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ARCHAEOLOGY AND ECONOMIC HISTORY:

between affinities and discord

Maria Cecilia D'ERCOLE

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ARCHAEOLOGY AND ECONOMIC HISTORY: between affinities and discord

Maria Cecilia D'ERCOLE

Abstract

Beyond the obvious points of convergence, these two disciplines have often followed parallel or even divergent courses. As such, the first major narratives about the economy of ancient societies were constructed with the almost complete omission of archaeological data. This indifference has even been openly admitted by historians who were otherwise mindful of a holistic approach to ancient societies (M. Finley, E. Will). This context appears to have changed in the 1980s, when a number of themes common to historical and archaeological inquiries were explored: for example, research on landscape in several Mediterranean regions (Greece, Italy, North Africa). Today, the tendency towards modelling in economic history leads to the selection of material indicators on the basis of criteria (economic growth) which fit more with current economic behaviours. There is nevertheless space for multidisciplinary convergence.

Keywords

Archaeology, history, economy, material data, evidence, growth.

Archaeology and economic history: the connections between these two disciplines are both obvious and necessary. Obvious, in so far as it would be superfluous to list the numerous investigative areas where archaeology has crossed paths with economic history. As early as 1967, Sally Humphreys presented an overview of this which has not changed substantially: “forms of production and exchange, patterns of settlement, cultural interrelations between the Greeks and Romans and their subjects or barbarian neighbours, (...) excavation of new types of site (farms, workshops...)” (Humphreys, 1967: 374), and to this we could add mines and many other domains. Necessary, because in the recognised absence of ancient discourse on economy, a fact common to both the Greek and Roman worlds, archaeology provides, in many cases, the only documentary basis and the only conceptual tools for historical reflection. However, despite this necessary interdependence, encounters between the two disciplines have not always been successful: on the contrary, they sometimes appeared as voluntary omissions or failed meetings. This paper aims to examine a number of important steps in the relationship between these disciplines, without in any way claiming to be exhaustive.

1 - The major narratives on the economy of classical antiquity

At the end of the 19th century, the first major historical narratives on the classical economy were developed, in a specific scientific and academic context: their antagonisms continue to have an impact on current scientific debate (Bruhns, 2014). As divergent as they were, these narratives nevertheless shared a language and a place of origin: the German scientific milieu of the final

decades of the 19th century. They also shared, in my view, an attitude towards the data produced by material culture. As a recent analysis has clearly shown (Mazza, 2008), the protagonists in this dispute, Karl Bücher and Eduard Meyer, drew their theories from a German academic field which was still under the intellectual influence of the ideas of Leopold von Ranke, whereby the notion of civilisation was firmly anchored in a sort of typology of historical development. The two rivals also advocated a theory of phases of development (Bücher's *Entwicklungsstufen*) which for them represented stages which were common to all past civilisations. These steps corresponded with well defined economic practices and forms of social life.

However, from this shared terrain, each succeeded in devising markedly different theories. For Bücher, every ancient civilisation fit into the stage which he defined as "*die geschlossene Hauswirtschaft*", that is, a closed economy, founded on a somewhat self-sufficient family unit ("*selbst genügende Wirtschaft*"). This stage was principally characterised by an agricultural economy and by the use of slave labour. The city-state itself behaved as a sort of "large family", or even as a father figure: "*Auch der Staat wirtschaftete wie ein reicher Hausvater*" (Bücher, 1914: 10-11). In this context, trade naturally played a lesser role (Bücher, 1914: 18, "*Auf der Stufe, des Hauswirtschaft ist der Handel zumeist interlokaler oder internationaler Wanderhandel*").

In contrast, Eduard Meyer's outlook accentuated the modern traits of the classical economy, which was interpreted as a sort of industrial economy *ante litteram*. Consequently, the German historian was led to dogmatically deny the importance of slavery in ancient societies and to emphasise the importance of trade in Archaic society, which cannot be considered, in his view, as a closed economy (Mazza, 2008: 53-54). Quite on the contrary, as early as the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, the Greek world was thought to have seen the rise of a mercantilist type of economy, established on a much larger scale than the family and urban environment. In addition, the phenomenon of ancient colonisation, which was revisited in this perspective, was considered as a trading zone covering a vast territorial space, from Caucasia to Crimea and the Iberian Peninsula. The social crises of the 7th and 6th centuries BCE were also interpreted as being direct consequences of the monetary economy, which destroyed the powers of the major aristocratic *gênê* (Mazza, 2008: 51-52). From these assumptions, Meyer was led to insist upon the destructive force¹ of great wealth holders, which disrupted the traditional economic and social bases and which caused the destruction of ancient society (Mazza, 2008: 75-76).

Both of these reconstructions were destined for considerable posterity, and are relevant to our analysis regarding a specific point, which, moreover, they both share (once again). These two visions of ancient society almost completely disregard the material data, or else bend them to fit their interpretation, as part of a schematic reconstruction whose theoretical legitimacy comes from other disciplines. In practice, these depictions belong neither to archaeological knowledge, nor even to historical knowledge of ancient societies. Comparisons with modern and contemporary history, economy and the geography of human societies had a much deeper impact than studies on ancient societies, where philological and aesthetic approaches were largely dominant, particularly in Germany. It was therefore with an almost total disregard for archaeology's contribution that the first comprehensive models of classical economy came about, with an impact which is still being felt. It was not until Mikhail Rostovtzeff's overview (1957, first edition 1926; Andreau, 1988), which fit more with Meyer's school of thought, without being in complete agreement with his position, that the quantitative data which archaeology could provide were finally taken into account.

1. "*zerstende Wirkung*".

2 - Finley's scepticism

This first failed meeting would be followed by others. Archaeology's contribution to the economic history of classical antiquity did not succeed in convincing the great historians, despite their interest in a holistic and innovative approach to ancient societies, which led them to put in place illuminating parallels with the modern and contemporary worlds, in the legal, political and social domains. Moses I. Finley did not hesitate to express his reservations regarding material culture as a basis for historical reconstruction. This position almost certainly stemmed from the historian's mistrust of quantitative data, which was clearly explained in the work written in 1986 by a great historian of the economy of classical antiquity, David Whittaker, shortly after Finley's death (Whittaker, 1986: 127-128). Having recalled that these methods of quantitative history were developed in particular with the founding of the *Journal of Economic History* in 1941, and initially applied to the history of modern slavery, Whittaker gave two essential reasons for Finley's hostility towards material culture. The first was his suspicion of all quantitative formulae, which, in his opinion, aimed to fix concepts which were, in reality, fluid and undefined. The second reason was Finley's defiance of the Anglo-American style of empiricism, where the term "cliometrics" had existed at least since the mid-1960s. It can nevertheless be noted that in his last work, *Ancient History, Evidence and Models* (Finley, 1985: 7-26, a chapter dedicated to the sources available to a historian of classical antiquity, "The Ancient Historian and his Sources"), Finley makes considerable space for archaeology's contribution to historical reconstruction, which at times goes further than the role of written sources: because: "the privileged position of Greek and Latin (...) is especially unacceptable for the early periods of both Greek and Roman history, where the archaeological evidence bulks so large (...) and where the quantitatively far from inconsiderable literary tradition is particularly suspect". The problem which remained for Finley was the use of archaeological data beyond their ability to provide information: a theme to which we will return below.

Finley was far from alone in his scepticism. Around the same time, several works by an important French historian, Édouard Will, raised the question of the limitations of archaeological documentation as the basis for historical reconstruction. Let us recall, by way of example, the "methodological reflections" presented in 1972 in Taranto, at the annual conference on the history and archaeology of Magna Graecia, whose focus that year was economic and social events. In his paper, Will acknowledged the progress made by the archaeological evidence, though it could not, however, escape "*cruelles incertitudes*" ("cruel uncertainties") (Will, 1973: 33). His account also expressed an extreme and open distrust of the very possibility "of discussing trade movements, or commercial relations in truly historic terms if we cannot precisely define that which hides behind these expressions – and we can never do this.", because, he said, we will never know the totality of the objects of trade, or the identity of those who transported these goods, or the itineraries or chronology of these trades. In relation to all of these questions, the partial responses which archaeology can provide will "always be insufficient to construct a history worthy of the name" (Will, 1973: 34). In the face of this damning indictment, I am inclined to suggest the much more accommodating attitude of an important economic historian, Carlo Cipolla. In a methodological piece which has lost none of its value, published in Italian and English, Cipolla highlights the necessity for historians to refine their tools of comprehension and their documentary bases, all the more so if their sources are scarce or incomplete. This necessity becomes urgent for periods like classical antiquity, when written sources become so uncertain and lacking in information. Even in this situation, Cipolla does not appear to have given in to scepticism, quite the opposite in fact: it is at this point that historians need to broaden their viewpoint, by attempting to find evidence in linguistics,

archaeology, numismatics, and epigraphy (Cipolla, 1988: 42-43).² It is therefore through history as a form of inquiry, a perspective which seems to me to agree with the notion of the “evidential paradigm” developed by Carlo Ginzburg (1979; 1980), that economic history and archaeology appear to come together.

3 - A new confidence

The 1980s appear to mark a positive turning point in these relations, at least in Europe. Firstly, several themes shared by the historical and archaeological inquiries were explored: here we can mention the research into landscape and the occupation of territory in several Mediterranean regions (Greece, Italy, North Africa), or the large pottery collections and studies on construction techniques which, in particular for the Roman world, enabled an assessment of the large scale move towards the exploitation of slave labour.³ This period also saw the publication of journals specially dedicated to economic and social themes. This was the case of the international journal *Opus*, created in Italy in 1982, which stated from the outset its ambition to make use of all types of sources, textual and material, by giving them equal roles in the reconstruction of the economic and social history of ancient worlds. The editors highlighted their wish to create a true historical and archaeological “bilingualism”, while respecting the research traditions and methodological tools of each body of evidence and each discipline (Ampolo, Pucci, 1982).⁴ The progress made during this period remains an essential part of our understanding of classical antiquity in several fields: artefact studies (*instrumentum domesticum*), analysis of territorial dynamics⁵ and urban topography, helped by tools of archaeological inquiry on a vast scale (surveys) and by the increasingly widespread adoption of the stratigraphic excavation method. In France and Italy, several studies concentrated on the slave mode of production in classical antiquity: historical analyses went hand in hand with field research, such as excavations of large rural estates, the *villae*⁶ and reflections on the use of archaeological material by historians (Garlan, 1985; Gras, 1987). During these same years, a work by K. Greene on the archaeology of the Roman economy presented an overview of the possible reconstructions, based on archaeology, in several fields of economic history: transport, agriculture, metalworking and pottery manufacture (Greene, 1986). Nevertheless, the signs of a new divorce were lying in wait for these two disciplines, which were far from being fixed and monolithic.

2. “But the written sources surviving from certain periods - from classical antiquity, for example - are so few and far between and so insubstantial that even the most powerful magnifying glass is of no avail. In these circumstances historians have to look around for other evidence.(...) historians hunt for clues in linguistics, archaeology, numismatics and epigraphy.”
3. One key example is the classic work of Jean-Paul Morel on black-glaze ware (Morel, 1981), as well as the work of Kevin Greene (1986).
4. “*Opus* ha l’ambizione di voler occupare uno spazio: la storia economica e sociale del mondo antico, nella sua accezione più vasta. (...) Caratteristica di *Opus* sarà l’utilizzazione critica di tutti i «sistemi» di fonti, da quelle letterarie a quelle materiali, dando ad esse pari dignità. Dovremo lavorare perchè si giunga a un vero e proprio ‘bilinguismo’ storico-archeologico, che rispetti pero’ la specificità dei diversi linguaggi, ciascuno con la propria tradizione.”
5. On land registers: Chouquer, Favory, 1980.
6. The first volume on the excavation of Villa Settefinestre appeared in 1985: Carandini, 1985.

4 - A contrasting present

So near and yet so far: the danger of mutual inattention still looms over the various approaches to ancient societies, however complementary they may be. In my view, one of the risks lies in the excessive tendency towards modelling, which is very common in economic history and in economics in general. The construction of models certainly has the advantage of proposing interpretations based on a theoretical organisation of the data. However, it sometimes leads to the selection of material indicators on the basis of criteria which are close to contemporary economic behaviours, rather than the operating demands of ancient societies. If we return to Carlo Cipolla's remarks, this attitude is suited to the approach of the economist, whose objective is to create models destined to have a practical influence, but not for historians, whose goal is to provide an explanation of the past and must therefore consider all the available variables for their argument (Cipolla, 1988: 20-21). Here are a few examples. The concepts of risk and survival, which are at the heart of demographic reproduction in ancient Greece, for example, closely recall modern economic theories. They are featured in a recent work, where archaeology plays a role which is generally rather marginal (Galant, 1991: 15-17). Another case provides an effective illustration of the gap between the questions asked, the functioning of ancient societies and the use of material data. The concept of economic growth is emphasised in several overviews and specific studies published in recent years,⁷ in relation to both the Greek and Roman worlds. These works explore models of growth, with an approach which is both spatial and temporal. Although these studies are of interest, I believe that the approach followed presents two types of problem: the first concerns the legitimacy of the question itself; the second focuses on the methodological tools used to answer it. Regarding the first point, we cannot deny that growth is in itself a factor of capital importance in historical development and periodization. According to certain authors, it is the very core of economic reflection. However, in my view it would be illusory to think that the question presents itself in the same way for all periods. The recent economic history of modern Europe, published in 2010 by Stephen Broadberry and Kevin O'Rourke, begins precisely by noting the development which came about with the Industrial Revolution. In this decisive period, for the first time in history, population growth was not followed by a crisis, because the new technology enabled the consistent satisfaction of increasing demands and needs (Broadberry, O'Rourke, 2010). It seems to me that this situation was in no way shared by ancient societies. Indeed, the notion of economic growth does not come about on the same terms for societies where a constant rate of demographic reproduction was already a sign of material prosperity. Furthermore, other criteria and parameters appear to be more relevant in this analysis. On this subject, we can share the opinion of Roland Étienne: the functioning of an ancient society was quite similar to that of a society under the Ancien Régime. This means that it was considered satisfactory if it allowed above all the maintenance of an army efficient enough to succeed in conquest, and then to ensure a suitable lifestyle for the court and to build monuments to the glory of the state. By highlighting the similarities between this economic outlook and that of other preindustrial societies, Étienne concludes that the criteria of "efficiency" were not the same as for contemporary societies. Analysis of ancient societies must take into account this difference (Étienne, 2007: 446).⁸ Let us be clear: this does not mean a return to a vision of technological and economic stagnation within ancient societies, which is an issue responsible for vast volumes of spilt ink (Finley, 1965, and Greene's re-reading, 2000; on technological progress in Rome;

7. Such as Morris, 2006: 93, for example: "These new questions are mostly about standards of living, and, indirectly, economic growth".

8. Criticism of this model of growth was expressed with new arguments by the same author: Étienne, 2010: 14-15.

Domergue, Bordès, 2006). Rather, this position aims to search for the keys to the explanations of economic events by deconstructing the dynamics of functioning unique to each society, including ancient ones. Regarding the Roman economy (which in reality encompasses a plurality of economies, in both the temporal and spatial sense), Gloria Vivenza recently highlighted the need to distinguish the economy of the Romans from later models of production (Vivenza, 2012: 25). She affirmed the importance of agrarian production, adding: “This supremacy of the countryside, even in a context where various forms of economic activity had reached significant levels, is undoubtedly a feature that distinguishes the Roman economy from those that followed, in which the most dynamic sector invariably prevailed” (Vivenza, 2012: 28).

It seems to me, once again, that archaeological data are mentioned in the most recent studies as part of a quantitative reflection which aims to demonstrate a unidirectional trend in economic growth, of which the material data are indicators. Also, archaeology is often evoked when it is necessary to establish an idea of scale, understood here as a measure of size: the scale of territories, of properties, of the urban area. We find this type of argument, for example, in the recent study by François de Callatay who reinstated - with a hint of provocation - the concept of the “Greek miracle”, by means of quantification. He demonstrated, on the basis of tangible indicators, the overall growth of Greek society between the Archaic and Hellenistic periods. The indicators used were height (which was moderately higher for the Greeks than for the Romans), life expectancy (here, again, Greeks lived longer than Romans), the degree of urbanisation and the surface area of houses, evaluated at an average of between 290 m² (Olynthus) and 205 m² (Priene), and finally salaries, estimated at one drachma per day in Athens in the construction sector (de Callatay, 2012: 64-65). Without examining the issue of the choice of indicators, it is interesting to analyse the creation of these data. Let us take the example of the surface area of the houses, a criterion which several authors have used, from W. Scheidel to I. Morris (Manning, Morris, 2005) and many others. This is certainly an indicator which appears to be objective, since it is founded on a simple measurement. However, it is difficult to extract data of (relative) value from this (objective) measurement, as we do not know the number of cases considered. Furthermore, this same objective criterion needs to be compared with other indicators which are more random because they are more subjective or difficult to reconstruct: for example, decoration, which is evidence of a house’s luxury emphasised to a greater or lesser extent, or even the idea of volume, and therefore the potential existence of upper floors, which is not taken into account in this type of estimation. On the other hand, taking the surface area as the only indicator runs the risk of producing generalisations. Let us consider two opposite examples. The houses of Megara Hyblaea in Sicily, display a standardised and egalitarian dimension of 15 to 20 m² of construction during the 7th century BC; the remaining area of 100 to 120m² was not built on (Gras, Tréziny, 2004: 533-537). However, this standard measurement is incapable of providing any information on the fact that several houses could have been grouped together and belonged to a single family group. An opposite example can be seen in houses with a large surface area, which may be found in classical or Hellenistic Greek cities. Sylvie Rougier-Blanc demonstrated in her recent inquiry into poverty in ancient Greece that these large houses could have belonged to a single occupant, but could also have been inhabited by several families. This practice of *synoikia*, house sharing, offered the possibility of accommodation to citizens on modest incomes and constituted a source of revenue for the owner. Regarding the price of these rentals, they were variable enough to discourage any sort of average calculation (Rougier-Blanc, 2014). A very significant case, which summarises all of the possibilities considered here, is the example of the sales agreements for houses in Olynthus, which are known through both the archaeological remains of the dwellings and the inscriptions which were found there, and which date from the first half of the 4th century BC. We can note that the estimations of the value of properties have an extremely large range, from 230 to 5 300 drachmas per house: the variation in prices and

therefore the estimated value can be explained not only by the surface area, which of course remains the basic criterion, but also by a considerable series of variables ranging from how centrally located the house was, to the presence of an upper floor, to the existence of internal divisions which imply the sale of the whole or of only part of the building.⁹ We can also mention cases which demonstrate the contradiction between certain material indicators: the site of Spina (late 6th-3rd centuries BC), on the mouth of the Po, is a perfect example. This settlement, though only partly excavated, has a modest appearance and a limited surface area (just 6 hectares). Despite its rudimentary form, this site has revealed luxurious grave goods and the remains of substantial urban decoration, such as Cycladic marble basins (Sassatelli, 1977: 119, n.7, fig. 3c: 133). This shows, yet again, the extent to which isolated indicators can be deceptive. The question of salaries enables us to add more arguments to this subject. The standard calculation of a salary of one drachma per day is essentially based, to my knowledge, on a single epigraphic text: the accounts of the construction site of the Erechtheion in 409/408 (Feyel, 2006, and previous reference), where the salary of one drachma per day was paid to certain categories of skilled workers, in particular the architect and the secretary (*grammateus*). The information may come from an epigraphic source, but it relates to well-known archaeological context. This record refers to contracts of limited duration and for a precise task, which therefore cannot be considered as the norm or as a standard benchmark for comparison.¹⁰ In fact, in-depth research recently carried out on pay rates on the construction sites of Delphi, Epidauros and Delos demonstrate clearly that salaries were the product of constant and detailed negotiations which may not be reduced to an established norm or to an arbitrary abstraction (Feyel, 2006: 408-428; as well as the excellent, as yet unpublished, doctoral thesis by V. Mathé, 2010). More generally, I believe that even today it is worth considering the criticisms of the model of economic growth expressed by Whittaker in his 1986 article cited above. On this, he wrote that the models of growth always separated gross national product from gross domestic product per capita. In a society that was essentially agrarian and with limited technology, the latter is an essential factor, as population increase can lead to both an increase in the GDP and a fall in individual revenue. Moreover, for ancient societies, we do not have access to the variables for the increase in production and for market activity. Between individual wealth and growth, there is not a cause and effect relationship: despite this, Whittaker notes that archaeologists and historians of classical antiquity regularly consider that increases in housing, construction and luxury artefacts are the sure signs of per capita growth. This is far from certain: if we examine comparative examples which have at their disposal more substantial quantitative data than ancient societies, such as Polish society in the feudal period, we can observe that production and individual revenues could decrease, while building construction and luxury artefacts increase (Whittaker, 1986: 130). Of course, we do not deny the existence of periods of growth in ancient societies and economies. I nevertheless believe that applying this interpretation to the dynamics and aims of classical economies can produce an arbitrary superposition onto ancient societies of very contemporary issues, which are themselves subject to debate (Méda, 2013).

9. On this interesting example: Nevett, 2000.

10. As done, for example, by Azoulay, 2010: 129, who used the supposed salary of one drachma per day to estimate the value of the *misthos*, the token of presence received by the 6000 Athenian *dikastes* (judges), which corresponded to two, and later three, obols per day.

Conclusion

Should we deny the possibility of an economic history on the basis of archaeology? Far from it. A recent overview of archaeology and trade demonstrated, from a comparative and diachronic perspective, the large variety of thematic directions and fields (spatial, symbolic, social, and anthropological) which opens up from such a multi-decade inquiry, which is still in the making (Oka, Kusimba, 2008). Several results from archaeological inquiry have a real impact on our understanding of the mechanisms of the classical economy. One of the most fertile of these fields of application seems to be research into craft areas, which developed in both Greek societies and the Roman world. Here, studies on the location and distribution of craft spaces demonstrate the centrality and visibility of the workshops (for pottery and metal production), which undoubtedly had an impact on the social esteem for the production activity.¹¹ For the Roman world, recent studies have revisited the economy of Pompeii based on an observation of areas of production and sales: for example, the analysis of the structures of bakers' workshops was carried out not simply in relation to this specific business, but also in relation to their ability to drive the economic activity of various trades (masons, carpenters, blacksmiths) and goods (stone and marble, wood and fuel), at different scales, local and distant, by applying the concept of a "technical system" (Monteix, 2017: 233-235). Observations on the distribution of spaces, for example in fulling workshops (*fullonicae*) enable us to approach in a new way the question of the division of work within these same societies (Flohr, 2011: 95-96).

Archaeology therefore affirms itself as a possible basis for the explanation of economic and social behaviours. However, the issue of the limits of the information which we can extract from material data is certainly real and has not changed radically in relation to the concerns voiced by Finley in 1985. Let us consider an eloquent example, that of the study of the remains of pottery kilns: archaeology can inform us about the distribution, the type of product, and the production capacity, but in the absence of texts, it cannot shed light on ownership relations, work contracts and the status, free or dependent, of the workers: as Finley put it, "the ownership of potteries and their labour force are unknown except for a relatively small number of cases in which amphora-marks indicate the presence or absence of slaves among the work-force. Our ignorance in this respect includes such central aspects as the relationship of the potters and potteries to the ownership of the land (including clay-beds), to the men involved in the trade, or to 'branches' in other places" (Finley, 1985: 24). The weight of this absence can be confirmed in recent studies. F. Laubenheimer's excellent work on an important workshop for the production of amphorae in the French Midi (Sallèles d'Aude) has provided a series of essential data on the typology of the products (Gauloise 4 type amphorae), the technique and volume of production, and on the workers themselves (presence of family groups) (Laubenheimer, 1990). This research used with precision and subtlety all of the data that one can extract on the basis of an archaeological inquiry and material remains. However, in the absence of any onomastic information, the relations of ownership and the status of the workforce remain unknown, just as Finley had predicted a few years earlier. This silence also concerns other fields. I can cite an example that I have explored in my previous work: the movement and working of amber from the Iron Age to the Roman Imperial period. Analyses carried out on a few samples, of several provenances and periods, demonstrated that carved amber found in several Mediterranean sites, in particular the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic sites, virtually all came from the Baltic Sea. This origin proves the existence of a very wide transport and trade network

11. On the urban centrality of Greek workshops: Sanidas, 2013, especially: 213-245. On the social status of a number of trades: D'Ercole, 2014, regarding cobblers in Greek and Roman societies.

(D'Ercole, 2008: 9-18). Stylistic analysis of a number of items also demonstrated the extent of the mobility of workshops and individuals, from Eastern Greece to Etruria and Southern Italy (D'Ercole, 2008: 52-61; 2013: 22-28). No text, be it literary or epigraphic, accompanies or sheds light on these vast movements. We can only suppose that non-monetary trade probably accompanied raw materials (metals, grain), which followed river routes and which involved a series of successive crossings in which the value of the material and the artefacts noticeably increased. Here, we can measure the strength and limitations of a trading process almost entirely demonstrated by archaeology: on one hand, the material objects reveal the geographic scale and the longevity of such trade routes, on the other hand, the almost total absence of sources does not enable us to understand the forms of acquisition of the raw material, or to quantify its value and the cost of working it, the organisation of the workshops and many other aspects of this phenomenon. However, the fact remains that the observation of the archaeological documents is in this case the only evidence for an economic phenomenon which has gone almost entirely unmentioned by textual sources, with the exception of a few brief allusions by authors from the Imperial Roman period, Pliny (*Natural History*, XXXVII, 3. 43-44) and especially Tacitus, who provided a very sharp insight into the difference in the value of amber among the Germanic peoples and in Rome (*Germania*, XLVI).

At the end of this analysis, I believe that the empirical and almost artisanal nature of mutual relations between archaeology and history, which was hoped for by the editors of *Opus*, is the best way to establish a useful confrontation between the archaeology and history of ancient societies, in particular of the Greek and Roman worlds. This confrontation implies the methodologically rigorous use of each type of evidence, of their respective possibilities and limitations: which also means constantly bearing in mind the notion of context in both spatial and chronological terms. In such conditions, archaeology and economic history can write, without establishing any mutual hierarchy but with each fulfilling its own potential, new hypotheses and interpretations.

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