

Between income and prestige: an essay on Roman landowning

Vladislav Semenov

Saint Petersburg, Russia; Saint Petersburg State University; e-mail: izhoravlad@mail.ru

Abstract

Many of those who get acquainted with the history of the ancient world, Roman history, and in particular the history of the economy of Ancient Rome, believe that the Romans organized their economy on the rational principle of income extraction, transferring the modern realities of the capitalist world to the history of the ancient world. However, this does not correspond to what our sources show. From them it can be seen that the economy of the ancient world was quite archaic, and demonstrative consumption played a big role in it, to indicate its status in society and prestige. One of the elements of prestigious consumption was in the possession of land. The Roman aristocracy is trying to increase the size of its possessions, despite the low and even negative profitability of the estates, going bankrupt at the same time.

Keywords: economics; history of Ancient Rome; ancient world; history; prestige; classical studies

In the history of the science of antiquity, there is a long-standing dispute about what the Roman slave-owning economy of the middle type was: whether it was a closed *oikos*, or vice versa, it worked in the market, how profitable it was (Weber 1891; Meyer 1898; Meyer 1923; White 1967; White 1970; White 1973; Kuziszchin 1973; Kuziszchin 1976; Kuziszchin 1999). These issues remain relevant. Against this background, the issue of prestigious economy and prestige in ancient society has recently become relevant (English 2005; Semenov 2014). The researchers drew attention to the fact that in ancient societies the tasks of economic activity did not always have a goal in the form of generating income, and conspicuous consumption was a very important element in ancient societies (English 2005; Semenov 2014). Therefore, sufficient adjustments can be made to the study of the economy of the ancient world. Classical history and economics are still often regarded as almost the first rationally arranged and aimed at generating income (Weber 1891; Meyer 1898; Meyer 1923; Rostovtzeff 1926), which would be aimed at the development of the economy. Under the influence of modernizing ideas, at the end of the 19th century – the first half of the 20th century (and sometimes later), researchers compared the ancient economy with the modern capitalist (or planned) economy, saw obvious parallels to them. Even now, in the general consciousness (especially on the basis of archaeological discoveries – after all, the Romans had plumbing, multi-storey buildings, telegraph, etc.), Roman society is directly compared with modern society. When studying the sources, a slightly different picture develops.

Authors of special agricultural treatises – Cato, Varro, Columella (White 1973; Semenov 2005b), Roman writers, among those who, one way or another, dealt with the issues of farming and its profitability (Pliny the Elder, etc.), in their letters Cicero (Kuziszchin 1976: 77 – 100; Bobrovnikova 2006: 75 – 84, 342-358; Semenov 2005c) and Pliny the Younger (Semenov 2005a) ambiguously relate to the income from their farms: on the one hand, all the authors write that every farm should be profitable, on the other hand, they write about it so

persistently that sometimes it seems that in reality the picture was not so joyful for the owners of medium-sized slave-owning estates (Semenov 2005c) (at least for a significant part of them). Cato in his treatise "Agriculture" more than once warns the owner of the estate from ruin, and advises squeezing income literally from everything. It is not by chance that Varro and other writers (Columella, Pliny the Elder) point out that it is possible to organize a profitable economy on a small plot of land, referring to the unprofitability of medium and large estates (Kuziszchin 1976: 135 – 250; Kuziszchin 1973: 102-130). From other sources (letters, historical works) we also see a sufficient number of ruined estate owners using slave labor (Semenov 2005a). Cato also says in his treatise that farming is not the most profitable, and sometimes (as follows from other sources) it is not at all a profitable type of economic activity. But even for an ordinary Roman, the fact of owning land was important. This was especially important for an aristocrat and a politician. Interestingly, it was not so much the income of the estate that was important, as the ownership of it itself. The farms described by Cato, Cicero, Pliny the Younger do not require the permanent presence the owner of the estate. The owner visits us, he receives some income (but may not receive it), rests there, although he solves pressing economic issues, but his main activity is in Rome and in the Senate (Semenov 2022). Therefore, already at the end of the III – beginning of the II century BC, an important figure of the average slave-owning economy becomes a great slave managing the estate. For the Roman, the prestige of owning the land itself was often more important than the income from this possession, and having lost this or that estate, the Roman tried either to return it or to acquire a new one. This applies not only to the aristocracy, but also to ordinary Romans. It is for the land as a true confirmation of the status of a full-fledged citizen that legionnaires fight during the civil wars (Shtaerman 1996: 84, 102 – 103). It is not for nothing that Cato, in his introduction to agriculture, said: "And when a good man was praised, he was praised like this: 'A good landowner and a good owner.' It was believed that those who were so praised were sought with the highest praise" (Porcius Cato M. Pref. 2-3 – Cato de agri cultura Liber), and we find this idea in one variation or another in many Roman authors. It should also be noted that in the history of antiquity, with rare exceptions, economic theory in the modern sense was not created. Treatises on the management of individual farms were limited to practical advice, without global theoretical generalizations: a villager ran his farm in the traditional way, the owner of a large slave-owning estate controlled it mainly while living in the city. In treatises, we often, as already mentioned above, meet tips for cost-effective management of rural property. This suggests that real things were different. But then why did the Romans fight for land holdings, and the aristocrats constantly sought to expand them? And the following answer arises: in the Classical world, and in general in antiquity, the status of a person and the external attributes of this status meant a lot, starting with clothes and ending with demonstrative consumption and demonstration of accumulated wealth. The juxtaposition of free and slave, citizen and stranger, was important and played a big role in public relations. In agricultural societies, and in Roman society as well, land ownership was an indicator of the status of a citizen, it also showed both the status and the position of a person in a civil collective. The aristocracy could not imagine itself without the presence of land holdings, so we observe a constant, although often ruinous, desire for the possession of land holdings, and their increase. What was important was not the income they brought, but the prestige of owning such possessions. Even those who were engaged in trade and buying off (with rare exceptions), that is, representatives of the equestrian class, having received the status of senators, and thus entering the aristocratic environment, sought to own land holdings.

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