

ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 HISTORY OF STUDIES

The literary tradition seems to treat the economy of early Rome rather ambiguously. On the one hand, the Augustan rhetoric of Livy and Dionysius describes the Rome of the last three kings as a wealthy community; on the other, the same historians and other scholars from the late republic proposed a mythical image of austerity embedded in an economy of pastoralism and basic agriculture.¹

While modern scholarship on ancient Roman historiography has rightly interpreted this dichotomy as the result of conservative propaganda against the dramatic social and economic changes occurring in the last two centuries of the republic,² it is interesting to note that the literary tradition seems to have heavily influenced the current interpretation, which often sees the early Roman economy as extremely austere and still based on pure subsistence, despite the evidence of extensive urbanisation during the course of the sixth century BC.

Such ambiguity has characterised the studies of the early Roman economy from the beginning, as shown, for example, by the admiration of Niccolò Machiavelli (Florence 1468–1527) for the austerity and frugality of Republican Rome, which, in his opinion, was the ideal basis for a strong and wealthy community.³

Later, the French Jesuit historian Pierre-Daniel Huet (Caen 1630 to Paris 1721), who was commissioned in 1670 by Jean-Baptiste Colbert to write an apologetic history of the importance of trade and navigation in antiquity, quoted the first treaty between Rome and Carthage as a clear example of the importance of maritime exchanges in early Rome, although he also had to admit that real trading activity started only after the First Punic War.⁴

In the same period, some of the most influential works of systematic critique on the early Roman historical tradition began to be published. First, Giovan Battista Vico (Naples 1668–1744) highlighted the lack of credibility of the traditional version of Roman history up to the end of the Second Punic War, Vico emphasised the roles of early Romans as purely farmers and warriors, but he also noted the institutional relevance of the Twelve Tables, with their social and economic implications.⁵

At the beginning of the eighteenth century in France, a similar critical approach to the literary tradition was independently adopted by Louis Jean Lévesque de Pouilly (Reims 1691 to Paris 1750), and most notably by Louis de Beaufort (The Hague 1703 to Maastricht 1795) in 1738⁶

Montesquieu was the first scholar to note the importance of Roman building activity in the age of Tarquinius, but he also excluded all economic activity apart from military action and booty.⁷

Later, in 1786, Francesco Mengotti (Fonzaso 1749 to Milan 1830) attributed the early Romans' lack of economic initiative to their innate rough and bellicose character, which would have produced a primitive economy based on poor agriculture and war booty, in contrast to much more enlightened and industrious people such as the Carthaginians.⁸

This approach partially continued into the nineteenth century: Niebhur, Marx and Max Weber stressed the key role played in Roman history by agriculture, and Theodor Mommsen, despite the importance given to agriculture, also described early Rome as the maritime city by nature of Latium and a (*Seestad Haus aus*).⁹

In a similar way, J. J. Bachofen (Basel 1815–1887), and later Ettore Pais (Borgo S. Dalmazzo 1856 to Rome 1939) and André Piganiol (Le Havre 1883 to Paris 1968), emphasised the importance of pastoralism in early Rome; Piganiol in particular interpreted the history and economy of early Rome as a dialectic between agriculture and pastoralism.¹⁰

To find different approaches we must look at the positivism legacy of the late nineteenth century. Julius Beloch (Petschkendorf 1854 to Rome 1929), for instance, started to evaluate the demography of archaic Rome in relation to its territory by means of literary sources and references to physical geography. Despite his critical approach to literary data, he accepted the demographic importance of Rome from its earliest phases onwards, but within an economy based on local consumption rather than on exportation, and his influence was

substantial in another remarkable work on the history of early Rome, which was published in 1907 by his pupil Gaetano De Sanctis (Rome 1870–1957).¹¹

Later, Giovanni Pinza (Rome 1872–1940) was the first scholar to attempt to carry out scientific research on the early economy of Latium based on archaeological data: in his detailed works on ancient Latium, he proposed for the first time a distinction between local production and Mediterranean importation and also stressed the active role played by trading activity in the early Roman economy.¹² These works had a profound influence on subsequent studies and created a new idea of the complex interactions of the archaic community.

Its legacy is clearly visible for example in a specific work by the young American scholar Louise E. W. Adams Holland (New York 1893–1990) on the commerce of Latium from the early Iron Age to the sixth century, in which, by means of a modernist approach, all the evidence of Greek and Phoenician objects has been re-evaluated as proof of long-distance importation.¹³

Tenney Frank (Clay Center, KS 1876 to Oxford 1939) can be considered to be one of the first historians to look at archaeological evidence (albeit often from secondary sources) in order to study the archaic Roman economy by means of modernist categories; this led him to emphasise the trading activity of early Rome.

He wrote explicitly:

We have a right to assume that Rome was one of the strongest and wealthiest cities of Italy in the last decades of Monarchy, that it was in touch with the commerce of the Mediterranean world, that it supported a strong army and a large population employed in the building trades and in the industries that made ware for soldiers, farmers, urban dwellers, and the court.¹⁴

The optimism of Tenney Frank in the use of archaeological records can be framed in the same cultural context as the greater work of Michail Rostovtsev (Kiev 1870 to New Haven 1952), *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, published in 1926, which became a manifesto for modernist approaches to ancient economies,¹⁵ or later also in the works of Fritz Moritz Heichelheim (Giessen 1901 to Toronto 1968).¹⁶

However, there have been criticisms of Frank's interpretations, above all regarding his views on supposed industrial production in archaic Rome, which seem unrealistic.¹⁷ We can also note that his idea of the archaic Roman economy seems strictly limited to the Etruscan influence: he suggested an economic rise of Rome only during the sixth century BC under the so-called Etruscan regime, envisaging a very primitive structure before the Archaic period, and a fifth-century crisis, because of a mechanistic interpretation of the scarcity of imported pottery and the absence of public building programmes according to literary sources.

More balanced approaches are evident in a work by Ettore Ciccotti (Potenza 1863 to Rome 1939), in the well-known paper by Giorgio Pasquali (Rome 1885 to Belluno 1952) on the *Grande Roma dei Tarquini* and in a later book by Luigi Clerici; these scholars focused on the production, circulation and distribution of goods and the role played by the state in economic matters, even if their theories were mainly based on literary sources.¹⁸

However, any modernist approach that stressed the similarities between the most advanced ancient economies and the modern economy also led to an emphasis on the main differences between archaic Rome and the late republic or early empire, with the implicit evolutionistic result that once again the early period is considered to be underdeveloped. Pasquali, in addition, stressed the idea of economic decline in the fifth century after rapid growth in the sixth century, due to the reforms of the Tarquini dynasty.

Nevertheless, in the decades between the two world wars the common opinion regarding archaic Rome was still minimalist and primitivist. Interesting considerations can be found, for example, in the first edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, in which the community of Rome until the fifth century BC is seen as essentially agricultural, in a poor position to participate in international and river trade and, in accordance with a primitivist perspective, lacking any real industrial activity and commerce, and having only domestic production, which did not result in an increase in wealth.¹⁹

An Etrusco-centric perspective is also evident in the work of one of Tenney Frank's pupils, Inez Scott Ryberg (Grines, IA 1901 to Gainesville, FL 1980), who considered archaic Rome as a passive participant in the flourishing trade of the Etruscan communities.²⁰

In 1945, a seminal work by the historian Santo Mazzarino (Catania 1916 to Rome 1987), based on literary, epigraphic and iconographic sources, stressed the close interaction between Rome and Italic and Etruscan people in terms of *koinè*, and theorised a profound social change in the age of king Servius Tullius.²¹

A few years later, innovative works by Louise Adams Holland and Joëll Le Gall (1913–1993) emphasised the economic value of control of the ford on the Tiber by early Roman communities.²²

Einar Gjerstad (Örebro 1897 to Lund 1988) collected a large amount of archaeological evidence in his monumental works on early Rome published between 1953 and 1973;²³ he also noted that imported Attic black figure pottery in Rome was on the same scale as that found in the main Etruscan cities, but unfortunately his basic assumption that the city of Rome grew only in the sixth century BC led him to ignore the economic significance of such data within the long-term evolution of Roman society from the Iron Age onwards.²⁴

A reductionist view of archaic Rome is clearly represented by the work of Andreas Alföldy (Pomáz 1895 to Princeton 1981) and by his hypercriticism of

the *Grande Rome dei Tarquini*; however, the same scholar did acknowledge the importance of the salt trade in the economic activity of early Rome.²⁵

The debate on archaic economies in central Tyrrhenian Italy was widened during the 1960s and 1970s by the discovery of the Etruscan sanctuaries of Pyrgi and Gravisca and by the analysis of cross-cultural and economic interactions in the Mediterranean basin between Greeks, Phoenicians and Italics.²⁶

In addition, from the 1960s onwards a series of surveys began to discover hundreds of open rural sites, mainly around Veii and Rome, which provided new data for the debate on the archaic Roman economy.²⁷ Then, from the 1970s, important archaeological discoveries of princely tombs and fortified settlements were made in ancient Latium, which, together with new investigations in the Forum Boarium, led to a reinterpretation of the complex economic interactions between Rome, its neighbouring communities and the Greek world. The finest synthesis of the new season of archaeological discoveries was offered by the 1976 exhibition *Civiltà del Lazio Primitivo*, organised in Rome by Massimo Pallottino (Rome 1909–1995), which gave a vivid image of the complexity of the society in Early Iron Age Latium.²⁸

The growing debate on the rise of rural landscapes in central Italy resulted in a reconsideration of the history of agriculture and traffic in the central Tyrrhenian area and the role played by *emporia*.

Then, in 1973, the seminal work of Moses Finley (New York 1912 to Cambridge 1986) marked a turning point in the history of ancient economies, the primitivism of which was highly emphasised by Finley in a reaction to the modernist theories of M. Rostovzev and other influential scholars. Within such an ideological framework, the reconstruction of ancient economies became strictly related to contemporary societies, according to a paradigm shared with K. Polanyi (Vienna 1886 to Pickering 1964), who theorised the embeddedness of the economy in society.²⁹

In addition, this primitivist approach led to a re-evaluation of concepts such as gift,³⁰ redistribution and reciprocity in pre-industrial economies, as opposed to market exchange, which became a marker of modern industrial economies, fuelling the already existing debate between formalists and substantivists.

Regarding early Rome, such a legacy is clearly visible from the second half of the 1970s onwards. An example is provided by a group of scholars, mainly archaeologists, linked to the journal *Dialoghi di Archeologia*, who adopted Marxian and substantivist categories to reconstruct the society and economy of Rome between the Iron Age and the Orientalising phase.³¹

In the 1980s, substantivist categories also characterised the important work of Michel Gras on archaic Tyrrhenian traffic and the summary of the Etruscan economy written by Mauro Cristofani (Rome 1941–1997), thanks mainly to the new archaeological evidence provided in those years by the impressive number of Greek and Etruscan amphorae found in the Tyrrhenian area.³²

Further intellectual progress was made in this period as a result of the discovery of the mixed character of early Greek colonisation and of the pivotal role played in the Tyrrhenian basin during the eighth century BC by Pithecusa, which was a site of connectivity between Greeks, Semitic people and the Tyrrhenian communities, including Latium.³³

However, the influence of the archaeological debate did not extend fully to the historical debate: in the same period, Michael Crawford stressed the existence of a state-designed metallic monetary unit from the middle of the sixth century BC onwards on the basis of literary sources, but he still interpreted the absence of coinage in Rome until the late fourth century BC as one aspect of the general isolation of the city, attested, in his opinion, by the archaeological record as well as by the literary tradition. A few years later the Roman law historian Francesco De Martino (Naples 1907–2002) was still imagining a transition between pastoralism and agriculture in the first phase of the monarchy in Rome and the rise of a trade economy during the course of the sixth century BC, followed by an economic crisis in the fifth century.³⁴

Meanwhile, further important discoveries for the understanding of the archaic Roman economy also came from research into the Late and Final Bronze Age in Italy. As early as 1969, a seminal paper by Renato Peroni (Vienna 1930 to Rome 2010) outlined the dramatic economic and social changes occurring in central Tyrrhenian Italy between the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age, by focusing on progress in metallurgy, population increase, long-distance trade linking Central Europe and the Mediterranean area and the rise of local cultures.³⁵ More recently other scholars have stressed the use of standardised weight systems in Central Europe, Italy and the Aegean during the Late Bronze Age in order to facilitate trade between communities with different socio-economic structures, and consequentially the existence of a weighed currency economy (*Gewichtsgeldwirtschaft*).³⁶

Between the 1970s and the 1990s the works of Anna Maria Bietti Sestieri highlighted the relatively complex subsistence economy of southern Etruria between the Final Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age, together with the exploitation of local mining resources.³⁷ Regarding Latium between the tenth and the ninth centuries, the analysis of the cemetery of the Latin community of Osteria dell'Osa by means of processualist approaches led to a reinforcement of the theory of long-distance relationships involving Etruria and Campania and of the economic role played by Latium as an intermediate area between the Greeks and the Etruscans.³⁸

A balanced view, which lies between modernist and primitivist approaches to the early Roman economy, has been offered by Carmine Ampolo. Regarding the fifth century BC, he has criticised both the hypermodernist thesis of T. Frank and the primitivist view of A. Alföldy by stressing the important role played by war booty and agriculture in parallel with pastoralism, which were probably

strongly integrated; he has also focused on the possible evidence of Polanyi's concept of trade control by the state, which seems to be confirmed by the tradition of the *Foedus Cassianum* concerning the *ius commercii* between Latin cities (Dion. Hal. VI, 95, 2). Jean Andraeu has recently concurred, denying the predominance of pastoralism in the archaic Roman economy and the evolution of agriculture during the course of the sixth century BC.³⁹

In 1987, Mario Torelli emphasised the complex interaction between Etruria and Rome, the role played by ancient and modern historiography in shaping economic and cultural differences between the two areas, and the misleading legacy of the late Republican Roman historians who invented an idealised austerity for archaic Rome which has survived until the present day. With a similar approach, Filippo Coarelli also criticised the still common primitivistic views on the archaic Roman economy by emphasising the importance, from the point of view of long-distance trade, of fairs, emporia and coastal settlements in parallel with the inland economies linked to river trades, agriculture and pastoralism.⁴⁰

An advance in the debate on the archaic Roman economy was provided by the historical summary of early Rome put forward by Timothy Cornell in 1995. Adopting a long-term chronological approach, the author stressed the economic growth taking place after the Orientalising period, which culminated in the flourishing city of the sixth century BC and a dramatic economic recession during the fifth century, when debt and food shortages caused an uprising of the plebs.⁴¹ The same author also helped to definitively dismantle the ethnocentric myth of "Etruscan Rome", exposing it as a modern historiographical invention, and he consequently restored early Rome to its role of frontier city in the central Tyrrhenian area. Then, a survey of the economy and society of early Rome from the Iron Age to the beginning of the fifth century BC was proposed by Christopher Smith, who also focused on the dramatic changes occurring in the sixth century BC.⁴²

In 1998, Albert J. Nijboer, who studied the economy of central Tyrrhenian Italy from 800 to 400 BC, published an innovative piece of research in which he focused mainly on pottery production and metallurgy to outline the ancient economy of Latium by means of ethnography, archaeometry, experimental archaeology, geological perspective and literary texts. Great emphasis was placed on the effects of urbanisation (which was dated to 800 BC onwards), technological changes, the rise of standardisation and pre-monetary exchange. One of the most important achievements of this work was the clear definition of the beginning of the standardisation of exchanges from the late seventh century BC onwards, thanks to the wide distribution of fixed weights, volumes and lengths in Etruria and Latium.⁴³

More recently, crucial progress in the understanding of the development of the city of Rome was made as a result of a series of urban excavations, which

took place from the mid-1980s onwards in the Forum and on the Palatine and Capitol Hills. Important phases between the Bronze Age and the Archaic period were revealed and a new debate was opened on the origins of Rome (and consequently on the role played by the economy in terms of social differentiation and craft specialisation), and on the rise of a kind of market exchange system.⁴⁴

Further advances in the understanding of the early Roman economy have come from the work of Christopher Smith on the structure of archaic Roman society and in particular on the controversial role played by the *gentes*, the rise or revival of whom has been convincingly contextualised in the dramatic social changes within the Roman community of the sixth century BC.⁴⁵

Also worthy of note is a recent work by Cristiano Viglietti, which attempts to re-evaluate the mentality behind the archaic Roman economy by means of anthropological models and by stressing the value of post-substantivist approaches.⁴⁶

In addition, the debate on cultural interactions in the archaic Mediterranean area has moved forward by focusing not only on trade carried out by Greeks and Phoenicians but also on the presence of possibly exported Etruscan and Italic objects in the Greek area and across the Mediterranean basin.⁴⁷

Within this framework a recent important work by Luca Alessandri on the protohistoric landscapes of ancient Latium has emphasised the role played by technological innovation and by the control of exchange networks as the basis of the rise of Latin elites from the Recent Bronze Age onwards.⁴⁸

However, despite all such efforts to reconstruct the archaic Roman economy, the topic is often ignored or systematically avoided in many historical handbooks and some of the latest summaries of economic history still propose stereotypical and outdated interpretations.⁴⁹

For these reasons, the main goal of this research is to reconstruct the history of the early Roman economy by examining the archaeological evidence. Furthermore, this approach will prioritise the reconstruction of the economic systems of production, trade and consumption in the medium- or long-term perspective, rather than focus on single subjects or historical events.

1.2 PROBLEMS OF METHOD AND DOCUMENTATION, AND OPEN QUESTIONS

The evolution of these studies reveals not only the importance of the sixth century BC in Rome as a turning point in the ancient Roman economy, but also the cursory way in which they have been carried out over the years, with primitivist prejudices and hypercritical methods regarding literary sources, which have strongly influenced the debate, and a lack of systematic dialogue between historians and archaeologists specifically for this period.⁵⁰

As a general statement, we can say that evolutionistic approaches, which are implicit in both primitivist and modernist historical reconstructions, must be avoided; on the contrary we should look at the ways in which local resources may have been exploited according to the contemporary social and cultural context.

In the theoretical discussion of early Mediterranean economies over the last two decades, many scholars have advocated pluralism in reconstructing trade-exchange systems, using a broader approach which could include aspects of both substantivist and formalist models.⁵¹

In fact, the whole debate on the dichotomy between primitivism and modernism and the intertwined anthropological dichotomy between formalism and substantivism has been highly influential, but is now considered out of date and even sterile.⁵²

Regarding the Mediterranean alone, for example, it is quite obvious that archaic economies (sixth to fifth century BC), which were mainly based on the interaction between city states, cannot be compared to modern economies in terms of scale, geographic distribution and social impact, or even to the economies of the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman Empire, the volume and complexity of which were probably unsurpassed until the Industrial Revolution.

It is also crucial to reconstruct any ancient economy as embedded within its own society and to consider the strong interaction between the economy and politics: on the one hand there is the powerful economic impact of wars, urbanisation, territorial control and land redistribution, and on the other the cultural and social influences on the economy in terms of consumption, luxury display and class competition.

In fact, it is very difficult to identify any period in history during which economics and politics played independent roles, other than on a theoretical level.

Hence in a critique of primitivist models there are many aspects, which must be considered when investigating archaic economies, at least in the Mediterranean basin.

These include:

1. The effects of urbanisation, which began in Greece and central Tyrrhenian Italy with different local processes during the Early Iron Age and which implies the presence of accumulation and concentration of wealth in a few selected areas.
2. The tradition of long-distance trade and strong Mediterranean connectivity from at least the Bronze Age onwards, which implies a complex network of Mediterranean economic activity.
3. The existence of large-scale production from specialised workshops, which was exported across the Mediterranean area, as exemplified by Corinthian and Attic

pottery, and the presence of a complex network of crop supply organised by the main cities to feed their inhabitants.

4. The interest of many *poleis* in improving their economies by means of specific laws, as recorded by the literary tradition of the sixth-century reforms ascribed to Solon in Athens and Servius Tullius in Rome, which are not only considered reliable by modern historians, but are also confirmed independently by archaeological evidence.

Recent work on the archaic Mediterranean basin has stressed the strong interaction and connectivity between different communities, as well as the advanced level of trade organisation and the existence of economies based on market forces,⁵³ even if in a framework of strict control by the state, as documented for late archaic Greece.⁵⁴ There is also ever-increasing evidence for marketplaces and market behaviour in the archaic Mediterranean,⁵⁵ which cannot be ignored when dealing with central Tyrrhenian Italy and early Rome.

However, we must also consider that history is more complex than any theoretical model and that any reconstruction should consider possible forms of resistance and conservatism, and consequently the possible coexistence of economies dependent on social networks, with market and rational behaviour.⁵⁶ This approach finds support in the school of economics known as “new institutional economics”, which analyses trade within social institutions and cultural trends that constrain and condition human behaviour, particularly through the impact of transaction costs on trade and on the evolution of property rights.⁵⁷ When dealing with the history of the archaic Roman economy, the first problem is a chronological one: given the importance of archaeological data as the main source of information, we should adopt a long-term approach to understand properly the main aspects of the archaic Roman economy.

Secondly, a regional perspective is important: as clearly pointed out by Renato Peroni Iron Age economies must be considered as network economies in which the supply of metals and the payment of tolls on transit goods were part of a larger system of trade, which included the mobility of artisans, manpower, wares and above all metals, cattle and foodstuffs.⁵⁸ This seems rather obvious to scholars of protohistory, but as we noted above, many classical historians still persist in imagining a subsistence economy for archaic Rome.

A third aspect is the necessity of avoiding ethnocentric approaches which lead to Etruscan and Latin communities being imagined as opposite and deeply different cultural and economic entities. As matter of fact, southern Etruria and Latium Vetus had strong cultural and economic interactions, as well as social mobility, from the Final Bronze Age onwards. Above all, the economies of