

***The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy***  
**Edited by Walter Scheidel (Stanford University)**  
**Cambridge University Press**

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## Rationale and structure

The new *Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World (CEHGRW)*, published in 2007, follows the tradition of other ‘Cambridge Histories’ in adopting a largely chronological framework: most chapters deal with clearly defined periods, or even more narrowly with specific periods in the history of clearly demarcated regions. The opening section offers five thematic chapters which focus on issues that are – to varying but always significant degrees – extraneous to economic activity per se: features such as climate, flora and fauna, demographic regimes, family structure, cultural institutions, and the stock of knowledge (as expressed in technology) primarily represent contextual preconditions for economic development. These chapters do not explore different sectors and properties of the economy per se.

However, a more thematic framework has a long tradition in the study of Greco-Roman economies, most notably in Moses Finley’s famous *Ancient Economy*, which deals with major institutions across different periods and locations. Because his approach entails the risk of creating a potentially misleading impression of an ‘ancient economy’ as a homogeneous whole, this volume will more narrowly deal with economic developments in the Roman world only, and give due weight to regional and temporal diversity, contrasts, and change within this period and region.

In principle, the study of ancient economies requires modern observers to adopt both approaches: chronological and regional differentiation (as in *CEHGRW*), **and** a thematic focus on key sectors and features of the economic systems. In practice, this objective is difficult to accomplish in the context of a single book project because of concerns about length and overlap. Under these circumstances, separate but deliberately complementary projects may be the only viable solution: the *CEHGRW*, as a comprehensive and up-to-date sequential account of economic development in specific periods and places, now provides a strong background for a shorter and somewhat more selective collection of discussions that focus on key topics and problems. Inevitably, these studies will differ quite considerably from most chapters in *CEHGRW*: while the latter were designed to condense a large amount of factual information and scholarly debates into solid ‘building blocks’ meant to add up to a coherent chronological survey of economic development in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean, the former will be more discursive and interpretive in character, in part because their more transcendent perspective encourages and indeed requires what one might call a ‘lighter touch’ and a stronger emphasis on comparison and interpretation, and in part because none of the authors can be expected to be an expert on a particular topic for every period and region of the Roman world (unlike *CEHGRW* authors who were able to deal with their primary area of chronological and/or geographical specialization).

This approach will not, and indeed cannot, result in another ‘history’ of ancient Mediterranean economies comparable to *CEHGRW*. Instead, it will create a collection of thematically interconnected studies of particularly salient features of these economic systems. The *Cambridge Companion* series offers a suitable format for this approach. Taken together, these studies will ‘accompany’ – and thereby complement – the more traditionally organized *CEHGRW* by identifying and exploring key themes that were previously subsumed within numerous much more narrowly regionally and chronologically constricted chapter-length surveys. If we envision the passing of time as a movement along a vertical axis, *CEHGRW* can be said to proceed in a ‘vertical’ fashion (from earlier to later) whereas the new *Companion* provides a ‘horizontal’ perspective, cutting across periods in search for unifying concepts and comparative standards of historical interpretation. Moreover, from this alternative perspective, the authors will be able to engage in a dialogue with *CEHGRW*.

The selection of topics is guided by a deliberate focus on the defining characteristics of the Roman economy, driven by the question “What makes the Roman economy ‘Roman’?” (in the sense of historically specific, notable, and significant relative to other pre-modern economies). This approach shapes the boundaries of the individual chapters. For instance, in addition to a chapter juxtaposing rival interpretations of Roman ‘trade’, different types of exchange will be discussed under a variety of headings: commercial exchange in the chapter on urbanism and division of labor; logistic conditions in the chapter on transportation; non-reciprocal flows in the chapter on predation. Owing the lack of tangible evidence and hence discernible historical specificity, some of the most fundamental features of early economies – such as smallholder farming and local exchange – will not receive separate chapters at all. Instead, contributors will concentrate on features that are both better documented and in important ways peculiar to the Roman economy (as opposed to other pre-modern systems), such as rationally organized slave labor and certain forms of wage labor and tenancy arrangements; the scale and organization of manufacturing; levels of monetization; or the economic dimension of military activity. All this will be explained in the editor’s introduction.

In an opening section on theory, the contributors will assess the nature and impact of ancient economic thinking and the potential contribution of formal Economics to the study of the ancient world, illustrated by a closer look at the role of human capital. The most substantial section, on producing and distributing, deals with the vital issues of natural resources and the sources of energy (still a much-neglected topic in ancient economic history); food production; the production of consumer durables; the logistics of economic exchange; and the pivotal role of cities in creating markets and fostering division of labor, which are critical determinants of economic development. The second section covers the relationship between state formation and economic development, a crucial linkage that merits greater attention than it usually receives among ancient historians: following the lead of scholarship on more recent societies, the contributors will assess the economic dimension of war-making, patterns of fiscal regimes, and the impact of coined money and other financial instruments. A section on labor markets deals with the quintessentially Roman institution of chattel slavery and the spectrum of contractual labor relations from farm-tenancy to wage labor. The chapter on wellbeing considers physiological markers of economic performance. The volume concludes with an outlook beyond the Roman period.

### **Format and schedule**

400 pages

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