

Regionalisation and the Integration of the Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity

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Abstracts

John Weisweiler, Cambridge: The Economics of Integration. Resident Aristocrats, Absent Emperors and the Roman Food Supply

In the fourth century, each year more than hundred thousand inhabitants of Rome received free rations of bread, olive oil and pork from the imperial state. The Roman food supply was the largest redistributive network in the Mediterranean world.

Recent studies by (amongst others) Jean-Michel Carrié, Boudewijn Sirks, Peter Herz and Domenico Vera have greatly deepened our understanding of the institutional operations of the Roman *annona*. In particular, they have elucidated the complex interplay between fiscal extractions and private commerce through which the means of subsistence for the Roman population were procured.

This paper seeks to shift attention from the administrative workings of the *annona*, exemplarily analysed in these studies, to the matrix of social relationship generated by this redistributive network. As a case study, it focuses on the impact of the food supply on the social world in which the leading members of the Roman senate lived.

Most of the grain, oil and pork distributed to the Roman populace came from the arch of lands stretching from central and southern Italy through Sicily to North Africa. Senators resident in Rome were the largest landowners and most important office-holders in these regions. The food supply network not only made a crucial contribution to the effective exploitation of their distant estates. It also enabled Roman aristocrats to establish profitable social, economic and cultural links with the professional associations responsible for the extraction, transport and processing of the foodstuffs distributed in Rome.

Collusion between aristocratic office-holders and the businessmen involved in the supply network sometimes threatened the supply of affordable foodstuffs in Rome. It also offered manifold opportunities for profiteering to the detriment of subject populations. But the frequent manipulation of the system by élites and sub-élites should not be taken as symptom of a loss of control by the institutions of the imperial state. Like in the Early Empire, so also in Late Antiquity emperors deliberately used the food supply system to reward office-holders and grain traders. Excessive forms of profiteering were prevented by the constant threat of violence by the Roman populace. The food supply enabled emperors not only to assert their continued patronage over the inhabitants of the imperial city. It also allowed them to tie élites and sub-élites in Italy and Africa closely to the imperial system.

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