

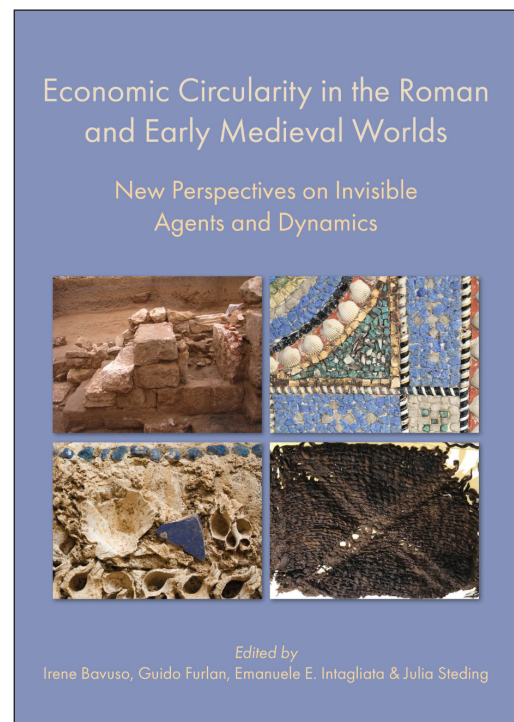
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Book Review

Bavuso, Irene, Guido Furlan, Emanuele E. Intagliata and Julia Steding (eds). 2023. *Economic Circularity in the Roman and Early Medieval Worlds: New Perspectives on Invisible Agents and Dynamics*. Oxford: Oxbow Books; 978-1-78925-996-4 hardback £50.

Economic Circularity in the Roman and Early Medieval Worlds is an edited volume featuring an introduction and 13 chapters that investigate different aspects of circular economic processes ('forms of reuse, repair, curation, maintenance', p. ix) between Roman antiquity and the early Middle Ages. This work reflects an increasing awareness that the reuse of objects, materials and spaces — conventionally assumed to have been a symptom of economic and social crises originating during Late Antiquity — was a deeply ingrained aspect of Roman cultural practices, including during earlier periods. Despite the growing interest in this topic, much remains unexplored, particularly the *how* and *why* (p. 143) of circular practices and the often-invisible agents responsible for them.

To address these issues, the volume adopts a multidisciplinary approach, bringing together the perspectives of archaeologists and historians and focusing on a variety of 'classes of material...processes...agents...and methodologies that are



generally overlooked in modern scholarship' from a *longue durée* perspective (p. ix). This diversity of viewpoints is a significant strength of the collection.

The first three contributions address 'the people involved in reuse practices and the organization of these practices' (p. x). In Chapter 1, Furlan offers a broad account of historical sources for ragpickers, scavengers and junk dealers from the Roman period through to the contemporary world, emphasizing their constant role at the intersection of formal and informal economies. In Chapter 2, Bavuso narrows focus onto one particular class of scavengers: graverobbers during the Early Medieval period. Bavuso argues that contrary to common assumptions, graverobbing was not always a haphazard or *ad hoc* activity, but sometimes reflected an organized, top-down affair. Garth Jones shifts away from this focus on socially marginal agents in circular processes in Chapter 3, focusing instead on examples of reuse in prestige contexts from Abbasid Samarra. She concludes that elites engaged in circular practices for symbolic purposes in addition to resource-management, undermining the notion of reuse as a straightforward symptom of crisis or scarcity.

The next seven chapters each handle specific classes of material or methodologies. Chapters 4 (Van Wersch and Wilkin) and 5 (Boschetti) both examine the recycling and reuse of glass, a topic that has occupied a central position in recent discussions of circular practices. Van Wersch and Wilkin underscore the extent to which recycled glass was interconnected with a variety of trade circuits and agents in the Early Medieval period. Boschetti, meanwhile, emphasizes how the circularity of glass had a long and varied history between the second century BC to the eighth century AD, with multiple factors potentially motivating individual examples of reuse. In Chapter 6, Wood examines methodologies for identifying episodes of recycling, focusing on glass and metal. He dissects the challenges posed by incomplete and conflicting data and highlights the importance of recycling to questions of provenance and circulation. Chapter 7, by Gleba and Busana, casts attention on the well-documented archaeological evidence of textile reuse in Roman naval contexts. Through a quantitative analysis of various examples, the authors argue that the practice was widespread and involved a variety of agents in the circular economy. In Chapter 8, English hypothesizes that recycling in seventh century AD lowland Britain often served aesthetic or spiritual rather than economic motives, analyzing materials from furnished burials to explore different modalities of reuse. In Chapter 9, Parrott investigates the reuse of metal casting models for Viking-era star-shaped brooches. He develops an innovative methodology that uses 3D scanning to reconstruct fragmentary molds and match them with extant brooches

in order to analyze the reuse of individual models. Chapter 10, by Intagliata, is also methodologically focused, discussing the challenges and limitations of using legacy data to study circular economic practices. Intagliata examines the case of Palmyra to demonstrate the potential and pitfalls of utilizing archival documentation to examine reuse.

The final chapters focus on buildings and building materials. In Chapter 11, McDavid examines invisible agents and circularity in the repair and maintenance of Roman *thermae*, highlighting the ecological, administrative and ritual factors that contributed to their resilience following the third century AD. Frey explores the circularity of columns in Chapter 12. He suggests that their reuse was a default practice driven by practicality, on one hand, and a desire to signify wealth and status on the other. This contrasts with rare examples of linear reuse where columns were repurposed in ways that ended their original function. Finally, in Chapter 13, Steding analyzes the reuse of inscribed stone objects in Palmyra, noting the challenges posed by incomplete and inconsistent documentation. Contrasting with the case of English in Chapter 8, Steding argues that most reused inscriptions from Palmyra were employed for practical purposes rather than ideological ones.

A recurring theme across the volume is that reuse, recycling, repair and maintenance are not inherently indicators of crisis or scarcity but point to a deeper ethos of circularity in the ancient world. This contrasts with modern linear consumption models, and some contributors highlight how contemporary consumption patterns influence (or prejudice) our understanding of past practices. Another theme is the persistent gaps in documentation for circular practices, both in legacy and contemporary datasets. The volume deserves commendation for drawing attention to these issues and offering practical lessons for addressing them.

The most significant weakness of this work is a lack of explicit commentary linking the individual chapters. While a natural result of this volume's multidisciplinary nature, there are often abrupt shifts in the type of topic handled by each contribution, and one wonders if ordering the chapters into tighter thematic groupings (no headings or formal divisions are reflected in the table of contents but are merely described in the introduction) might have provided a more natural flow. As a result of these issues, the lack of a concluding chapter feels like a glaring omission. Although the introduction to the volume does a proper job of outlining the topic and highlighting the importance of a multidisciplinary approach, final remarks from the editors on the 'how and why' of circular practices in light of the conclusions drawn by the various chapters would have been welcome.

Despite these issues, the volume raises critical awareness about a number of methodologies and subtopics that better illuminate circular economic practices, and the various challenges involved in studying them. It will surely serve as a valuable resource for any historian or archaeologist interested in economic circularity, moving the needle on our understanding of this essential emerging topic.

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