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978-0-521-85532-7 - The Roman Bazaar: A Comparative Study of Trade and Markets in a Tributary Empire

Peter Fibiger Bang

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Alles “Factische” sei selbst “schon Theorie”.

Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, no. 575

L’histoire comparée . . . elle consiste à faire tout son devoir d’historien: ne pas se laisser emprisonner dans des cadres conventionnels.

Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l’histoire*, p. 155

Roman Bazaar may seem a curious title. Bazaar, the Persian word for market, belongs to India and the Middle East on the Western mental map. It is a symbol of the Orient, a commercial universe at the same time exotic and tempting, and dangerously chaotic and impenetrable.¹ In a study of Roman markets and trade, the term at first appears misplaced and out of context. Nonetheless, the juxtaposition of East and (Roman)West is deliberate. It aims to challenge our preconceived notions and well-established intellectual barriers. The study of Roman trade needs this badly. The nature of Roman commercial life has been debated with varying intensity since the Enlightenment. The subject has become “falsely” familiar to the scholarly community; positions are well known and deeply entrenched, arguments repetitive and circular, the outcome a stalemate. A clear symptom of this is the continued vitality of the century-old debate between “primitivists” and “modernists”.² There is an urgent need for a change in perspective. By examining Roman trade through the lens of the bazaar, the sense of familiarity will, it is hoped, disappear, or at least be considerably lessened, and thus allow the object to appear in a different, mildly alienating light, revealing new aspects of its existence. The bazaar will emerge in this study as not so much an exotic thing of the East,

¹ Kim, the character immortalised by Rudyard Kipling in his novel of the same name, always finds in the bazaar a refuge beyond the reach of his Western existence.

² Whittaker 1995; Bang 1997a; Davies 1998; Schiavone 2000; Mattingly and Salmon 2001; Morris 2002.

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an Oriental “artefact”, as the form of trade characteristic of the pre-modern high cultures of the agrarian world. The bazaar is not incompatible with a Roman setting, far from it; in Damascus it is still possible to observe how the two co-exist, the one organically built into the other, in the narrow alleys leading from the old *Via Recta* to the Umayyad Mosque, the former temple of Jove (see Frontispiece).

Evidently, part of the problem of ancient economic history is the poor and fragmented state of the evidence. Compared to historians of European trade and capitalism from the Middle Ages through to the industrial revolution, the situation of the ancient historian is deplorable. Nothing like the copious merchant archives, company records, toll registers and lists published by brokers of prices current in the bourses – the bread and butter of European trade history – exists from Roman antiquity. The ancient historian has to make do with much less and must be willing and able to combine the testimony of very different kinds of sources. He or she cannot afford to ignore the evidence of any one group of material. Papyri, *ostraca*, wax tablets, Roman law, the classical literature, inscriptions and archaeological evidence must all be consulted and made to contribute to the final image. No single group of sources can set the analysis on a firm footing. Inscriptions mentioning merchants, for instance, provide very little detailed information and are in any case relatively few in number, leaving large tracts of the Empire completely in the dark. Archaeology has produced abundant evidence of transport of goods around the Mediterranean, but mainly through finds of potsherds in field surveys and excavations. This tells us of transport of oil and wine in clay containers and trade in pottery. Perishable containers and goods are, on the other hand, often invisible. The huge number of grain ships bringing supplies from Egypt and Africa to Rome have left hardly any trace in the archaeological record, whereas the probably smaller number of ships sailing with cargoes of oil and wine dominate the wreck evidence.³ Cloth, an important commodity in pre-industrial trade, is also largely unaccounted for by archaeology. Though clearly of great worth, the distribution patterns revealed

³ Cf. Parker 1992.

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by archaeology cannot easily substitute for our missing trade statistics.⁴

The general inadequacies of the evidence accentuate the role of conceptualisation in historical research. Too often historians forget that the sources are not identical with history; they are only the fragmentary remains, the traces of the past world which we seek to re-create in our writings. Sources are, in other words, not self-explanatory. They must be interpreted in order to bring us to the ancient reality. This has, in fact, always been acknowledged by most practitioners of the historical profession. But it would be fair to say that, with some very honourable exceptions, the discipline has neglected the development of interpretative tools. The way that history was institutionalised as a discipline across universities in Europe and America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused on promoting the detailed examination and critical scrutiny of sources. How to combine the observations into a coherent whole was, on the other hand, seen as a function of the personal inclinations of the individual scholar. Romanticist historians claimed to be artists, working on the basis of their personal intuition and “divine” inspiration.⁵ Scholars of a more positivist bent agreed. They tended to regard the “art” of interpreting the evidence as a subjective activity, not really part of the proper “scientific” pursuit of history, which should simply stick to the sources. The latter was no solution; ultimately it was simply a way of giving up on writing history.⁶

The historian of Hellenism, Droysen, followed by Max Weber in the next generation, offered an alternative to this submission to subjectivism. Intuition might be of service to historians dealing with problems and occurrences of which they had immediate experience. However, as soon as they had to deal with questions beyond their personal horizon, their experience stopped being of any use to them. Indeed it might often lead them to make false judgments and introduce anachronistic features to their analysis – the

⁴ Whittaker 1989. ⁵ Meyer 1910.

⁶ As the “founder” of the modern historical profession in Denmark, Kristian Erslev quite possibly did, cf. Tandrup 1979. A small booklet (Erslev 1911), making a sharp distinction between the critical scrutiny of sources and the subjective art of interpretation, has continued to provoke intense debate among Danish historians right up to the present day. See Finley 1985b, chapter 4 for a general treatment of the question.

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cardinal sin of the professional historian. Such concerns are particularly pertinent with regard to phenomena either far removed in time and place from the historian, or such as cannot readily be seen from the observation of individual examples but only appear from the statistical study of large masses of evidence. Both conditions apply in the study of ancient economies. The response of Droysen and Weber was to pay close attention to the formation of concepts – our analytical tools – or theory. By broadening and refining his conceptual and theoretical repertoire, the historian acquires a method for improving and making explicit the assumptions that he brings to bear on the source material. Theory and conceptual analysis are a means by which the historian controls and compensates for his “deficient” experience.⁷

One example must suffice for demonstration. In common parlance market trade is always the same. Careful theoretical examination of markets, however, reveals that they may operate in very different ways according to circumstances. The bazaar, for instance, possesses a number of characteristics, which produce a distinct pattern of trade very different from that of modern, capitalist markets, as we shall see more fully explained in Chapter 3. For the moment, a basic definition in ideal-typical terms will do. As a form of trade, the bazaar has taken shape from the many irregularities characteristic of pre-industrial peasant societies. Compared to modern markets, the bazaar is distinguished by high uncertainty of information and relative unpredictability of supply and demand. This makes the prices of commodities in the bazaar fairly volatile. As a consequence, the integration of markets is often low and fragile; it is simply difficult for traders to obtain sufficiently reliable and stable information on which effectively to respond to developments in other markets. Considerable fragmentation of markets prevails. From a modern perspective where trade has focused on overcoming these obstacles to commercial integration by creating a more transparent and predictable environment, this condition has often been mistaken for a seeming chaos and lack of organisation. Most merchants operating in a bazaar environment are

⁷ Droysen 1977, esp. 217–219 and 285–393; Weber 1922: 146–290; Finley 1985b, chapter 4; Veyne 1976b.

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small and household-based. However, they were and are not passive victims of uncertainty. Instead they tend to pursue strategies which do not aim to eradicate the general conditions of uncertainty, but rather reproduce them as part of the solution. One such strategy, as observed by Clifford Geertz, is clientelisation. Merchants in the bazaar seek to cultivate personal and lasting relations of exchange with particular business partners. This serves to shelter them against the all-pervasive risks and uncertainties of the bazaar, but on the basis of specially trusted and favoured relations. The market as a generalised sphere of exchange is not available, or only in a very limited way, to the bazaar merchant. His is not a level playing field. Better opportunities might, for instance, be available in a different market. However, if the merchant lacks his network of personal alliances, he may not be able to make use of those opportunities and will therefore prefer to remain in the market he knows. Fragmentation of the market is not simply an imperfection; quite the reverse, it is reproduced by the way the bazaar functions.⁸

Described in this way, the bazaar as a model of markets is bound to be of particular interest to the student of pre-industrial trade. It provides an attractive formula by which to treat the many irregularities characteristic of a world based on slow-moving animal and weather-bound sea transport. Yet, even here is it possible to make distinctions. In this study, the bazaar is used as a concept to describe markets in complex agrarian societies before the development of (early) modern capitalism with its links to mercantilist privileges and later liberal programmes of *laissez-faire* economics. These policies helped to strengthen the position of the middleman, often a man of dubious reputation and status in aristocratically dominated societies, and saw a development towards more stable and integrated markets during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries within the European-led, for lack of a better word, world-system.⁹

Theoretical and conceptual reflection enables the historian to cultivate his analytical imagination and increases his capacity

⁸ Geertz 1979 is the best theoretical description of the bazaar.

⁹ Cf. Wallerstein 1974a, Steensgaard 1973a and Persson 1999 on the link between European commercial policies, institutional innovations and the gradual improvement in the integration of markets; Bang 2006, for further discussion.

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for perceiving historical differences.¹⁰ Traditionally historians have described Greco-Roman antiquity with concepts taken from the “Western” historical experience. For a long period classics was seen as the epitome of civilisation and constituted the backbone of elite education in Europe and America. As this position was lost in the cluster of processes normally referred to as modernisation, a gap began to open up in people’s minds between the European present and the Greco-Roman past. Increasingly Greco-Roman culture has come to be seen as a foreign place and the experience of modernity as a correspondingly inadequate guide to the ancient past. This has set classicists and ancient historians free to explore the less familiar aspects of the ancient world. They have in particular sought inspiration from anthropology. This discipline, having developed a rich theoretical tradition, has proven a virtual gold-mine for ancient historians in search of organising concepts. Indeed, the anthropological work of Clifford Geertz greatly informs the use in this study of the bazaar as an ideal-type. But the relevance of anthropological research for ancient history also has very real limits. Anthropologists have traditionally either focused on so-called primitive societies or studied traditional, most commonly peasant, communities in isolation from the outside world.¹¹ This is a problem for the student of an urbanised high culture, which depended on its ability to break the isolation of the individual peasant villages and claim a part of agricultural production for the consumption of urban dwellers and specialists. The isolated units of anthropology are too simple for the ancient reality.¹² Economics might offer another possible theoretical avenue to the student of Roman trade. In particular, development economics, dealing with societies where agriculture still holds a very prominent position, has something to offer. But much has already changed in the third world. It does not represent a pristine version

¹⁰ Bloch 1967: 44–81; Veyne 1971; Finley 1985b.

¹¹ A local emphasis, failing to take proper account of intercity/long-distance trade, is a particular weakness of Geertz’ early work (1963) on the bazaar. The 1979 treatment is more aware of links between markets, but the attention is still pointed towards local links.

¹² Finley 1975: Chapter 6. Horden and Purcell 2000 struggle with this problem; they have difficulties combining their micro-analytical approach with a clear understanding of wider processes such as state formation; see Bang 2004.

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of pre-industrial society. In addition, economics as a discipline is more orientated towards the future than the past. Its objectives are different from those of history.

Both anthropology and economics offer valuable insights to the ancient economic historian. This study draws on some of these. But neither of the two disciplines has focused its attention on the problems most relevant to the student of the ancient world – a pre-industrial high culture. The ancient historian is thrust back on himself or herself to develop an adequate theoretical framework more thoroughly grounded in a historical experience relevant to his/her own subject. This brings us back to Weber's project. His ambition was to ground the social sciences securely in historical experience. Theories developed in relation to the modern world had to be complemented by concepts developed to deal with pre-industrial conditions – a historical sociology. Weber's tool was comparative history.¹³ By studying other societies which resemble the Roman world more closely, ancient historians acquire a more secure basis for their own interpretations. Comparative history provides them with the historical experience they lack.

The number of relevant historical parallels to the Roman Empire is relatively limited. Pre-industrial history does not present us with many giant, multiethnic agrarian empires sufficiently well known to warrant closer comparison. The last point bears emphasis. Pre-Columbian empires in the Americas, such as the Inca and Aztec, though smaller, might for instance be considered potential candidates for comparison. But our knowledge of these polities is considerably less than of Rome. The sources are fewer and scholarship much less copious. The same goes for a number of ancient and medieval imperial formations.¹⁴ Anyhow, this is not to say that these are not interesting cases.¹⁵ But from a pragmatic perspective, the best candidates for comparison would seem to be found in the context of sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Asia. Ottoman, Ming/Ch'ing and Mughal history all offer attractive comparisons.

¹³ Weber 1972. See Skocpol 1979; Skocpol and Sommers 1980 on the analytical qualities of comparative history.

¹⁴ The volume edited by Alcock, D'Altroy, Morrison and Sinopoli (2001), while interesting, did reveal the huge discrepancies in the density of information between the Roman Empire and many potential comparisons.

¹⁵ See Scheidel 2008 for an interesting attempt to compare Rome and Han China.

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These empires have size, dense documentary record and extensive historiography speaking in their favour.

But the choice is not merely a matter of expediency. The early modern timeframe means that all three imperial societies were, in turn, confronted with expansive, European capitalism. This has caused Mughal, Ottoman and Chinese historians to debate to what extent trade and markets in these empires resembled or differed from European (see Chapter 1). The challenge facing these historiographies has in many ways been the same as that confronting the Roman historian: to find a way to account for vibrant commercial networks and considerable exchange without denying the existence of significant differences to the emerging forms of modern capitalism, in other words to avoid the Scylla of primitivism and the Charybdis of modernism.¹⁶ The historian of Roman trade can surely learn from these efforts. This study draws on the experience from all three empires, but Mughal India has been singled out for more detailed comparison. This choice is not wholly arbitrary. The character and shape of the historiography of the Mughal Empire is such as to be particularly helpful in suggesting solutions to the problems which have occupied historians of the Roman economy and trade – as will appear from the following chapters. Suffice it here to note the availability of an extensive literature on trade in the Indian Ocean and the prominent position claimed by a model, positing a close link between state taxation and commercialisation, in explaining economic developments in the Mughal Empire, much as in Hopkins' influential interpretation of Roman economic history.

A Roman–Mughal comparison may seem to militate against the instincts of traditional historical research. It disregards both the unity of time and of space. Trans-epochal as well as cross-cultural comparisons are often viewed with suspicion.¹⁷ This is in many cases unwarranted. Neither cultures nor epochs are “sacred” boundary markers. They are analytical, not arbitrary, I hasten to add, constructs, useful generalisations designed to throw light on specific aspects of reality. Such categories must be designed and

¹⁶ Bang *et al.* 1999; See Bang and Bayly 2003 for some preliminary comparisons.

¹⁷ Even Tilly 1984. Bloch 1967: 44–81 is more nuanced.

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adjusted to serve the historical inquiry. From an economic point of view, imperial capitals like Rome and Agra – giant cities of the pre-industrial world with population figures reaching into the hundreds of thousands and financed by an enormous expenditure of imperial tribute – clearly have much more in common than each of them has with a contemporary smallish peasant village within their respective cultural orbits in, say, Anatolia or Bengal. “L’unité de lieu n’est que désordre. Seule l’unité de problème fait centre”, as Marc Bloch once remarked.¹⁸ This approach does not exclude recognising differences. The production of calicoes in Bengal during the Mughal era represents one of the most extensive pre-industrial examples of cloth production. A significant, though far from the biggest, part of production went to foreign exports.¹⁹ Roman products such as wine and glass did find their way out of the Empire, but the Roman economy was without a similarly large export trade. In that respect, India, in spite of having often enjoyed a reputation for being the quintessential traditional society, would seem to be not less commercialised than the Roman world, rather the opposite. This makes Mughal India a useful upper benchmark for discussions of Roman trade and markets. Categories, in effect, must be handled pragmatically and tailored to fit our analytical needs.

This takes us to the problem of trespassing. Only rarely can comparative historians aspire to be experts in more than one field. Therefore they must depend, to a large extent, on the work of colleagues in other areas of research. Inevitably, they are bound to make some mistakes, just as their understanding of parts of the “foreign” material undoubtedly will leave much to be desired. None of this should be seen as vitiating the endeavour. It bears emphasis that the aim is not to produce a comprehensive and detailed account of Mughal India. Not every detail or nuance is important to the comparative historian. Emphasis must be placed on the aspects which can help to elucidate the problems in which he/she is interested. The same goes for scholarly disagreements. No historiography is ever fixed. New generations tend to produce new, competing versions of the past. Any historical question of

¹⁸ Bloch 1934: 81. McNeill 1986: 35 and 84; Aymard 1990. ¹⁹ Prakash 1998.

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more than moderate interest is bound to be contested. In practice it is not possible, nor is it desirable, to account for every conflicting view in the interpretation of the comparative example. In general, I have chosen what seemed to be the better-argued case, even if controversial, and restricted myself to indicating only some of the major fault lines in scholarly debates on the Mughal Empire. The aim, it should be remembered, has been to use Mughal history to develop concepts for Roman history.²⁰

Remaining to be explained are a few matters of terminology and chronology. The term “tributary” empire may require clarification. *Tributum* designates in Latin the taxes owed by the provinces to the Roman imperial state. During the 1970s and early 1980s the term gained currency among Marxist scholars to describe the predominance of the political power to tax in mobilising the agricultural surplus of peasant producers. This distinguishes a tributary empire from the modern colonial empires of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The latter treated their dependencies much more with a view to commercial exploitation. Provinces provided the Romans with tax revenue; colonies served more as suppliers of raw products and consumers of metropolitan exports.²¹ Chris Wickham gave the concept a well-directed twist, when he suggested it be used to distinguish centralised, imperial surplus extraction from rent claimed by local, decentralised and independent feudal lords.²² It is in this sense that the term has been adopted in the present study, though in an undogmatic way and without subscribing to the broader Marxist framework. In general “tributary” seems preferable to the empty and less precise phrase “traditional” empire. Occasionally “tributary” has been used interchangeably with “agrarian” or “universal” empire. The term “universal” may help to clarify further the notion of empire used here. It is generally reserved for vast extensive hegemonic polities that manage to dominate and absorb most states within their orbits. This sets a tributary empire apart from the early modern absolutist monarchies which developed on the basis of European feudalism and formed part of a pluralistic

²⁰ Paludan 1995: 197–203 is the best available discussion of this problem. See further Goldstone 1991: xxvii and 50–60.

²¹ See Hobsbawm 1987, chapter 3 for a treatment of colonial empires.

²² Wickham 1985; Wolf 1982; Amin 1973.