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TRADE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Historians have long argued about the place of trade in classical antiquity: was it the life-blood of a complex, Mediterranean-wide economic system, or a thin veneer on the surface of an underdeveloped agrarian society? Trade underpinned the growth of Athenian and Roman power, helping to supply armies and cities. It furnished the goods that ancient elites needed to maintain their dominance – and yet, those same elites generally regarded trade and traders as a threat to social order. Trade, like the patterns of consumption that determined its development, was implicated in wider debates about politics, morality and the state of society, just as the expansion of trade in the modern world is presented both as the answer to global poverty and as an instrument of exploitation and cultural imperialism. This book explores the nature and importance of ancient trade, considering its ecological and cultural significance as well as its economic aspects.

NEVILLE MORLEY is a Senior Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Bristol. His previous publications include *Metropolis and Hinterland: the City of Rome and the Italian Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *Models and Concepts in Ancient History* (2004).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo
Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521634168
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First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge
A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-63279-9 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-63416-8 paperback

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Dedication

For Anne

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Preface

As I was completing this book, in the weeks after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, the price of petrol in some parts of the United Kingdom reached £1 per litre; this was, in part, because the destruction of refining facilities in the Gulf of Mexico meant that American oil companies were seeking to buy up supplies in Europe, while the price of crude oil on the global market passed \$70 per barrel. This can be seen as an indication of the awesome power of the modern world-trade system to mobilise goods from across the globe; there is a shortfall in supply leading to a price rise, the news is communicated almost instantaneously and the market responds, shipping oil thousands of miles to where the demand is greatest. The demands of resentful road hauliers that the government should intervene to lower prices and protect their profits are based on a complete misunderstanding of basic economics; the market simply reflects the hard realities of supply and demand, and petrol subsidies or a reduction in fuel tax could defeat their own object by stimulating demand and pushing prices up even further. Such developments emphasise the relative powerlessness of states, let alone individuals, in the face of market forces; they are a forcible reminder that, within a globalised economy, even the basic rhythms of everyday life can now be affected by events thousands of miles away – an experience which, as a regular buyer of *Fairtrade* products, I naively tend to associate more with downtrodden coffee and cocoa producers in the Third World. Connectivity, it is clear, affects us all; however much the rules of the game are rigged in favour of certain players, no one is wholly insulated from the effects of the global market.

Over the last decade, as I have been working on this book, the terms in which trade, markets and ‘globalisation’ are discussed have been changing. There remain many adherents of the conventional view of trade as indispensable and unequivocally desirable, the lifeblood of economic development and the sole hope for lifting millions out of poverty; the market, it

is argued, is the only efficient way of allocating and distributing limited resources. Some governments, above all those of the United States and the United Kingdom, continue to follow the advice of such economists, working to free world trade from its remaining constraints and to extend the reach of market forces further into social life. Increasingly, however, more critical voices have made themselves heard, not least in protests at meetings of the World Trade Organisation and G8 summits. Far from being a cure for poverty, trade is seen to be widening the gap between rich and poor. The globalised market creates misery for agricultural producers in Africa and South America, sweatshop workers in Asia and unemployed steel workers in South Wales; consumer demand for strawberries in December, perfectly round red tomatoes (however tasteless) and dirt-cheap meat (however toxic) destroys eco-systems and racks up the food miles; the relentless pursuit of profit undermines local social and economic structures, while even culture and knowledge become commodities. These developments are attributed not to trade *per se* but to the conditions under which it currently takes place – depending on the commentator, the blame lies with systems of agricultural tariffs, the dynamics of capitalism or dependence on carbon-based energy – but there is a general sense that more trade is not necessarily the answer to everything.

In particular, there is a feeling that the conventional understanding of trade, as simply a mechanism by which supply and demand are reconciled and resources are allocated in the most efficient way possible, neglects all the important questions about sustainability, justice, and the degree to which the market – as a reflection of the human beings whose decisions ultimately determine its operations – is not so much efficient as irrational and unpredictable. Recent events seem to confirm the need for cultural and psychological explanations alongside economic ones: petrol shortages created by panic-buying as the sight of other people queuing to buy petrol arouses a fear of shortages, and, underlying the whole problem, the way that individual car ownership has come to be seen as an inalienable and indispensable right, regardless of its social or environmental consequences. In such circumstances, the ancient idealisation of self-sufficiency and the avoidance of dependence, regularly blamed for the lack of economic development in classical antiquity, appears in a new light – but only to emphasise the impossibility of realising *autarkeia* in the modern world without a radical change of lifestyle. This is true even for those who attempt to recreate *The Good Life* in their back gardens. My chickens eat grain from the other side of the country, my beehives include components from Germany and China, and my home brew uses Czech hops and electricity from non-renewable

sources; this book would not have been produced without Indian tea, German beer and sausages, a Japanese laptop built in the Philippines running an American operating system, and the ideas of scholars from across the globe. Ancient self-sufficiency, too, was more about asserting one's adherence to a set of values and adopting a social identity than a practical policy, but the gap between ideal and reality was not so great as it is today. It is a reminder that the sort of trade now permeating and shaping our lives is not a natural and universal institution, based on innate human tendencies, but a particular and, in the light of current events, probably limited cultural expression.

To most ancient historians, this contrast between past and present will appear a very unremarkable conclusion; in the great debate between 'primitivist' and 'modernising' approaches to the ancient economy, one side has constantly emphasised the enormous differences between ancient and modern societies. Underpinning this primitivist perspective, however, is a blanket acceptance of the conventional association of trade with economic development, an assumption it shares with the modernisers; for all their differences, both sides take it for granted that trade is an index of modernity (without properly exploring the meanings of that problematic concept), and that the proper questions to ask in a book like this are about the volume of trade, the nature of the objects traded and the degree to which the organisation of trade resembled that of medieval or early modern Europe. The problem is that either these questions are unanswerable, given the state and nature of the surviving evidence, or the answers offered fail to give any sense of what was distinctive about Greek or Roman antiquity as opposed to other pre-industrial societies, labelling them simply as 'non-modern' or 'proto-modern'.

This book seeks to set up and explore different questions, and to offer different perspectives on the subject of trade in classical antiquity and the nature of ancient economic structures. It draws on ideas that have been developed in economic history, environmental history, anthropology and sociology, and on the recent work of some ancient economic historians whose avowed intention is to get beyond the stale and unprofitable oppositions of the old debates. The result is a picture of antiquity that may appear relatively 'modern', in so far as it is difficult to imagine the development of classical culture without a high level of movement of goods through the Mediterranean – but only on condition that the present day is seen to be less modern, its economy less detached from the rest of society, than is generally claimed. In particular, the image of both ancient and modern is tinted by the fact that, as is becoming increasingly clear, connectivity has

its costs as well as its undeniable benefits, and that some of those ‘benefits’ depend very much on one’s place in the social structure.

This book has been a long time in the making, and I am fortunate that academic publishing – or at any rate the Classics section of Cambridge University Press – operates according to a system of relaxed, personalised exchange rather than insisting on the strict enforcement of written contracts and their notional deadlines. In such systems of reciprocity and trust, an obligation may finally be discharged years after it was initially incurred, when the debtor is finally in a position to repay what is owed and/or when the sense of shame and embarrassment at his failure to do so becomes overwhelming. It is with a feeling of enormous relief that I am finally able to thank Peter Garnsey, Paul Cartledge and Michael Sharp for their faith that I would, eventually, get round to finishing this book; I suspect they may often have wished that they had asked someone less susceptible to illness, family crisis and ever-expanding academic administrative duties.

I have incurred many further debts in the course of writing; for ideas, encouragement, loans of books and unpublished papers, conversations and prompt responses to random queries. I am particularly beholden to Sitta von Reden, for the example of her work, for the pleasure – now, unfortunately, in the past – of having her as a colleague, and for her sympathy as a fellow *Key Themes* defaulter. I have benefited enormously from seeing the draft chapters of fellow contributors to the forthcoming *Cambridge Economic History of Greco-Roman Antiquity*, especially those of Wim Jongman, Astrid Möller, Robin Osborne and Gary Reger, from the comments of the editors, especially Walter Scheidel, on my own chapter, and from participating in the related seminar. Seminar audiences in Bristol, Exeter and The Hague have made many helpful comments on early drafts of some of this material. The Bristol final-year students who survived my unit on ‘Trade in Antiquity’ in 2003/4 made clear to me the limitations both of existing approaches to the subject and of my attempts at developing a new agenda, and I owe them a great deal for that. Among many other friends and colleagues who have in one way or another contributed to this enterprise, I would like to single out Peter Bang, Gillian Clark, Shelley Hales, Aideen Hartney, Aleka Lianeri, Dominic Rathbone and Greg Woolf.

I am indebted to Jill Glover and Anna Hales, for personal support and sympathy at various stages over the last few years; to Elfi Dorsch and Hans Schmid for Bier, Kuchen und Mitgefühl in the latter stages of writing; to my favourite exotic luxury items, Amber, Basil, Cleo and Jasper; and above all and always to Anne, for everything.