

The Economy of the Later Roman Province of Third Palestine



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THE ECONOMY OF THE
LATER ROMAN PROVINCE
OF THIRD PALESTINE

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Cover: Mosaic depicting a man with an amphora, in the north aisle of the Byzantine Church at Petra, Jordan. Image credit: Bronwyn Douglas, Petra Church Project collection, © American Center of Research Digital Archive (ACOR).

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Preface

Though I did not know it at the time, the genesis for this book began in 1998. I was a young engineering major at NC State and headed for Aqaba, Jordan (ancient Aila) for my first archaeological dig which was directed by Tom Parker. Though I was nervous about the trip, I quickly developed an appreciation for Jordan's people, history, and culture. When I returned home, I immediately changed majors and became one of Tom Parker's students. Tom Parker's mentorship was instrumental in my success as a graduate student at NC State. He instilled in me a deep interest in economic history, which has continued to this day. For my MA thesis, I wrote on the Roman Red Sea ports, of which Aila was one. When I went to UCLA, I wanted to explore new topics, but ended up returning to the history of ancient Jordan for my dissertation which I completed in 2008. Some of the material in this book, especially chapters two, four, five, and six were discussed extensively in that dissertation.

However, none of the economic material from my dissertation appeared in my first book, *The Mirage of the Saracen: Christians and Nomads in the Sinai Peninsula in Late Antiquity* (2015, University of California Press), or in my second book, *Near Eastern Cities from Alexander to the Successors of Muhammad* (2009, Routledge). I continued to do research on the economic history of the province of Third Palestine through the years, eventually realizing that I had enough material to constitute another book project. But, most importantly, I realized that I could make a contribution, however minor, to how scholars thought about the economy of the Roman and Byzantine Near East. As I read the theoretical work on the subject, I realized that our understandings of the economy of the Near East had become ossified and had grown distant from the scholarship about the ancient economy from other regions of the Roman Empire. At the same time, I came to believe that much of the work in mainstream Roman economic studies had gotten too far from the data that our archaeological and literary sources provide. In returning to the work I had done on the economy of Third Palestine, I hoped to use the evidence that I had collected to demonstrate my issues with the debate about the ancient economy and the methods that were being employed to study it. I will let the reader decide if I succeeded in this task.

I owe so much to the scholars who came before me and helped me along this path. I benefited from the experience of so many people, including: Leigh Ann Bedal, Hans Bernard, Lucy Blue, Kristoffer Daamgard, Benjamin Dolinka, Susan Downey, John Cooper, Tali Erickson-Gini, Zbigniew Fiema, Traianos Gagos, Susan Gelb, Kenneth Holum, Nicholas Hudson, Pamela Koulianos, Mary Mattocks, Burton MacDonald, Ron Mellor, Ahmed al-Momani, John Oleson, S. Thomas Parker, Megan Perry, David Philips, Barbara Porter, Tim Power, Steven Sidebotham, Jennifer Ramsay, Claudia Rapp, Andrew Smith II, Roberta Tomber, Ross Ian Thomas, Frank Trombley, Chris Tuttle, Bert de Vries, Willeke Wendrich, Sarah Wenner Maximuk, and Yvonne Gerber. Thanks to my department and UAB for granting me a semester sabbatical to finish this book. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions. Any mistakes are my own, and if I have forgotten someone, I am truly sorry.

I want to give special thanks to my family: Shay McKay, you are such a loving inspiration for me every day. Our kids: Agatha, Nico, Elowen, Ruby, and Ansel are proving to be such

wonderful people as they mature. To my mom, Don, and Amy, thank you for everything! Rush and Linda, thanks for accepting me into your family.

Finally, I want to dedicate this book to my late mentor, S. Thomas Parker. Without his guidance, I would not be where I am today. I know that he improved so many peoples' lives, and I try to be a mentor in his image – full of encouragement, joy, and, when necessary, toughness!

Chapter 1: Introduction

When the nun Egeria visited the Sinai Peninsula in the late fourth century AD, she noted that the land was too rocky to produce food.¹ Understandably, she was amazed at the paradox that gardens and orchards flourished around Mount Sinai.² She watched as monks tended these gardens and was convinced that their diligent work had overcome the cruel and inhospitable nature of the Sinai Peninsula. Other authors agreed with Egeria's initial impression about the lack of agricultural productiveness of the soil in the region. For example, the sixth century author Procopius noted that 'in the place previously called Arabia, but now called Third Palestine, desert stretches to a great extent, bearing neither fruit nor water nor anything good.'³ As agriculture was the heart of the ancient economy, Procopius was essentially declaring that the province of Third Palestine was worthless.⁴

The province of Third Palestine was created sometime in the late fourth century AD from regions that had previously been part of the Roman provinces Palaestina and Arabia.⁵ The province spans portions of three modern nations in the Middle East – the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, the Negev desert in Israel, and Jordan south of the Wadi al-Hasa.⁶ The boundaries of this province were created with due attention to the province's geography and underlying economic reality. As noted by both Egeria and Procopius, large scale agriculture could not be practiced in much of Third Palestine due to a lack of rainfall and water resources; however, just as Egeria states that monastic diligence allowed agricultural production in the Sinai, unique adaptations were developed in Third Palestine which allowed for the cultivation of crops in *wadis* (dry ravines) using flash floods or springs as the primary source of water.

Other than Egeria's description of the Sinai monastic gardeners, no ancient literary source describes or even mentions these gardens or fields; nevertheless, we know much about them from archaeology and papyri. Late antique agricultural installations are found throughout Third Palestine. Israeli archaeologists first examined these systems in the Negev, and more recently work in southern Jordan has increased our knowledge of these installations (Zohary 1954; Lavento *et al.* 2004; Oleson 2010: 363-492; Driessen and Abudana 2018). Furthermore, the Nessana and Petra papyri provide information on the productivity, ownership, and tax burden of fields around Nessana and Petra (Mayerson 1962; Nasarat *et al.* 2012; Nasarat 2019). These agricultural systems allowed for the creation of complex sedentary communities beginning in the Nabataean period with agricultural production and urbanism reaching its

¹ Egeria 3.6, 'Nam cum ipse mons sanctus Syna totus petrinus sit, ita ut nec fructicem habeat...'

² Egeria 3.6, '...id est de pomis quae in ipso monte nascuntur... statim sancti monachi pro diligentia sua arbusculas ponunt et ompariola instituunt vel arationes et iuxta ibi monasteria, quasi ex ipsius montis terra aliquos fructus capiant, quos tamen minibus suis elaborasse videantur.'

³ Procopius, *De aedificiis* 5.8.1. 'Ἐν δὲ τῇ πάλαι μὲν Ἀραβίᾳ, νῦν δὲ Παλαιστίνῃ τρίτῃ καλουμένῃ, χώρα μὲν ἔρημος ἐπὶ μακρὸν κατατείνει, καρπῶν τε καὶ ὕδατων καὶ πάντων ἀγαθῶν ἄφορος.

⁴ See Greene 1986: 67-97; Horden and Purcell 2000: 175-298 on the importance of agriculture to the ancient economy; See Decker 2011 for the most exhaustive analysis of agriculture in the late antique Near East.

⁵ Sipilä 2009: 166-190; Ward 2012; Di Segni 2018. The exact date of the creation of the province is unknown, but it occurred sometime in the late fourth century after a series of obscure provincial reorganizations.

⁶ The Karak Plateau was added to Third Palestine in the sixth century (Stephanus Byzantinus, *Ethnika*, 26).

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Figure 1-1. Topography of Third Palestine (Map by Amy Nicole Woods, GISP and Walter Ward)

apex during late antiquity when these regions were administered as the province of Third Palestine (Erickson-Gini 2012; Ramsay and Smith 2013).

While towns flourished in the Negev and southern Jordan in late antiquity, pastoralist groups also lived in the region. These groups relied on animal husbandry and the production of animal products for survival, often supplementing their diet with provisions from sedentary communities acquired through trade, coercion, and occasionally violence. Some members of these pastoralist groups were also related to or married to people in the settled communities, with some so-called nomads even living within the towns and villages. Many studies have demonstrated the complex political, cultural, and social relationships between the pastoralist and sedentary communities which have revealed that there was not a strict dichotomy between these two groups (Ward 2015a: 19-41, 111-114). In this book, I will focus only on the role that the pastoralists played in the economy of the province, instead of investigating their social, cultural, religious and political impacts.

Just as pastoralist groups exploited a unique economic niche, hermits and monks were drawn to Third Palestine precisely because of its arid environment in order to seek the solitude of the desert. The Sinai was home to the largest and most important concentrations of monastic communities in Third Palestine at Mount Sinai, Raithou, and Pharan, but monastic communities could be found throughout the Negev and southern Jordan. Individual, isolated cells can be seen in Petra and in other regions of southern Jordan, and larger monastic settlements are known from the Negev, including Saint George's near Shivta and urban monastic centers in Nessana. Lot's Cave and Jebel Haroun in southern Jordan also attracted monastic communities and served as pilgrimage destinations (Figueras 1995; 2013; 2007; Politis 2001; Ward 2015a: 47-55).

Pilgrims, like Egeria, visited Third Palestine seeking spiritual riches. They sought to encounter the living truth of the gospel through direct connection with the holy men of the desert and to understand the written word of the Bible by experiencing the sites associated with Biblical events (Ward 2015a: 42-91). While in the region, pilgrims contributed substantially to economic activity in Third Palestine. The communities of Third Palestine took advantage of these new opportunities by providing lodging, food, drink, souvenirs, and guides. Pilgrims even developed a taste for the wine of Third Palestine, which was exported through Gaza to the rest of the Mediterranean World (Kingsley 2001; Pieri 2005).

Pilgrims traveled to the Sinai via the same routes through which international and interregional exchange flowed, and Third Palestine was the hub of international exchange with the communities of the Red Sea, Indian Ocean and Arabian Peninsula. Aila, located at the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, appears as a major port in the literary sources beginning in the late third century or early fourth century AD (Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 6). Later, in the fourth century, a unique amphora type began to be produced there. This container has been discovered in southern Arabia and Ethiopia, confirming the importance of Aila as a port (Melkawi *et al.* 1994; Tomber 2004: 397-398.). Another port, Iotabe, appears briefly in the literary sources before disappearing in the sixth century (Ward 2007: 163-164). Furthermore, evidence of trade with the Arabian Peninsula, especially with the city of Mecca, appears in the Arabic literary sources which describe the origins of Islam. These Arabian merchants traded for provisions in the

provinces of Third Palestine and Arabia with high quality animal products or purchased goods with silver and gold bullion (Crone 1987).

In addition to international trade, there seems to have been steady traffic between various regions of Third Palestine. The discovery of fish and other sea products, the date trade, and the documents of a small caravan (P. Ness. 89), suggests that commercial exchange was an important component of the economic life of the province. Amphorae (ceramic transport containers) from Gaza and central Palestine have been found in large numbers throughout the Negev along the trade routes which led to Aila. This attests to the shipment of goods to Aila for sale in the Red Sea basin.

By looking at differences in the distribution of amphorae, it appears that each region of Third Palestine developed its economic connections independently. The Kerak Plateau, for example, acquired Palestinian Bag Jars (PBJ) rather than Gaza amphorae. This probably reflects the fact that the production centers of PBJ were much closer than to the Kerak Plateau. Egyptian and the Aila amphorae are not found inland in large numbers, suggesting that both were oriented towards sea rather than land transport.

Ancient cities were the heart of the Roman administration and hubs of control of the hinterland. Agricultural production was regulated by bureaucrats based in the cities, and the elite landowners maintained an urban lifestyle in the late antique Near East even after their equals in the West had largely abandoned city life.⁷ But this is not to say that that cities were not transformed compared to the second century AD. Cities in late antiquity were more likely to produce evidence of commercial or industrial uses.⁸ The best evidence for the increasing role of the city in economic pursuits in Third Palestine comes from the city of Petra, which also happens to be the most well-excavated city in the province. But even here, there is limited archaeological evidence. Additional evidence of the urban economy appears in the Petra and Nessana Papyri. As the hub of imperial and local administration, the cities of Third Palestine were especially important contributors to the ancient economy.

In this book, I have two goals. The first is to gather material related to the economy of Third Palestine. Accomplishing this requires the use of historical information, literary sources, papyri, and most importantly, archaeological evidence. In doing so, I have discovered a rich trove of data elucidating the importance of agriculture, nomadism, interregional and international trade, pilgrimage traffic, and the urban economy. My second goal is to determine the effectiveness of modern attempts to understand the ancient economy using the evidence from Third Palestine. To accomplish this task, I describe, later in this chapter, how modern historians and economists have viewed and modeled the ancient economy. Our journey begins with the 'primitive' model developed by Finley. This model was refined throughout the 1980s and 1990s before being rejected by historians influenced by modern, neo-liberal economic theory. This approach is exemplified by the book series, Oxford Studies on the Roman Economy. As we will see in the conclusion of this book, I believe that the data from Third Palestine rejects neo-liberal interpretations of the ancient economy; however, it is also

⁷ For example, the tax registration office for the fields around Petra and Augustopolis was at Petra (P. Petra 3-5: 19, 25, 50, also see 52).

⁸ On the transformation of the cities of the Near East in late antiquity, see Kennedy 1985, Avni 2011 and 2014. Magness 2003 extends the discussion into the early Islamic period.

clear that the modern dichotomy between a ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ economy is a false one. The economy of Third Palestine, and ancient societies in general, are much more complex than either polarity. For far too long, the debates about the economy of the Near East in late antiquity have focused on this false dichotomy instead of simply describing the economy as our sources present it.

Chapters 2 through 6 describe the evidence in extensive detail. Chapter 2 looks at agriculture and pastoralism. As we will see, things are more complicated than binary opposites, rather, the communities of farmers and pastoralists had porous boundaries and were in many ways connected intimately with each other. This chapter demonstrates the effectiveness of the water catchment systems which allowed the water-poor region to be agriculturally productive. Chapter 3 looks at the urban centers and towns of Third Palestine in more depth. I focus largely on the city of Petra, which was the capital of the province, but use the available evidence from sites such as Aila, Humayma, and the towns of the Negev Desert. In late antiquity, cities elsewhere in the Near East increasingly became the focus of industry, and my goal in this chapter is to determine if this trend can be detected in Third Palestine.

Chapters 4 through 6 investigate economic exchange. I have purposely used the word exchange rather than trade because exchange is more expansive – it includes redistribution by the government and Church in addition to traditional conceptions of commerce. Chapter 4 examines exchange within Third Palestine through the analysis of finds of four types of amphorae and the limited papyrological data attesting to regional exchange. Chapter 5 expands the focus beyond Third Palestine and the later Roman Empire. It examines the role of Third Palestine as a prime facilitator of trade with the Red Sea, Arabian Peninsula, and India. Goods from these regions were conveyed across Third Palestine as were goods from the Roman Empire which were intended for export. I argue that some of the regional exchange described in Chapter 4 is evidence of the transfer of goods to Aila for export. Chapter 6 examines the role of Christian monks and pilgrims on the economy of Third Palestine. Visits by pilgrims stimulated local economies both during their immediate visits and later by seeking exports from the Holy Land in the form of wine.

Geography, settlements, and administration of Third Palestine

Before venturing into modern understandings of the ancient economy, it is important to discuss the geography of Third Palestine.⁹ As suggested by Procopius at the beginning of this chapter, the economic realities of Third Palestine ensured that it was not a typical province. It was situated between two economic and cultural zones, connecting the Arabian Peninsula and the Red Sea to the Mediterranean world, facilitating both commercial and cultural exchange between these regions. (See Figure 1-1)

The province of Third Palestine is now divided between three modern countries, Egypt, Israel, and Jordan. While it is possible to visit all three countries in whichever order one chooses, this journey begins with a drive from Amman to Aqaba along Jordan’s scenic, modern King’s Highway, which essentially follows the ancient route of the Via Nova Traiana. During the spring, the highlands of the Kerak Plateau and Shara highlands sprout with green fields,

⁹ As Holden and Purcell (2000) demonstrated, the Mediterranean is not a uniform climatic zone but made up of dozens of micro-regions. Third Palestine itself can be seen as a discrete micro-region worthy of study.

creating a stark contrast with the almost white desert of the extreme southern portion of modern Jordan. The huge gorges, the Wadi Mujib and Wadi al-Hasa, separate the Kerak Plateau from the rest of Jordan. While these canyons were clearly impediments to travel in the ancient period (as they remain today), two Roman milestones can still be seen along the modern road which descends into the Wadi Mujib. On a clear day, one can barely see the Dead Sea shimmering from the heights of Karak Castle (ancient Charachmoba). At Karak, the road forks. The western path heads down to the Dead Sea to Ghor es-Safi (ancient Zoara). Between Ghor es-Safi and Aqaba (ancient Aila) lies the desolate Wadi Arabah into which dozens of wadis drain the surrounding highlands. The eastern route continues to the rose-colored city of Petra and, later, Aqaba.

Although caravans in the ancient period crossed the Wadi Arabah at many points, today the border is closed from the Dead Sea to the checkpoint between Aqaba and Israeli-controlled Eilat. One can cross from Aqaba to Eilat, and from Eilat, the path forks again. One can follow the Sinai coast (after crossing the Egyptian border) down to the mountainous passes which lead to Mount Sinai, or turn north-west into the Negev desert and towards the Mediterranean Sea.

The Sinai, the Negev, and southern Jordan were integral parts of the Nabataean Kingdom. In AD 106 when the kingdom was annexed by Rome, these regions, along with the Karak Plateau, northern Jordan, and portions of southern (modern) Syria, were incorporated into the Roman province of Arabia (*provincia Arabia*). Under Diocletian, the province of Arabia was divided at the Wadi al-Hasa. The regions south of the Wadi al-Hasa - the Sinai, the Negev, and southern Jordan - were then attached to the province of Palestine. Later in the fourth century, this larger province of Palestine was split. The Sinai, the Negev, and southern Jordan then became the province of Palaestina Salutaris, which later became known as Palaestina Tertia (Third Palestine). During the administrative changes of the fourth century, the Sinai, the Negev, and southern Jordan always remained integrated because of their similar economic conditions, homogeneous population, and shared culture. In the sixth century, the Karak plateau was joined to Third Palestine (Sipilä 2009: 131-210; Ward 2012; Di Segni 2018).

The two most populated areas of Third Palestine included the Negev Desert and the ancient Moab plain which ran from Petra in the south through the Karak Plateau. The most important center in southern Jordan was Petra, but there were a number of other important towns in this region such as at Udhruh (Augustopolis). North of the Wadi al-Hasa on the Kerak Plateau, the largest settlements were Rabbathmoba (later Areopolis) and Charachmoba. South of Petra, the terrain becomes more desert-like as the Shara highlands descend towards the Gulf of Aqaba. Auara (Humayma) was the most important settlement until one came to Aila at the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba.

In the Negev, settlement was largely limited to the region located along the routes from Petra to the Mediterranean Sea. Important towns in this area include Elusa, Nessana, Oboda, Mampsis, Rehovot, and Sobata.¹⁰ The southern Negev desert is principally an arid, desert wasteland bisected by two large erosional craters which hindered movement. The southern desert, therefore, was inhabited only by semi-nomadic or nomadic populations.

¹⁰ Negev 2003; For a more detailed analysis of these towns, see Shereshevski, 1991.

Wadi Arabah, which runs south from the Dead Sea to the Red Sea, lay between these two zones of settlement (Smith 2010a). This geographic feature was formed by the same tectonic rift activity that created the Dead Sea and the Great Rift Valley in Africa. Zoara was located just south of the Dead Sea, and further south were the copper mines at Phaino (Wadi Faynan). Beyond this, there were small stations which facilitated the crossing of the Wadi Arabah such as Bir Madhkur (Smith 2005). Finally, Aila lay at the end of the Wadi Arabah on the edge of the Red Sea. The island Iotabe was located somewhere south of Aila, perhaps at the island known as Jazirat al-Firaun or near the straits of Tiran.

Settlement in the Sinai was concentrated in the southern mountainous regions. Between the coastal plain and the southern Sinai lies the waterless desert of Tih (also known as the Sinai Plateau). Pharan was the only town of any size in the Sinai, and it may have owed its existence to nearby mineral deposits. There were also a few smaller settlements, such as Dahab on the eastern coast of the Sinai (Meshel 2000b). Monastic communities at Mount Sinai, Raithou, and scattered throughout the mountains flourished in this period.

We have three sixth-century lists of towns and cities for Third Palestine. Stephanus's *Ethnika* (mid-sixth century?) describes Arindela (Gharandal?, unlocated), Elusa, Petra, Areopolis and Charachmoba as cities and Adara (Augustopolis/Udhruh) as a 'large village.'¹¹ The geographers, Hierocles (pre-535) and Georgius Cyprius (end of the sixth) include additional sites as cities such as Augustopolis, Zoara, Mampsis, Bitarous (Betthoros? – modern Lejjun?), Berosaba, Aila, Pentakomia, Mampsira, Metrokomia, and Salton Hieratikon.¹²

The distinction between a city (*polis*) and a village (*kome*) was important for the imperial administration. As was the custom throughout the Near East, villages were placed under the control of a city. Although the surviving evidence is extremely patchy, it is clear from the Nessana Papyri that Nessana was a village under the control of Elusa.¹³ P. Nessana 24 (3-4) demonstrates that whenever a sale of land was conducted, the sale was reported to a logographer at Elusa. In another document, P. Nessana 29, dated to 590, a soldier was summoned to appear at a court in Elusa. The summons (παράγγελιάς) was issued at Elusa (P. Ness. 29.3-4).

The references to Elusa as a center of provincial administration in the Nessana Papyri led many scholars to believe that Elusa was the capital of Palaestina Tertia, but they misinterpreted the administrative control of a city over a village (Brünnnow and Domaszewski 1909: 277-278; Casson 1952; Kraemer 1958: 29; Gutwein 1981: 13; Dan 1982: 136-137). This type of administrative control is also seen in the documents of the Petra Papyri, as the tax officials at Petra were also in charge of tax collection at Augustopolis (which was called a village by Stephanus).¹⁴ Petra, however, was the capital of Third Palestine and was the residence of the governor. Petra holds

¹¹ Stephanus Byzantinus, *Ethnika*, 26.

¹² Hierocles, *Synecdemus* 721.1-11. He lists the cities of Third Palestine as: Petra, Augustopolis, Arindela, Charachmoba, Areopolis, Zoara, Mampsis, Bitarous (Betthoros?), Elusa, and Salton. Georgius Cyprius, *Descriptio orbis Romani* 1043-1057 lists Petra, Augustopolis, Arindela, Charachmoba, Areopolis, Mampsis, Elusa, Zoara, Berosaba (Beersheva?), Aila, Pentakomia, Mampsira, Metrokomia, and Salton Hieratikon.

¹³ See, for example, P. Nessana 24.2. κώμη Νεσσάνοις ὀρίου πόλεως Ἐλούσης. This papyrus, dated to November 26, 569 preserves the entire formula.

¹⁴ These requests address the 'present and future tax collectors of the metropolis [Petra] and the districts around Augustopolis.' See for example, P. Petra 19; Nasarat 2019: 54-55.

the primacy in the municipal lists of Hierocles and Georgius Cyprus and is called a metropolis by Georgius Cyprus.¹⁵ In the Petra Papyri, it is proudly declared the ‘Hadriana metrocolonia and metropolis of Third Palestine Salutaris.’¹⁶

The lists by Hierocles and Georgius Cyprus show that each region of Third Palestine had its own administrative cities. Aila, Petra, Augustopolis, Arindela, and Zoara in southern Jordan, Elusa, Mampsis, Berosaba, and Salton (Hieratikon?) in the Negev, and Charachmoba, Areopolis, and Bitarous (Betthoros?) on the Kerak Plateau all served as regional centers. The names Pentakomia (Five Villages) and Metrokomia (Mother Village) may suggest that groups of villages were also used for administrative centers in regions lacking urban centers. The large centers of Phaino, Iotabe, and Pharan do not appear in these lists despite having attested bishops (Ward 2012: 298-299). These sites, therefore, may not have been cities in the mid-sixth century.

At the turn of the fifth century, the governor of Third Palestine held the status of *praeses* (Notitia Dignitatum, *Oriens* 1.79, 87.). This continued into the reign of Justinian when the governor is called a *hegemon* by Hierocles (*Synecdemus* 721.1). Justinian’s *Novel* 103 describes the governor as an *ordinarius*.¹⁷ The same rank, *ordinarius*, appears in a fragmentary portion of P. Petra 57 (223), which the editors interpreted as referring to a military rank; and, in another official letter, an *archon* is attested who was likely the governor of the province (P. Petra 60.1; Arjava *et al.* 2018: 151, 178). Another civic official, the *defensor civitatis* appears in P. Petra 78.¹⁸

Some earlier scholars posited that ‘the territory below the Wadi Hasa ... had long been relinquished to the care of native phylarchs, or sheikhs of the seminomadic tribes ... [i]t was no longer a part of the Byzantine administration’ (Bowersock 1983: 184). Now, however, the Petra Papyri demonstrate the continuance of imperial authority throughout Third Palestine into the late sixth century (Caldwell 2001: 68-110). Nevertheless, phylarchs and their allied tribes clearly played an important role in the defense and society of Third Palestine and the Near East (Gutwein 1981: 314-321; Fisher 2011; Fisher 2015). For example, Amorkesos (Imru’ al-Qays) was confirmed as phylarch after he took the island of Iotabe from the Romans and Justinian appointed the Saracen sheik Abu Karib phylarch over the Saracens throughout Palestine.¹⁹ The phylarch Abu Karib appears in Petra Papyri 39 (165, 488), but not in an official capacity (Arjava *et al.* 2011: 90). Instead, he was only one of several arbitrators in a legal dispute and was consulted after the failed arbitration of a *chorepiscopus*. The role played by Abu Karib was not a unique one, but instead followed a long tradition of intervention by powerful individuals in the judicial system of the Roman Empire.²⁰

¹⁵ Hierocles, *Synecdemus* 721.2; Georgius Cyprius, *Descriptio orbis Romani* 1044, Πέτραι μητρόπολις.

¹⁶ See for example P. Petra 1.4-5, μνητρικ[ολωνιών] ‘Ἀδριανῆ Πέτρα μητροπόλει τῆς τρίτης Παλαιστίνης Κλουτ[αρία].

¹⁷ See Mayerson 1988 on this edict and its purpose.

¹⁸ This is one of two official documents in the archive. The other is more fragmentary (79). Both mention ‘public officials’ (*dēmosieuontas*) of Petra.

¹⁹ Procopius, *De Bellis* 1.19.10; Malchus, frag. 1.

²⁰ On this papyrus and its implications, see Caldwell 2001: 111-149. On Abu Karib, see Shahid 1995: 124-130; Fisher 2015: 84-88

Interpreting the ancient economy

The study of the economy of the ancient world has a long and storied history, involving many luminaries of modern scholarship on the classical world. During the past century of scholarship, understandings of the ancient economy and that of the Roman Empire, in particular, have swung from modernist interpretations to primitivist and now back again to a more modernist understanding. As more archaeological data is uncovered, evidence of exchange has been discovered in virtually every corner of the Roman world, in every hamlet and small agricultural village, and even in the pastoralist camps in the remote Sinai desert.

By the mid-1980s, a so-called ‘New Orthodoxy’ appeared to reign supreme. This idea, developed in large part with rudimentary economic models bolstered by archaeological data, argued for economic growth and extensive trade during the Roman Empire.²¹ In the 1980s, New Institutional Economics, developed by Douglass North, first appeared in the writings of Roman Economic historians.²² By the 2010’s, this form of economic modeling, often called ‘cliometrics,’ has come to dominate discussions of the Roman economy. Cliometrics assumes that data can validate economic models developed for the past.²³ Both sides in the primitivist /modernist debate have adopted the underlying assumptions of New Institutional Economics with primitivists viewing the Roman world like a developing country and modernists embracing ideas about the role of government and monetary policy which have been dominant in world politics since the middle of the 1970s (Hobson 2014).

The traditional debate: ‘primitive’ or ‘modern’

It was only in the twentieth century that scholars turned to investigating the economy of the ancient world, concentrating on the period of the Pax Romana, roughly from the late first century BC until the beginning of the third century AD. The traditional debate has been framed by two polar opposite positions: a primitivist interpretation and a modernist one.

The original modernist interpretation of the Roman economy lacked a theoretical framework and self-reflection and assumed that the ancient economy was just like the contemporary one. For example, Michael Rostovtzeff’s *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (1926) was one of the first books to marshal archaeological, artistic, and literary sources to understand the ancient economy (Rostovtzeff 1953). He was profoundly impacted by the communist revolution in Russia which he fled, and he employed words such as proletariat, communism and capitalism in his work. He describes a Roman Empire with extensive private commercial enterprises and a recognizable modern economy. He was particularly interested in what he called ‘caravan cities,’ such as Petra and Palmyra, which existed solely as a result of trade and used them as examples of how the economy of the ancient world mirrored that of the modern.

²¹ See most importantly, Hopkins 1980 and Greene 1986.

²² A full discussion of New Institutional Economics would be out of place in this book but see North 1961 and 1990 for his most influential works.

²³ The most obvious example is Scheidel, Morris, and Saller 2007 and the book series, Oxford Studies on the Roman Economy, exemplified by Bowman and Wilson 2009.

Similarly, Henri Pirenne's *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (1937) assumes that the economy functioned much like the economy of the early twentieth century. This fact is, of course, not what made Pirenne famous, rather, it was what we now call the Pirenne thesis in which he argued that the Islamic conquests severed the Mediterranean and created the medieval world (Effros 2017). But, his underlying economic understandings were that of his contemporary society in structure (McCormick 2001).

Moses Finley's *The Ancient Economy* reset understandings of the ancient economy when he argued for a much less capitalist view of economic activity.²⁴ He believed that cities were largely consumer-driven with little productive capacity. He argued that the urban elites were parasites on the countryside, from which they extracted heavy rent from the poor. He argued that trade was quite limited because of the high cost of transportation. He made some exceptions for luxury trade in items like silk, incense, and eastern spices, but believed that most other long-distance commerce was directed by the imperial government in order to supply the imperial capitals of Rome and, later, Constantinople. Another major tenant of his argument is that money was not reinvested into commerce or industry but into land because he believed that the wealthy were motivated primarily by cultural and not economic considerations. He argued that the newly wealthy wished to join the landed aristocracy and so transitioned out of commerce as soon as was possible. Furthermore, he believed that there was little specialization of labor.

One problem with Finley's theories is that they were largely based on literary sources, which often describe the unique and unusual and not the ordinary and mundane. He was well aware of the problems of his sources, declaring that models would be necessary to understand the economy because the literary sources could merely produce lists of interesting facts and could not describe superstructure. However, he also rejected the use of archaeology declaring that it could not discover evidence of 'economic structure' or the 'social mode of production.' He also rejected the use of statistics and cliometrics because he felt that the information provided in the literary sources was not representative (Finley 1985: 57-66).

While Finley has been rightly credited with developing what is now called the primitivist model, the work of his contemporary A.H.M. Jones (1964) has dominated the understanding of the late antique economy. Jones argued that the later empire developed a crushing tax regime that both transformed life (most documents are dated based on the 15 year tax cycles, the indictions) and devastated the economy. Jones also believed that trade was entirely dependent on the power of the state to command the economy. His theory of economic decline combined with a severe population loss due to several plagues which reduced trade and economic activity. The similar view of Tate (who studied the Syrian rural hinterland) has been summarized as follows:

[compared to the prosperity of the early Empire] we have the supposed Diocletianic 'recovery', a more oppressive fiscal regime, a free population overburdened by tax demands largely generated by the need to maintain an overblown military and bureaucratic establishment and collected via the wealthy landowners (Bowman and Wilson 2009: 49, summarizing Tate 1992: 1).

²⁴ Finley 1973. Finley's views were influenced by Polanyi who had been writing for decades about the pre-Industrial world (see Polanyi 1944; Dalton 1968). Finley had been a student of Polanyi's at Columbia (Morris 1999: xi).

Archaeologists pushed back against Finley's primitive model of the economy. With increasing archaeological evidence, especially of transport amphorae which contained liquid products, they argued that there was a wide distribution of goods throughout the Roman Empire, with amphorae and ceramic fine wares being discovered in virtually every corner of the Roman world (Garnsey *et al.* 1983; Greene 1990). The leading figure of this movement was Keith Hopkins who showed how the system of taxation actually encouraged trade within the Empire (1980; 1983). Hopkins famously employed the 'Fisher equation' which estimates prices based on supply and demand, and he tried to create models to understand the functioning of the economy (Hopkins 1980: 109). While his ideas gained ground with archaeologists, classicists and historians, such as Duncan-Jones, routinely attacked and mischaracterized Hopkin's ideas (Duncan-Jones 1990, esp. 30-47; Elliot 2020: 6-8). Others just utterly rejected his attempts at modeling the ancient world (Hopkins 1978; Badian 1982; Wilson 2014).

Several scholars have noted the impossibility of reconciling the primitivist and modernist debate, which relies on mis-readings, over-simplifications, and ignores the areas in which the polarities agree and overlap (Saller 2002: 251-257). The debate has descended the level of scholarly name-calling, as 'anti-primitivists' are accused of being 'neo-modernists,' while 'primitivists' take offense with being labeled with that term (Carrié 2012: 13-14). Elliot notes that 'the primitivist/modernist ... binaries have been unfortunately reduced to caricatures' (2020: 8). Some scholars have proposed a more nuanced 'third way' (Bang 2007 and 2008; Whittow 2013; Elliot 2020), but, the importance of these binary categories remains, especially for the study of the economy of the late antique Near East. Scholars of the region remain committed to one side or the other in this debate, seemingly missing the rise of New Institutional Economics in other fields of ancient history.

The rise of neoliberal interpretations of the ancient economy

Roman historians were relatively late to the New Institutional Economics and cliometrics party, which had been developed in the late 1950s and advanced during the 1960s via the *Journal of Economic History* (Conrad and Meyer 1958; Noth 1961; Fogel 1966). A.H.M. Jones and Finley both agreed that modern economic theories projected anachronistic, capitalistic ideas into a world in which those ideas did not exist (Hobson 2014, 14-16). However, by the 1980s, New Institutional Economics began to be used by ancient historians. And today, New Institutional Economics seems to be the prevailing theoretical background of most modern ancient economists, even if these trends have not had a major impact on those who study the late antique Near East (Callataj 2014: 20-22).

New Institutional Economics assumes that humans seek maximum profit, are self-interested, and rational in their economic activities, but limited in their knowledge (von Mises 1949). New Institutional Economics seeks to understand transaction costs and how institutions manage and affect these transaction costs, especially in terms of the market (Coase 1960; North 1990). One of the most important methods of New Institutional Economics is the development of economic models. These models are seen not just as predictive of future events, but also capable of predicting events in the past (Friedman 1953: 9). Cliometrics is the application of New Institutional Economics using historical data (Rawski *et al.* 1996; Diebolt and Hauptert 2015). There are even books explaining New Institutional Economics and Cliometrics for the

ancient historian (Jones 2014).²⁵ Despite the dominance of New Institutional Economics and Cliometrics, there are still critics who reject the entire enterprise, especially for the study of the ancient world (Boldizzoni 2011; Hobson 2014; Viglietti 2018). These critics note that New Institutional Economics assumes that modern, Western-style capitalistic economies are the norm and any deviation is inferior.

Modeling the Roman economy first appeared in the works of Keith Hopkins as discussed above (Hopkins 1980). By the end of the 1980s, even those who disagreed with Hopkins were developing their own models of the ancient economy (Garnsey and Saller 1987: esp. 46-63; Duncan-Jones 1990). One of the problems, however, with studying the economy of the ancient world is that there are very few quality data-sets. According to Morley, this can lead ancient historians to inject their own assumptions into the data which in turn creates a model that validates their theories (2014: 32-34). Wilson makes similar arguments about the models developed by Hopkins, Garnsey, and Saller (Wilson 2014). However, even when scholars reject the models created and the data used, they often continue to see the universal laws of New Institutional Economics at work (Hobson 2014).

Despite these issues, New Institutional Economics, cliometrics, and modeling have consumed the study of the ancient economy since the 1990s. Scholars have been obsessed with calculating the GDP of the Roman Empire (Hopkins 1983; Scheidel 2006; Bang 2008: 110-121; Scheidel and Friesen 2009; Lo Cascio and Malanima 2014; Wilson 2014), modeling expansion and retraction of the economy (Hopkins 1980; Garnsey and Saller 1987: 43-63; Saller 2002; Morris 2004; Jongman 2007; Scheidel *et al.* 2007; Silver 2007; Bang 2008:122-127; Jongman 2009; Lo Cascio 2009; Scheidel 2009; Saller 2012; Ober 2014), price fluctuations (Temin 2014), estimating workers' wages (Rathbone 2009; Kron 2014; Scheidel 2014), and quantifying the economy in general (Bowman and Wilson 2009; Bowman and Wilson 2011; Bowman and Wilson 2013; Callataj 2014; Kay 2014). Kehoe used the model of formal and informal institutions to explain the property rights and land use (Kehoe 2007). New Institutional Economics has often led scholars towards a modernist interpretation of the Roman economy (Elliot 2020: 15-18). One only needs to glance through the essays in the *Cambridge companion to the Roman economy, Quantifying the Roman economy, Quantifying the Greco-Roman economy and beyond* or *Capital, investment, and innovation in the Roman world* to see these assumptions at work (Bowman and Wilson 2009; Scheidel 2012; Callataj 2014; Erdkamp, Verboven, and Zuiderhoek 2020).

Market or bazaar economy?

Two recent contributions to the debate about the economy revolve around conceptions of Roman market integration. Peter Temin has led the pack declaring plainly, 'ancient Rome had a market economy' (2013: 2). In several articles and his book, *The Roman Market Economy*, Temin used New Institutional Economics to develop models to argue that the Roman economy was a group of interdependent market economies, which he defined 'as an economy where many resources are allocated by prices that are free to move in response to changes in underlying conditions' (2001; 2006; 2012; quote at 2013: 6). Though 'ancient economies clearly differed from modern ones... the principles of economics still hold true...' (Temin 2012: 45).

²⁵ However, see the scathing review by Hobson in the 2014 issue of the *Journal of Roman Archaeology* which suggests that this book roundly fails to achieve this goal.

Temin develops several models of the Roman economy, but I want to only mention one model briefly which demonstrates the dangers of his methods. In Chapter 2 of *The Roman Market Economy*, Temin argues that the price of wheat proves that there was an integrated market for wheat throughout the entire Roman world. He demonstrates this via several charts, graphs, and regression analysis, which is clearly intended to signify an inscrutable scientific analysis (Temin 2013: 29-52). But, this model is based on only eight data-points spread out by approximately one hundred and fifty years and over the entire Mediterranean! How in the world could grain prices from Spain in 150 BCE be in any way connected to grain prices in Palestine in 15 CE? Though he argues otherwise, Temin's models are based on circular reasoning, in which the data demonstrates the validity of the model because the model was created by that data. This, in my opinion, is one of the major issues with the models created by New Institutional Economics for understanding the ancient economy. As Elliot notes, economists justify their use of New Institutional Economics because they assume that 'economic forces of markets, integration and money are dominant' (2020: 9). Temin may be correct that the Roman economy was an integrated market economy, but that is a mere assumption unproved by his data.

Peter Bang is responsible for a different conception of the Roman economy. Instead of being an integrated market economy, Bang characterized the Roman market as a 'bazaar economy' in which Rome acted as a tributary state, like the Mughal Empire (Bang 2008). A tributary state is one in which an empire gains its surplus by 'extraction from rent claimed by local, decentralized and independent feudal lords' (Bang 2008, 10; Wickham 1985). Landlords were able to use the system to their advantage, by protecting their own assets at the expense of the lower classes (Bang 2008: 101-110).

The bazaar, according to Bang,

is distinguished by high uncertainty of information and relative unpredictability of supply and demand. This makes the prices of commodities in the bazaar fairly volatile. As a consequence, the integration of markets is often low and fragile; it is simply difficult for traders to obtain sufficiently reliable and stable information on which effectively to respond to developments in other markets... Merchants in the bazaar seek to cultivate personal and lasting relations of exchange with particular business partners. This serves to shelter them against the all-pervasive risks and uncertainties of the bazaar ... (Bang 2008: 4-5)

Bang therefore believes that the economy of the Roman Empire was a group of divided markets, i.e. there was not an integrated market as described by Temin. Furthermore, one must jettison modern conceptions of a bazaar, for a 'bazaar economy' is one which involves long-distance trade, accumulation of surplus funds, brokers, money-lending, fairs and markets, and connected urban and rural communities (Bang 2008: 197-199, 295-296). According to Elliott, the 'otherness of the 'bazaar economy' model challenges modern scholars to envision the Roman economy on its own unique terms instead of an antecedent to modernity' (2020: 39).

Temin and Bang represent two of the most influential attempts to define the economy of the Roman Empire. Both see New Institutional Economics as valuable tools for understanding the economy, but they arrived at quite different conclusions. In the coming chapters, I will

present the data from the province of Third Palestine. I attempt to do this with as little modern interpretation as possible and will use the conclusion to make my argument about how to frame the data from the province in the wider debate about the economy of the Roman world.