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# TRAC Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference

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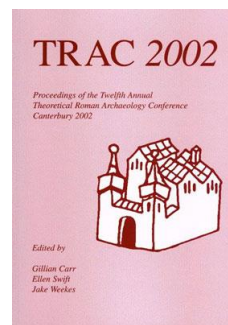
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# Late Roman economic systems: their implication in the interpretation of social organisation.

*Paul Johnson*

## *Introduction*

The aim of this paper is to discuss the ways in which we can use material evidence for the exchange of goods in order to investigate patterns of social organisation. In particular, it is the intent of this paper to explore the relationship between economic activity and social organisation in the Late Roman Empire. Much emphasis has been placed on the economic role of ceramic goods in the Late Roman Empire and work has been carried out which shows how changing social practices reflect changes in the way that goods are used and hence their appearance in the archaeological record. However, the focus on particular types of ceramic vessel excludes a wide range of goods which were in fact of a more fundamental importance in the everyday life of people in the Late Roman Empire. Previous studies have also failed to appreciate the way that less culturally specific goods can reflect patterns of social organisation through their spatial patterning. This paper will focus on the staple goods of grain and oil in order to suggest how the society of the Late Roman Empire may have functioned at its most basic level. Neither grain nor oil survive well in the archaeological record. As such, we must look to the containers and buildings in which they were stored to provide evidence for their presence.

This use of proxy indicators for the presence of these goods is not unproblematic, but it is practicable where a study of the goods themselves is not. We are fortunate in that it is possible to postulate the likely sites for the storage of grain in warehouse complexes such as those at Ostia and in Rome (Rickman 1971; Hermansen 1982). One can therefore assess the presence or at least the possibility of the presence of grain, if not the actual quantities which were stored. More detailed evidence can be accumulated through an examination of the movement of oil around the Mediterranean. This was transported both in large ceramic amphorae, which survive well in almost all conditions, and also by the later Roman Empire in oilskins, which unfortunately do not. The amphorae are unrivalled as a proxy indicator of the oil trade; one must however, be careful when dealing with the evidence from amphorae. Whilst some can be confidently identified with the transportation of oil due to the residues left on their inner surfaces, there is a noticeable 'grey area' where the contents are unknown. The recent developments in typological and fabric analyses also enable many of these amphorae to be accurately located to particular regions within a broad geographical context. In some cases it has even been possible to identify amphorae deriving from particular kiln sites (Peacock et al. 1990). Through a study of this evidence, one may garner a clearer understanding of economic and, by inference, social organisation in this period.

## *Background to the study of late Roman economic systems*

This paper does not allow sufficient scope for a detailed and exhaustive discussion of all the

previous studies of the Late Roman economy. However, it is extremely important to highlight some of the past approaches in order to contextualise the rationale behind the paper.

A particularly influential piece of scholarship in the field was Moses Finley's *The Ancient Economy* (1973); his ideas were to be fundamental in shaping many of the works which followed. Thought-provoking though this work is, Finley rarely considered the implications of economic behaviour for a society. He saw society and economy as linked, but deemed this to be a one-way relationship whereby social considerations defined economic practice. He was particularly concerned with the relationship between social hierarchies and economic activity. The main thrust of much of his argument concerned which 'professions' were deemed suitable by different strata of society, arguing that trade and agricultural production were exclusive pursuits undertaken by members of different classes. High status, concomitant with land ownership, is seen as the key to economic potential. Yet it is acknowledged that there are many professions open to the 'lower classes'. What Finley lacks is a real idea of how to work from the evidence of economic activity to a reconstruction of social practices.

The Marxist perspective of Rostovtzeff's *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (1957) was highly influential in its time, suggesting that the Roman Empire had an economic base more complex than simple subsistence farming. Finley, however, believed a great deal of this to be rather vague and prone to unsupported generalisations (1973: 33). Studies of the economy and supply of bulk goods to Rome have, however, traditionally relied upon the historical sources for most of their evidence (Frank 1933–40; Sirks 1991; Tengström 1974; Whittaker 1983), partly because of a perceived lack of archaeological evidence and the lure of quantitative values for the scale of imports (Finley 1999: 25). Historians have also attempted to deduce population sizes for the city and the quantity of goods required to feed its population (e.g. Gamsey 1983; Hopkins 1980; Virlouvet 2000). This approach is severely limited due to inconsistencies in the sources and the modern readings of them.

Certainly by the 1980s Finley's work had begun to come under criticism and indeed led to revisions of the original work (Finley 1985; 1999). Following the second edition of *The Ancient Economy*, much discussion has taken place concerning the focus and relevance of Finley's work (Nippel 1991). More recent research has been published which confidently asserts that Roman Imperial expansion "should be linked to a major increase in commerce" (Patterson 1998: 150). Whilst this takes some account of the idea of the interrelation between changing social circumstances and economy the work is still based largely on ancient textual sources. The inescapable observation is that the majority of the work critical of Finley's conclusions was so dominated by the need to repudiate those very ideas that it inevitably did little to move beyond the basic concepts involved. The state of academic debate as outlined by Parkins (1998), has largely consisted of an argument over whether the ideas of Finley or Rostovtzeff are closer to the truth.

Recently attempts have been made (Mattingly & Salmon 2001) to move the debate about the ancient economy past the consideration of agricultural production to other economic practices occurring within or around towns. Unfortunately, as the authors admit, it does not address the question of the social implications of economic activity (Mattingly and Salmon 2001: 4). Whilst this represents a large step in the right direction by emphasising other forms of economic activity besides large scale trade in foodstuffs, it fails to take into consideration the most important aspect of any economic system: the people whom it serves. What is needed, and what this paper will attempt to do, is to contextualise the economy within its society and show how an understanding of one can shed light on the other.

The most recent and perhaps most effective attempt to move beyond the traditional models and paradigms associated with the study of the Roman Economy comes through a piece of work which is neither about Rome, nor specifically about the economy. Horden and Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea* (2001) places the emphasis back on the need for societies to use the resources available to them in order to make up shortfalls in agricultural production. That is not to argue for a kind of ecological determinism, as many of the goods exchanged were almost ubiquitous in their availability, but instead that all forms of economic activity are interlinked; one cannot separate producer from consumer and one cannot distinguish this from the wider social milieu. A mobility of goods is argued to have been accompanied by a similar mobility of the labour force, whether through itinerancy or through the forced movement ascribed to slavery. This begins to tie the social to the economic, since movements of people will, by definition, have an impact on society.

Much of the debate over the Roman economy has centred on the role of the state in the supply of the *Annona* and other goods to Rome. The argument has been dominated by the opposed views of Finley and Rostovtzeff regarding the complexity of the Roman economy and the extent of state involvement in the economic life of the Roman Empire. Much academic discourse has argued for extensive state involvement, especially where the supply of grain to Rome was involved (Casson 1980). Wickham's view whereby the late Roman trading system was dominated by, if not reliant upon, the demands of the state (1988: 193) may well be very close to the mark. More importantly, however, he makes explicit the connection between the economic activities of the state and those of the people living in the provinces (in this case Africa). Much of the work arguing for a centralised supply system has been primarily reliant on epigraphic evidence [e.g. Cébeillac-Gervasoni (1994) for the duties of the *Praefectus Annonae* (Casson 1980: 22–23)]. It has also been argued that as grain was so vital to the diet of the people of the ancient Mediterranean it engendered an unusual level of involvement from the state (Rickman 1980). The mechanisms for the collection of this grain are by admission not well known (Rickman 1980) and as such one must doubt the certainty of those whose arguments for high levels of state involvement are based on rather tenuous evidence. The creation of a *Procurator Portus Ostie(n)sis* under Claudius has been associated with the creation of the Claudian harbour at Portus (Houston 1980). This official has also been associated with the *Praefectus Annonae* and, as such, has been deemed to be responsible for the offloading and transhipment of the *Annona*. It would appear that in the later Empire, this official became the *Procurator Portus Utriusque* and was seen to be responsible for the *Annona* in the period after Septimius Severus (Houston 1980). That there was an official responsible for the *Annona* at Portus is unsurprising but the evidence fails to reveal much more about the way in which the Imperial government was involved in the supply of the *Annona* to the population of the city of Rome.

These studies and their biases have left a legacy of interpretation based on general models and ideal types, leaving us with a view of a late Roman economy which is restrictive and unduly dominated by the demands of the *Annona* supply to Rome. The *Annona* is undoubtedly an important part of the Late Roman economy, but its prevalence in both the literature and in the conception of the totality of Late Roman economics is misleading and problematic for anyone who wishes to form an understanding of the implications for the vast majority of Late Roman society. In order to fully exploit the potential of the evidence now available, it is essential to move beyond these paradigms and embrace a new approach which can shed light on the day to day economic interaction between the people of the Roman Empire.

### *New approaches to the problem*

Whilst most recent studies of the Roman economy have failed to elucidate the social aspects of the economy altogether, those which have addressed this issue have not tested the ideas which they propose. What is needed, therefore, is a well grounded, theoretically informed archaeological investigation into the social implications of a given economic system. What we need to consider are the distributions of particular types of goods and the relative quantities in which they appear in a given context in order to understand patterns of distribution and consumption, and the social factors which may influence them. In order to accomplish this, we must more freely embrace theoretical viewpoints which enable us to move beyond an empirical assessment of the evidence and attempt to understand the social dimension of the archaeological record. This can be accomplished more fully where there is a large corpus of data, collected with these objectives in mind upon which to base an interpretation. However, in order to wholly appreciate what is needed, it is important to recognise both the potential and the shortcomings of the evidence now at our disposal.

Though the two are closely interrelated, society is not so much a facet of economic behaviour as economy is a result of social practices and demands. Economy could never function without society. All too often, economic studies have tended to ignore the human element; one must never forget that it is people who demanded these goods and thus caused them to be moved. Furthermore, it was people who actually transported them. Social practice is really the focus of all archaeological research. In this, Roman archaeology and the archaeology of late Antiquity should be seen as no different. The following section will demonstrate how this approach may be applied to the archaeological record.

### *Case study: Ostia*

The Grandi *Horrea* are located by the ancient course of the Tiber just to the North of the *Decumanus Maximus* (Figure 1). They are easily the largest *horrea* yet discovered in Ostia and are important in understanding the processes behind the movement of goods into and through the town. Whilst we are somewhat hampered by the lack of detailed publication for the site, it has been proposed that they were still in use in the early fourth century (Calza 1953: 153) and there is much that can be said from a study of the standing remains and their relationship to their surroundings in the town. One can see that the *horrea* are oriented such that their only visible access fronts on to the riverside, an important functional aspect of a building dealing with riverine trade. However, when one also considers that there is no access into the building from any other direction, and that to the south the *horrea* are obscured by a series of small buildings fronting onto the street, this offers some important insight into the way that the building was used and how it related to the rest of the city.

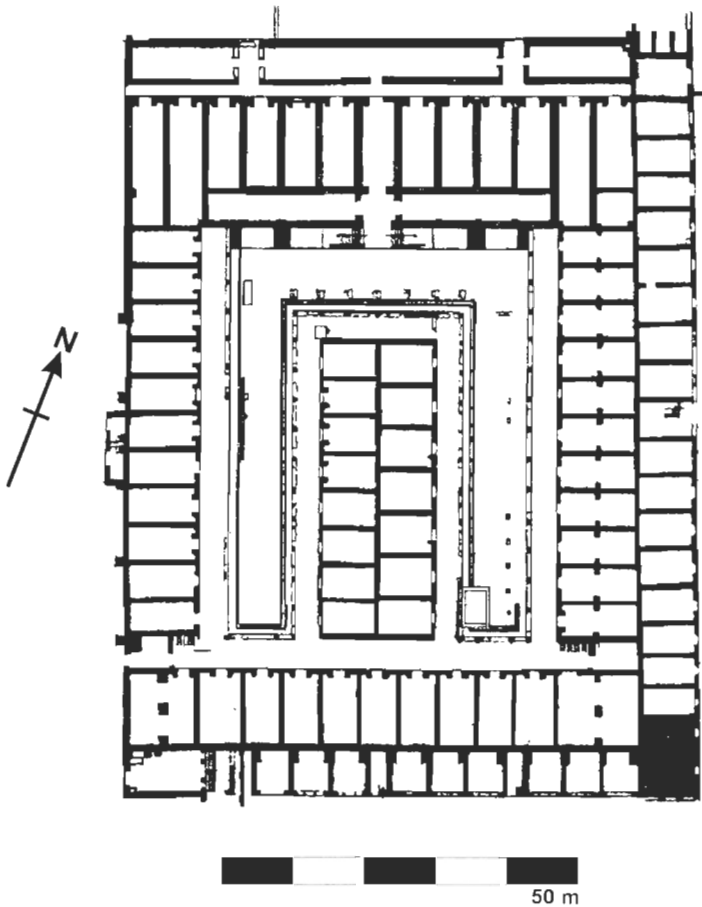


Figure 1. The Grandi Horrea (after Rickman 1971: 44)

The *Grandi Horrea* are particularly important as a type site for Ostian storehouses as they have been fully excavated and demonstrate the entirety of their plan. In particular, their standing remains demonstrate the presence of raised *suspensurae* flooring (Figure 2), as such these *horrea* must be treated as primarily being grain stores. As these have an entrance and frontage facing the river to the north one may expect them to have been situated in order to facilitate the movement of grain to and from the river. The overall pattern of *horrea* in Ostia (Figure 3) provides some interesting insights into the distribution of goods around the city. One can see that the larger *horrea* have all been identified as containing grain (Meiggs 1973). Although they have been seen as 'scattered' (Meiggs 1973: 282), the plan seems to suggest that they are actually concentrated toward the waterfront and in close proximity to the major public areas. This may indicate that there was a particular importance attached to grain. Or, alternatively and perhaps concomitantly, there was a much greater quantity of grain passing through the city and



Figure 2. *Suspensurae* flooring in the Grandi Horrea.

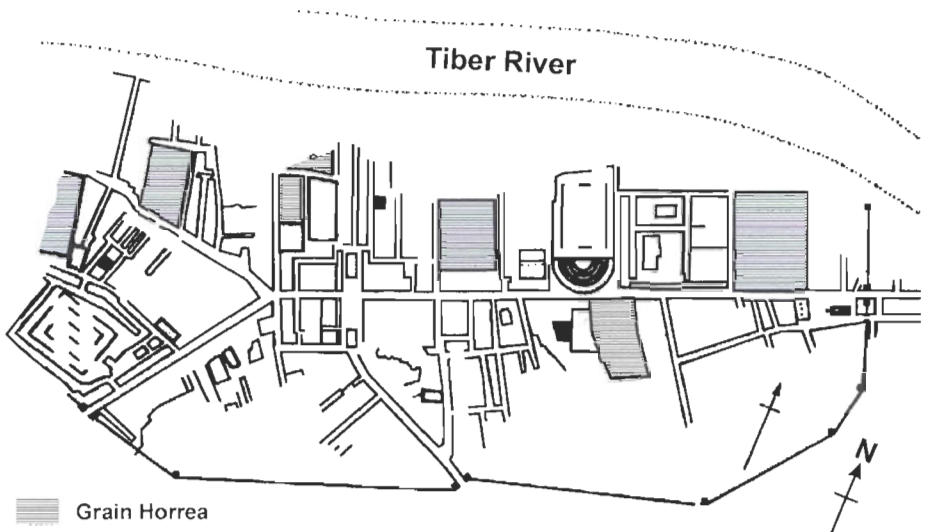


Figure 3. *Distribution of known Horrea.* (after Meiggs 1973: 284)

so it was considered expedient to place the storage facilities close to the water. The *horrea* identified with the storage of other commodities are almost without exception much smaller. Furthermore, they are all located further away from the river. It would not seem imprudent to suggest that this is indicative of a division between the goods intended for consumption and long-term storage in Ostia and those, such as grain, which formed part of the *Annona* and were destined for transport further up-river.

The economic implications of this are evident. The *Grandi Horrea* were a complex for the storage of grain, the most basic foodstuff in the ancient world, yet it was not constructed in such a way as to facilitate the supply of the population of Ostia. Furthermore, due to its relative size in comparison with other known *horrea* in Ostia, it must have accounted for a large part of the trade through the docks of the city. Its social implications, whilst less immediately apparent, are therefore significant. The proprietors of this complex must have been able to mobilise a large labour force in order to deal with the quantity of goods being stored in the *horrea*. This would have been at best a seasonal occupation due to the restricted sailing seasons in the ancient Mediterranean and implies that there was a large amount of labour available within the city on an ad-hoc basis.

The idea of short term or temporary labour has been postulated for the construction industry (De Laine 2000); why not for other purposes too? Indeed, De Laine suggests that unemployed labourers may have found work at the docks. This freedom for labourers to effectively hire themselves out wherever needed argues against ideas of tight control over or marked distinctions between various professions and might enable a wider re-assessment of the shipping mechanisms in place in the Late Empire.

It would be possible to see the existence of the various guilds as merely providing the organisation for the shipments, hiring free labour when needed for the physical task of actually moving these goods into and out of the warehouses. Without wider comparison, it is difficult to suggest any general patterns but this offers one possibility.

To illuminate further this point, it is necessary to draw on other material evidence. One of the very few well-published excavated sites at Ostia is the *Terme del Nuotatore* (Carandini & Panella 1973). The site lies to the south of the *Decumanus Maximus* (Figure 4) and is located away from the major thoroughfares of the city. The importance of this site is due not to its function as a bath house but rather to its mid-third century abandonment and use as a dump. Firstly, this in itself is suggestive of changing patterns within society which may have led to the disuse of a public bathing facility. This may be attributable to a general decline in the use of public bathing facilities or simply that the facilities formerly provided by the *Terme del Nuotatore* were now being provided elsewhere. Secondly, the nature of the deposits in the site would indicate that we cannot ascribe the disuse of the baths to a general abandonment or depopulation of the city. The presence of a large proportion of Tunisian oil amphorae datable to the fourth century (Keay 1984; 1998) would suggest a thriving import of commodities into the city, concomitant with the demands of a settled population.

Analyses carried out on the amphorae remains subsequent to excavation have revealed a startling increase in the proportion of African amphorae beginning in the late Severan period or by the late third century (Panella 1986: 65). By the fourth century the proportion of African amphorae had reached 45.1% of the total (Panella 1986: 66). Of these, amphorae which can be identified with the production and shipment of oil account for 53.1% of the total number of African amphorae. The area known as *ambiente XVI* disclosed amphorae remains in two discrete stratigraphic layers. The upper '*Strato I*' represents the post destruction layer of deposition following the mid third century abandonment of the site (Anselmino et al. 1977:



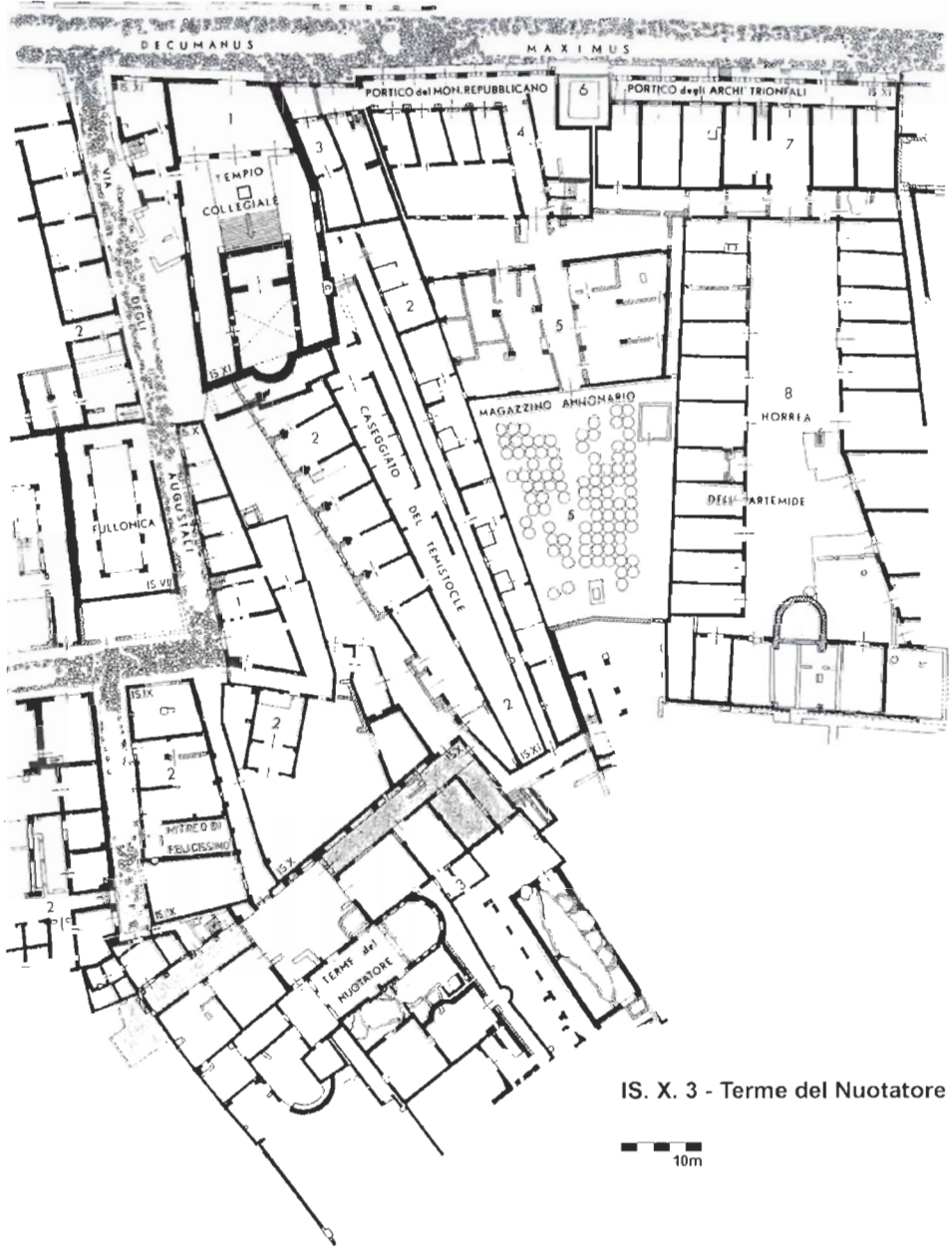


Figure 4. Location of the Terme del Nuotatore. (after Carandini 1973: Tav. 1)

14). This layer contained a total of 1125 amphorae fragments (Anselmino et al. 1977: 244), a large proportion of which seem to have been African. This definition between two layers of deposition would seem indicative of an organised policy. If the deposits were ad-hoc it would be far more likely that there would be a single, undifferentiated stratigraphic layer covering the entire post-use period of the site. As it stands, there would seem to have been two discrete depositional episodes, each occurring over a short period of time with an interval between them. This is not a characteristic associated with a disorganised, continuously used dump. One can therefore postulate that the later deposition identified as *Strato I* is concomitant with increased imports of African goods following the redirection of the Egyptian grain fleet.

This sudden surge in the proportion of African amphorae can be confidently ascribed to the *Annona* shipments. However, these deposits also reveal details about the means by which these goods reached the populations of the cities to which they were transported. The location of these deposits, away from the major *horrea*, the main thoroughfares and piazzas echo the changes that can be seen in Rome in the same period. The lack of a replacement site for Monte Testaccio by the *horrea* of the Emporium suggests that this change in the pattern of amphora deposition is reflective of a changing pattern of distribution and consumption within Roman society. What is seen in the late third and early fourth centuries is a shift from the tightly controlled, centralised distributive network evidenced by the Dressel 20s that form Monte Testaccio (Remesal-Rodríguez 1998). It has been postulated that Monte Testaccio is composed of 1,334,000,000 kilograms of amphora sherds. This equates to roughly 53,359,800 whole amphorae which accumulated over a period of two centuries (Rodríguez-Almeida 1984; 1994).

The fourth century and the rise of the African oil amphorae see a more decentralised distributive network. This, in turn, is indicative of a relaxation of the state monopoly of imports and an increased reliance on quasi independent shippers to bring in the commodities required in the urban markets of Ostia and indeed, of Rome.

What is then seen from the admittedly limited evidence of these two sites is an often contradictory, yet undeniably illuminating, set of data. At the most basic level, the *Grandi Horrea* suggest that the economic focus of the city was outward looking, that its functional importance was the movement of goods up the Tiber towards Rome. From the restricted means of access to this building, we can further infer that there was a degree of separation between those goods destined for transshipment and those which would be distributed within the city. If we see the grain passing through the *Grandi Horrea* as being destined for Rome, the access into the building would suggest that goods destined for consumption in Ostia were stored and distributed from other locations.

This has resonance with the apparent division of oil between that destined for the *Annona* or the 'Rome levy' and that which was not; as recorded on the *Ilot De L'Amirauté* in Carthage (Peña 1998). The deposits at the *Terme del Nuotatore* would suggest that the city was still a centre of population in the Late Roman period but, as the bath house was abandoned there was some form of shift occurring in the social behaviour of elements of the population.

With such a limited data set one is only able to hypothesise about what this may mean. However, it can be suggested with a fair degree of certainty that the economic changes occurring in the fourth century were accompanied by significant alterations within the fabric of late Roman society. In Ostia we can see this as a shift in focus of activity and the structured re-use of an abandoned building as a dump for the refuse of the city. The quantity of material found in the *Terme del Nuotatore* alone is not sufficient to suggest a thriving population, but the structured manner in which the deposits were formed suggests that there was still control by some civic authority and as such is important in refuting ideas of a decline in either social

organisation or the population of the city. It can be suggested that Ostia remained an important centre for the import and export of goods to and from Rome, hence important for the society of that city. Despite the construction of the harbours at Portus, the *Grandi Horrea* still fulfilled this function well into the late empire. If the grain stored there was not going to feed the population of Ostia, then it must have been some part of the wider trading networks which linked Rome to the Mediterranean as a whole.

### Conclusion

This paper has presented a very brief overview of the complexities involved in the exploration of Late Roman society through the medium of economic evidence. The preceding discussion has been a conscious attempt to identify the questions which need to be answered in order to form a better understanding of this subject. Furthermore, it has begun to construct a framework upon which future thinking regarding the Late Roman economy can be based. Although there are problems with the current state of the evidence available for this type of study, this paper has espoused a different way of looking at these issues, and through attempting to apply this approach to the archaeological evidence we can see where its potential and its shortcomings lie. By looking at patterns of economic distribution, it is possible to infer patterns of social organisation as the various modes of distribution necessitated different social practices for their operation. In this case, one can suggest that these practices were linked to the provision of the *Annona* and therefore the governance of the Roman state. The scattered nature of deposits can be equated to a more dispersed pattern of distribution of goods prior to consumption and a decentralised yet organised system of disposal. This paper has also drawn attention to the problems inherent in making generalisations based on an understanding of one or two supposedly typical sites. The *Terme del Nuotatore* has itself often been used in this way, to provide a foundation for economic histories of the western Mediterranean. Yet it is still not fully understood in relation to other sites within the city of Ostia. The lack of systematic excavation has precluded a regional study within the city. However, this paper has demonstrated how one can approach the question of the way in which buildings like the *Grandi Horrea* may have been used.

This paper has been able to show that there is the potential to explore the evidence further and that there are still important questions to be asked of the data currently available for study. With the publication of more material from excavations at Ostia it should be possible to test further these ideas with respect to that particular city. However the real advances will come through relating this to the wider Mediterranean context. What is now required is a wider synthesis of the available data from sites around the Mediterranean, both published and unpublished, in order to explore what patterns may emerge from them.

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