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## Book Review: Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance. By Jairus Banaji.

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## Book Review: Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance. By Jairus Banaji.

### **Abstract**

Jairus Banaji's monograph, a revised version of his 1992 Oxford D. Phil. thesis, examines the changing social and economic makeup of the eastern Mediterranean countryside from the third to the seventh century a.d. Combining numismatic, papyrological, literary, and archaeological material with an impressive command of comparative evidence, the author presents a compelling vision of late antique agriculture that differs dramatically from conventional treatments. Scholars typically describe the late-Roman economy as in decline, afflicted by excessive taxation, debased coinage, rampant inflation, and a shortage of labor. Faced with these difficulties, they argue, Roman landowners reverted to more self-sufficient practices and, consequently, levels of monetization fell substantially. Banaji, however, believes that this view owes more to the persistence of Max Weber's flawed sociological theories than to the evidence. He suggests that, on the contrary, there was a "general economic revival" (3) beginning in the fourth century.

### **Disciplines**

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | European History | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

### **Comments**

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance* by Jairus Banaji

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selves side-by-side with local farmers in the Ecuadorian highlands or Bangladeshi lowlands.

One place where *Notes of a Potato Watcher* contributes directly to current historiographical debate is in its depiction of the “Great Hunger” as genocidal in its socioeconomic dimensions. “Ireland’s plight had as much to do with prejudice, free-trade ideology, and land tenure as it did with Malthusian principles,” writes Lang. “Blame the potato, if you must; blame the Irish and their big families. But blame as well how blind self-righteousness can be; blame as well how easily inhumanity cloaks itself in economic theory” (136, 144). In some ways, the argument for the Irish famine as genocide is a return to themes first proposed by the nationalist journalist-historian John Mitchel in *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (1860). Lang’s “neo-nationalist” conclusion is in accord with a number of other retellings of the potato famine story, including Cecil Woodham-Smith’s *The Great Hunger* (1962), Robert Scally’s *End of Hidden Ireland* (1995), Christine Kinealy’s *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (1997), as well as articles published in the mid-1990s by Ed Lengel, John Newsinger, and Hazel Waters.

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*Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance.* By Jairus Banaji. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 286 pp., \$74.00, cloth, ISBN 0-19-924440-5.

Jairus Banaji’s monograph, a revised version of his 1992 Oxford D. Phil. thesis, examines the changing social and economic makeup of the eastern Mediterranean countryside from the third to the seventh century A.D. Combining numismatic, papyrological, literary, and archaeological material with an impressive command of comparative evidence, the author presents a compelling vision of late antique agriculture that differs dramatically from conventional treatments. Scholars typically describe the late-Roman economy as in decline, afflicted by excessive taxation, debased coinage, rampant inflation, and a shortage of labor. Faced with these difficulties, they argue, Roman landowners reverted to more self-sufficient practices and, consequently, levels of monetization fell substantially. Banaji, however, believes that this view owes more to the persistence of Max Weber’s flawed sociological theories than to the evidence. He suggests that, on the contrary, there was a “general economic revival” (3) beginning in the fourth century.

The emperor Constantine initiated this revival by creating a stable gold currency around 311 A.D. While base-metal coins continued to decline in value, the gold coinage remained strong. Those with the power to insist on payment in gold—the bureaucracy and the military—were, therefore, insulated from the effects of what Banaji calls “stratified inflation” (37). The gold *solidus* became the “mass currency” (38) of the Roman world, used not just for large commercial transactions but even for agricultural wages.

In the fifth century a new elite class, well positioned to exploit the opportunities afforded by this stable currency, emerged from the imperial bureaucracy and transformed the countryside. The late antique aristocrat, personally involved in the day-to-day management of his or her estates, invested in capital improvements, intensified cultivation, developed new “estate villages” (188), and sought profits, not merely self-sufficiency. As a result, the countryside became more prosperous, rural settlement grew, the use of wage labor increased, and the Mediterranean world achieved “historically unprecedented levels of monetization and monetary expansion” (213).

Though in most respects clearly written and argued, Banaji’s text does occasionally get bogged down in a mass of detail. Chapter three, an extensive treatment of the Roman monetary system, will challenge those unfamiliar with Roman numismatics (and probably disturb a number of numismatists as well). Chapters five and six, which chart the fortunes of the aristocracy over the course of five hundred years, are also rather heavy going. Readers unfamiliar with Greek and Latin will often need to consult the fairly comprehensive glossary in order to make sense of the shifting array of ranks and titles employed by the upper class. Nevertheless, Banaji compensates for these difficulties with frequent translations, summaries of complex arguments, and three appendices. This well-produced volume provides a nuanced and generally convincing portrait of rural life in late antiquity, although, due to the nature of the available evidence, the Egyptian perspective tends to dominate.

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*Canning Gold: Northern New England’s Sweet Corn Industry.* By Paul B. Frederic. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002. 222 pp., \$60.00 hardback, ISBN 0-7618-2199-6.

Since its expansion in the late nineteenth century vegetable canning has been a significant aspect of the nation’s food-processing sector. The industry has provided economic opportunities for growers and cannery employees, and its