11-2005

Veterans, Agriculture, and Monetization in the Late Roman Republic

David B. Hollander

Iowa State University, dbh8@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs

Part of the Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs/7. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.
Veterans, Agriculture, and Monetization in the Late Roman Republic

Abstract
In Ancient Literacy William V. Harris argued that the Greeks and Romans never achieved mass literacy in part because they lacked an "essential instrument," that is "an extensive network of schools ... subsidized by religion or by the state." The Romans did, however, have one large and very well-funded educational institution: the army. Though it may never have taught reading and writing, the Roman army was constantly training tens of thousands of soldiers in the arts of war. But the army was more than an institution, it was also a community with its own special rules, traditions and procedures. In addition to learning how to fight, a recruit had to learn how to live in his new military environment: Scholars have long recognized the army's important role in the acculturation or 'Romanization' of auxiliaries. In this paper I want to consider how army life taught soldiers to use money, that is, how exposure to the military community may have altered economic behavior. The army, I would like to suggest, taught soldiers a style of 'household management' or money use that was risky when practiced by farmers. Since in the first century B.C.E. the Romans typically settled veterans on the land where they were presumably expected to engage in agriculture, the military's inadvertent instruction may have contributed to the political and economic difficulties of the age, particularly debt crisis.

Disciplines
Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity

Comments
David B. Hollander

Veterans, Agriculture, and Monetization in the Late Roman Republic*

*Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association, 26-29 October, Pittsburgh, and at the 47th Annual Missouri Valley History Conference, 4-6 March, 2004, Omaha. I would like to thank the audiences and my fellow panelists for their useful comments and suggestions. Unless otherwise noted, translations come from the Loeb Classical Library editions.

Why should it be supposed that... small farmers should have been more successful... but for defects derived from their having served in the army?" 

In Ancient Literacy William V. Harris argued that the Greeks and Romans never achieved mass literacy in part because they lacked an "essential instrument," that is "an extensive network of schools... subsidized by religion or by the state." The Romans did, however, have one large and very well funded educational institution: the army. Though it may never have taught reading and writing, the Roman army was constantly training tens of thousands of soldiers in the arts of war. But the army was more than an institution, it was also a community with its own special rules, traditions and procedures. In addition to learning how to fight, a recruit had to learn how to live in his new military environment. Scholars have long recognized the army's important role in the acculturation or 'Romanization' of auxiliaries. In this paper I want to consider how army life taught soldiers to use money, that is, how exposure to the military community may have altered economic behavior. The army, I would like to suggest, taught soldiers a style of 'household management' or money use that was risky when practiced by farmers. Since in the first century B.C.E. the Romans typically settled veterans on the land where they were presumably expected to engage in agriculture, the military's inadvertent instruction may have contributed to the...
political and economic difficulties of the age, particularly debt crisis.

Debt crisis repeatedly afflicted the Roman world in the late Republic. Significant crises occurred from 89 to 86, in 63, and from 49 to 47 B.C.E. Though quantitative evidence describing these crises is nonexistent, one can still identify with some confidence their causes. Often Roman debt crises can be linked closely to warfare, particularly to the conflicts which took place on Italian soil during the last 60 years of the Republic. Warfare in Italy would quickly upset the credit structure which depended heavily on the value of land, the security for most loans. Warfare brought an increased demand for coinage and thus drove up interest rates as creditors began to call in their debts, taking money out of circulation. Those debtors who lacked cash were forced to borrow from others at a higher rate or sell property to remain solvent. However, since warfare usually entailed the widespread destruction of property as well as, frequently, the confiscation and redistribution of land, real estate prices tended to fall dramatically at even the rumor of war. Thus for many Romans war inevitably brought about the financial and social ruin of bankruptcy.

For the crises of the 80s and 40s, warfare in Italy no doubt provides sufficient explanation. The debt crisis of the 80s followed the devastation of the Social War and coincided, as did the crisis of the 40s, with a major civil war. The Romans were certainly aware of the relationship between war and debt crisis. Shortly after Caesar invaded Italy in 49, Cicero joked that no one had ever done more to lower real estate prices in Italy than Pompey. What, however, caused the debt crisis of 63? Italy had been relatively peaceful since the end of the slave revolt in 71 and yet Cicero reports that "indebtedness was never greater." While Cicero was certainly not above exaggerating the difficulties with which he contended during his consulship, a number of other sources indicate that Rome faced a major debt crisis in the mid 60s. Sallust writes that as early as 66 some Romans were contemplating revolution because of the harsh burden of debt. Plutarch tells us that Cato the Younger fought against debt relief proposals in 64, and we learn from Dio that a tribune proposed the cancellation of debts at the beginning of 63.

In the fall of 63 Catiline, heavily in debt following two unsuccessful bids for the consulship, attempted to capitalize on this situation. He organized a
conspiracy and attempted to overthrow the government, promising supporters that he would abolish debts and redistribute wealth and offices. However, Cicero uncovered Catiline’s plans and successfully thwarted the conspiracy. The rebels were defeated in Etruria early in 62. Contemporary observers clearly believed that debt crisis brought on the conspiracy and uprising. Soon after the crisis Cicero, who had just bought an expensive house from Crassus, joked that he himself was now in debt and interested in joining a conspiracy.

But who joined Catiline’s conspiracy? Apparently his cause was particularly popular with Sulla’s veterans, thousands of whom had been settled on confiscated Italian land in the late 80s.

Judging from contemporary accounts Sulla’s veterans seem to have been lousy farmers. Sallust and Cicero both report that by the mid-60s many of them had either lost the land on which they had been settled or were heavily in debt. Both writers attribute the veterans’ support for Catiline to their economic plight. Appian and Plutarch also emphasize that Sullan veterans, “who had squandered the gains of their former life of plunder,” constituted a large portion of Catiline’s supporters. Ancient writers, of course, attributed the economic failure of these veterans to moral deficiencies. They were spendthrifts, lazy and addicted to luxury. Successful farmers, on the other hand, worked hard throughout the year and avoided all unnecessary expenditures. Modern historians came to dismiss these moralizing explanations and used to suggest that these veterans were either inexperienced farmers or had no interest in farming at all, renting or quickly selling the land allotted to them. More recently, however, scholars have begun to doubt that veterans were any more likely than anyone else to fail at farming or go bankrupt. They pointed out that most soldiers were recruited from rural areas and were thus unlikely to be ignorant of agriculture. In addition P.A. Brunt noted that most of Sulla’s veterans had served in the army for only a few years, not long enough to have grown soft from exposure to eastern

---

14 Sall., Cat. 16.4; Cic., Cat. 2.7.16-21. Cf. also Andreau 1999, 103 and Giovannini 1995, 15.
15 Cic., Fam. 5.6.2.
16 Cic., Mar. 49; Cic., Cat. 2.20; Sall., Cat. 16; App., B. Civ. 2.2. However Harris 1971, 269 and 291 and de Blois 2000, 14 doubt that many Sullan veterans fought for Catiline.
17 Brunt 1971, 305.
18 Sall., Cat. 16.4; Cic., Cat. 2.7.21.
19 App., B. Civ. 2.2; Plut., Cic. 14.2.
20 Cf., for example, Sall., Cat. 10.2.
22 Brunt 1962, 82; Brunt 1971, 309 suggested that “the extent to which the Sullan veterans failed may be exaggerated”; cf. also Harris 1971, 267-71.
23 Brunt 1962, 75; Skydsgaard 1980, 70.
luxury during the campaign against Mithridates. Besides, imperial era settlements demonstrated that veterans might farm successfully even after serving in the army for 25 years. If, on the other hand, veterans tended to sell their allotments immediately or employ tenants, there could be no connection between their agricultural abilities and indebtedness. While some Sullan veterans were certainly in financial trouble, it has also been argued that they were simply an easy target. Since many hated the veterans for the part they played in the civil war, proscriptions and confiscations, it made good rhetorical sense to play up their involvement with Catiline. Uncertainty concerning the size, location, and quality of allotments has also served to complicate the picture. Sallust, for example, has Lepidus, consul in 78, describe Sulla's veterans as “banished to swamps and woods.” Obviously if veterans had been given marginal land, they would be unlikely to succeed.

The nexus of unresolved questions surrounding the Catilinarian conspiracy makes it almost impossible to say anything definitive about the make-up of Catiline's faction or the motives and economic circumstances of his supporters. Whatever the relative numbers, it is clear that people from many different backgrounds and situations followed Catiline, and it was never particularly difficult for anyone to go into debt in the ancient world. Nevertheless it is worth exploring the possibility that Roman writers observed—but misinterpreted—the symptoms of a 'defect derived from army service.'

Sociologists refer to the idea that working in a particular occupation can affect a person's subsequent social or economic accomplishments as the 'bridging hypothesis.' Military service provides "an environment in which the individual may acquire new skills and abilities which... could help him in his civilian career." Through the statistical analysis of surveys and questionnaires scholars have tested the bridging hypothesis with respect to U.S. veterans of all major conflicts from World War II to the present. Studies regularly find significant differences between veterans and non-veterans with respect to economic and educational attainment, attitudes and even self-esteem. However these differences do not always favor veterans. For example, although it has been observed that there is a consistent “positive effect of military service on the status attainment of veterans” from World War II and the Korean War, an educational deficit exists for veterans of the

---

24 Brunt 1971, 310.
25 Brunt 1962, 83.
26 Harris 1971, 291.
27 Gabba 1976, 45; and Harris 1971, 259.
28 Sall., Oratio Lepid. 23; cf. also Cic., Leg. Agr. 2.70; and Tac., Ann. 1.17.
29 Browning et al. 1973, 76; cf. also Lakhani 1998.
30 Teachman and Call 1996, 2.
Vietnam War and the all-volunteer force.\textsuperscript{31}

While it is obviously impossible to conduct similar studies on Roman veterans, it seems reasonable to expect that differences would develop between veterans and non-veterans in the Roman world because of the substantial differences between economic life on a farm and in the army. Army life brought about the "resocialization" of the recruit as he adapted to his new environment and learnt new skills.\textsuperscript{32} One of the major differences between the rural agricultural economy and life in the Roman army was the level of monetization. Although the Roman countryside was not, as archaeologists and numismatists once supposed, essentially unmonetized, it still seems safe to assert that far more coins circulated in towns and army camps than in rural areas.\textsuperscript{33} Farmers used coins for some purchases, but typically employed a range of commodities in their transactions.\textsuperscript{34}

The army, by contrast, ran on cash. "Soldiers and money," Julius Caesar supposedly once remarked, "if you lack one, you will soon lack the other."\textsuperscript{35} Roman soldiers received a relatively modest salary in cash from which certain deductions were made, but their income could be supplemented by donatives from their generals and, perhaps most importantly, from the sale of booty. Merchants and traders as well as prostitutes and astrologers regularly followed Roman armies, buying the spoils of victory and selling products and services to the soldiers.\textsuperscript{36} Sallust tells of a Roman army in North Africa whose soldiers "sold the grain which was allotted them by the state and bought bread from day to day."\textsuperscript{37} As Claude Nicolet, commenting on the Republican army, observed: "Commercial and military activity were not sharply opposed... Pillage and commerce were two complimentary and interconnected methods of exchange and... it was a long time before the ancient world established a clear distinction between them."

Army life must have quickly habituated soldiers to the use of coinage and the practice of liquidating assets such as grain, slaves and cattle in exchange for cash.\textsuperscript{38} This sort of economic behavior was advantageous in a soldier but

\textsuperscript{31} Cohen et al. 1995, 88.
\textsuperscript{32} Broom and Smith 1963, 323.
\textsuperscript{33} Howgego 1992, 20.
\textsuperscript{34} Cato, Agr. 2.5 and 5.3-4; cf. also Forbes and Foxhall 1995, 79; and de Ligt 1991, 75.
\textsuperscript{35} Dio Cass. 42.49.5 (translated by Frederiksen 1966, 132).
\textsuperscript{36} Roth 1999, 96-101; and Phang 2001, 246-47.
\textsuperscript{37} Sall., Jug. 44. While Sallust does not explicitly state that coinage was used for these transactions, the use of 
\textit{sordere} and 
\textit{mercari} implies monetized behavior especially since they are contrasted with 
\textit{multari} which appears in the previous clause.
\textsuperscript{38} Nicolet 1980, 122.
\textsuperscript{39} Livy emphasizes the need for soldiers to sell their booty lest the army be slowed down (10.17.4) or the soldiers be distracted from fighting (10.20.16). Polybius 10.16 describes the procedures used.
dangerous in a farmer. The soldier needed mobility and could usually depend on a steady supply of coins and food. Farmers, however, did not have the state’s financial and logistical support behind them. The strategy of the successful farmer was to amass a diversified portfolio of assets, in particular grain, oil and wine. These commodities could be sold when prices were high, consumed in times of food shortage, exchanged for labor and goods, or lent to other farmers. Even Cato and Varro, who were probably writing for the ‘commercial farmer’, emphasize the importance of long-term storage on a farm. Although ancient and modern depictions of the Roman farmer as highly self-sufficient are idealizing exaggerations, the Roman farmer was certainly much more self-reliant than the Roman soldier. By maintaining stores of several commodities the farmer insulated himself from the monetary economy. Considering how dramatically prices, especially the prices of foodstuffs, tended to fluctuate, for a farmer to rely too heavily on coinage could be financially disastrous.

The late Republic was a crucial moment in Rome’s monetary history. Whatever the precise figures for coin production may be, it is clear that the money supply grew dramatically from the mid-second to the mid-first century and that not all of this new coinage simply replaced the non-Roman issues being removed from circulation by Roman imperialism. As Keith Hopkins suggested, “money percolated into a myriad of transactions which had previously been embedded in the subsistence economy.” Since cities were already monetized, money was percolating into a myriad of rural transactions. Veterans were no doubt instrumental in this process of rural monetization but the transformation of the agricultural economy would not have been smooth. The adoption of new monetary practices by established farmers as well as the application of such practices to an unfamiliar environment by veterans would inevitably cause difficulties as there were no exempla to guide either group.
Studies of the monetization of rural India suggest a close relationship between increased money use and indebtedness. John Mellor, for example, notes that "Monetization undoubtedly turned many inexperienced Indians into debtors."45 Joan Frayn has described one aspect of this problem. "Before the introduction of a monetary system," she argues, the subsistence farmer "would have repaid in kind at the next harvest. Now he must pay in cash and with interest. The price of the borrowed grain would be fixed in the time of scarcity, not at the harvest."46 Such unfavorable borrowing conditions would have forced more farmers into bankruptcy. While Roman veterans may not have been subsistence farmers, they would be at the mercy of the same relentless process, especially if their economic behavior continued to resemble that of soldiers. It is not the use of coinage per se that would cause trouble for some veterans but the failure to maintain a diversified store of commodities or too great a willingness to speculate. It would have been difficult for many veterans to give up the monetary habits army life had drilled into them.

The Romans themselves seem to have been aware of the problems posed by the reintroduction of veterans into the agricultural economy and made some efforts to deal with them. There were laws prohibiting the sale of a veteran’s land allotment for as many as twenty years.47 Such measures would limit the amount of money veterans could borrow since a farm that could not be alienated presumably could not be used as security for a loan. Restricting the sale of land would, in theory, discourage risky financial behavior by veterans. Unfortunately these measures were apparently often ignored or overturned.48 The obvious solution was to substitute a discharge bonus in cash for the customary allotment of land. According to Dio, Augustus made this change, although not because of the difficulties facing veteran farmers but in order to assure soldiers of a definite reward for service and to avoid upsetting those whose land might be confiscated.49

The relationship between money-use, agriculture and veteran settlement policies in the Roman world is complex. While army service may have put some Romans at a disadvantage when they later turned to agriculture, several other factors may have also contributed. For example, veterans must often have been given land far from the areas in which they grew up. Cato and

45 Mellor et al. 1968, 61; cf. also Chandavarkar 1977.
46 Frayn 1979, 78. It is possible that loans in kind could legally charge higher rates of interest (cf. Billeter 1898, 288-305) but a good harvest would allow the repayment of even exorbitant interest in kind. Those in debt for money, however, were at the mercy of both the weather and the market price of their produce.
47 App., B. Civ. 3.2 and 3.7.
48 Cic., Leg. Agr. 2.78; and App., B. Civ. 3.2.
49 Dio Cass. 54.25.5. However Brunt 1962, 83 notes that according to Tac., Ann. 1.17 Augustus was still giving land to some veterans in 14 C.E. Cf. also Keppie 1983, 208-9.
Varro both note that there were a variety of distinct topographical, ecological, and climatic situations within Italy.\textsuperscript{50} Someone who had farmed successfully in one region might fail in another if he did not adapt to local circumstances. Furthermore, even though, as I noted earlier, most recruits probably came from a rural background, the abandonment of property qualifications for army service in the late second century must have meant that fewer soldiers in the first century would have had prior experience running their own farm households. While they may have worked in the fields as hired hands or seasonal laborers, they would still lack the necessary household management skills since military service had interrupted their agricultural apprenticeship.\textsuperscript{51}

Veterans might also fail through the lack of a local support network. As the Roman agricultural manuals indicate, farmers depended on their local communities for supplies, craftsmen, workers, markets and loans.\textsuperscript{52} Veteran farmers, perhaps settled far from their original homes amid a terrified or resentful ‘indigenous’ population, would have to forge anew the complex relationships and arrangements that the locals could take for granted. Perhaps this helps explain why Caesar began to settle veterans in their units, so that they could continue to rely on their comrades for assistance.\textsuperscript{53}

Evidence for the economic behavior of soldiers and veterans in the late Republic is not abundant and it is impossible to prove definitively that military service put veterans at an economic disadvantage. Such a causal relationship does, however, seem plausible. As scholars begin to incorporate the phenomenon of monetization into more diachronic accounts of the Roman economy, it makes sense to consider carefully the means by which people changed their monetary habits. The army taught many Romans how to fight; perhaps it also taught them how to buy and sell. Still, as Columella subsequently noted, the Romans lacked one important kind of educational institution: "There are to this day schools for rhetoricians and... for mathematicians and musicians... training schools for... the seasoning of food and dressers of the head and hair... but of agriculture I know neither self-professed teachers nor pupils.”\textsuperscript{54}

Works Cited


\textsuperscript{50} Cato, \textit{Agr.} 1.1-3; and Varro, \textit{Rust.} 1.9 and 1.12.

\textsuperscript{51} Aubert 1994, 415 notes the “fairly developed technical, organizational, and managerial skills” required to run a farm.

\textsuperscript{52} Cato, \textit{Agr.} 4; and Varro, \textit{Rust.} 1.16; cf. also de Ligt 1993, 131.

\textsuperscript{53} Gabba 1976, 51.

\textsuperscript{54} Columella, \textit{Rust.} Preface 5.


