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Pact 27 - I.3 : Anthony Bonanno

Aspects of the Socio-Economic Structure of Roman Maritime Commerce

Introduction

Talking about socio-economic structure of Roman Maritime Commerce on this occasion and to the present audience makes me feel like carrying the proverbial coals to Newcastle.

I must confess straightaway that this is a totally new field of research for me. Until I obtained my doctorate from London University in 1975, and for a couple of years after, I concentrated my energy almost solely on Classical art, in particular Roman portraiture in relief; which explains the inclusion of the third part of my paper which some of you may find intrusive in the discussion of the theme of this conference. Since then, with my assumption of teaching duties at the University of Malta, barring one or two occasional contributions to Roman sculpture, I was forced by geographical, economic and logistical circumstances to focus my attention on the archaeology of my homeland.

To socio-economic approaches of archaeological research I turned my attention in 1985, but my contribution then was related to the inhabitants of the Maltese archipelago who in prehistoric times produced those extraordinary megalithic buildings which never desist from arousing the wonder and admiration of visitors (Bonanno, 1986). In actual fact, to the economy of the Maltese islands under Roman occupation I had, in 1976, dedicated a paper in which I tried to identify the more evident sources, as well as the less evident ones, from which they derived their means of survival at a time when, as a result of the prevailing political situation, the islands had lost their military strategic importance which they always enjoyed and turned to economic advantage whenever a different power held sway over them from that ruling neighbouring lands, particularly Sicily (Bonanno, 1976). But the overwhelming preponderance of the prehistoric archaeological heritage of my country and the fact that I have so far remained alone in

the teaching of this discipline in its one University have forced me to postpone the study of Roman Malta to a later time, hopefully in the near future.

You would understand, therefore, that when I first received the kind invitation from the President of the Societat Catalana d'Arqueologia to take an active part in this conference my first reaction was to try to put together a paper on Malta's role in Roman maritime commerce, about which literary, epigraphic as well as archaeological data exist that need only to be collated and discussed. This would have been a much easier task for me and one which, I think, would have borne more tangible results than what I am about to deliver to you.

I am sure you would allow me a couple of seconds, at this stage, to take the opportunity to express my deep gratitude to the organizers of this conference both for their kind invitation and their hospitality. It is out of respect for the rules of hospitality, in particular Mediterranean hospitality that, when I found myself assigned to this Round Table, I accepted whole heartedly, albeit with some trepidation, to take part in it even though it implied an extra effort of my part and even though I was pretty sure that had I asked, I would have been accorded a change of topic to suit my desires. I am quite satisfied to have taken that decision because the preparation of this paper has opened for me a new horizon, full of pleasant surprises and satisfactions and from which more light might be forthcoming on a number of aspects of Maltese archaeology.

In my readings, for example, I learnt more on Roman cargo ships, their size and the relationship between their tonnage and the weight of their anchors. This led me to think that it might be possible to arrive at a better identification of the ship which must have dropped close to the northern coast of Malta, probably as a result of a shipwreck, the largest anchor ever to be registered for antiquity — the stock is almost four meters long. By calculating the weight of the whole anchor, of which only the stock has been discovered, one will be able to calculate the size of the ship and, perhaps, its purpose or category. I would welcome any help from specialists in this field. This, however, I presume, falls under the topic of a later Round Table in this meeting and I would be grateful if the matter were raised then.

Several other Roman anchor stocks have been fished out of the sea off the Maltese coasts, both near Qawra Point (from where the gigantic stock just mentioned came) and from other shipwreck sites which still need archaeological investigation, but none of them have, to my knowledge, any inscription or mark of identification like the ones that have been studied by my colleague Piero Gianfrotta together with Antoinette Hesnard in their contribution to the prosopography of Roman Maritime Commerce and to the social standing of the people involved in it (Gianfrotta-Hesnard, 1988).

Social attitudes to commerce

Like me, you have probably found yourselves one time or another, in introductory courses to Archaeology, comparing the methodology of this discipline with that of detective work in which the investigator has to rely mainly on two sources of information :

- a. the statements of the witness, or witnesses (if any), who might be biased for some reason or other, and who tend to give a version of the truth which is distorted in varying degrees ;
- b. the actual clues : fingerprints, cigarette-buds, foot-prints or tyre-marks, in short, whatever traces the crime perpetrator inadvertently leaves behind. The latter are in themselves undeniable, objective truths (often much more reliable than the versions given by witnesses) but when it comes to their interpretation there is no guarantee it will always be the correct one. It is by combining the two areas of investigation that the detective has the best possibility of arriving at the closest version of the factual truth. The third field of investigation, which is probably the most difficult to complete, because it is the least tangible and least palpable, is the search for the motivations behind the crime, as well as behind the varying versions of the facts given by the interrogated.

I do not think I would have the courage to ask you for even a few minutes' grace to explain the analogy, but I am sure you would agree with me that if there is an area in the study of the world of ancient Rome in which the investigator has to rely more on objective archaeological data, but at the same time taking into account, and giving due weight to, the statements made on the subject by contemporary writers, namely the written sources, that area must be the question of social attitudes to commerce among the Roman aristocracy on the one hand, and their actual participation, or lack of it, in commercial activity on the other hand.

The problem stems from the apparent incompatibility between the impression of utter contempt against *mercatura*, *mercatores*, *navicularii* and (under the empire) *negotiatores* in favour of agriculture and landed property we derive from our literary sources, and the actual evidence from epigraphic, archaeological and, as we shall see, even from other literary sources, confirming the participation (albeit indirect) of the wealthy members of the aristocracy in commercial operations, particularly those connected with seaborne trade. While Finley (1973, p. 57) stresses the importance of Roman senatorial writings, such as Cicero's *De Officiis*, the letters of Younger Pliny and the *Cena Trimalchionis*, as « not a bad guide » to prevailing Roman social and economic behaviour, John D'Arms (1981, p. 18-19) rightly warns us to distrust official ideologies of any age as they tend to give an imperfect picture of realities of social systems.

It is true that, as Finley (1973, p. 60) observes, several Roman writings (in particular Livy 21, 63.4; Cic. *Verr.* II, 4.8, 5.46, 5.167; Tac. *Ann.* 4.13.2; Cic. *De Off.* 1.151; Philos. *Vit. Soph.* 2.21) and legal texts, namely the *lex Claudia* of 218 B.C. which remained technically in force through the late Republic and the early empire (Scaev. *Dig.* 50.5.3; Paul, *Sententiae*, Leiden frag. 3; Cic. *Verr.* 5.45), emphasize the low status of the professional traders and manufacturers throughout Roman history.

Nevertheless, in an exquisite little paper delivered in a similar international meeting held at Antibes in 1985, André Tchernia (1986) has remarkably succeeded to establish, from an intelligent analysis of a sizable number of literary sources (among which, Sall. *Cat.* II, 7; Colum. I, 7-10; Sen. *Ep.* 17, 10; Suet. *Nero* XI, 4; *Dig.* 14.3.5.2), the important, I should say indispensable role played by the rich aristocracy in supporting the organization of maritime commerce through *faeneratio* (money lending) without actually participating in any direct way in the enterprise. Tchernia, like his predecessors (Rougé, 1966, 1980 and 1985; Veyne, 1979; Andreau, 1978 and 1985; Hopkins, 1983) shows convincingly that money lending at an interest to finance commerce, particularly maritime commerce, which required a heavy initial investment, was a constant profit-making activity practiced on the same level as agriculture by the most respectable members of the Roman aristocracy. From a letter of Seneca (*Ep.* 119.1) he even snatches glimpses of the mechanisms involved in contracting such loans through the intervention of middlemen (*proxenetae* and *intercessores*).

The basic difference between the position of Tchernia (1986) and that of D'Arms (1981) is, I find, that the latter believed that the aristocratic capitalists did not stop at *faeneratio* but engaged also in partnerships. The most important example on which disagreement is registered seems to be that of Cato's *faenus nauticum* towards the end of his life (Plut. *Cat. Mai.* 21. 5-6) which is taken by U. von Lübtow (1975, p. 107) and J. D'Arms (1981, p. 39-40) as extending to a share in the company in which Cato was represented by Quinctio (his freedman), while Tchernia (1986, p. 127) follows Rougé (1980, p. 293) in denying such a « direct participation in the enterprise, its benefits and risks ». Other examples are, however, given by D'Arms (1981, p. 40-45, 54-55) of private commercial partnerships (*societates privatae*) of which members of the aristocracy were part and the social composition of which was normally quite heterogeneous and cut across boundaries of rank and status. The evidence in favour of this heterogeneity is gradually, but steadily accruing from archaeological research especially, as we shall see in a minute, from data produced by underwater archaeology.

When it comes to discussing the socio-economic structure of Roman seaborne commerce one cannot possibly avoid plunging into the by now

vexed question of the involvement, whether directly or indirectly, if at all, of the senatorial class in this type of commerce. Although a general introduction for the sake of the less initiated among us would not be out of place in this session I do not feel competent to make it myself in view of the short time I have been able to occupy myself with the problem and, above all, in view of the presence here among us of scholars who are deeply immersed and much better versed in all its facets. I shall, therefore, limit myself to call your attention to two works (at present still in the press) which impinge in one way or another on the debate and which have been kindly passed on to me for possible discussion in this meeting.

The first one is a paper by C.R. Whittaker entitled «Trade and the aristocracy in the Roman empire» that was delivered at the VIIIth Congress of the International Federation of the Societies of Classical Studies in Dublin, 1984, and is about to be published in *OPUS*, 1985.

Whittaker's paper could be understood, and has in fact been interpreted, as a negation of the existence of a proper long distance maritime commerce. I hold myself subject to correction, but I have the impression that this is not the real message of the British scholar. In fact, to quote Whittaker's own words, «the fact that the rich estate owners did transport their own produce long distances overseas is not in doubt». What he sets out to challenge, and to my mind with some success, is the «value of the classical model of market forces, with its talk of price wars, cost effectiveness and new techniques of mass production» and the preconceptions that have characterized several studies published on this topic that display «a surprising convergence of views between Marxists and those who accept the model of competing markets best known through Rostovtzeff». Whittaker has put together an amount of cogent evidence to suggest that transportation of state commodities (*annona*, military supplies and produce from imperial estates) was so overwhelming that it allowed comparatively very little space for private entrepreneurial trade, although private *negotiatores* and *navicularii* were regularly used for the purpose. Consequently, in his view, most of the free, private trade (the *commeatus privatus*) was carried as supplementary cargo. His main argument was *not* «that the market prices never mattered in the world of Roman economics or that demand never stimulated supply» but that «the fact that Roman aristocrats made profits from trade must be sharply separated from entrepreneurial activity in trade». And it is the latter argument, I expect, that will find the greatest opposition among many of us here.

That banking, money lending and financing *negotia* through client intermediaries was a major source of senatorial wealth has, as we have already seen, been firmly established (see also Pavis d'Escurac, 1977;

D'Arms, 1981 ; Pleket, 1983) and has only been seriously dismissed, so far as I can recollect, by Syme (1977) and Whittaker (1985, n. 46). I agree with the latter that one needs not always see senators or provincial aristocrats « lurking behind freedmen in commerce », and that one must distinguish between rich patrons employing *clientes* (*ingenui*, *liberti* or *servi*) to sell the surplus from their own lands, on the one hand, and actually involving them in the running of entrepreneurial transactions from which they derived their cut, on the other hand. The literary and epigraphic sources, however, provide us with examples of both practices (D'Arms, 1981: esp. Ch. 6 ; Pleket, 1983). This does not, however, imply the exclusion of freedmen operating independently (Garnsey, 1981).

The second paper I would like to bring to your attention is concerned with new contributions from underwater archaeology to the question relating to the participation of the senatorial class in maritime commerce. The view that senators, who were often great capitalists, made use of the services of their clients of free, freedmen and slave status (who naturally received a share of the profits) either to manage for them the transportation of commodities or, more often, through financial loans is now receiving further confirmation from a crossed prosopographic study of the names stamped on amphorae stoppers (that is, not those stamped on the amphorae themselves) and those on Roman anchors ; which are the names of *mercatores* in the first case, and of *navicularii* in the second.

The material connected with this research has been presented by Piero Gianfrotta and Antoinette Hesnard in the Congress on Roman amphorae held in Siena in 1986. I am most grateful to my friend Piero Gianfrotta for kindly making available to me a manuscript summary of this important paper before it is published. This is certainly a very important discovery because it illustrates with facts (i.e., names of *ingenui*, *liberti* and *servi*) what has for years been the subject of contrasting discussions ; another instance in which archaeology has played a determining role in clarifying obscure gaps left by written documentation.

For further details of this study I can only refer you to its publication, due within this year. I shall limit myself to mentioning a few points of interest.

The stamps in question are found on stoppers of clay (pozzolana) which constitute a system of plugging of wine amphorae limited to central Italy from the beginning of the second century B.C. to the Augustan age. The stamps occur in three types : the first showing names of persons ; the second only geometric designs ; and the third initials accompanied by geometric designs. Several names have been integrated with various degrees of difficulty. The evidence collected goes a long way to confirming the presence of

mercatores or their representatives on cargo ships, as suggested by other sources both for the late Republic (Rougé, 1966, p. 288 ff., with references from Cicero) and for the empire (*Dig.* XIV.2.4.1 ; XVIII.6). In some cases all the amphorae are stamped by the same person thus representing the cargo of one *mercator*, in others they were stamped by different *mercatores*. In one case, the shipwreck of Dramont A, one and the same person had his stamp on the whole amphorae cargo as well as on the anchors (Sex[tius] Arrius M[arci] f[ilius] thus proving that the *mercator* was also the *navicularius* who traded cargo on his own ship. Cases are also known of « polyvalent » *mercatores* who stamp amphorae of different types. It is to be remembered, nevertheless, that on other amphorae, like the Spanish ones, the *mercatores* do not appear on the stoppers but on the amphora body itself.

In spite of the difficulties encountered in the identification of the names new elements can already be desumed from this study and tentative connections have been made with *patroni* in Minturnae (L. Carisianus, Marcus and Caius Staius). The Clovatus of the Gran du Roi could be connected with Pompei (or even Capua and Cuma) where the name is recorded. As for the social status of the persons represented by the stamps, it is clearly quite varied : many stamps refer to freeborn traders whereas others denote freedmen. Only a few so far refer to slaves. After all, the situation revealed by these names is quite congruent with that one desumes for the late Republic from the reading of Cicero's letters (D'Arms, 1981, p. 41, n. 111) where it is clear that maritime commerce was undertaken at different levels, through slaves, freedmen and friends.

I am not sure what reaction the last section of my paper is going to have but I hope you will forgive me for failing to resist the temptation of letting my art-historical background to resurface. I have to confess that I derived particular satisfaction from this piece of research because in the course of it I met a number of personalities that I had been acquainted with only from my studies of Roman portraiture in relief. I had practically given up the latter field of study for the last thirteen years owing to my almost total commitment to Maltese archaeology, and to the very serious bibliographic shortcomings of Maltese libraries.

So you can imagine how pleasantly surprised I was to learn that among the members of the senatorial class during the first two centuries of the empire, who were indirectly involved in maritime trade through their *clientes*, there were several who have been identified among the emperor's companions represented on official commemorative reliefs. Among these the first I know of is L. Licinius Sura, an *oriundus* of Hispania Tarraconensis, three times consul, who received the honour of a public statue on the Caelian Hill (Groag, 1926, p. 471-85 ; *PIR*² L, 253) and whose *libertus*, L. Licinius

Secundus, was a well established *mercator* at Tarraco and Barcino (*ILS*, 1955, p. 6956; *AE*, 1957, p. 26; Syme, 1969, p. 232, n. 119). Licinius Sura has been identified among Trajan's military associates in a number of scenes on Trajan's Column (Bandinelli, 1970, p. 229; Bonanno, 1976a, p. 72-73, pls. 147, 151); and as the togate man behind the emperor on the panel to the right of the inscription facing the countryside of the Arch of Trajan at Benevento (Rotili, 1972, p. 90, 107, 145, fig. 113, pl. CXXVI; Hassel, 1966, p. 18) although I myself find the iconography of the two characters somewhat incompatible, and others have suggested another identification of it, namely, with Lusius Quietus (Von Domaszewski, 1899, p. 190; Pietrangeli, 1947, p. 2).

Second in chronological order come the two Caesernii brothers: T. Caesernius Staius Quinctus Macedo Quinctianus, *patronus* of Aquileia, a companion of Hadrian on his journey to the East and suffect consul at the outset of the reign of Antoninus Pius (*PIR*² C, 182); and his brother T. Caesernius Staius Quinctius Staianus Memmius Macrinus, also suffect consul and companion to Hadrian in the East (*PIR*² C, 183). Both of them appear several times in the emperor's retinue on the Hadrianic roundels which now form part of the Arch of Constantine (Bulle, 1919, p. 155-9; Bonanno, 1976a, p. 100-1, 103, 106). The former of the two is known to have had oil and wine from his estates distributed in amphorae at Aquileia, again through freedmen intermediaries. Lastly, I would like to mention C. Fulvius Plautianus, Septimius Severus' close friend and pretorian prefect who, like Severus, was African by birth, a man of the highest rank, consul, and father of Plautilla, wife of Caracalla (*PIR*² F, 554). His image has been tentatively identified in a headless figure on the right of Septimius Severus in the Submission scene B on Panel III of that emperor's arch in the Forum Romanum (Brilliant, 1967, p. 207, 254). Others, however (*viz.*, Budde, 1955, p. 3, n. 7; Bonanno, 1976a, p. 144, pl. 271), see Geta in this headless figure and Plautianus in the bearded man between it and Severus. Plautianus and his daughter Plautilla have also been identified in the two erased figures accompanying Caracalla on one of the two panels adorning the Arch of the Argentarii in the Forum Boarium. Together with their images, their names were erased from the inscription of the arch after the murder of Plautianus and the banishment of Plautilla in A.D. 205 (Haynes-Hirst, 1939, p. 22-3, fig. 13; Wiggers-Wegner, 1971, p. 125). It appears that part of Plautianus' wealth derived from marble trade and that he was responsible for the importation of that immense quantity of marble which went into the decoration of the forum of Lepcis Magna, his native town (*IRT*, 1952, n° 530).

The above are just three of a list of eighteen early imperial notables collected by D'Arms (1981, Ch. 7) whose highly diversified lucrative interests included seaborne trade.

A further point of interest emanating from Roman official historical relief is that *mercatores*, namely, the *mercatores* of the Forum Boarium and Forum Olitorium are represented by three figures and their protective divinities (Portunus, Hercules, Apollo) on one of the panels of the Arch of Trajan at Benevento (Rotili, 1972, p. 102-106, pls. CIII, CVII-CXII). The most significant thing to note in this context is that the size of the *mercatores* is substantially smaller than that of the Emperor and of his entourage. This is one of the earliest instances of hierarchical representation by means of size differentiation in Roman official relief. Do we take it to reflect the inferior social standing of this category of Roman society? I may be wrong, but I seem to find an echo of Cicero's judgement of these men almost two centuries earlier: *homines tenues, obscuro loco nati* (Cic. *Verr.*, 5.167).

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