estimates of Chinese and Roman populations of this period, see D. M. Heer, *Society and Population* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968) 2.

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the city of Rome from a large town to a resplendent city, capital of an empire. By the end of the last century BC, the population of the city of Rome was in the region of one million. Rome was one of the largest pre-industrial cities ever created by man.² It was here that aristocrats displayed their booty in triumphal processions, spent most of their income and competed with each other in ostentatious luxury. Their private expenditure, and public expenditure on building monuments, temples, roads and drains, directly and indirectly contributed to the livelihood of several hundred thousand new inhabitants. Immigration from the countryside was also encouraged by the grant of state subsidies on wheat distributed to citizens living in the city of Rome.

The growth in the population of the capital city and indeed in the population of Italy as a whole (see Table 1.2), implied a transformation of the countryside. The people living in the city of Rome constituted a huge market for the purchase of food produced on Italian farms: wheat, wine, olive oil, cloth and more specialised produce. To be sure, the city of Rome was fed partly from the provinces; a tenth of the Sicilian wheat crop, for example, was extracted as tax and was often sent to Rome. But a large part of the food consumed in the city of Rome and in other prosperous towns such as Capua and Puteoli also came from estates newly formed in Italy, owned by rich Romans and cultivated by slaves.³

The transformation of a subsistence economy which had previously produced only a small surplus into a market economy which produced and consumed a large surplus was achieved by increasing the productivity of agricultural labour on larger farms. Fewer men produced more food. Under-employed small-holders were expelled from their plots and replaced by a smaller number of slaves.⁴ The rich bought

² Rome was the largest city in the world and was perhaps not equalled in size before the rise of the great cities of China in the Sung dynasty. See G. Rozman, *Urban Networks in Ch'ing China and Tokugawa Japan* (Princeton, 1973) 35 and the compendious, useful but not obviously reliable T. Chandler and G. Fox, *3000 Years of Urban Growth* (New York, 1974). The population of London reached about one million in 1800 and it was then by far the largest city in Europe. In 1600, only two European cities had populations over 200,000 namely Paris and Naples.

³ There is no direct confirmation of this generalisation in the classical texts. But that does not matter. We must suppose either that large Italian landowners sold the produce of their estates to Italian townsmen, or that they got no return on the capital which they repeatedly invested both in land and in the slaves who worked it. The first generalisation seems more economical.

⁴ It is not possible to prove this assertion by the traditional method of selective quotation from classical sources. For example, Livy (6.12) suggested that the frequent wars in a district of central Italy in an earlier period might be explained by its high population. He noted that in his time the district produced few soldiers, and would have been deserted but for slaves. My assertion is compatible with such passages in the sources, but cannot be validated by them. Instead, I have tried to consider

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up their land, or took possession of it by violence. They reorganised small-holdings into larger and more profitable farms in order to compete with other nobles, to increase the return on their investment in land and in slaves, and to exploit their slaves more effectively. Moreover, in many parts of Italy, large land-owners changed the pattern of land-use.⁵ Considerable areas of arable land were turned into pasture, perhaps so that higher value produce such as wool or meat, instead of wheat, could be sold in the city of Rome, even after the heavy transport costs had been paid. Other land was converted into olive plantations and vineyards, and the value of its produce increased. These improvements were important; they figured largely in Roman handbooks on agriculture. But their scope was limited by the size of the available market. Many peasant farms remained intact. After all, the urban poor constituted the only mass market, and they probably spent about as much on bread as on wine and olive oil together.⁶ This

both the probability and the consequences of the assertion being wrong, and then to ask: What alternative assertion is more likely to be true? This procedure, based on a compatibility theory of historical truth, is used often in this book.

⁵ 'I was the first to make shepherds give way to ploughmen on the public land', *Inscriptiones Latinae liberae rei publicae*, ed. A. Degrassi (Florence, 1957–63) n^o 454. This was one of the proud boasts of a consul (? of 132 BC) who had a milestone, in the genre of a market cross, set up in a southern Italian town and inscribed with his achievements. The inscription is commonly understood to refer to the distribution of public land to small-holders in accordance with the Gracchan land laws (133 BC). Varro (*On Agriculture* 2, preface 4) also wrote that latterly Romans had 'turned arable into pasture out of greed and against the law'.

From such snippets, it is difficult to prove any general change in land use. But my general impression is that the rapid expansion of pasture and vineyards was based on the conversion of arable as well as on the extension of private property over hitherto unclaimed or common lands. On the growth in volume and prestige of Italian wines, dated to the second century BC, see Pliny, *Natural History* 14.87–8; on the growth of pasture, see A. J. Toynbee, *Hannibal's Legacy* (Oxford, 1965) vol. 2, 286ff.

⁶ The relative size of the markets for agricultural crops is obviously an important problem. The ancient data are clearly insufficient. As a sighting shot, without any implication that the prices in Rome were of the same order and for illustration only, I looked at the single case of Madrid in the mid-eighteenth century. Goods entering the city (which had a population of about 135,000 in 1757) were checked for customs; in 1757, imports totalled as followed: 96,000 *arrobas* of olive oil, 500,000 *arrobas* of wine, 520,000 *fanegas* of wheat. I took average prices for 1753–62 for New Castille from L. J. Hamilton, *War and Prices in Spain 1651–1800* (New York, 1957) 229 ff. and figures on consumption from D. R. Ringrose, 'Transportation and economic stagnation in 18th-century Castille', *Journal of Economic History* 28 (1968) 51–79. Of the three products, wheat consisted 46% of the total costs; wine 45%; olive oil 9%. Wheat consumption works out at about 160 kg per person year, wine at 100 litres per adult year – which is rather low for wheat and high for wine. However, these figures can serve as only a very rough guide. For comparison, I posited the same consumption but with prices from Marseille, 1701–10; this produced somewhat different ratios of cost: wheat 64%, wine 19%, oil 17%; data from R. Baehrel, *Une Croissance* (Paris, 1961) 530ff. In Rome wheat was probably also the single most important product, in volume and value, particularly for the poor.

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weakness in the aggregate purchasing power of the urban sector helped insulate a sizeable sector of the Italian peasantry from the agrarian revolution which transformed working practices on larger farms.

The conquest of an empire affected the Italian countryside in several other important respects. Military campaigns all around the Mediterranean basin forced prolonged military service on tens of thousands of peasants. Throughout the last two centuries BC, there were commonly over 100,000 Italians serving in the army, that is more than ten per cent of the estimated adult male population.⁷ Global numbers disguise individual suffering; we have to think what prolonged military service meant to individual peasants, what its implications were for their families and for the farms off which they lived. Many single-family farms could bear the absence of a grown-up son, even for several years; military service may even have helped by giving them some alternative employment and pay. But in some families, the conscription of the only adult male or the absence of an only son in the army overseas when his father died meant increasing poverty and debt.⁸

Over time, mass military service must have contributed to the impoverishment of many free Roman small-holders. At least we know that thousands of Roman peasants lost their land. In addition invasions by Carthaginians and Celtic tribes, slave rebellions and civil wars which were repeatedly fought on Italian soil all contributed to the destruction of traditional agricultural holdings. Even so, more Italian peasants might have survived both the demands of military service and the destruction of war but for one other factor: the massive investment by the rich of the profits derived from empire in Italian land. The rich could establish large estates in Italy only by the wholesale eviction of Italian peasants from their farms. Typically these estates were

⁷ See Table 1.1 below, which deals with Roman citizen soldiers only. P. A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower 225 BC-AD 14* (Oxford, 1971) 425 lists the size of the Italian armed forces for the twenty-one years between 200 and 168 BC for which we have full information. The average size of the army and smallish fleet was about 140,000, drawn from an adult male population of about one million (*ibid.* 59).

⁸ In the traditional Roman histories, folk-heroes faced similar problems; it seems likely that their problems reflected anxieties which persisted. For example, Cincinnatus summoned to be dictator while working at the plough is said to have exclaimed: 'My land will not be sown this year, and so we shall run the risk of not having enough to eat' (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 10.17). Another famous general, Atilius Regulus serving in Africa during the first war against Carthage wrote to the senate to say that the bailiff of his small farm had died, that a farm hand had taken the stock, and requested that a replacement be sent to see to its cultivation, so that his wife and children should not starve (Valerius Maximus 4.4.6). Poor soldiers had no such privilege.

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cultivated by imported slaves. The displacement of large numbers of free peasants by slaves helped transform the agricultural economy of Italy, and fomented the political conflicts of the late Republic.

The mass eviction of the poor by the rich underlay the political conflicts and civil wars of the last century of the Roman Republic. For example, the possession of public land (*ager publicus*) and its redistribution to the poor became a major political issue, and exacerbated the tensions between the rich and the poor.⁹ This public land in Italy had been kept apart out of land sequestered by the Romans from conquered tribes or rebellious allies, ostensibly for the collective benefit. It constituted a significant but minor part of all Roman land, being by modern estimates well less than a fifth of all Roman land in the mid-third century BC, and hardly more than that in the second century BC (such estimates are inevitably crude); but its maldistribution became a political *cause célèbre*. The public land was concentrated in the hands of the rich; the laws which prohibited large holdings of public land were ignored (so Cato, frag. 167 *ORF*); and the rents which should have been paid to the state were by senatorial inertia left uncollected (Livy 42.19).¹⁰

A narrative history of the last century of the Republic would be punctuated by conflicts over this land, by land laws and by land distributions, which were more often proposed than effected. In 133 BC for example, a young aristocratic and revolutionary tribune of the people proposed the redistribution of the public land illegally held by the rich. He was assassinated by his opponents in the senate, but the land commission which he had founded succeeded in distributing

⁹ Ancient commentators on the political struggles of the late Republic usually saw the main axis of conflict as between nobles and the people; see L. R. Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar* (Berkeley, 1944). The direct opposition rich–poor is only rarely mentioned in historical sources of the period (see, for example Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.10). Nevertheless, it seems to have underlain much social and political conflict; see the interesting discussion by M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (London, 1973) 35ff.

¹⁰ See Toynbee (1965): vol. 1, 166; vol. 2, 556–7). The traditional histories reflect this concern with the maldistribution of public land, sometimes anachronistically. Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Roman Antiquities* 8.73–75; cf. 9.51) who lived in the reign of Augustus; he recorded a debate purportedly held in 486 BC, but it probably reflected typical attitudes of a much later period. A leading senator, Appius, said (73.4): ‘As things now stand, the envy of the poor against the rich who have appropriated and continue to occupy the public lands is justified; it is not surprising that they demand that public property should be divided among all citizens instead of being held by the few . . .’ But he went on to argue that splitting state-land into small lots would be troublesome to the poor, because they were poor; it would be better for the state to lease land in large lots: these would bring in large revenues, from which soldiers could be paid and fed. With some refinements, the suggestion was generally approved. For a long discussion of the evidence, see G. Tibiletti, ‘Il Possesso dell’ Ager Publicus’, *Athenaeum* 26 (1948) 173–236.

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some land to poor citizens. The trouble was that in spite of legal safeguards, the new settlers were as likely to be evicted as the old; the same forces were still at work. Again in the first century BC, citizen soldiers who had military power and the patronage of political generals such as Sulla, Pompey and Julius Caesar, occasionally secured small-holdings for themselves at the end of their service. But they usually took over land which was already being cultivated by other small-holders, and in addition, some of them failed to settle down on their lands, which were again bought up by the rich. Thus the successive redistribution of small-holdings probably did not significantly increase the total number of small-holders, even if it slowed down their demise.¹¹ The overall tendency was for poor Romans to be squeezed out of any significant share in the profits of conquest so long as they stayed in the Italian countryside.

The central place of land in Roman politics sprang from the overwhelming importance of land in the Roman economy. Land and agricultural labour remained the two most important constituents of wealth in all periods of Roman history. Manufacturing, trade and urban rents were of minor importance in comparison with agriculture. That does not mean they should be ignored; the deployment of ten to twenty per cent of the labour force in non-agricultural tasks is one of the factors which differentiates a few pre-industrial societies from the rest. In Italy at the end of the period of imperial expansion, the proportion of the population engaged in urban occupations may have risen towards thirty per cent (see Table 1.2; the figures are speculative), because the profits of empire and the economic changes, reflected in the change of occupation from country to town, from agriculture to handicrafts or to service trades, were concentrated in Italy. The city of Rome was the capital of the Mediterranean basin. In the rest of the Roman empire, the proportion of the labour force primarily engaged in agriculture was probably in the order of ninety per cent, as it had been in Italy before the period of expansion.¹² But even in Italy

¹¹ Soldiers were commonly given land which was already under cultivation; 'where the plough and reaping hook have been', as a law of Augustus on colonies stated (Hyginus, *On the Fixing of Boundaries*, ed. Lachmann (Berlin, 1848) 203). This led to repeated friction between colonists and the old inhabitants (see, for example, Granius Licinianus p. 34F). Some ex-soldiers settled by Sulla before 80 BC were involved in the rebellion of Catiline in 63 BC; according to Sallust (*Catiline* 16): 'they had squandered their resources and remembered their former victory and booty'. This seems an inadequate basis for thinking that all ex-soldiers were bad farmers. It was always assumed in the classical world that soldiers could turn into peasants and vice versa. On all this, see Brunt (1971: 294ff.).

¹² Some comparative evidence may help as a guide. Bulgaria (1910), Yugoslavia (1931) had 81% and 79% of their work-force engaged in agriculture. The figures for Turkey

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at the peak of its prosperity, and at all levels of society, among nobles, bourgeois and peasants, power and wealth depended almost directly on the area and fertility of the land which each individual possessed. Land-holdings were the geographical expression of social stratification.

Among the rural population, even when slavery in Italy was at its height, free peasants probably constituted a majority of the Italian population outside the city of Rome.¹³ By peasants, I mean ideally families engaged primarily in the cultivation of land, whether as free-holders or as tenants (often as both), tied to the wider society by the liens of tax and/or rent, labour dues and political obligation. The persistence of the peasantry is important; but so were the changes in the ownership and organisation of estates, and the mass emigration of free Italian peasants which made those changes in estate organisation possible.

Some indications of scale may be helpful; they are rough orders of magnitude only, though based on or derived from the careful analysis of the evidence by Brunt (1971). Rather speculatively I calculate that in two generations (80–8 BC), roughly half the peasant families of Roman Italy, over one and a half million people, were forced mostly by state intervention to move from their ancestral farms. They went either to new farms in Italy or overseas, or they migrated of their own accord to the city of Rome and other Italian towns. The main channel of their mobility was the army. In a complementary flow, but over a long period, many more than two million peasants from the conquered

(1927) and China in the 1940s were 82% and over 80%. See O. S. Morgan ed., *Agricultural Systems of Middle Europe* (New York, 1933) 48 and 359; *Recensement général de la population 1927* (Ankara, 1929) 29; C. K. Yang, *A Chinese Village* (MIT, 1959) 23. The composition of these populations was already somewhat affected by their links with foreign, industrial markets. I think the comparable figures for the Roman empire would have been higher.

¹³ It is impossible to calculate the ratio of free men to slaves outside the city of Rome accurately, but we can see whether our guesses are compatible with each other and with what else we know. For present purposes, I assume a total population in Italy of 6.0 million, which is between the best guesses of Beloch (5.5 million (*Die Bevölkerung der griechisch-römischen Welt* 436) and Brunt (7.5 million (1971: 124)). I follow Beloch in thinking that there were no more than two million slaves (see note 14 below). For crude estimates, which may be useful as illustrations of rural/urban distribution, see Table 1.2 below (p. 68).

If all the rural population worked on the land, and the agricultural land constituted 40% of Italy's surface (as against 55% in 1881), then at roughly 10 million hectares, it allowed over two hectares per person, which is feasible but not generous, given (a) low yields, (b) the high proportion of adults among slaves, and (c) their need to produce a surplus. For similar arguments, see Beloch (1886: 417) and Brunt (1971: 126). I agree with Beloch that the estimated slave population was extremely high for Roman conditions.

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provinces became war captives and then slaves in Italy.¹⁴ Changes such as these affected even those peasants who stayed secure in their ancestral farms. Indeed, the growth of markets, the import of provincial slaves and taxes, the imposition of rents and a general increase in monetisation changed the whole structure of the Roman economy. But in spite of these changes and migrations, the solid core of Italian peasants remained peasants.

In this chapter, I shall concentrate on the impact of conquest on the two most important elements in the Roman economy, land and labour. We can see their changing relationship, for example, in the acquisition of large estates by the rich and the massive import of slaves to work them; both had deep social and political repercussions. The impact of victory on the conquering society presents us with a process of extraordinary sociological interest. Rome provides one of the few well-documented examples of a pre-industrial society undergoing rapid social change in a period of technical stagnation. Military conquest served the same function as widespread technical innovation. The resources of the Mediterranean basin were heaped into Italy and split the traditional institutions asunder. The Roman government tried to absorb the new wealth, values and administration within the existing framework. It failed, just as most modern developing countries fail, to establish institutions for the allocation of new resources without violent conflict.¹⁵

THE INTRUSION OF SLAVES

Two aspects of the transformation of the Italian economy in the period of imperial expansion stand out: the increase in the wealth of the

¹⁴ There is no clear evidence on the number of slaves in Italy, and the best we can do is guess. Beloch (1886: 418) thought that there were less than two million slaves in Italy at the end of the first century BC; Brunt (1971: 124) thought that there were three million. The discrepancy serves as an index of the plausible margin of error.

One discrepancy should be mentioned here. Since male slaves predominated and mortality was high, the total of slaves ever imported was higher than the number of slaves at any one time. There is therefore little point in adding up the known figures of enslaved captives, even if they were accurate.

For a thorough discussion of the sources of slavery, see E. M. Schtaerman, *Die Blütezeit der Sklavenwirtschaft in der römischen Republik* (Wiesbaden, 1969) 36–70. She is quite right to point out how exceptional it was for Romans to enslave the conquered. But I still think that war was the most common source of slaves in the period of imperial expansion. Nor were war and trade mutually exclusive; enslaved prisoners of war were imported into Italy and distributed by traders.

¹⁵ I have dealt with some of the problems of this process in 'Structural differentiation in Rome' in I. M. Lewis ed., *History and Social Anthropology* (London, 1968) 63–78 and also at the end of this chapter; more generally, see S. N. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires* (New York, 1963), and N. J. Smelser in B. F. Hoselitz and W. E. Moore, *Industrialization and Social Change* (Paris, 1963).

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Roman elite and the massive growth of slavery. Let us deal with slavery first (see also Chapter II). According to the best modern estimates, there were about two (or even three) million slaves in Italy by the end of the first century BC. That is about thirty-five to forty per cent of the total estimated population of Italy. Given our evidence, these figures are only guesses; they may well be too large; when slavery was at its height in the southern states of the USA, the proportion of slaves was only one third. However that may be, no one can reasonably doubt that huge numbers of slaves were imported into Italy during the last two centuries BC. Roman Italy belonged to that very small group of five societies in which slaves constituted a large proportion of the labour force.

When we compare Roman with American slavery, the growth of slavery in Roman Italy seems surprising. In the eighteenth century, slavery was used as a means of recruiting labour to cultivate newly discovered lands for which there was no adequate local labour force. Slaves by and large grew crops for sale in markets which were bolstered by the incipient industrial revolution. In Roman Italy (and to a much smaller extent in classical Athens), slaves were recruited to cultivate land which was already being cultivated by citizen peasants. We have to explain not only the import of slaves but the extrusion of citizens.

The massive import of agricultural slaves into central Italy implied a drastic reorganisation of land-holdings. Many small farms were taken over by the rich and amalgamated into larger farms so that slave-gangs could be efficiently supervised and profitably worked.¹⁶ Even so, slavery was by no means an obvious solution to the elite's needs for agricultural labour. Many peasants had surplus labour, and free labourers worked part-time on the estates of the rich. The interdependence of rich men and of free peasants, many of whom owned some land and also worked as part tenants or as labourers on the land of the rich, is well illustrated in the following passage from the agricultural treatise of Varro (last century BC):

All agricultural work is carried out by slaves or free men, or by both; by free men, when they cultivate the ground themselves, as many poor people do with

¹⁶ It is useful to distinguish between holdings and farms. Rich men had huge holdings of land, commonly divided into farms; many of these were much larger than peasant family farms, but they were not *latifundia*. This is deduced from the illustrations used by the agricultural writers Cato, Varro and Columella of farms varying from 25 ha (100 *iugera*) for a vineyard to 50 ha (arable) and 60 ha (olives), worked by 16, 8–11 and 13 slaves respectively. The recommended size of herds was 50–100 goats, 100–120 cattle, 100–150 pigs – large by peasant standards, but hardly ranching.

For testimony, see Cato, *On Agriculture* 10–11; Columella, *On Agriculture* 2.12; and on livestock, see Varro, *On Agriculture* 2.3–5 and P. A. Brunt, *JRS* 62 (1972) 154.

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their families, or when they work as hired labourers contracted for the heavier work of the farm, such as the harvest or haying. . . In my opinion, it is more profitable to work unhealthy land with free wage labourers than with slaves; and even in healthy places, the heavy tasks such as the storage of the harvest can best be done by free labourers. (*On Agriculture* 1.17)¹⁷

The extrusion of peasants from their plots increased the pool of under-employed free labourers. Why did the rich not make use of free wage-labourers, instead of buying slaves out of capital? That is always one of the problems about mass chattel slavery. I argue below (p. 110) that slaves were normally quite expensive (though the evidence is sparse); to make a profit on their investment in slaves, slave-owners had to keep their slaves at work twice as long as Roman peasants normally needed to work in order to live at the level of minimum subsistence.¹⁸ This implies that Roman agricultural slavery could work economically only if peasant small-holdings were amalgamated into larger units and if crops were mixed so as to provide slaves with full employment, and masters with a larger product from slaves' labour than was commonly achieved with free labour on small peasant farms. Masters also had to taken into account the risk that their slaves might die, and their investment might be lost; add to that the cost of supervision. The massive replacement of free citizen peasants with conquered slaves was a complex process, which is difficult to understand.

As with most sociological problems, each attempt at an explanation involves further explanations. An examination of the growth of slavery involves us in a whole network of changes which affected almost every aspect of Roman society. Why slaves? Was it the chance of greater profit which induced the rich to buy slaves, or was it rather the values of free men which inhibited them from working as the permanent dependants of other Romans? How far was the growth of slavery affected by the frequency of wars, the demand for citizens as soldiers, or the ease with which the conquered were enslaved? What was the fit between the increase in the size of farms, in the size of the surplus and of the urban markets which consumed the increased surplus? It is of course, much easier to asks questions than to provide answers. But for the moment I want to stress the complexity of the problem and the degree to which economic changes were connected with and

¹⁷ See also: Cato, *On Agriculture* 5 and 144; Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 42. The best discussion of Roman agricultural labour, although awkwardly arranged, is still W. E. Heitland, *Agricola* (Cambridge, 1921) and see also K. D. White, *Roman Farming* (London, 1970).

¹⁸ See Chapter II, notes 15 and 23.