

CHAPTER I

*Seasonality, uncertainty, and consumer demand
in an ancient city*

Late in the second century CE, Artemidorus of Daldis composed a handbook on the interpretation of dreams in the hope of establishing both a theoretical framework for his craft and a body of empirical data capable of guiding the interpretations of others. To that end, if we can believe his claims, he not only read widely in related topics but also conducted firsthand research, interviewing diviners personally and analyzing dreams for clients in urban marketplaces in Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy.¹ More importantly, Artemidorus believed strongly that professional diviners could make sense of a client's dream only by taking into account the dreamer's personal qualities – things like gender, age, status, and even occupation.² For that very reason, he was careful to distinguish between the various meanings any given dream could hold for clients of different backgrounds. As a result, his handbook therefore reflected the concerns and anxieties of men and women who not only lived in the cities of some of the most important regions of the Roman Empire (including at least one truly metropolitan city, Ephesus) but also spanned the social spectrum, from slaves to the municipal elite.³

Artisans and craftsmen featured prominently enough among Artemidorus' clients that he produced interpretations tailored specifically to members of this particular social group. On the basis of these interpretations, we can reconstruct some sense of the questions that artisans posed when they visited professionals like Artemidorus – questions that are not necessarily reflected in surviving texts authored by artisans themselves, which largely take the form of graffiti, inscriptions, and the occasional written contract. Unsurprisingly, many of Artemidorus' interpretations

¹ Artem. 1.pr.

² On the importance of occupation, see Artem. 1.9. For a good example of this analytic in practice, see Artem. 1.17. For discussion, see Harris-McCoy 2012: 15–18.

³ See Artem. 3.66, where he explains that although he normally writes as Artemidorus of Ephesus, in this particular case he chose to honor his mother's home by styling himself Artemidorus of Daldis.

suggest that artisans sought meaning in their dreams out of anxiety about their general prospects for long-term career success. Sometimes these dreams could signal impending ruin, as Artemidorus noted in the case of the unfortunate carpenter from Cyzicus.⁴ Other dreams portended a brighter future, and Artemidorus records that artisans who dreamt that they possessed strong and muscular forearms could anticipate success in their trades, as could those who dreamt of having sexual intercourse with their mothers. While the import of the first dream was probably self-evident, Artemidorus tells us that the second was propitious because artisans often spoke metaphorically of their crafts as their “mothers,” and hence intercourse with their biological mothers in their dreams symbolically denoted ongoing engagement with their businesses in the future.⁵

More interesting are those interpretations in which Artemidorus evokes artisans’ anxieties about their economic fortunes in the immediate future and over the short term. These interpretations, scattered throughout the body of the text, imply not only that artisans worried constantly about whether or not they would receive any business at all from clients but also that the volume of such business could seem frighteningly erratic and unpredictable. On a very basic level, Artemidorus’ interpretations reflect artisans’ concerns over the availability of work simply by signifying periods of activity or unemployment. Thus, it was propitious for an artisan to dream that he had more than two ears, since this dream indicated that he would receive orders from many clients. Conversely, it was bad for an artisan to dream of fishing: since one could not fish and work at the same time, this dream clearly foretold an upcoming period of idleness.⁶

At the same time, however, Artemidorus’ work alludes to the essential unpredictability of the markets in which artisans sold their products and services. The fact that artisans consulted interpreters like Artemidorus is an indirect reflection of that unpredictability, inasmuch as it signaled artisans’ desire to eliminate uncertainty about the future. More pointedly, several of Artemidorus’ interpretations engage more or less directly with that unpredictability. It seems significant, for example, that Artemidorus could rarely predict how long a period of unemployment would last. The primary exception is found in his discussion of what an artisan could expect in

⁴ See Introduction, n. 3. ⁵ Artem. 1.42, 1.79.

⁶ For dreams about unemployment, see, e.g., Artem. 1.13; 1.54; 2.3. (The dream about fishing can be found at 2.14.) Cf. Pleket 1987, as well as Aubert 2001: 107 and n. 35. For dreams about good prospects for employment, see, e.g., 1.24 (where an artisan dreams of having more than two ears) and 1.42. Finally, for dreams about the viability of one’s occupation more generally, see, e.g., 1.70.

his immediate future if he were to dream that he was an *ephebe* – a young man on the cusp of manhood. While this dream could be auspicious for some clients, for artisans it was particularly foreboding: it portended a full year of unemployment.⁷ In all other cases, however, Artemidorus' interpretations predict changes of a more erratic nature in the volume of work an artisan could anticipate. Thus, when artisans dreamt that they were dressed in white clothing, this too signified an upcoming dearth of work, but the costlier the clothing the artisan wore in his dream, the more serious that period of unemployment was likely to be.⁸ By the same token, dreams that were auspicious for an artisan often predicted sudden (and perhaps ultimately ephemeral) improvements in job prospects. I have already noted Artemidorus' interpretation of a case in which an artisan dreamt that he had more than two ears, which implied an unexpected windfall in business. To that, we might add his interpretation of a case in which an artisan dreamt that he had more than two hands. This dream signified that the dreamer would soon have a great deal of work to do – more, in fact, than he could manage on his own.⁹

The world evoked by Artemidorus' interpretations – in which urban craftsmen and artisans worried constantly about their ongoing prospects for work – invites comparison with Francis Place's comments about the nature of London's economy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Place, a London tailor, had to contend with the kind of volatility hinted at in Artemidorus' predictions about artisans' prospects for employment. When he wrote his autobiography in the 1820s, Place did so as a man of leisure who had retired after enjoying an astonishing amount of success in his tailoring business. That success, however, had been anything but inevitable, and he remembered periods in which he had worried about the stability of the nascent business he ran from the small apartment that doubled as workplace and residence: "my employment was very irregular sometimes sinking down to almost nothing – at other times all I had was wanted at the same time." Not only did this volatility make it difficult for Place to exploit fully those opportunities that came his way – he frequently lacked ready cash with which to hire temporary help in order to alleviate his workload – the irregularity of his business also interfered with his ability to pay his bills, since his revenue stream was uncertain.¹⁰

The parallels between Place's reminiscences and the anxieties detectable in Artemidorus' dream interpretations suggest that further comparison between the economic conditions in the Roman world and those in the

⁷ Artem. 1.54. ⁸ Artem. 2.3. ⁹ Artem. 1.24, 1.42. ¹⁰ Place 1972: 173–4.

cities of early modern Europe may establish a context for the concerns expressed in Artemidorus' handbook. In what follows, I explore this possibility by using recent studies of urban economies in the early modern period in order to structure an analysis of the urban economies of the Roman world. In the first section of this chapter, I lay out a basic model of consumer demand in early modern cities. As we shall see, product markets in the cities of northwestern Europe were generally anything but stable well into the nineteenth century, even if conditions had started to change somewhat for the better in segments catering to working- and middle-class consumers in the early 1700s. Instead, consumer demand for many goods and services varied considerably over the course of a given year. Not only was that demand highly seasonal in character, it was also frequently subject to uncertainty even during peak moments of its seasonal cycle. As a result, many urban producers were forced to respond to problems much like those that plagued Francis Place. I then adopt this model as a heuristic device for examining the rhythms of economic life in the cities of the Roman Empire. In the second section of the chapter, I show that demand was no less seasonal in most ancient cities than in the early modern context. In the third section, I shift my focus to uncertainty. Here, I suggest that in antiquity urban demand for artisans' products and services was likely more susceptible to uncertainty than in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, for two main reasons: (1) many urban residents in the Roman world enjoyed less purchasing power than did even unskilled workers in cities like London and Amsterdam; (2) those city dwellers who did enjoy some prosperity did not necessarily develop consumption habits that would have encouraged them to purchase manufactured goods on a regular and consistent basis. In the cities of the Roman world, seasonality and uncertainty therefore combined to ensure that consumer demand in urban economies seemed very unpredictable indeed to artisans who turned to professionals like Artemidorus to find meaning in their dreams.

Consumer demand in early modern cities: an overview

In this section, I survey recent research on the urban economies of early modern Europe and identify structural features of those economies that can guide our analysis of demand in the cities of the Roman world. Two structural features stand out and, as we shall see in later sections, generate powerful new insights into our understanding of ancient urban economies. First, seasonality profoundly influenced the rhythms of demand in the cities of the early modern world well into the nineteenth century, both by

constraining the purchasing power of individuals or the intensity with which producers and distributors could carry out certain activities over the course of the year, and by generating distinctly seasonal rhythms of travel and migration to and from cities. Second, that demand was also subject to a high degree of uncertainty, both because members of certain social groups engaged in highly particularistic forms of consumption, and because others were vulnerable to fluctuations in food prices that limited their purchasing power. Together, these aspects of the economic environment affected demand in multiple segments of the urban economy. Most notably, they posed as many challenges for artisans and craftsmen who manufactured goods for the emerging middle- and working-class markets as they did for those who catered to the wealthy.

Seasonality imposed a distinct shape on demand in most sectors of the early modern economy, including manufacture. Simply put, seasonal fluctuations – whether climatic or social – could produce considerable peaks and troughs in consumer demand over the course of any given year, and even though they were to some degree predictable, they were not entirely regular. Climatic seasonality made its impact felt in three main ways. First, the seasons naturally dictated the growth cycles of staple food crops, many of which exhibited seasonal changes in prices. Grain crops, for instance, were generally at their most affordable immediately after the harvest, but grew more expensive over the winter, spring, and early summer as stores were gradually exhausted. The severity of those price changes depended, among other things, on the level of integration of local markets: in London they were lower than elsewhere because of the capital city's primacy in Great Britain's urban system, but in other cities they remained more pronounced. Notable swings in grain prices were naturally more serious for the less affluent than for the wealthy, and rises in the price of grain and bread cut into the purchasing power of both working-class consumers and some of the "middling" types during the lean months leading up to the next harvest.¹¹

Second, climatic seasonality limited the ability of craftsmen who practiced their trades outdoors to work during certain months of the year. Winter was a lean time for builders and shipwrights in early modern Europe, since cold weather could dramatically slow or even halt

¹¹ Persson 1999: 65–72 discusses seasonal oscillations in grain prices in early modern Europe; Chartres 1985: 457, on the other hand, argues that fluctuations of this nature are difficult to detect in the case of England during the late seventeenth century.

their activities.¹² Seasonal changes in the weather also affected trades that depended on agricultural produce for their raw materials – not only the food processing industries, in which the harvest was a critical event in the annual calendar, but also the textile industries, which relied on seasonal supplies of wool, cotton, and flax.¹³

Third, shipping schedules remained closely tied to the seasons until well into the nineteenth century, when the advent of steamships freed ocean-going vessels from the distinctly seasonal sailing patterns imposed by wind and tide. Patterns of this sort are particularly well attested in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London. The Port, though quiet from November through February, experienced two noticeable peaks in inbound shipping: one in the spring, when ships arrived from the Americas, and the other in early autumn, when shipping from the West Indies complemented American and European traffic.¹⁴ Not only did this sailing schedule generate cycles of employment and unemployment along the docks for the stevedores and longshoremen who unloaded ships' cargoes, it also affected demand for artisans and manufacturers who sold products to seaborne merchants. It also probably affected local market conditions in other ways that are difficult to trace, by altering the supply of raw materials or imported luxury goods that competed with the products of local artisans.¹⁵

Social patterns of seasonality also shaped the rhythms of demand in early modern cities. At the most basic level, the uneven distribution of important liturgical and secular holidays throughout the calendar year generated distinct patterns in consumption habits, particularly among wealthy consumers. The Christmas gift-buying season in early modern London generated not only a clear and seasonal peak in business in December for many craftsmen but also an equally clear trough in demand in January.¹⁶ Just as frequently, holidays in most European cities served as contexts for conspicuous consumption and display among members of wealthier social groups, and therefore generated considerable demand for the goods and services of numerous artisans who made or repaired clothing and important accessories. By treating records detailing the number of journeymen employed in any given month as proxy data for prevailing levels of demand, Michael Sonenscher demonstrated some years ago that the holiday calendar created pronounced peaks in demand for

¹² Sonenscher 1989: 138 and 203–4; Schwarz 1992: 109. Cf. Sonenscher 1989: 24 on seasonality in the French glazing trade.

¹³ Schwarz 1992: 103. ¹⁴ Schwarz 1992: 107–8. ¹⁵ Stedman Jones 1984: 36–7.

¹⁶ Schwarz 1992: 106–7.

both wigmakers and tailors in eighteenth-century Rouen. For tailors, those peaks occurred just before the Easter season and the Feast of All Saints. Seasonal peaks in demand were even more pronounced for wigmakers, who were very busy indeed at three particular times of the year: between the beginning of the New Year and Lent, between Easter and Pentecost, and between the Feast of All Saints and Christmas.¹⁷

Patterns of travel and temporary migration generated social seasonality of a more pervasive kind because they could alter the size and composition of a city's overall consumer base in ways that affected demand for the products and services of a wide range of urban manufacturers at certain times of the year. London serves as a particularly good and well-documented example of an early modern city in which this kind of social seasonality was strongly pronounced, particularly among wealthier clients. By the seventeenth century at the latest, Londoners referred to the months between late autumn and early summer as "the Season." Because the Court was in residence in the capital and Parliament was in session at this time of year, London exercised a magnetic attraction on members of the English aristocracy and gentry: elected politicians came to London to discharge their duties; aristocrats to make their appearances at court; the gentry to mingle with high society. Many of these part-time residents and visitors not only maintained townhouses in the city but also arrived with sizeable retinues in tow. All were keen to purchase manufactured goods of high quality in London, and members of their retinues generated some demand for goods and services in their own right. The Season affected even the consumption patterns of the wealthier full-time residents of the capital, whose social calendars became busier at this time of year and who consequently felt increased pressure to engage in conspicuous consumption.

If the onset and height of the Season produced a regular and predictable surge in the demand for goods and services within London, then its dissipation in high summer and early autumn produced an equally predictable slump in business. The fashionable districts of the city emptied out as the Court relocated to its summer residence, Parliament went into recess, and members of high society and wealthy Londoners alike left the heat of the city for more pleasant summer retreats. Demand for manufactured goods and services in the capital fell off dramatically, and

¹⁷ Sonenscher 1989: 159, 162–3.

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many craftsmen found themselves un- or underemployed until the Season began anew.¹⁸

Within these seasonal rhythms – which were broadly predictable – the demand for the products and services of many artisans in early modern cities was also subject to considerable uncertainty. For those who catered to a wealthy clientele, that uncertainty was produced by the particularistic consumption habits of customers who sought to make claims about their own status, taste, and refinement. While clients at this level of the social spectrum purchased some ready-made goods off the shelf, they were more likely to commission pieces tailored at least in part to their individual specifications. Since the artisans who catered to their needs therefore worked primarily on a bespoke or made-to-order basis, trade in this level of the market was dominated by short-term fluctuations in demand that remained erratic and unpredictable even within broader seasonal peaks in overall consumption. In these circumstances artisans could easily experience long periods of little or no activity, punctuated by periods in which they were overwhelmed by a sudden windfall of orders. Francis Place’s complaint about the irregularity of his employment fits clearly into this particular context, but he was far from alone. Adam Smith noted that masons and bricklayers in particular were heavily dependent “upon the occasional calls of [their] customers” and often found themselves out of work because of the unpredictable and episodic character of their employment, and although he did not elaborate on circumstances in other lines of work, he did suggest that many other craftsmen experienced this same uncertainty (if perhaps not to quite the same degree).¹⁹ Among these we should include most artisans who worked in the upmarket segments of the urban luxury trades – painters, sculptors, goldsmiths, jewelers, coach makers, and fine tailors.²⁰

From the middle of the seventeenth century onward, markets for artisans began to expand in important ways thanks to new consumption patterns among the “middling” populations of Europe – merchants, shopkeepers, artisans, and other professionals who catered to the needs of the wealthy – and even, to some extent, among the working classes. Large sectors of the clothing, footwear, and food processing trades were affected

¹⁸ Schwarz 1992: 104–7; Green 1995: 34–6. On p. 35, Green includes a graph of one nineteenth-century tailor’s monthly accounts, which shows that his earnings could be more than twice as high in May as they were in August. Stedman Jones 1984: 34–5 argues that the Season remained clearly defined throughout much of the nineteenth century.

¹⁹ Smith 1994: 119 (Bk. I, Ch. X, Pt. I).

²⁰ Earle 1989b: 114–15; Sonenscher 1989: 137–8; Schwarz 1992: 118.

early on by this process. For example, by the mid-eighteenth century the furniture trades in London were experiencing growing demand from the upper middle classes.²¹ Historians continue to debate the precise causes of this development, but at least three mutually reinforcing processes appear to have been at work. First, changing ideas of luxury and comfort among the middle classes increased demand for a range of relatively inexpensive and replaceable manufactured goods that served less as stores of value than as goods to be enjoyed in their own right. Second, changes in market structure and household organization released previously underemployed labor into the market (particularly the labor of women and children), while simultaneously driving the substitution of goods purchased on the market for goods produced in the home. Third, changes in the organization and technology of production generated incremental decreases in the real costs of durable manufactured goods.²²

Because these new patterns of consumption increased demand for goods that were simultaneously less expensive and more standardized than those produced for the upmarket trade, they made possible the development of markets that were less subject to uncertainty than those dominated by wealthy clients who purchased made-to-order items. That said, it took some time for markets of this nature to mature, and most historians conclude that true mass markets, in which manufactured goods were purchased by a wide cross-section of the population on a regular basis, were a product of the nineteenth century.²³ Until then, the markets catering to middle- and working-class customers not only failed to outstrip dramatically those catering to the wealthy in terms of size but they also remained subject to important uncertainties of their own. Not only was much of the income of the artisanal and working class still seasonal, inter-annual variability in crop yields in the seventeenth and eighteenth century generated considerable variation in food prices from year to year, and made the purchasing power of members of these social groups unstable.²⁴

For most manufacturers in early modern cities, demand was therefore quite variable over the course of any given year, both in segments of the market catering to elite clients and in segments catering to the growing number of middle- and working-class consumers. Artisans contended not only with seasonal fluctuations in demand – whether produced by the

²¹ Earle 1989b: 21–2; Kirkham 1988; Schwarz 1992: 186–207.

²² See, e.g., Weatherill 1988; Earle 1989b: 269–301; Fairchild 1993; de Vries 1993, 1994, and 2008, esp. 71–2; Farr 2000: 62–70.

²³ For a general overview, see Farr 2000: 62–81.

²⁴ On seasonal variations in crop prices, see above, n. 11.

weather's impact on transportation and production, or by forms of social seasonality capable of changing consumption patterns in dramatic ways – but also with uncertainty arising from the aggregate behavior or purchasing power of the urban population. As we shall see in the following two sections, these observations offer a valuable heuristic device for exploring the economic conditions that were likely typical of cities in the Roman world, in which factors comparable to those responsible for seasonal and uncertain demand in the early modern period were almost certainly at work.

Seasonality and demand in Roman cities

Ancient historians are increasingly sensitive to the fact that seasonality affected not only the political, military, and religious calendars of Rome and other ancient cities but also urban economic life.²⁵ Yet, at the same time, we are only just beginning to understand how pervasive its impact could be. In a world that remained fundamentally agrarian in character, and in which medium- to long-distance trade depended heavily on oar- or sail-powered ships, the seasonal rhythms of both the weather and the agricultural calendar dramatically molded urban life.

In what follows, I consider how climatic and social aspects of seasonality structured the demand for the products and services of artisans and other skilled workers in the cities of the Roman world. As we shall see, cities in the ancient Mediterranean were no less susceptible than those in early modern Europe to distinctly seasonal changes in prevailing levels of urban demand. Evidence that this was the case in Rome itself is particularly suggestive, but our sources also imply that conditions were broadly comparable elsewhere in the empire. Although the individual factors responsible for creating seasonal rhythms in urban demand did not affect all sectors of the economy equally, few artisans were immune to such rhythms, whether they catered to a wealthy clientele or to consumers from low and middling income groups.

The model I outlined in the previous section suggests that factors of two kinds could generate patterns of seasonal change in demand for artisans' goods and services in Roman cities: first, climate and its impact on production and transportation; second, seasonal changes in social behavior that altered overall patterns of consumption, sometimes on a dramatic

²⁵ For the impact of seasonality on urban economic life, see Brunt 1980; Aldrete and Mattingly 1999; and Erdkamp 2008.