

## *Introduction*

At some point after the middle of the first century BCE, Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces commissioned a costly and visually striking funerary monument for himself on the eastern fringe of the city of Rome, near the intersection of the Via Labicana and the Via Praenestina (Figure I.1). Built from travertine and over thirty feet high, it bore an innovative decorative scheme evoking the world of work and business. The three surviving facades confront the viewer with the circular mouths of replicas of the kneading machines used in the city's larger bakeries, arranged in three horizontal rows. Above these, just below the tomb's upper story, runs a frieze depicting several scenes associated with bread and bread-making: on its south face the frieze depicts the receipt and milling of grain; on the north face, the work in the bakery itself; and on the west face, the weighing of the final product. Finally, the visual program of the monument is complemented by an inscription proclaiming: "This is the monument of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces, baker, contractor, public servant."<sup>1</sup>

The scale and cost of the monument demonstrate that Eurysaces enjoyed success in his profession. Other artisans were not so fortunate. Although those who failed to prosper in the urban economies of the Roman world are more difficult to detect – they were, after all, unlikely to commemorate their failures on a monument – they do make occasional appearances in the evidentiary record, even if only in oblique ways. Our legal sources, for instance, leave little doubt that financial collapse was a very real risk for slaves who had been entrusted with capital by their masters to develop and operate a business: during the second century BCE, the praetors at Rome developed legal remedies designed to permit creditors of a slave whose business had become insolvent to recover their money

<sup>1</sup> For a recent and thorough discussion of this monument, see Petersen 2003.

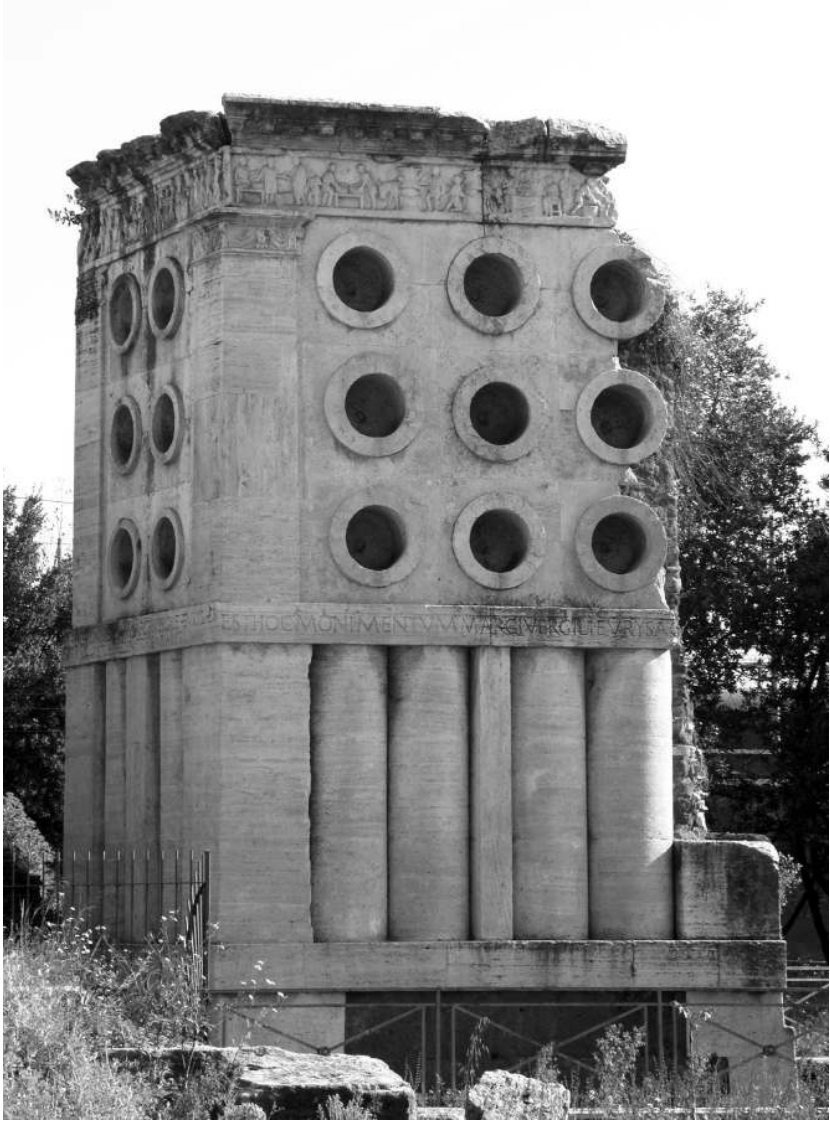


Figure I.1 The tomb of Eurysaces (Photo: Cameron Hawkins)

*Introduction*

3

from the slave's master.<sup>2</sup> Much later, in the second century CE, Artemidorus of Daldis recorded the story of a carpenter from the city of Cyzicus in Anatolia in his handbook on the interpretation of dreams, *Oneirocritica*. According to Artemidorus, the carpenter's dream that his colleague had died proved to be an evil omen of his own impending financial ruin: shortly after this dream, the carpenter was forced to abandon his workshop and leave Cyzicus because he could not pay back his creditors.<sup>3</sup>

These brief anecdotes provide representative examples of our direct evidence concerning the experiences and fortunes of the artisans who lived and worked in the cities of the Roman world during the late Roman Republic and early Roman Empire. They communicate vital information, particularly in the case of Eurysaces' monument, which implies that Eurysaces enjoyed success largely because he could produce bread at a scale suitable for state contracts. Yet, at the same time, these sources raise more questions than they answer about the nature of urban economies in the Roman world, the opportunities and challenges they created for artisans, and the strategies artisans devised to navigate these economies successfully. For instance, while observers in the ancient world recognized that the concentrated demand produced by urban environments could create opportunities for those with skill or ambition, the contrast between the fortunes of Eurysaces and the carpenter from Cyzicus implies that those opportunities held potentially serious risks. Likewise, although the scenes of working life preserved on Eurysaces' monument leave little doubt that his enterprise operated on a scale that demanded the help of numerous workers and even suggest that his bakery gave rise to internal divisions of labor, they say little about what Eurysaces' efforts to recruit and manage his workforce entailed.<sup>4</sup>

Given the nature of the evidence, historians who study artisans and urban producers in the Roman world have followed two trajectories. First, scholars have researched production and distribution in those industries that have left strong traces in the archaeological evidence (some of which, strictly speaking, took place in suburban or rural contexts rather than urban). These include the pottery industries responsible for producing the coarsewares and finewares that circulated widely in the Roman world, as well as more utilitarian items such as ceramic shipping containers, tiles,

<sup>2</sup> In particular, see Aubert 2013: 201–2 and Chiussi 1993 on the *actio tributoria*, which receives extensive treatment on the part of the Roman jurists.

<sup>3</sup> Artem. 4.1. <sup>4</sup> For a brief discussion of divisions of labor within bakeries, see Ruffing 2008: 374.

or bricks;<sup>5</sup> industries that produced marble sarcophagi;<sup>6</sup> and, increasingly, those that gave rise to sizeable physical installations, like the fulling industry.<sup>7</sup> Studies of this sort have revealed much about the organization of individual industries, even if the nature of the evidence makes it difficult to grapple with questions concerning strategies on the level of the individual workshop. Second, scholars have also explored what representations like those of Eurysaces can tell us about the self-fashioned identity of artisans and other members of sub-elite groups in Roman cities and about the value artisans attached to hard work and professional success.<sup>8</sup> Work in this vein has done much to read past Cicero's notorious argument that most urban trades belonged to what he called the "sordid" rather than the "liberal" arts (*quaestus sordidi* and *quaestus liberales*, respectively) and to demonstrate that artisans in particular took pride in their skill, in the proceeds of their labor, and did not hesitate to celebrate their successes.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, it has also worked to situate artisans in their social contexts by shedding light on the kinds of personal and professional relationships that gave structure to their working lives.

By comparison, historians have only recently focused in detail on the questions that Artemidorus' anecdote and Eurysaces' monument raise about the nature of the Roman economy and about the strategies artisans developed to manage their enterprises.<sup>10</sup> While it has now been over a decade since Jean-Jacques Aubert encouraged ancient historians to develop a detailed and comprehensive model of business management in antiquity,<sup>11</sup> we are still in the very early stages of this project. As a result, we still know much less about the factors that shaped the decisions of urban producers than we do about those that shaped the decisions of wealthy landholders like Cicero or even about those that shaped the decisions of the tenants and smallholders who constituted the bulk of the rural population in Italy and other regions of the empire. This gap in our knowledge is problematic for two reasons. First, a study of artisans and their business

<sup>5</sup> Aubert 1994 discusses the management and organization of a number of different ceramic industries. Cf. also Fülle 1997 for a detailed discussion of *terra sigillata* production.

<sup>6</sup> Ward-Perkins 1992 is the standard work. See, more recently, Birk 2012, who attempts to produce a more nuanced analysis of the organization of workforces in this particular industry.

<sup>7</sup> Flohr 2007, 2011, and 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Much of this work was inspired by Veyne 2000, which explores the culture of the so-called *plebs media*. For the state of the art, see Tran 2013. Cf. also Knapp 2011: 5–52 and Mayer 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Cic. *Off.* 1.150–1.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Venticinque 2010 and Holleran 2012: 194–231. For examples that approach the problem from an archaeological perspective, see Birk 2012 (marble workers) and Flohr 2013, esp. 96–180 and 242–87.

<sup>11</sup> Aubert 2001: 106–8.

*Argument*

5

strategies can enrich our understanding of the practical circumstances that gave rise to the thought-worlds of the “invisible Romans” that form the subject of Robert Knapp’s recent book – broadly speaking, those members of Roman society who, unlike the elite, did not produce extensive literary reflections about their world.<sup>12</sup> Second, because artisans’ strategies reflected the economic environments in which they were embedded, an analysis of those strategies can contribute directly to the debate about the structure and performance of the Roman world’s economy.

**Argument**

In this book, I intend to fill that gap by making three principal arguments about artisans, their strategies, and the economic environment in which they worked. In the first place, I show that even though urban environments in antiquity did give rise to concentrated markets for the products and services of artisans and other urban producers, those markets were fundamentally unstable, because consumer demand at all levels of the socioeconomic spectrum remained both seasonal and uncertain. Second, I demonstrate that artisans responded to the instability of urban product markets in two main ways: (1) they sought to buffer themselves against the risks that arose from seasonal and uncertain demand by devising business strategies designed both to minimize their fixed and ongoing costs and to ensure that they had the flexibility to respond to elevated periods of demand by stepping up production when necessary; (2) they compensated for potentially high transaction costs in what was a tight market for skilled labor by embedding their production strategies either in relationships of trust (which often arose in the context of professional associations), or in relationships of power that bound freed slaves to their former masters. Third, I suggest that an understanding of artisans’ strategies can be used to address persistent questions about the performance of the Roman economy, especially its potential for intensive growth during the late Republic and early Empire. Those strategies point to subtle but important contrasts between the world of antiquity and the world of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe – contrasts which suggest not only that the urban market structures of the Roman world were underdeveloped in comparison with those of early modern Europe but also that the Roman economy was unlikely to have experienced ongoing growth during the first and second centuries CE.

<sup>12</sup> Knapp 2011.

By making these arguments, I contribute to current scholarship on the social and economic history of the Roman world in two ways. First, by drawing a connection between artisans' strategies and the nature of the economic environment in which they worked, I add some fresh perspective to the ongoing debate about the structure of economic life in antiquity – that is, about how economic behavior and social relations intersected with and influenced one another. The basic parameters of this debate continue to be shaped heavily by Sir Moses Finley's substantivist model, which was itself influenced by the work of sociologists such as Max Weber and Karl Polanyi. Crudely put, Finley held that individuals in the Greek and Roman worlds tended to prioritize concerns about social and political status over economic goals emphasizing material gain and that even though they were linked to extensive markets, they nevertheless embedded a considerable amount of economic exchange in relationships based on reciprocity or hierarchies of status. Much of the dialogue in ancient history over the past thirty years has revolved around efforts to assess whether or not Finley's models need to be nuanced or even replaced by those based more strongly on methodological individualism and to elaborate on the consequences that this might hold for our understanding of economic life in antiquity.<sup>13</sup>

In Chapters 2–4 in this book, I make the case that while social relations and the ideologies on which they were based did affect the behavior of artisans in the Roman world, much of the evidence suggests that artisans made strategic use of social relations based on power hierarchies or trust in their efforts to respond to the challenges generated by the seasonal and uncertain demand for their products and services. As we shall see, social relations and ideologies exerted their strongest structural effect upon behavior within the household, where they affected the division of labor between (mostly male) artisans and their wives. The economic lives of women have become a major focus of interest in recent years, both at the level of the household and at the level of the Roman economy more broadly. While the early work of Susan Treggiari focused on how gender affected the kinds of work performed by women, more recently historians have grappled explicitly with the problem of family dynamics in a society in which households weighed the demands of gender ideologies against the hard, practical need to earn a living. Scholars have offered valuable insights

<sup>13</sup> Good discussions of the development and state of this debate can be found in Morris 2002, Manning and Morris 2005b, and Bang 2008: 17–36.

about the implications that gendered divisions of labor hold for our understanding of living standards and economic growth, but much remains to be said about how and to what extent women who belonged to artisanal milieus contributed to their households' well-being.<sup>14</sup> I stress that even though artisans could be flexible and adaptable when they deployed the labor of their wives and sons, the importance they attached to specific kinds of work performed by their wives – namely, to several kinds of household tasks crucial to a household's economic success – limited women's participation in work directed explicitly toward market production and income generation.

In other respects, however, artisans made strategic use of social relations in order to navigate successfully the economic environments in which they worked. This was true above all in the case of coercive social relationships based on slavery. Historians are well aware that Roman slaveholders found numerous ways to exploit the labor of slaves and freedmen in urban enterprises, whether by employing slaves directly as managers of a workshop or as members of its staff, or by placing slaves in charge of semi-autonomous businesses.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, slaveholders could also derive benefits from slaves whom they freed. The dominant approach to Roman manumission stresses that slaveholders freed slaves in order to exploit the opportunities of urban markets indirectly, namely by relying on freedmen to manage urban businesses as their agents or managers, or as junior partners in joint enterprises.<sup>16</sup> Yet even though Sandra Joshel pointed out some years ago that many of the freed slaves who are identified as artisans in the Roman funerary inscriptions seem to have been manumitted by other craftsmen rather than by wealthy slaveholders, few serious attempts have been made to assess why and in what contexts artisans themselves acquired, trained, and manumitted slaves, or to tease out the implications of Joshel's observations for our understanding of urban labor markets.<sup>17</sup> I resolve this tension by showing that artisans took advantage of their ability to assert ongoing control over former slaves in order to retain access to skilled labor, while offloading many of the risks of seasonal employment onto their freedmen themselves.

Relationships built on trust and reciprocity likewise offered artisans considerable scope for strategic action. Scholarly interest in the economic

<sup>14</sup> Treggiari 1979 is the classic study. For work focusing on women and household strategies, see especially Scheidel 1995 and 1996a, Saller 2003, and Groen-Vallinga 2013.

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of the economics of slavery in ancient Greece and Rome, see Bradley 1994: 57–80, Osborne 1995, and Scheidel 2008.

<sup>16</sup> See especially Mouritsen 2011: 206–47. <sup>17</sup> Joshel 1977, esp. 205 and 619–20.



aspects of trust and reciprocity in the Roman world was stimulated originally by studies of peasant agriculture in the ancient Mediterranean, which sought in part to explore how peasant cultivators constructed networks of mutual support as a form of insurance against the ever-present danger of harvest failure and famine.<sup>18</sup> Historians have built on this approach by examining the extent to which individuals relied on trust and reciprocity not just to secure support in times of crisis, but rather to structure their social and economic strategies more broadly. This is true not only of those who continue to study peasant communities in antiquity<sup>19</sup> but also of those interested in the economic behavior of members of other social groups. In particular, Koenraad Verboven has recently stressed that members of the Roman socioeconomic elite relied heavily on relationships of friendship and patronage anchored in trust (*fides*) to provide security for their economic transactions and to overcome limitations of Roman business law that may otherwise have stifled economic activity.<sup>20</sup> Nor have the social strata of artisans and businessmen been overlooked. Paul Veyne's work, for instance, has explored the connections between trust, reputation, and business dealings among members of the *plebs media*.<sup>21</sup>

Other historians, drawing on comparative studies of sociability in later historical periods, have resumed study of the voluntary associations (cultic, professional, or otherwise) to which many members of the Roman world's urban population belonged and which fostered networks of trust, reciprocity, and mutual support.<sup>22</sup> Yet despite this renewed interest in the social worlds of Roman artisans and businessmen, we have only just begun to piece together an understanding of how urban producers took advantage of relationships of trust and reciprocity as they negotiated economic life in Roman cities. Much of the work on the intersection between social and economic life in voluntary associations has concentrated on the material and social support these associations could provide both for artisans or businessmen and for the inhabitants of Roman cities in general, whether by providing short-term loans, offering assistance with funerary rites and expenses, or allowing members to engage collectively in both urban politics and relationships of patronage with the wealthy and powerful. Historians have probed whether or not association members used the relationships they cultivated with one another to articulate business strategies, but in most cases they have concentrated on

<sup>18</sup> Garnsey 1988: 41–63 and Gallant 1991: 153–68 remain fundamental.

<sup>19</sup> See, most recently, Grey 2011. <sup>20</sup> Verboven 2002. <sup>21</sup> Veyne 2000.

<sup>22</sup> For the most important general treatments, see below, Chapter 2, n. 13.



long-distance traders, who relied on strong social ties to collect information about markets and to structure agency relationships.<sup>23</sup> I extend this work by showing how artisans employed relationships of trust based upon reputations to solve serious problems of coordination without incurring the costs and risks necessary to create large firms.

Second, because these questions of economic structure cannot be divorced from the overall performance of the Roman economy, my arguments in the following chapters also contribute to the scholarship on economic growth in the Roman world, which remains one of the most pressing problems confronting historians of the late Republic and early Empire. At issue are three key points with a profound bearing on how we conceptualize standards of living in antiquity: (1) how the per capita output of the economy measured up to the outputs of other preindustrial systems; (2) whether the Roman economy experienced sustained growth in productivity above and beyond those changes provoked by Roman conquests in the second and first centuries BCE and by the wealth that those conquests transferred to Italy; (3) how equitably the output of the Roman economy was distributed among members of different social and economic strata.<sup>24</sup>

We have not yet reached a consensus on any of these points. Views about per capita output range from conservative estimates that the economy of Roman Italy at its peak (if not of the empire as a whole) was capable of performing at the same level as the more developed areas of northwestern Europe ca. 1500 CE,<sup>25</sup> to more optimistic claims that Roman Italy was capable of generating a per capita output comparable to that of the same area in the late seventeenth or eighteenth centuries.<sup>26</sup> Opinions on long-term change in per capita output also vary substantially, although two models in particular deserve to be singled out. The first is a model of one-off growth generated by Rome's political integration of the Mediterranean world, which accelerated the diffusion of Hellenistic innovations from east to west and prompted a period of intensified urbanization in the western provinces. Because this model emphasizes causal factors that occurred relatively early – chiefly, during the second century BCE – it implies not

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Bang 2008: 239–68 and Broekaert 2011 on associations of traders. Venticinque 2010 focuses instead on urban craftsmen in Roman Egypt.

<sup>24</sup> For a short introduction to the basic issues, see Scheidel 2012a: 2–5. Scheidel 2009 and Wilson 2009 offer lengthier discussions.

<sup>25</sup> Scheidel and Friesen 2009: 64 and 74.

<sup>26</sup> Grantham 1999: 222–5; Lo Cascio and Malanima 2009; Temin 2013: 243–61. Jongman 2007: 600 also seems to prefer an estimate that places the performance of the Roman economy “at the upper end of what could be achieved in preindustrial economies.”

only that growth had likely stagnated by the early Empire but also that demographic expansion may have started to erode any gains in per capita output that the economy had generated in the late Republic. An alternative model posits that per capita output, incomes, and living standards continued to grow throughout the first and second centuries CE until this growth was ultimately interrupted by a sudden shock – possibly by the Antonine plague in the late second century CE or by the political and economic upheavals associated with the “crisis” of the third century.<sup>27</sup>

These disparate views persist largely because we are still navigating the serious empirical and theoretical challenges that obscure the trajectory of the Roman economy from our view. The empirical problems are the consequence of a dearth of evidence that prevents us from quantifying critical parameters like the population of the Roman Empire or the total output of its economy in any precise way. Historians instead make inferences about economic change on the basis of disparate categories of evidence that may serve as proxy data. Recent work, for instance, has emphasized the construction and interpretation of archaeological time-series. One of the most well-known series charts the number of (known) shipwrecks in the Mediterranean century by century, but archaeologists and historians have also exploited time-series reflecting several other phenomena that may reflect changing economic performance: lead and copper pollution deposited in Greenland ice sheets, archaeological evidence pointing to changing levels of meat consumption, osteological markers of health and stature in human remains, dedicatory inscriptions reflecting building activity, and the spread of technical innovations such as waterwheels. On occasion, our fragmentary documentary evidence can be pressed into service for this purpose, as demonstrated by recent studies on wages and incomes. Crucially, these proxies do not always line up in ways that permit easy conclusions about long-term developmental patterns: while the shipwreck time-series seems to suggest that the volume of maritime trade in the Mediterranean peaked in the first century BCE, the archaeological evidence for meat consumption shows that animals were slaughtered for food at a higher rate in the late second century CE than was the case in earlier periods.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> On the basic contrast between the two models, see Temin 2013: 233–4. Scheidel 2009 advances a cautious argument for a spurt of one-time growth that had already begun to taper off by the late Republic or early Empire (but cf. Wilson 2009 for a criticism of this position); Jongman 2007: 611–15 believes that per capita growth continued into the second century CE.

<sup>28</sup> On these various different time-series, see Jongman 2007, Scheidel 2009, and Wilson 2009.