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Approaches to Quantifying the Roman Economy
 Colloquium, Wednesday 27th September 2006
 Headley Lecture Theatre, Ashmolean Museum, Beaumont St., Oxford

“In this meeting we will discuss approaches to quantifying the Roman economy, concentrating on theory and models, methodology, and the viability (or not) of particular kinds of metrics”.

This was the first in a proposed series of annual colloquia based upon the Oxford Roman Economy Project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which began in October 2005 and is due to end in September 2010. The aims of the project are to address

“the fundamentals of the Roman imperial economy and will provide a detailed analysis of major economic activities (agriculture, trade, commerce, mining), utilising quantifiable bodies of artefactual and documentary evidence and placing them in the broader structural context of regional variation, distribution, size and nature of markets, supply and demand”.

The chronological parameters of the study are 100 BC to 300 AD, so somewhat outside of my own which are from the end of the Hannibalic War to the death of the Emperor Trajan (c.200 BC to 117 AD). The choice of these parameters allows the study of the greatest period of expansion and economic growth; in continuing to follow the fortunes of the Roman Empire until 300 AD the Oxford Roman Economy Project will also be following its perceived decline. It is an ambitious project.

The day began with a general introduction to the project and to the day by the project leaders, Alan Bowman and Andrew Wilson. The morning was more or less devoted to the problem of ancient demography, with papers by Elio Lo Cascio on *Urbanisation as a proxy of demographic and economic growth* and Lisa Fentress on *Peopling the countryside: Roman demography in the Albegna Valley and Jerba*. The morning session was rounded off by Alan Bowman’s *Quantifying Egyptian Agriculture*. It did not strike me until after the colloquium that despite so many papers on demography the vexed question of whether to go for a low count or a high count for the population of Italy for the period never really came up. The afternoon session was a little more varied, beginning with Andrew Wilson’s *Approaches to quantifying Roman trade*, Dominic Rathbone *Earnings and costs: living standards and the Roman economy* and finally Matthew Ponting on *Roman silver coinage: mints, metallurgy, and production*. The focus of all the papers was on the methods used to obtain the data and on how the data could be used to confirm (or

otherwise) results from other methods or from comparative material. The day was a very full one. The major problem, as is usual, was that there was not really much time after the papers or during the breaks in which to ask questions or for discussion. On a personal note, I at last met the 'other' Susan Walker.

The importance of this colloquium, and the project as a whole, is indicated by the interest it generated. The venue had to be changed in order to accommodate twice the number of people at first anticipated; even then the lecture hall was almost full to capacity. I think it is planned to publish the papers given at this colloquium on the Oxford Roman Economy Project web site at some point.

www.romaneconomy.ox.ac.uk

I would like to thank the School of Historical Studies for covering part of my travel expenses for this colloquium.