Book Review: The Grain Market in the Roman Empire: A Social, Political and Economic Study by Paul Erdkamp

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Abstract
The title of Erdkamp's new book fails to do it justice. This study looks at much more than the grain market. Indeed, the first three chapters are a wide-ranging discussion of and excellent introduction to Roman agriculture. They also examine the cultivation of olives and grapes, and the economic strategies of peasants, as well as those whose production was geared more toward the market. In order to understand the grain market, Erdkamp looks far beyond the marketplace to the constraints placed upon producers, the problems of storage and transportation, and the impacts of taxation, geography, and public food distribution on supply and demand.

Disciplines
Agricultural Economics | Agronomy and Crop Sciences | Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Demography, Population, and Ecology | European History | Medieval History

Comments
Review

Reviewed Work(s): The Grain Market in the Roman Empire: A Social, Political and Economic Study by Paul Erdkamp

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as well as a bibliography of carefully documented source materials that will hopefully lead other scholars to follow her path. Unfortunately for the world of Burma studies, Judith Richell passed away in 1999 at the age of fifty-six. She was only weeks away from submitting her doctoral dissertation. The National University of Singapore Press agreed to take the almost-complete manuscript and produce a book with the help of her husband who completed the final typescript. This book is undoubtedly valuable for her detailed contribution to the social, economic, and medical history of this much under-researched part of Southeast Asia.

Monique Skidmore
Australian National University

Europe


The title of Erdkamp’s new book fails to do it justice. This study looks at much more than the grain market. Indeed, the first three chapters are a wide-ranging discussion of—and excellent introduction to—Roman agriculture. They also examine the cultivation of olives and grapes, and the economic strategies of peasants, as well as those whose production was geared more toward the market. In order to understand the grain market, Erdkamp looks far beyond the marketplace to the constraints placed upon producers, the problems of storage and transportation, and the impacts of taxation, geography, and public food distribution on supply and demand.

In “Production and Productivity in Roman Agriculture,” Erdkamp examines the means of production (land, capital, and labor), as well as the yield rates given for grain cultivation in the works of Cicero and Varro (which he considers to be reliable). The goal is to estimate the potential “net agricultural surplus” (gross surplus minus what the farm household itself consumed) for peasants, “market-orientated farmers,” and “the commercial estates of the elite” (54). He argues that this surplus was “sufficient to sustain a much larger part of the population than 10 or 20 per cent” (13).

“The World of the Smallholder” focuses on the availability and use of labor in peasant households. Erdkamp examines, among other topics, the role of women in agriculture and rural textile production, peasants’ opportunities for employment off the farm, the advantages and disadvantages associated with cash crops such as olives and vines, and the importance of pigs and sheep to the small farmer. He concludes that the poorest farmers...
“might have had much time to spare,” but that they had few employment options besides working their own land (84).

The third chapter looks at how farmers who had a net surplus of grain went about selling it. Here, he considers both the practices of smallholders (whose sales would usually have been local) and those of larger landholders. Erdkamp concentrates on the issues of advance sale of crops and the extent to which grain bypassed the market altogether to feed wealthy landowners’ urban households and clients.

The latter half of the book largely turns away from the farm to consider market integration, Rome’s public grain supply, and government intervention in the grain market. A brief conclusion follows in which Erdkamp summarizes his arguments and discusses the possibility of economic growth in the empire. He is cautiously optimistic. The book, which also includes a bibliography, subject index, and index locorum, is well produced and has few typographical errors. In most respects this book is accessible to the non-specialist. Erdkamp makes ample use of comparative evidence and quotations from Greek and Latin sources appear in English translation with the exception of one inscription for which, strangely, he supplies a German translation (119). Overall, this is an important contribution to the study of both Roman agriculture and the Roman economy.

David B. Hollander
Iowa State University


Meat Matters is an engrossing and wide-ranging study of the meat trade in eighteenth-century Paris. Sydney Watts offers what she describes as “a holistic approach to the meat trade” in order to explain the changing roles of butchers and consumers, as well as crown and local officials, to a growing market for meat over the course of the eighteenth century (5). As the population of Paris—and along with it, the consumption horizons of its middling and lower orders—expanded during the eighteenth century, increasing demand for meat, and the labor to produce it, presented a challenge to one of Paris’s most ancient and respected guilds, the butchers. Yet, as they called for regulation to halt the spread of meat merchants operating outside of the guild system, they also expanded and transformed the labor market within their ranks by relying upon journeymen—wage laborers who could never expect to rise to the level of master. A great deal of the meat arriving in Paris entered on the hoof, and the Crown consolidated and reorganized cattle markets, including the hitherto informal credit arrange-