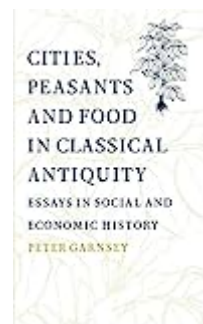


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Garnsey. *Cities, Peasants and Food in Classical Antiquity: Essays in Social and Economic History.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xvi + 336 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-59147-8.



Reviewed by Michael Kucher (Program in Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, University of Washington, Tacoma)

Published on H-Urban (November, 1999)

At once sweeping in its scope and microscopic in its level of detail, Peter Garnsey's scholarship on the material foundations of ancient Greek and Roman life is a pleasure to read and a valuable addition to our knowledge of the subject. Divided into three sections, "Cities," "Peasants," and "Food," the collection of sixteen previously published essays addresses a period of history spanning 1100 years. Each section has something to offer the student of the urban world in antiquity. Editing by Walter Scheidel, the Moses and Mary Finley Research Fellow in Ancient History, Darwin College, University of Cambridge, has given the volume a cohesion obtained by few such collections.

The greatest surprise to the non-classicist (including this reviewer) is the state of the literature regarding the material foundations of the ancient world. The sorts of questions that classicists like Garnsey, Professor of the History of Classical Antiquity at Cambridge University, are now asking have outstripped the ability of traditional, literature-based scholarship to provide the answers. For instance, Garnsey writes "even well-documented cities like Pompeii lack economic studies" (pp. 69-70). Meanwhile, archaeologists—who have accumulated most of the data that would be useful in answering these questions—have often worked apart from other classicists. It appears that the opportunities to synthesize data have been too

few. Garnsey proves an exception to the pattern of fragmented specialization, overcoming the paucity of traditional documentary sources by deftly synthesizing into his work archaeological evidence with inferences built upon a deep knowledge of the Greek and Roman literary corpus. He succeeds in shedding new light on extremely elusive topics, for which classicists, urban historians, and those teaching Western Civilization will be grateful. This review will touch upon a few representative essays in each section in an attempt to delineate Garnsey's approach, his contribution to classical studies, and the utility of his work to readers of H-Urban.

A theme that ties much of this collection of essays together is the gradual and inexorable revolution that integrating non-literary sources is having on contemporary studies of Greek and Roman Antiquity. This theme emerges in the section devoted to cities. For instance, in his re-examination of property ownership patterns, "Urban Property Investment in Roman Society," Garnsey asserts that the scholar's first duty is to get past the "patrician rhetoric" of the sources in order to see how members of ancient elites were, in fact, investing in land (p. 66). Garnsey finds that despite the antiquated value system that privileged rural landholdings, there is plenty of evidence of urban investments despite their riskier nature, if one looks in the right places. Garnsey has an uncanny

ability to identify those sources and to exploit them fully.

"An Association of Builders in Late Antique Sardis" begins disarmingly enough with the exegesis of an inscription from A.D. 459 in which local builders bind themselves to certain standards of professional practice. The inscription records an agreement with a city official, which outlines procedures for resolving disputes between builders and clients in Sardis. >From this obscure, (and apparently unique) inscription, Garnsey builds concentric circles of contextual information that allow him to interpret the larger significance of the text, from which he derives the character of the building trade, the supply and demand of skilled labor, and the economic climate of the period from which it dates. Under his magisterial eye, a dry inscription becomes a window onto a moment of the economic history of Sardis, and the reader should not be surprised to learn that Garnsey's conclusions challenge the accepted view of the late antique economy. Garnsey focuses on the building boom that the inscription represents and finds that it "fits together very nicely" with the archaeological evidence (p. 86). He concludes, "the traditional picture of urban decline in as a gross distortion of the truth. The thesis of decline is the product of an over-concentration on the literary sources and a neglect of archaeology, or a misinterpretation of archaeological evidence—I have in mind the common assumption that a reduction in the intra-mural area of a city implies a reduction in the area of habitation and demographic decline" (p. 86). As a student of urban form who has drawn the same inference, this reviewer can only admire Garnsey's ability to revise our most fundamental assumptions.

Many of the essay sections on peasants concern the relationship between city and countryside and the role of peasants in the ancient economy. Garnsey's conclusions about the nature of the work force in agricultural economies will be of interest to urban historians. In Athens he finds that slave and peasant economies coexisted side by side (p. 94). In Roman Society, the picture was much more complex. Yes, slavery was widespread in Italy and Sicily, but tenancy was more usual in North Africa and Egypt. He concludes "The survival of the Empire depended ultimately on the capacity of successive governments to draw sufficient tax-revenue and military manpower from the agricultural population (p. 105). Words like "complex," "interdependent," and "overlapping" typify Garnsey's nuanced approach to parsing the evidence of classical antiquity.

Garnsey's examination of the role of peasants in the

work force leads him to the question of where they lived, providing the topic for another essay, "Where did Italian Peasants Live?" Garnsey begins in a manner typical of his style, by attempting to reduce the confusion of terms used to describe various sorts of peasants. He differentiates between small owner-cultivators, tenant farmers, and day laborers, which turn out to constitute overlapping categories (p. 107). He blames any misconceptions we might have about the nature of the peasantry on an over-dependence upon literary sources. His research suggests that the free laboring class as a whole was larger than previously thought; the role of slave labor in agriculture has been over-estimated; and that slave and free systems of labor were interdependent (p. 109). Once again he urges the addition of archaeological knowledge to what we know from literary sources, which he argues will reveal "a complex mosaic of settlement patterns" (p. 110). The non-specialist reader is grateful here and elsewhere for Scheidel's addenda. In this case he notes that Garnsey's conclusion, that "the majority of peasants lived spread out over the countryside" and not in agrotowns as some have argued, holds up despite the challenges it has faced (p. 131).

The history of food provides the topic of his final section. The growing number of books and articles on the subject testifies to culinary history's emergence from the sidelines of several disciplines to become a fashionable, even mainstream topic of study.[1] Long before its more widespread acceptance among scholars, Garnsey had recognized that the study of food and famine in ancient Greece and Rome would be fundamental to our understanding of that world. Garnsey's 1985 essay, "Grain for Athens," his first foray into the history of diet in antiquity, opens the third section of this book. Garnsey begins his study of the economic history of urban food supply with a review of the sizable literature on the subject. He finds little hard data, and that they are often of a contradictory nature. Despite the frequent lack of firm numbers, he is able to make some plausible estimates by combining fragmentary data such as that on imports and land under cultivation in the surrounding countryside. By showing that most scholars have previously underestimated the productivity of the Athenian hinterland, he concludes that the importance of grain imports to Athens had previously been exaggerated and "that Athens became dependent on foreign sources later than is generally assumed" (p. 194). Garnsey's mastery of the previous scholarship, the extreme caution with which he handles his data, and his highly nuanced argument, make his case persuasive, in this and all his essays.

Garnsey reveals unexpected dimensions to the question of diet in his essay "The Bean: Substance and Symbol" by showing how complex this one ingredient and its different levels of meaning can be. Garnsey is as comfortable discussing the physiological dimensions of "vicia faba" as its symbolic and philosophical aspects. In untangling the contested nature of the bean for the Pythagoreans and the Orphics, the approach he takes is typical of his work: "The matter is more complicated than this. . . . Even the philosophers—and gods—were not unanimously hostile. Pythagoras shunned beans, but Epicurus in a food shortage distributed them among his friends" (p. 215). The reader is left feeling as satisfied with the process of Garnsey's investigations as with his conclusions.

Walter Scheidel's work as editor has made this collection more useful to scholars. Scheidel seems uniquely suited in knowledge and temperament to the task of editing a volume that covers so many topics. In what are too modestly called "addenda," Scheidel's pithy historiographic essays sum up scholarship subsequent to each of Garnsey's essays and situate Garnsey's contributions to the body of twentieth-century scholarship. This ingenious solution to the dilemma of revising essays for re-publication in a collection deserves special mention.

Scheidel manifests his concern for the reader's convenience in the inclusion of the original page numbers and page breaks for each of the previously published essays in a volume that appears to be entirely free of even the smallest typographic errors. The inclusive bibliography, covering thirty-six pages and over eight hundred items is a wonderful asset. The index is generous in its level of detail. In an age when the task of editing a volume, especially one destined for an academic audience, is too often treated by publishers as a luxury to be avoided, it is an especial pleasure to see such loving attention paid to that task. Seldom has the partnership between an editor and scholar produced such a conspicuously felicitous outcome. Even a casual acquaintance with Peter Garnsey's work will reward the reader with new insights and new questions about a world we thought we knew well enough.

NOTE

[1]. See for instance *Lingua Franca's* "Breakthrough Books" at <http://www.linguafranca.com/>

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Michael Kucher. Review of Garnsey, Peter, *Cities, Peasants and Food in Classical Antiquity: Essays in Social and Economic History*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. November, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3568>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.