
The phenomenon of the Roman colonate, and the historiographical problems attendant upon it, have long been a thorn in the side of historians of the society and economy of the late Roman Empire. The stated aim of this monograph is ‘to show the circumstances surrounding [the colonate] and to discover to what measure these contributed to reducing free tenants to a position where they did not dare to leave the land they tilled, land which did not belong to them’ (15). Such a contextualisation must inevitably deal with the questions of depopulation and labour shortage, agri deserti, fiscal pressure, desertion of the land, debt slavery, laeti and dediticii.

Each of these, together with ‘the issue of freedom’ (1), is present in the current, rather brief, study. Ambitious in its scope and displaying a good grasp of the range of documentary evidence, it is essentially a collection of short essays loosely linked by the thematic nature of the title. After a fairly detailed Foreword, outlining the history of the scholarship, successive chapters deal with Tax and Freedom, Tax and Social Mobility, Debts and Freedom, Coloni Iuris Alieni, Adscripticii, Barbarians on Roman Territory and Inquilini. A Conclusion presents some interesting hypotheses, albeit ones which are not necessarily supported by the evidence presented in the preceding chapters.

A vast and impressive literature surrounds the colonate—J.-B. H. Savigny, Fustel de Coulanges, M.I. Rostovtzeff, Otto Seeck, A.H.M. Jones, G.E.M. de Ste Croix, Walter Goffart and J.-M. Carrié among others have assayed solutions to the question. This literature focuses primarily on the origins of the colonate as an institution, and its similarity to seigneurial relations in the Mediaeval period. The debate includes the following questions: Can the origins of the institution be found in public law, or in
private relationships between landlords and tenants in the late Roman period? How is the colonate to be connected to the processes of tax assessment and collection in the period? Did landlords or the State benefit most from the arrangement? What does the institution of the colonate reveal about the economic health of the late Roman Empire?

Miroslava Mircovic (M) signals her preferred solution to the question of the degradation of the status of *coloni* very early on (3), reviving Fustel de Coulanges’ argument that debt and rent arrears were responsible, and dismissing the currently prevailing theory of administrative and fiscal pressure. That is, she sees the origins of the colonate in the private rather than the public sphere. However, as she states, the aim of the work is not to create a new theory of the origins of the colonate; rather, it is to examine the process whereby free tenants were reduced to a position which has commonly been equated with that of slavery. Such an aim implicitly assumes that the punitive legislation of, for example, *CJ XI.53.1* and *CTh V.17.1*, was effectively enforced. Jones’ assertion that this was not the case, as well as his comment that laws are more useful as descriptions of existing conditions than of the curative measures taken to address them (*The Later Roman Empire* [1964]; *Eirene* 8 [1970]), render such an assumption problematic.

Nevertheless, a number of suggestions made throughout the work may fruitfully reward further examination. In discussing the sixth-century text, *P. Oxy. 2479*, M links it with another sixth-century papyrus—the reference should read *P. Oxy. 136* (583 AD) rather than *P. Oxy. 583* (583 AD)—to reach the conclusion that both tax and rents were collected from *enapographoi* (tenant farmers enrolled on the tax lists) by the *pronoetes* (estate overseer) at the same time. This calls into question the view of these two types of surplus extraction as somehow mutually exclusive. If this conclusion can be further tested, and extended to other regions of the Empire, it may allow for an answer to the problem posed by Chris Wickham (*Past and Present* 103 [1984])
concerning the relationship between the two, and the question may
turn out to rest upon a false dichotomy. This in turn would redirect
discussion of the colonate away from a purely fiscal or even
economic focus, since those aspects could be interpreted as changing
little in the period.

M also suggests that, ‘in certain ways, the situation of the
colonus resembled that of a cliens’ (112). Such a link is worth
pursuing. The complex interplay of the terms patronus and
dominus between, for example, CTh V.19.1 and Sidonius
Apollinaris Ep. V.19, together with M’s own view of the links
between rent arrears and the development of the colonus-
relationship, certainly allow for such an interpretation, and
would cast further doubt upon the current interpretation of the
colonate, which focuses upon the demands of the government at
the expense of the private details of these relationships. Moreover, it would allow for the possibility that a colonus might
in fact obtain some benefits from the relationship, as patronage
relationships are by their nature mutually exploitative.
However, such possibilities are not fully explored in the current
work.

Perhaps the most significant conclusion of this work is M’s
assertion:

‘The most efficacious way [for the Roman state] of keeping the
landless on the farms they cultivated... was to enable the
landlords to prevent them as private debtors from leaving.
This was a new departure for the Later Roman Empire:
although released from the capitatio, coloni in the most cases
were unable to leave because of their private debts and
obligations to the landowners. By remaining to cultivate the
land, they facilitated the payment of the iugatio.’ (123)

As already noted, such an interpretation is problematic in that it
places a great weight upon the interventionist nature of
legislation in the period. Moreover, it sits uneasily with her
continuing assertion that the private aspects of the relationship must take precedence over its public elements, quite apart from the issues surrounding the problematic interpretation of the terms *capitatio* (‘head-tax’) and *iugatio* (‘land-tax’).

In this case, though, the statement is significant in that it serves implicitly as a rejection of the thesis propounded by Goffart (*Caput and colonate: towards a history of late Roman taxation* [1974]) that the period in fact witnessed the opposite process; that is, a shift in the balance of responsibility for taxes from the shoulders of local elites to the centralised government. Goffart’s conclusions have seldom been accorded any attention, but for the study of taxation in the period to move on, it is essential that they should be. The criticism of Goffart’s position implicit in M’s statement may provide a starting point.

However, the work operates still within the long-established paradigms of crisis, depopulation, manpower shortage and oppressive tax. Moreover, as Carrié (*Opus 1* [1982]; *Opus 2* [1983]) has suggested, it is the historiographical construction of the colonate itself, the presupposition that it was in fact an ‘institution’, and the assumptions upon which such a construction is based that are in need of scrutiny. A reappraisal that simply reconstitutes existing paradigms without questioning their foundations offers little new to the study of the colonate. M too readily accepts the opinions of past scholars concerning the crisis of the late Roman Empire, asserting, for example, ‘Indebtedness of the *colonus* due to rental arrears... must have become widespread during the crisis of the Later Empire’ (45); and further, ‘A general decline in the economy, as well as the increasing difficulty in obtaining laborers in the Late Roman times resulted in more rigorous enforcement of existing laws’ (60). Such assertions, unsupported in the text by any primary evidence and in fact themselves questionable (see e.g. C.R. Whittaker in C.E. King [ed.] *Imperial Revenue, Expenditure and Monetary Policy in the Fourth Century AD* [1980] and T. Lewit *Agricultural Production in*
the Roman Economy AD 200-400 [1991]), are in need of critical reevaluation.

More serious, perhaps, is M's tendency to create a picture of the colonate based on evidence taken from widely disparate chronological periods. In this she is not alone; but telescoping, for example, evidence from a late fourth century law (CJ XI.48.4) and a sixth century papyrus (P. Oxy. 2479)—as M does (75)—creates an essentially static view of the colonate, denying it a chronological progression and flying in the face of the author's own stated intention to trace the process of degradation of status of the colonus. Likewise, an over-literal reliance upon the legal sources—as noted with reference to punishment of fugitive coloni in the case of CJ XI.53.1 and CTh V.17.1, and at 57—leads towards a picture of the colonate which, while purportedly non-legal and private, is in fact simply recreating and repropounding the existing legally-based paradigms.

This study has much to recommend it as a general introduction to and gazetteer of the important sources for the colonate of the late Roman Empire. Ultimately, however, it is an unsatisfying work. It remains bound to the current, problematic paradigms of interpretation, and offers little that had not already been offered by Roth Clausing in 1925. In particular, the social and economic context of the colonate remains to be adequately sketched.

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