

Verboven, Koenraad; Laes, Christian (Hrsg.): *Work, Labour, and Professions in the Roman World*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2016. ISBN: 9789004331655; XV, 353 S.

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The topic of economic performance has become a key issue in scholarship on the Roman economy. One group of scholars uses archaeological (proxy-)data to investigate whether the Roman period witnessed per capita economic growth, and how sustained and widespread such growth may have been. Some indeed argue that such moderate growth occurred. Another group of scholars has turned to New Institutional Economics (NIE) to highlight the role of social institutions, both formal (laws and regulations) and informal (conventions and customs) in setting transaction costs and hence promoting or inhibiting economic growth.¹ Drawing on NIE, it has been argued that the primary focus of imperial institutions on tax extraction (rather than on stimulating trade as such) and the reliance on personal networks in trade relations limited the degree of integration and development of the Roman economy.²

The papers in „*Work, Labour, and Professions in the Roman World*“ add to this second line of scholarship. The volume arises from the Ghent/Brussels research centre „Structure and determinants of economic performance in the Roman World“ that aims to „unravel the driving forces behind the long-term development of Roman economic performance“ (p. vii). As the editors Verboven and Laes point out in the preface, the volume focuses on „how Romans were able to mobilize, train and direct human efforts“ (p. viii). They regard NIE as a tool that „makes work of social, cultural and economic historians and archaeologists relevant for one another and allows for more realistic, embedded views on the economy as part of society“ (p. vii).

The well-edited volume contains a preface, single bibliography and indices for persons, places and subjects. Its main body consists of 13 chapters that draw on ideas from NIE – some more explicit than others – to discuss organisational aspects of labour. Whilst the papers

are not strictly ordered as such, there are three main themes they engage with: the diversity of labour and the labour market (mainly discussed in chapters 1 to 6); the social context of production and the identity and status of producers (chapters 7, 8, 11 and 12); and the role of *collegia*, especially in reducing transaction costs (chapters 9 and 10).

The editors introduce the terminology related to work and labour and theories on labour systems in the first chapter. Studying work means studying how past societies conceptualised efforts as work, how they mobilized labour and organised cooperation – and how all this affected economic performance and social organisation. As do several other papers, they rightly stress that the focus on coerced (slave) labour in the dominant Weberian/Finleyan and Neo-Marxist frameworks has obscured the fact that most labour was provided in different ways. By contrast, neoclassical economic theory, NIE and recent work within the broader field of European social history highlight the flexible nature of labour provisioning. Thus, Zuiderhoek argues that in Roman Asia Minor, the fragmented and underdeveloped nature of wage labour markets, where skilled labour was rare and transaction costs high, forced both households and cities to employ dependent and semi-dependent types of labour. Equally, Hawkins argues that labour markets were tight and transaction costs high as employers could not rely on relational contracts based on reputation and social sanctions to enforce wage labour contracts. Hence, workshops mainly operated with permanent skilled slave-labour, even though demand was volatile and employing slave labour could lead to seasonal underemployment. Bernard, by contrast, argues that the building industry in Rome depended mainly on temporary wage labourers with different levels of skill and different wages, but also with different soci-

¹ Douglas North, *Structure and Change in Economic History*, New York 1981.

² Bruce Frier / Dennis Kehoe, *Law and Economic Institutions*, in: Walter Scheidel / Ian Morris / Richard Saller (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 132–134; Peter Bang, *The Roman Bazaar. A Comparative Study of Trade and Markets in a Tributary Empire*, Cambridge 2008.

al statuses. A thoughtful analysis of Diocletian's Price edict by Groen Vallinga and Tacoma equally suggests that wages varied according to the level of skill, and that urban wages in general are higher than rural wages. Interestingly, they suggest that the variability in wages implies that skilled wage labourers could indeed attain fairly high standards of living. On the other hand, low-wage tasks could be considered as additions to family incomes that (especially for farmers) also drew on child and female labour. Holleran analyses how information would have spread through the wage labour market: oral advertisements and congregations would mainly be used to acquire short-term labour, while social networks (migrant communities, neighbourhoods and *collegia*) and clientelism were more likely important in establishing longer-term labour contracts.

The theme of labour identity formation is addressed from diverse perspectives. Chapters by Tran and Lis & Soly discuss literary and epigraphic sources to show that skilled labour was indeed a source of respect and status in the Roman World. This positive (self-)representation in antiquity stands in stark contrast with attitudes to labour in the Middle ages, when the dominance of Christian ethics made the use of material culture for work-related identity-building unacceptable. In a study of mint workers, Bond shows that the social status of labourers also changed through time in response to the changing spatial organisation of mints and the desire to control minting activities. Chapters by Murphy and Flohr focus on workshops and manufactories. Flohr assesses professional identity formation in light of the intensity and frequency of interactions within workgroups, with customers and wider urban communities. Workers in *tabernae* and, to a lesser extent, medium-sized domestic workshops would, in contrast to labourers in large manufactories, have had ample possibilities to develop a professional identity. Murphy (in the only archaeological paper) uses excavation data from pottery production sites to show that both within a seemingly uniform industry (such as terra sigillata production) and within the individual workshop, workgroups could regularly be reorganised, even

within short periods of time. These observations form a welcome reminder of the complexity and dynamics of labour organisation.

The third theme, the role of *collegia* as political and economic institutions, is addressed by Verboven and Liu. Verboven argues that considering their size, a substantial proportion of the urban population was involved in crafts. Membership was beneficial in providing a social network and obtaining contracts, but while larger *collegia* (*dendrophori*, *centonarii* and *fabri*) attained importance in local urban organisation and had direct ties to the imperial court, smaller *collegia* might only have functioned to allocate corvée and taxes. Liu then proceeds with a critical evaluation of the role of *collegia* in lowering transaction costs. She stresses that *collegia* were also mechanisms of exclusion, and membership could also have high costs without secure benefits: they needed considerable resources in order to function, and especially the smaller ones could disappear because of mismanagement and economic downturn. Membership of other networks could be equally beneficial, especially if one attained a position as broker between such networks and *collegia*. Liu therefore rightly urges for caution in attributing *collegia* a role in lowering transaction costs.

The written sources and epigraphic data that many of the papers draw upon is fragmentary; hence some chapters draw conclusions that are not unlikely, but also not strongly supported by the evidence (as for example Holleran acknowledges). In some cases, the nature of the evidence also leads to different evaluations: where Hawkins considers apprenticeships as rare because of high opportunity costs, Tran and Liu seem to suggest they were more common; Flohr's generalising comments regarding the identity formation of labourers in larger manufactories sit uncomfortably with Murphy's more nuanced discussion of the archaeologically attested variability of labour organisation; and finally, whereas Zuiderhoek and Hawkins suggest that labour markets were underdeveloped, other papers assume a larger and more varied wage labour market. One can think of good explanations for such apparently contrasting evaluations: regional and chronological variations in socio-economic and demographic conditions

could lead to different types of demand for labour and hence different forms of labour mobilisation and training (Rome should not be expected to operate in the same way as cities in Asia Minor). To clarify such differential assessments and outline the implications and potential for further work, a concluding section would have been useful. In light of this, a particular issue to be addressed more fully is the confrontation of written sources and epigraphy with archaeological evidence: as the editors stress, it is this interdisciplinary dialogue that makes NIE particularly useful. Especially at the firm level, archaeological evidence holds considerable potential for better understanding labour organisation and its implications.

That being said, the limitations of the evidence are recognised in many of the papers, and as a whole the volume clearly illustrates the potential and limitations of NIE as a complementary perspective on the Roman economy. The papers highlight the variability of labour forms employed, and how firms, social networks and administrative institutions affected the organisation of labour. As such, the volume advocates more nuanced understandings of how social contexts affected economic performance – without necessarily ascribing a positive role to social institutions in lowering transaction costs. Chapters such as that by Liu show a healthy critical attitude in pointing out that with the available evidence we simply cannot say if institutions such as *collegia* actually lowered transaction costs and stimulated the economy. Rather, the importance of NIE and the focus on the social context of labour is „[...] more indirect: to provide a richer account of how the ancient economy worked, what strains are likely to have affected its operation, and the ways in which ancient institutions were contrived in response to the strains.”³ In this sense, this collection of essays forms a welcome addition to the scholarly debate.

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³Frier / Kehoe 2007, p. 142.