

1 Introduction: Defining Roman Peasant Economics

In 1979, Prof. Peter Garnsey published an article in the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, in which he attempted to answer the question of why archaeologists and ancient historians had not studied peasant communities in Roman Italy. According to Garnsey, this gap was due to the negative response that preceding historiography had given to a previous question, “Did peasant proprietors survive in significant numbers in the Late Republic and Early Empire?” Despite Garnsey’s own attempts (1976, 1980) and those of other notable scholars (Fraysn 1974, 1979; Evans 1980, 1980b; Foxhall 1990; De Ligt 1990, 1991) to initiate a research focus on rural *proletarii*, non-slave laborers, smallholders, and rural tenants during the Roman period, this line of study remained stagnant until relatively recently. Several factors may explain the lack of continuity in this research. One of them is the undeniable academic success of the *villa schiavistica* model as a manifestation of the slave-owning mode of production in the Roman period, bolstered by the publication of the results of the archaeological excavations directed by Andrea Carandini (1985, 1989) of the Roman *villa* of Settefinestre in Etruria. The authority conferred by the vast majority of ancient historians on a relatively small group of sources (known as the *De Re Rustica* treatise writers, vid. Martin 1971) led to widespread acceptance of the idea of a progressive replacement of the traditional Republican-period, citizen-peasant communities by a model structured around the *villa* as a center of large slave holdings.

The extension of this agricultural production model, based on the *villa schiavistica* as the essential nucleus of the economic structure of other provincial territories, has been called “agrarian Romanisation” (Leveau 2014). It was understood as a natural result of the imperialist expansion of the Roman state throughout the Mediterranean (Remesal 2008). In this way, the archaeological concept of the *villa* was established as a material correlate of the Roman slave-owning production mode and the backbone of social and economic life in the rural world of large sectors of the Empire.

A paradigm shift has occurred in recent decades, however, thanks mainly to the development of survey projects carried out in Roman Italy and the systematic examination of data resulting from rescue archaeology. In view of all this evidence, it is no longer possible to sustain the idea that peasant communities disappeared during the late Republican and early Imperial periods (Launaro 2011; Bowes 2020). The traditional model is no longer useful to explain the complex configuration of Roman rural landscapes from a microregional perspective.

An increasing number of interdisciplinary projects is now responsible for giving visibility to the presence and relevance of various modes of occupation

and exploitation of rural areas in the Roman world that foregrounds peasants from the perspective of anthropological peasant studies discussed next.

Archaeological analysis of peasant communities in Roman times involves a series of historiographical questions that transcend the lack of material evidence or textual sources. As various anthropologists (Wolf 1966: 13–17; Shanin 1971a: 15; Mintz 1973; Elis 1988b: 5–6) have pointed out, the subaltern nature of peasant communities throughout history has often hampered their ability to transmit or codify forms of social or cultural identity that are distinguishable from those of elite or aristocratic groups. These difficulties are reflected in the intense debates that have taken place within peasant studies since the inception of modern sociology (Edelman 2013). Nevertheless, it is possible to find generic characteristics for the concept of peasantry, in which to insert a large number of the social groups that populated the Roman countryside. A useful definition of the peasantry was proposed by Theodor Shanin in one of his most famous works *Peasantry: Delineation of a Sociological Concept and Field of Study*. He considers that the peasantry “consists of small agricultural producers who, with the help of simple equipment and the labor of their families, produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfilment of obligations to the holders of political and economic powers” (Shanin 1971a: 2, 3). However, as Shanin (1971b: 292) himself acknowledges, attempts to reduce the concept of peasantry to a closed social category would be a self-defeating exercise in reductionism for any social scientist or historian.

In light of all this new information and inspired by the line of research initiated by various scholars, the intention of this Element is to take up the question posed by Peter Garnsey for Roman Italy and to transfer it to the specific context of Roman Iberia (Table 1). To achieve this, the aim is to summarize recent publications regarding the study of archaeological evidence generated by various projects that have applied various survey and remote-sensing methodologies or have examined data generated by rescue archaeology projects. This is complemented by a review of extensive archaeological data contained in publications oriented according to traditional historiographical perspectives and legacy data. The discussion of all this information allows us to characterize the population structures of these rural communities on two fundamental levels. First, we examine the various territorial implantation and landscape configuration dynamics, in which these peasant communities are recorded in different micro-regions of the Iberian Peninsula. Second, we characterize the dwellings of these communities who lived outside (or rather on the margins of) the monumental *villae*. The purpose of this study is to analyze to what extent the landscape configuration, population structure, and economic and social life of various rural sectors of Roman Spain were conditioned by these peasant communities, by their ways of life, and by their forms of territorial exploitation.

Table 1 Summary of the main events and chronological periods mentioned in the text.

Period	Chronology	Key Events and Developments
Iron Age	c. 900 BC–218 BC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arrival of Indo-European and Eastern Mediterranean communities - Arise of Iberian and Celtiberian cultural groups - First cities-states in the Iberian Peninsula - Intensification of economy and increase of regional interchanges
Roman Conquest	218 BC–19 BC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Progressive conquest in phases - Second Punic War (218–201 BC) - Wars with Iberian and Celtiberian communities. Numantine War (154–133 BC). - Roman territorial control mainly through local centers. - Augustus completes northern conquest
Early Roman Empire	1st century–3rd century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Process of municipalization - Roman colonies established - Economic integration within Empire - Trade network development
Late Roman Empire	3rd century–5th century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Crisis of the Roman Empire - Economic instability - Political fragmentation
Late Antiquity	AD 409–AD 711	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collapse of Roman rule - Visigothic Kingdom of Toledo - Christianization of society - Islamic conquest

1.1 Roman Peasantry in the Textual Sources

A variety of Latin terms were used in various classical sources to designate diverse rural inhabitants in the Roman period: *rusticus* (Apul. *Metam.* XII. 24. 4), *rusticanus* (Cic. *Verr.* V. 34), *rusticulus* (Cic. *Sest.* XXXVIII. 82), *proletarius* (Aulus Gellius, *Noct. Att.* XVI. 10; Cic. *Res Publ.* II, 22, 10), *servus* (Juv. *Sat.* III, 9. 44), and *colonus*

(Cic. *pro Caec.* 57). However, there is no Latin word that can be used as an exact translation of the English word peasant. Many of these terms were used in various contexts to designate a wide variety of social realities, such as tenants, smallholders, rural workers, or even members of the local rural elites. However, in the entire history of Latin literature – at least that written up to the late Roman period – it is not possible to find a single source that describes individuals who can be identified as peasants. Despite the fact that some scholars have concerned themselves with analyzing the hidden transcripts contained in the work of some Latin authors, such as the writers of agricultural handbooks *De Re Rustica* (Kron 2017), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (López Medina 2020), Pliny's *Natural History* (Shaw 2015: 278–279), or the *Epistles* of Dio Chrysostom (Erdkamp 2005: 55–105), it is almost impossible to find detailed and non-biased information about the worldview or the material living conditions of these groups in a review of literary sources.

Other textual sources offer more direct information about these communities during the Roman period: for example, the laws that regulated the great imperial domains of North Africa, such as the *lex Manciana* (Kehoe 1988; Kolendo 1991; De Ligt 1998) or the *lex Hadriana* (González Bordas 2020). These are known in great detail thanks to the study of inscriptions documented in various sectors of *Africa Proconsularis*. Other North African inscriptions, in particular, funerary texts, offer us access to other ideological references about the uses and customs of these peasant communities of Roman Africa. This is the case of the famous Maktar harvester inscription (*CIL*, VIII 11824; *ILS* 7457, for the best study published to date see Shaw 2015: 3–92, 281–298), as well as other lesser known inscriptions that contain biographical references to the concerns and virtues associated with these communities (Stone 1998). Other legal texts, such as leases or harvesting contracts for agricultural products (P. Sarap. 49 and 50; P. S. I. 789; P. Flor. 80 and 101; Montevecchi 1950), also offer us notable information on the living conditions of these sectors of rural society in the context of Roman Egypt (Bagnall 2005; Bowman 2009).

Although these sources contain interesting information about the economic conditions and social life of peasant communities in various provinces of the Roman Empire, in the specific context of Roman Iberia, with a few exceptions related to generic references to some rural settlements (Curchin 1985; Le Roux 2009) or certain onomastic or kinship references related to forms of dependency in rural contexts (Sastre 2007), we have practically no textual sources that contain references to these rural communities (Tarpin 2002). Similarly to North Africa, we have some epigraphic sources for the Iberian Peninsula that provide interesting evidence. This is the case with the bronze tablet containing the allocation of enclosure lots (*sortitio*) of *Ilici* (Elx, Alacant) (Mayer and Olesti 2001), an exceptional source that allows us to understand the allocation of small plots of

land that were to be part of the centuriation of the territory of this Roman colony. This document serves to confirm that, at least at the time of the formal act of surrender or submission to Roman authority of the territory (*deditio*) and the ritual of foundation of a new Roman town (*deductio*), the Roman surveyors intended to establish a relatively equal distribution of small plots among the different veterans and coloners, who would then cultivate them using strategies similar to those of other smallholders in various historical contexts (especially Republican Italy). This tablet is an example of the detailed administrative record that Roman magistrates developed at a local level to ensure the effective implementation of taxation on all inhabitants of the countryside in provincial territories. Despite the importance of this source, to which we will return later, it remains one of the few textual sources that reference this type of smallholders in the context of the Iberian Peninsula. To a large extent, research on the living conditions and historical evolution of peasant communities from the Roman period in Iberia has to be limited fundamentally to the analysis of archaeological evidence. Thus, the main aim of this study is the construction of a historical portrait of the peasantries of Roman Iberia through the analysis of various (and dispersed) archaeological testimonies bequeathed to us by those communities.

1.2 Analyzing Peasant Economics in the Roman Period

The examination of Roman rural economies in recent decades has been predominantly shaped by the application of modern economic models. The classic debates between “modernists” and “primitivists” have now transitioned toward an emphasis on quantitative indicators and the legal-institutional framework (Kehoe 1988; Scheidel, Morris, and Saller 2007) to comprehend the ways in which community economic structures functioned. Many of these approaches stem from a liberal application of the market concept as the backbone of such analyses (Temin 2013). Even interpretations rooted in Marxist conceptions (e.g., the slave mode of production) of the *De Re Rustica* treatises and archaeological records from systematic excavations since the 1970s–80s are interwoven with this mercantilist or proto-capitalist perspective on the Roman economy (Carandini 1985; Leveau 2014; Launaro 2015). However, without dismissing the relevance of these approaches for understanding the Roman economy, it is crucial to acknowledge that such studies overshadow or disregard the economic constraints and motivations of a substantial portion of the Roman rural population.

As Chayanov (1925) previously established, the economy of peasant groups is structured by the need to navigate a series of decisions and balances that transcend the microeconomic conceptions of classical economic theory (Figure 1). This does not imply that this economy is simplistic or primitive, as

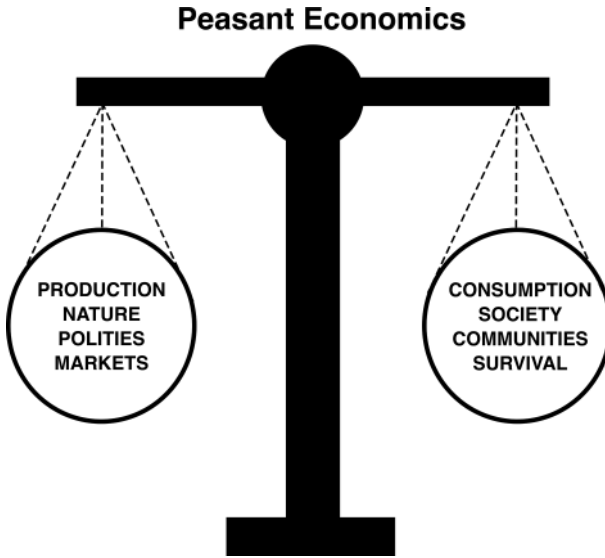


Figure 1 Graph of the main balances related to peasant economies' performance.

some contemporary scholars of the Roman economy may implicitly suggest. Nor is the wholesale disappearance of peasant communities in the Roman world due to the development of a mercantile economy reliant on massive slave labor, as has been claimed on various occasions. In the present era, marked by the global application of neoliberal paradigms, we have witnessed the emergence of new forms of the peasant economy and the reformulation of agricultural paradigms beyond capitalist conceptions (Van der Ploeg 2008). Therefore, the assertion of a complete substitution of the Roman peasantry as a collective historical agent is only plausible from an ideologically biased perspective of the ancient world as a necessary precursor to the capitalist economy of the contemporary world.

The analysis of peasant economies cannot be conducted solely through classical mercantile lenses. There was an economy not based on the investment of past labor effort with wages (or the investment of financial resources in the purchase of slave labor). To sustain themselves, these peasant groups were predominantly reliant on work carried out by members of a family unit and other members of the extensive and complex corporate groups that were characteristic of preindustrial and other contemporary rural societies (Shanin 1990; Netting 1993). Building upon this initial premise, the following sections will explore the essential elements and balances that these rural communities of Roman Iberia had to maintain for their subsistence.

A fundamental balance in peasant economies exists between production and consumption, operating within an investment and subsistence framework (Halstead 2014). While diverging from modern financial economic models, these systems incorporate distinct forms of capital. In this context, “capital” encompasses tangible assets including farmsteads, cultivated fields, land improvements, tools, and productive infrastructure (Van der Ploeg 2008: 45). These elements often generate substantial material remains, providing archaeologists with valuable data for characterizing the various sorts of “capital” available to Roman-era rural settlements across the Iberian Peninsula. The second section of this Elements project aims to provide an updated overview of our current understanding of this material evidence, which serve to characterize the various forms of “capital” available to farms and other forms of rural habitation during the Roman period across different regions of the Iberian Peninsula.

Another balance that every peasant economy must address concerns the relationship between the natural and the social spheres (Toledo 1990). The agricultural and livestock activities of these communities are invariably structured through specific interventions in or exploitation of the landscape. Contrary to the common perception of the relative simplicity of peasant life, these communities were in fact characterized by the development and implementation of diverse agricultural strategies linked to various cultivation and husbandry methods across different environmental contexts. This entails the application of multiple approaches to exploiting and modifying the neighboring landscapes. In the case of peasant communities, this capacity to alter the surrounding landscapes is not primarily based on potential profit. Consequently, peasant groups may develop agricultural strategies such as intensification, where the production of short-term yields is so marginal that it would be automatically discarded by any agricultural enterprise based on financial or capitalist calculations. Although these practices may not be optimal in terms of economic yields, they often ensure long-term sustainability. This balance is defined in terms of co-production – an ecological relationship between humans and nature (Chayanov 1925: 58; Gerritsen 2002, 2012; Altieri and Toledo 2011; Van der Ploeg 2008, 2015). In the third section, we will analyze the agricultural strategies deployed by peasant groups in different regions of Roman Iberia and the landscape alterations that these strategies entailed. As we shall see, diverse archaeological indicators suggest adaptations in the implementation of intensification agrarian strategies.

One fundamental aspect is related the operational framework of peasant groups to the mobilization of household labor. Relevant to this question is the structural relationship between operational models based on land quantity – depending on the availability of slave or dependent labor, as in the case of the