

INTRODUCTION

Frugality in Theory and History

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Roman Frugality: Stories of Decline and Fall

Concern with frugal conduct (or lack thereof) has a pervasive presence in our ancient sources and registers with particular force in the literary record of late-republican and early imperial Rome. In the story that many a text from this period tells, frugality was a characteristic attitude to wealth on the part of Rome's ancestral aristocracy – or indeed the populace as a whole. Roman historiographers frequently convey the impression that 'the Romans' (suitably reified) lived in simple self-sufficiency throughout the first five or six centuries of their city's history, beholden to a set of values (not least *frugalitas*) that encouraged self-restraint, material sobriety and prudent husbandry and disowned greed and ambition alongside those professions that were deemed to promote a luxurious style of life. But in the years after the Second Punic War, military conquest and the transition to a Mediterranean-wide empire, which coincided with the adoption of foreign customs and the embrace of 'Eastern' luxury, fatally weakened this frugal ethos and ushered in the unchecked pursuit of material enrichment and the spendthrift enjoyment of new-found wealth – leading to moral corruption and, ultimately, the downfall of the republican commonwealth.¹ The adoption of a profligate lifestyle by

¹ See Lintott 1972 for a critical discussion of the ancient sources that link imperial expansion to moral decline. For the (gendered) link between luxury and autocracy in ancient thought involving the concepts of *truphelluxuria* and *hubris/superbia* see Dench 1998: 124: '*Hybris* is a trait attendant on successes which are not controlled by moderation, and in consequence those in possession of absolute power and of empire are particularly prone to it: the immoderation of *hybris* associates it closely with the feminine traits of decadent behaviour, or *tryphe*.'

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a significant segment of the Roman population also triggered the rise of a nostalgic discourse among the more prudent or economically disadvantaged that lamented the decline and eventual loss of the ancestral outlook that had long prevailed in Roman society and enabled its rise to imperial greatness. This discourse ensured that even as Rome lost its frugal ways and succumbed to the vices of greed, ambition and luxury, her seemingly exemplary commitment to material sobriety during the heydays of the republic was able to endure as a model of inspiration and emulation for later ages with similar ambitions to moral and military grandeur.

From the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, scholars writing on Roman history were by and large content with replicating variants of the historical plot the ancient moralists constructed, with a similar ideological emphasis: they approved of frugality and rebuked luxury. Austere management of material resources tended to be understood in positive terms, as a key reason for Rome's political stability and military success. Peasant discipline in the form of economic thrift and moral fibre was thought to have ensured that republican Rome rested on solid foundations.² Conversely, disregard for ancestral customs was perceived to be the cause of a moral as well as political and economic downturn during the empire.³ Yet this 'classical' paradigm gradually went out of fashion as the notion of luxury and economic phenomena more generally underwent a process of 'demoralisation' in the early modern period.⁴ In the wake of Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733) and others, who radically re-evaluated the significance of 'private vices' by turning them into a source for 'public benefits', the correlation of morality and economic productivity in ancient Rome equally underwent fundamental reassessment.⁵ From the

² Representatives of this school of thought include Montesquieu 1734; Dureau de la Malle 1840; and Sirago 1995.

³ See e.g. Meursius 1605: 1–3; Constant 1819; Dureau de la Malle 1840: 491–2; Zumpt 1841: 70–5.

⁴ Berry 1994 (and Chapter 7 in this volume) reconstructs this story.

⁵ On the debate between Mandeville and Shaftsbury and its implications for the study of Roman history see Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 320–9.

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late eighteenth century to more recent times, a considerable number of social and economic historians came to endorse the view that Rome's avowed commitment to frugality constitutes evidence of an essentially pre-modern (a.k.a. 'primitive') mindset insofar as it inhibited economic enterprise and hence needlessly stymied prosperity.

For this school of thought the frugal habitus that has often been taken to characterise the ancient Romans tout court presented an obstacle to the development of an economic system akin to our modern one, based as it is on growth, investment of capital, unfettered consumption and the theoretically unlimited expansion of the market. The alleged traditional mentality of the republican aristocracy was thus deemed to impede economic progress; conversely, the apparent crisis of traditional values in the imperial age received re-evaluation as a positive development that temporarily helped to improve the Roman economy, at least according to such performance indicators as accelerated growth and the production of surplus. The novel opportunities that arose under the principate and ensuing changes in attitude and outlook were thought to have provided a stimulus for commercial activities and, more generally, the emergence of a more profit- and investment-oriented culture, alongside the rise of social groups that lived off those activities. In this story, the prosperity of the Roman Empire resulted at least in part from the breakdown of Rome's traditionally frugal ethos.⁶ The Romans thereby matured into an ancient variant of the *homo oeconomicus* (the term was coined by Maffeo Pantaleoni in his *Principii di economia pura*, 1889) who populates certain forms of modern economic theory that consider the satisfaction of as many wants as possible and the desire for capital accretion omnipresent factors of economic activity – trans-historical universals as it were, limited only by the respective state of technological progress and

⁶ See e.g. Mengotti 1787: vii; Gibbon 1782; Friedländer 1964: 180, 307; Earl 1967: 31–2. For discussion see Finley 1985: 60–1; Garnsey and Saller 1987: 43; Morris 1999: xx–xxiii; Hitchner 2005; Harris 2007: 538.

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varying socio-political circumstances.⁷ Certain aspects of Roman history – sustained imperial expansion, the ruthless exploitation of conquered territories or the unrestrained indulgence in the pleasures of consumption fuelled by the windfalls of military aggression – seem indeed to attest that ancient Rome provides another case study in the arguably universal human desire to accumulate and use wealth to the fullest possible extent.

But scholarly interest in ancient modes of (economic) self-restraint and their alleged disappearance in the imperial age anyway peaked some time ago. More recent work on the Roman economy tends to bracket preoccupation with frugality altogether.⁸ Whether the focus is on craftsmen or trade – on, to cite some representative titles, ‘the world of the *fullo*’, ‘Roman artisans and the urban economy’, ‘urban craftsmen and traders in the Roman world’, ‘the economics of the Roman stone trade’, ‘the Romans and trade’ or on settlement and urbanisation, agriculture, *ager publicus* and landownership, material sobriety and self-restraint have seemingly become irrelevant in our efforts to analyse and explain data.⁹ Likewise, recent attempts to ‘quantify the Roman economy’ have been as uninterested in frugality as studies on ‘Rome’s economic revolution’, ‘the Roman market economy’ and ‘globalisation and the Roman world’.¹⁰

While scholars no longer ponder the enabling or inhibiting impact of Rome’s allegedly frugal ethos, the question of how to study ancient economic practice has remained controversial. The respective strengths and weaknesses of approaches that are

⁷ See e.g. Jongman 2007: 598.

⁸ Exceptions include Passet 2011 and Viglietti 2011: 139–224.

⁹ See, respectively, Flohr 2013; Hawkins 2016; the papers in Wilson and Flohr 2016; Russell 2013; Tchernia 2011/2016. On settlement and demographics, agriculture and the exploitation of natural resources (of the sea and the land) in the Roman world see Marzano 2013; the papers in Bowman and Wilson 2011 and 2013b; and the papers in Erdkamp, Verboven and Zuiderhoek 2015; on *ager publicus* in Italy during the republican centuries (396–89 BCE) Roselaar 2010; on commerce and trade the papers in Wilson and Bowman 2018 (cf. Bresson 2016 for a comparable study of the Greek world).

¹⁰ See the papers in Bowman and Wilson 2009; Kay 2014; Temin 2013; and the papers in Pitts and Versluys 2015.

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‘primitivist’ and/or ‘substantivist’ in orientation vis-à-vis those that are ‘modernist’ and/or ‘formalist’¹¹ have remained the subject of debate – not least as part of concerted efforts to move beyond what has always been a somewhat artificial binary.¹² Many studies now put the emphasis on detail, specificity and heterogeneity and take into consideration social context and the potential impact of noneconomic values, certainly on the attitudes, to some extent also on the conduct, of specific individuals or groups – while emphasising the importance of economic rationality and financial self-interest as key, yet often neglected factors in history.¹³ But frugality, however defined, is not a variable that registers much (if at all). The same is true of contemporary accounts of Roman military expansion and imperial exploitation as well as their domestic repercussions:¹⁴ such studies unceremoniously dispense with the plot of the ancient moralisers who considered imperial success a main reason for the weakening of frugal values insofar as it enabled the influx of ‘Eastern’ luxury and thereby caused moral decadence and, more generally, societal decline (while conveniently overlooking the awkward fact that Rome smashed much of the Mediterranean world and Northern Europe to pieces at the same time it succumbed to supposedly effeminising luxury).¹⁵

¹¹ The terms are taken from Scheidel 2012b: 7–8. He glosses them as follows: ‘Put in a highly simplified manner, formalist positions stress similarities between ancient and modern economies by emphasizing the putative significance of price-setting markets, comparative advantage, and capitalist ventures, whereas substantivists emphasize discontinuities by focusing on how status concerns mediated economic behavior and generated specific dynamics that reflected elite preference for rent-taking and landownership and disdain for commercial enterprise that reinforced the fusion of political and economic power and marginalized independent merchants.’ For a summary of the debate, see Scheidel, Morris and Saller 2007; Viglietti 2018: 216–24.

¹² See e.g. Harris 1993 and Saller 2005.

¹³ See e.g. Morley 2004a: 48–50; the papers in Bang, Ikeguchi and Ziche 2006 and Droß-Krüpe, Föllinger and Ruffing 2016; or Manning 2018: 15: ‘analysis of “the ancient economy” must be located between the “static traditional economy” and a “fluid market economy”.’ (The quotation marks seem designed to indicate scepticism of reifying ‘the ancient economy’ (single and unchanging) in favour of a plurality and heterogeneity of (local) economies, with significant change over time.)

¹⁴ See e.g. Erskine 2010; Lavan 2013; the papers in Hoyos 2013; Harris 2016.

¹⁵ Already Cicero, in his anti-austerity speech *pro Murena*, called the bluff: see below 66.

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In short, over time, ‘frugality’ has morphed from a key factor into a non-factor in our endeavours to understand the world(s) of ancient Rome. Historians now tend to treat frugality not primarily as a habitus that regulated economic behaviour, but as a discursive phenomenon of scant economic or socio-political import – a reaction by certain members of the Roman elite to societal changes brought about by unparalleled levels of consumption in the wake of Rome’s imperial expansion in Southern Italy and the wider Mediterranean. The current indifference to modes of (material) sobriety and (economic) self-restraint as variables in Roman history suggests that the scholarly discussion has simply moved on. From the point of view of much modern scholarship, Rome’s supposed commitment to frugality in the days of yore has by and large dwindled into a discursive reflex in authors of the late republic and early imperial period without significant purchase on economic, cultural or socio-political practice: it has become ‘a curious accretion to be ignored by those in pursuit of the real matter in Roman texts’.¹⁶ Stories of the decline and fall of Roman frugality thus have a counterpart in the decline and fall of Roman frugality as a historical phenomenon worth studying.

Roman Frugality Rethought

Arguably, however, the history of scholarship on Roman frugality is a case of the baby getting thrown out with the bathwater – without the infant receiving the courtesy of prior in-depth examination. For despite its prominent place in the cultural imaginary of late-republican and early imperial Rome, frugality has received little direct, let alone systematic attention even in those quarters where its existence and importance were taken for granted, at least in comparison and contrast to the interest generated by related concepts such

¹⁶ Edwards 1993: 2, who is critical of this outlook. Cf. Gibbon 1782: 62; Salvioli 1929: 12–13; Lintott 1972: 626–7, 638; Courtney 1980: 255.

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as luxury or poverty.¹⁷ If at all, it tends to register as an ancillary concern: in most of the scholarly literature, whatever its overall approach and underlying premises, frugality figures primarily as an unexamined given to be asserted, denied or ignored for arguments whose focus lies elsewhere. Neither the concept nor the phenomenon has ever been at the centre of a sustained cross-disciplinary investigation that explores the limits and possibilities of detecting modes of frugality in Roman society and offers genealogical soundings into Roman practices of, and reflections on, (material) moderation – let alone the largely unexplored impact this body of thought has had on later historical periods. Part of the reason is that Roman frugality tends to be understood in narrowly moral–economic terms. Yet while the interface of the moral and the economic constitutes an important aspect of Roman frugality, this interface is more complex than is generally assumed and the phenomenon as a whole much broader in scope, as already indicated by the variety of ‘equivalents’ the Latin term *frugalitas* has attracted in English translations – including ‘thrift’, ‘sobriety’, ‘moderation’, ‘self-restraint’ (esp. concerning food and drink, but also sex and power), ‘healthy diet’, ‘uprightness’ or ‘honesty’. With its complex semantics and adventurous history, *frugalitas* is not *just* an antonym of luxury – it is also only one of the concepts of relevance here.

Hence the aim of our volume: in and through this introduction and the subsequent case studies, it tries to rethink the place and function of (appeals to) thrift, self-restraint (material) sobriety and, more generally, ‘the morality of needs and wants’, as well as the associated Latin terms and discourses from the archaic period to early imperial times and beyond. Our approach is historical and genealogical in Foucault’s

¹⁷ Interest in Roman luxury dates back to Meursius 1605; see also Baudrillart 1881; De Marchi 1895. More recent work includes Clemente 1981; Ampolo 1984; Edwards 1993; Goddard 1994; Dalby 2000; Bottiglieri 2002; Fulminante 2003; Coudry 2004; Weeber 2006; 2007; Dubois-Pelerin 2008; Wallace-Hadrill 2008; Arena 2011; Zanda 2011; Casinos Mora 2015; Andreau and Coudry 2016. On poverty, see the papers in Atkins and Osborne 2006 and Corbo 2006 (focusing on late antiquity); cf. Townsend 1979; 1985.

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sense of the term.¹⁸ the objective is to identify the factors – the economic circumstances, socio-political dynamics and discursive opportunities – that, at certain moments in time, rendered it attractive for specific social groups or individuals to engage in, or at least endorse and encourage, modes of frugality and thereby to explain the workings of Roman notions and practices of moderation with reference to their wider socio-political settings and cultural contexts. Our point of departure is the suspicion that we might miss the cultural logic that informed and governed the strategies and choices of historical agents if we consider Roman frugality as just a discursive construct or as the product of a greatly civilised society or of a primitive people: much recent scholarship in social history and anthropology has emphasised the importance of describing the conceptual and social worlds of communities differently from those of the modern observer.¹⁹ (Nowadays this includes critical reflection on the ways in which we inevitably project our own categories and common sense onto historical realities and recognition of the risk that the search for historical specificity may turn into a reification of difference.²⁰)

Such a project, of course, cannot simply turn back the clock. Certain gambits that in times past endowed frugality with inherent significance and explanatory value are dead for good reasons and should remain buried. Grand narratives that explain the historical record by appealing to the mentality of ‘a people’ have run their course. Claims that ‘the Romans’ of old were somehow naturally frugal are now as antediluvian as attempts to interpret the absence of significant literary activities in Rome before the middle of the third century BCE with

¹⁸ Foucault 1980.

¹⁹ Geertz 1973: 5–30; 2000: 36–72; Sahlins 1985: vii–xviii; 1995: 5–14; Roller 2010: 236–41; Bettini and Short 2018.

²⁰ Cf. James Hynes’ satiric take on the debate between Marshall Sahlins and Ganath Obeyesekere in *Publish and Perish: Three Tales of Tenure and Terror* (1997), who reappear as Joe Brody, ‘a stubborn old Irishman who argued that the Hawaiians murdered Cook because they mistook him for the god Lono’ and Stanley Tulafale, ‘a massive, soft-spoken Samoan who bristled eloquently on behalf of Third Worlders everywhere at the imputation that level-headed Hawaiians could mistake a bad-tempered Yorkshireman for their god of renewal’ (104).

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reference to a ‘national character’ or the uninspiring Italian climate.²¹ Any rethinking of Roman frugality has to resist the reifications so prevalent in earlier scholarship, where ‘frugality’ often figured as a defining characteristic of ‘the Romans’ – a mental outlook, born and bred into their bones in legendary times.

Likewise, the stories of decadence told by ancient authors and the attendant celebration of frugality have ceased to compel as explanatory accounts of the causes and consequences of developments in Roman history. This material does not amount to a critical discourse with inbuilt analytic value, but is itself a historical phenomenon in need of analysis and explication. By definition, the assertion of frugal norms allegedly upheld by the ancestors or the diagnosis of contemporary socio-political pathologies in narratives of moral disintegration are first and foremost acts of rhetoric and authorial self-fashioning (not least since the authors tended to exempt themselves from the general malaise they diagnosed all around them) and need to be treated as such.²² The notion of a turning point in Roman history, for instance, when the floodgates of luxury opened and swept away the ancestral culture of frugality that dominates many a historiographical text from the late republic seems to be a figure of thought that first emerged towards the end of the second century BCE, arguably in response to the Gracchan crisis and its aftermath.²³ Conversely, of course, the fact that ancient sources which nostalgically evoke frugal times and lament their disappearance have a precise set of enabling conditions and a specific historical context does not mean that they are not worth studying as revealing forms of Roman self-description. This is more generally true of Roman reflections on modes of material sobriety, whatever their relation to economic and socio-political practice. As Andrew Wallace-Hadrill has recently maintained, the elaborate controversies, and the

²¹ These ideas dominate in Latin literary histories until the middle of the twentieth century.

²² See e.g. Morley 2004b and Biesinger 2016. ²³ Lintott 1972.

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juridical provisions, vis-à-vis the good and bad uses of material possessions that register at various moments in Roman history, ‘rather than representing a failure to confront the more “real” social and economic issues, [...] may prove to be anti-quiry’s way of expressing them. [...] We need [...] to listen to [the ancient Romans’] discourse more attentively.’²⁴

The point of departure for a historical-genealogical study of frugality has to be the recognition that Roman frugality ‘as such’ does not exist. There might be considerable ‘categorical continuity’ of *parsimonia-frugalitas*/frugality or related notions and their overwhelmingly (but not exclusively) positive connotations across Roman history.²⁵ Yet the limits of what was judged ethically, socially and legally commendable in the material sphere (or, conversely, unbecoming) show a ‘substantive discontinuity’ throughout different phases in Roman history:²⁶ the boundaries of acceptable behaviour regarding the consumption and use of wealth changed considerably over time – and often with great velocity. The same is true of vernacular cultures.²⁷ We are, then, dealing with a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, in which socio-political and economic practices and institutions interlock with moral codes around behaviours and attitudes concerned with the accumulation and strategic deployment of material resources not least in the pursuit of power – across a time-span of almost a millennium. Like related phenomena or concepts such as ‘luxury’, ‘wealth’, ‘conspicuous consumption’ and expenditure (*sumptus*) or ‘poverty’, frugality does not possess an ahistorical essence: it needs to be studied contextually and diachronically.²⁸ The distinction between discursive assertions and enacted norms is as important here as due attention to which

²⁴ Wallace Hadrill 2008: 329. See also the papers in Andraeu, France and Pittia 2004; in Andraeu and Coudry 2016; and in Beck, Jehne and Serrati 2016. Cf. Clemente 1981: 14; Arena 2011: 464.

²⁵ Clemente 1981: 10–13; cf. Dubois-Pelerin 2008: 13.

²⁶ On luxury, Edwards 1993: 140–72; Berry 1994: 241; cf. Coudry 2004: 160–1. Dubois-Pelerin 2008: 43; cf. more generally the other items cited in note 17.

²⁷ See in particular Berry 1994; Kovesi Killerby 2002; Muzzarelli and Campanini 2003.

²⁸ See Bottiglieri 2016: 14 on changing conceptions of *sumptus*.