
TRADE AND COLONIALISM IN THE NEAR EAST

INTRODUCTION

For some years now, ancient colonialism has been the subject of debate and scrutiny by archaeologists, anthropologists and historians. In the course of that debate, Greek and Roman colonialisms have received special attention, whereas the Phoenician “colonialism” of the ninth to seventh centuries BC has not merited similar interest on the part of the specialists.

Modern criticism and, in particular, post-colonial theorising agree in disparaging the excessive use of modern and contemporary analogies to explain ancient colonial situations. Modern colonial concepts, with all their connotations of coercion and alienation of the land, are projected into the past, often without taking account of the enormous variety and complexity of colonial systems that have little or nothing in common with the colonial models of modern times. Therefore, notions like acculturation, civilising mission, centre and periphery, ethnicity, imperialism, domination, indigenous cultural subordination, economic exploitation, asymmetrical power relations or unequal trade are topics taken from nineteenth- and twentieth- century European colonialism that we frequently find applied to colonial situations of pre-Roman times.

Phoenician colonisation has not escaped the theoretical guidelines of modern colonial ideology and certain one-track approaches that look on the Mediterranean “colonisations” of the first millennium BC from an exclusive standpoint – agricultural colonies versus commercial expansion – or from certain colonial typologies – trading post, “comptoir”, population transfer, agricultural colonies and so forth – established by European colonialism. Nor is the scant information contained in the classical sources much help in clarifying the picture, focussing almost exclusively on the Greek and Roman experiences.

2 TRADE AND COLONIALISM IN THE NEAR EAST

The feeling we get from the studies carried out so far on the Phoenician colonial system is one of profound dissatisfaction. The limitations imposed in their day by the diffusionist models – acculturation, Hellenisation, Orientalising – combined with the few alternatives offered by processual archaeology or the classical models have left very little room for manoeuvre when it comes to drawing up alternative models for interpretation. In recent years, the archaeological record has merely grown in size in the Phoenician colonies in the West, so there is no justification for the fact that there is a lack of theoretical debate about this concrete colonial system at present. In other latitudes and ancient colonial situations with much less archaeological data, the specialists spend their time proposing new and interesting theoretical models for interpreting the archaeological evidence from colonial settlements.

When it comes to analysing the Phoenician colonial system, the lack of data from the metropolis – from Phoenicia itself – has undoubtedly pointed studies almost exclusively towards the colonies and this has fostered a “western” and Mediterranean view of a phenomenon that had arisen in the Near East. Thus, the Phoenician expansion was analysed from the perspective of the Greek and Roman examples, in which the socio-economic structures of the metropolis were indeed known. Indeed, it is the typology of the metropolis alone that helps establish the typology of the colonies. Moreover, we were forgetting that, unlike Greece and Rome, the ancient East had centuries and millennia of colonial experience before the Phoenicians irrupted into the Mediterranean.

The starting point of this project is to help to establish the differences and similarities that exist between an ancient colonial system with Oriental roots and Mediterranean and European colonialism. This gave rise to the idea of analysing the Phoenician case from the East that is from a geographic, economic and socio-political perspective that situates Tyre as the last link in a long chain of colonial experiences in the East.

In the first part of this volume, the state of the question of ancient trade and colonialism is analysed. The need to revise the concepts of colonialism and inter-regional trade has made us look in depth at questions of theory and economic history at the hands of Polanyi and his followers and detractors. The aim is for a better understanding of the current situation in the controversy provoked by the so-called primitivists and modernists, a debate that has surfaced with renewed vigour in the last few years between specialists in the archaeology and economic history of the Near East.

In the second part, the colonial situations in which inter-regional trade plays a determining part are reviewed. With that aim, we have attempted to track the antecedents of the Phoenician colonial system, so it can be said that this volume is the result of a journey through different colonial experiences that arose in the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51417-0 - Commerce and Colonization in the Ancient Near East

Maria Eugenia Aubet

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ancient East in a context of long-distance inter-regional trade. In this volume, cases from the Early and Middle Bronze Age are analysed in which a number of socio-economic variables come together that define the Phoenician model as well: a metropolis with a mercantile tradition that acts as an intermediary between different inter-regional exchange circuits and some of the international economic and political circumstances favourable to the establishment of permanent operative bases – colonies – abroad.

The general idea is simply to make the reader take part in this long journey, not claiming to involve him in a self-complacent exercise of erudition, but with the conviction that at the end, the reader will modify his perception of the Phoenician colonies as something more than the result of a series of naval expeditions in search of raw materials.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51417-0 - Commerce and Colonization in the Ancient Near East

Maria Eugenia Aubet

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51417-0 - Commerce and Colonization in the Ancient Near East

Maria Eugenia Aubet

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

THE DEBATE CONCERNING
ANCIENT ECONOMY

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51417-0 - Commerce and Colonization in the Ancient Near East

Maria Eugenia Aubet

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1. THE FIRST GREAT DEBATE: PRIMITIVISTS VERSUS MODERNISTS

Until recently, scholars often used to write about the commercial foreign policies of small Greek states, and about the large industrial centres of the ancient world. These modernising terms assumed a correspondingly high level of commercial and industrial activity, which now seems completely unjustified. They also simply assumed that modern economic concepts and institutions, such as investment, banks, freedom of trade, economic policy were easily applicable to the ancient world.

GARNSEY, HOPKINS AND WHITTAKER
(1983: XI)

INTRODUCTION

It could be said that no generally accepted theory of the character and nature of ancient economy exists today. From different ideologies and disciplines, historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and economists have been arguing from the end of the nineteenth century down to the present day about how to approach a study of ancient economy. It is impossible to deny the important part played in this debate by economic anthropology in formulating methodological and theoretical propositions about ancient and primitive economies, and this confirms “the importance of anthropology’s theoretical contribution as a social science which attempts to examine social realities in a cross-cultural frame of reference” (Gledhill, 2000: 22).

However, even today, historians and anthropologists usually ignore each other as they approach the study of ancient societies and economies. “Instead of seeking

common objectives and filling the gaps in their own information, historians are seen merely as a source of factual information while anthropologists are considered to be a source of theory” (Appadurai, 1991: 10–11). The particular contribution of anthropology to the social and historical sciences stems fundamentally from its first-rate methodology: the direct study of human life on the ground through ethnographic fieldwork. For a certain period of time, the anthropologist lives with the population he or she is studying, observing the details of its behaviour as it occurs and keeping up an extensive dialogue with it about its practices and beliefs.

However, the advantages offered by archaeology are frequently forgotten; unlike anthropology, it enables us to study medium- and long-term changes and processes, and it is at a greater remove from the subject studied, as well as more objective. Strictly speaking, archaeology, together with a study of literary sources, ought to be the discipline best placed to reconstruct and compare the development and organisation of different systems of exchange and colonialism in the civilisations of the ancient Orient.

In studies of the ancient Near East, a third discipline – economic history – has, in recent decades, been gradually imposing itself on the traditional studies that had long given pride of place almost exclusively to analysing religious ideology and political forms, based on a study of the material culture. From the end of the 1970s, countless debates have taken place about how to interpret ancient trade and economies, with particular reference to the Mesopotamian and Greek worlds. Despite attempts to formulate theories to explain economic activity in the societies of the ancient East, very few works of synthesis have been published on economic history. The majority of discussions have focussed chiefly on whether the market existed in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean or not.

Therefore, it is not easy to determine the economic role played by institutions in Mesopotamian and Eastern society. For a long time, the idea prevailed that the economies of the Mesopotamian cities were dominated by the two main institutions of the period: the palace and/or the temple. Palace and temple, inseparable from the idea of State, would have enjoyed considerable power: they managed the substantial wealth that revolved around the local gods, were the owners of the irrigated land and pastures and, with the surpluses obtained from some highly productive soils, acquired raw materials that were not accessible locally – timber, metals, stone – through interregional exchange. This centralised, redistributive and despotic system has been called “temple-state economy” and also “Asiatic mode of production”.

The idea of a dominant temple-palace economy in the ancient East arose at the beginning of the twentieth century and stemmed from the first transcriptions of the cuneiform archives discovered in the Mesopotamian cities. Because the majority of these archives came from urban temples and sanctuaries, researchers

logically concluded that the whole economy of the ancient East was in the hands of the religious institutions (see Chapter 5). Over time, this system would have given way, by a gradual process of secularisation, to a central power coordinated by the palace, with the monarch of the city-states assuming the functions that, until then, had been fulfilled by the temples. The documentation on hand at the beginning of the twentieth century seemed to confirm the absence of private property and commercial activity of an entrepreneurial or private kind before the second millennium BC, so it was with the appearance of private property in the second millennium that a middle class and capitalist or “modern” forms of economic activity arose.¹

Two schools of thought have long held sway in the debate on the methods and theoretical concepts that should be applied to an investigation of the economic and sociopolitical structures of the ancient East and Mediterranean: the so-called modernists and primitivists. Since the start of the twentieth century, this controversy has continued, with varying emphasis, right down to our own day.

Another great contributor to the study of the economy of the ancient world has been Marxist thought, not only as regards concepts and methodology, but also in a critical capacity and in the perspectives it has opened up on the economy of the ancient East.

THE MODERNIST-PRIMITIVIST CONTROVERSY

Considered to be one of the longest and most interminable arguments in European historiography concerning antiquity, the controversy between modernists and primitivists culminated shortly before the First World War, pitting two great German historians, Karl Bücher and Eduard Meyer, against each other.²

Already at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, a debate had started about the alleged “primitive” or “modern” nature of the ancient economy. Those who considered the ancient world to be organised in accordance with a rationale that was not modern stressed the absence of a market and of mechanisms for regulating prices, and the non-existence of a commercial

1. In the 1970s, the idea of an economy run exclusively by the temple-palace was still dominant in many of the studies of the Near East (cf. Lipinski, 1979). Today, this very monolithic view of the Eastern city-state is not accepted, based as it was on an inadequate and uneven archaeological record and on the almost exclusive presence of archives from the temples or the palace at certain periods in its history. Everything indicates that the interaction between public institutions and the private sphere was much more complex than was thought (cf. Snell, 1997: 148–149; Powell, 1999; Van de Mieroop, 2004: 55).

2. On this controversy, see notably Dalton (1975: 73–74) and Pearson (1976: 54–55).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51417-0 - Commerce and Colonization in the Ancient Near East

Maria Eugenia Aubet

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 THE DEBATE CONCERNING ANCIENT ECONOMY

mentality oriented towards profit. As other strands and many Marxist historians would claim later, the primitivists were convinced that modern capitalism represented a peculiar phenomenon, unprecedented in history, hence the importance of analysing pre-capitalist societies separately and establishing the distinctive features that had contributed to the appearance of this new economic paradigm.

For their part, the modernists claimed that all the features inherent in modern capitalist economies were present in the ancient world and so all the tools of modern economic analysis were relevant to a study of the ancient world, because ancient societies would have functioned from economic motivations very similar to those of modern capitalism. Consequently, concepts like the desire for profit, accumulation of capital, lending for interest, inflation, price fluctuation, speculation and laws of supply and demand could be applied to the ancient world.

On the question of whether classic economic theory is universally valid, the primitivists supported the proposition that every historical period is unique and so economic models could not be applied independently of time and place, as opposed to the very static view of history and the individual championed by the modernists, according to which historical and economic circumstances have hardly changed since antiquity (cf. Rowlands, 1994: 1; Van de Mieroop, 2004: 56–58).

The ferocity displayed by the Bücher-Meyer controversy at certain points in time can be understood only in the context of the ideological and political radicalisation of the late nineteenth century in Germany, when the supposed natural advantages of free trade propounded by the liberal economists (Adam Smith, David Ricardo), the theory of state bureaucracy versus individual freedom (Marx, Weber), fear of the spread of socialism, the question of the necessary stages between feudalism and capitalism – the debate about whether countries like Poland and Russia could develop a “socialist” economy without necessarily passing through the “Western” capitalist stage – and the liberal or socialist option of the German economy were all being debated.

Karl Bücher (1847–1930) was a renowned historian of the economy and one of the founders of the so-called economy without a market. As an economist, he specialised in the history of commerce and in the economy of ancient Greece, for which he put forward the theory of the *oikos* economy (also known as the domestic or patrimonial economy), which would, in his view, have gone through various evolutionary stages within the societies. According to him, there was no complex economic life before the birth of the modern state. Up until the year 1000 AD, the economy would not have moved beyond a closed domestic economy – *geschlossene Hauswirtschaft* – with production aimed exclusively at meeting its own needs and with no exchange of any kind between the different domestic units.