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Book Review

The Economy of Pompeii

Edited by Miko Flohr and Andrew Wilson (Oxford Studies on the Roman Economy). Pp. xviii + 433. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017. \$150. ISBN 978-0-19-878657-3 (cloth).

Reviewed by [Ray Laurence](#)

This volume, the 12th in the series Oxford Studies on the Roman Economy, derives from a conference held in Oxford in 2012 and seeks to connect ongoing work in Pompeii to ongoing debates in Roman economic history with a view to reigniting the debate over whether individual cities can contribute to our understanding of the Roman economy (rejected by Jongman in the book's closing discussion). The book is divided into four broad sections that define its scope: "City and Hinterland," "Quality of Life," "Economic Life and Its Contexts," and "Money and Trade." In addition, there is closing discussion by Jongman and an introduction by the editors.

The introduction, in which the editors chart "a century of scholarly debate" (6–8) on the Pompeian economy, reveals many of the tensions in the book and some of its shortcomings. For them, the scholarship begins with Tenney Frank in 1918, who is followed by more recent scholars (including Jashemski, Curtis, Mayeske, and Moeller), through Maiuri in the Italian context, onward to the editors' triumvirate of Jongman, Wallace-Hadrill, and Laurence. There is a major omission here, though—Rostovtzeff, a key focus for Jongman's closing discussion. However, for the newcomer to the subject, the editors never actually define what the debate was about or how the debate stimulated further analysis and analytical fieldwork in Pompeii.

There is another omission from the introduction: how were excavations at Pompeii carried out to reveal (or not to reveal) evidence for economic history? In other words, was the economy a focus for excavators—not just Maiuri, but as far back as Spinazzola and Fiorelli and even into the present day? This omission is matched by another: how should we compare the Pompeian evidence (with its unique qualities and defects) with sites with quite different archaeological processes of deposition? As the editors conclude, "It is only to be hoped that future work on the economic history of specific cities will enable the scholarly community to compare the 'local' outcomes of these large historical processes in a more informed way" (16).

A key problem for the book is how the work by Pompeianists integrates with the preoccupations of scholars working on the economy. Rowan, drawing on her D.Phil. research (Oxford) on the bioarchaeological remains of the sewer from Cardo V in Herculaneum, provides plenty of data but does not really attempt to make comparisons to other sites. However, importantly, she sees a change in the diet of Pompeians with a greater variety of foodstuffs consumed by 79 C.E. Lazer observes that the stature of Pompeians was similar to that found in other skeletal samples from Roman Italy, perhaps causing us to consider Pompeii as a possible proxy for other cities. Poehler's data-rich chapter argues that social activity has shaped the data that may be used to define the economy, but it is difficult, or even impossible, to distinguish the 10 shades of gray in his maps to be able to use his data and his findings.

The economic significance of one or more earthquakes in the 60s C.E. is raised by Monteix, who posits a need to view Pompeii as having "a recuperation capacity" and as a place to study "urban resilience" (212)—factors that cause difficulty integrating Pompeii into the norms and expectations for the Roman economy found, for example, in the editors' introduction or in Jongman's closing discussion. Esposito sees the effects of the earthquakes in terms of the quality of frescoes produced and the need to produce a greater quantity of wall decoration following the earthquakes and, importantly, argues that painting should be seen as a form of urban production consumed by all classes across Pompeii.

Pompeii is a site that, in recent years, has been subjected to ever more refined mapping and quantification, as we see here in discussions of coins (Ellis, Hobbs), doorways (Poehler), dolia (Monteix), consumption in the House of Menander (Ray), and agricultural capacity (de Simone), and in Flohr's chapter entitled "Quantifying

Pompeii: Population, Inequality, and the Urban Economy.” Yet there are clear limits to what can be quantified, and this deserves further discussion.

With Flohr, we step into a world of Pompeian knowns and unknowns, the latter including the population, the part of the city above the ground floor that was sliced apart by volcanic processes, property divisions, the unexcavated part of the city, the suburbs just beyond the city walls, and more. Flohr’s ingenious solutions create a high and low count for the population from the material remains of the city. Reading the graphs and statistics, I was struck by how we may equate the presence of the peristyle at the top end of the rank size as “elite,” but perhaps this may define the elite more broadly than the small demographic percentage assumed by most Roman historians. Thus, it may include the elite and those who were in a position to become part of the elite for a generation or more. Would renting a house with a peristyle allow you to gain a higher status?

Equally, who exactly were part of this “elite”? Robinson links the interpretation of results from Insula VI.1 to the elite of the literary landscape of Cicero’s *De Officiis* and other key texts, but to do so it is necessary to ignore the distance between practice and representation. The elite might include or exclude—among others—decurions, freed slaves, priestesses, or veterans. However, my own sense of the definition of the elite found in the chapters of this book is that it corresponds to the sum of interactions between the few (however defined) and the many, a process that produced the measurable inequalities that we can find within the material remains at Pompeii. Thus, although Ellis later in the book may identify Insulae VIII.7 and I.1 as “sub-elite” (300) because of the absence of atria, it is possible or even probable that it was the elite who funded or created the urbanism of the subelite.

Research on Pompeii has tended to complicate matters for the wider Roman economy, even in relationship to coins—the “preferred monetary instrument of the Roman world” (365). Ellis establishes the association between coin finds and construction, which we should view as a form of production, rather than associating coins with trade associated with shops. Importantly, he dates this building boom to the Augustan period, rather than after the earthquakes. Thus, these coins, representing 10% of total circulation for Verboven, are derived from contexts that are not related to trade per se, which is so often the focus of debates about coin circulation. Moreover, as both Ellis and Hobbs remind us, more than 20% of coin finds may be so corroded that they are illegible, which presents us with a quantifiable absence of knowledge.

Given the book’s title, those interested in economic history will be drawn to it, and that may bring Pompeii into further dialogue with this interest group. The editors’ view that Pompeii was prosperous will not be surprising to Pompeianists, because it depends on already-known facts combined with developments in archaeological science in relation to the aging of skeletons (discussed by Lazer). For Pompeianists, the book brings together high-quality work that adds to the publications associated with these scholars. I am not sure, though, that the book altered my view of the city’s economy. While the papers are all of good quality, the volume does not entirely gel together and is very much ongoing, rather than shifting debates to a new position or reigniting debate. I suspect many papers will be read individually online, where the absence of color illustrations is an impediment to the reader, as it is in the print version at \$150.

There is a logic to publishing this book: assemble a cast of scholars whose work on Pompeii is already well known through publications, bring them to Oxford to discuss the topic over two days in 2012, and then have them write up their papers for a book published in 2017. This may be a function of the [Oxford Roman Economy Project](#), with its aims firmly tied to a publication series, along with maintaining databases and a looser constellation of scholars working in the area. After publication, the book is purchased by university libraries and individuals and will appear in reading lists for undergraduate and postgraduate courses on Pompeii and the Roman economy—although its usefulness for undergraduate courses seems less certain.

Overall, these are good papers and well worth reading for their individual content or as a collection of papers, but it will also be worth delving deeper into the more substantial publications and theses of these authors, and in the words of the editors, “there are still many roads that can and need to be explored further” (12).

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