

ATHENS AND ROME: LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Lecture 30 – The Ancient Economy - Rome

CLCS4007

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Agriculture

- ▣ Agrarian base – main occupation for the majority of the population.
 - free tenants vs. slave labour, supplemented with seasonal free labour.
- ▣ Influx of slaves during mid-late Republic – Gracchan reforms – slave rebellions.
- ▣ Increasing indications of “serfdom” by Late Antique period?

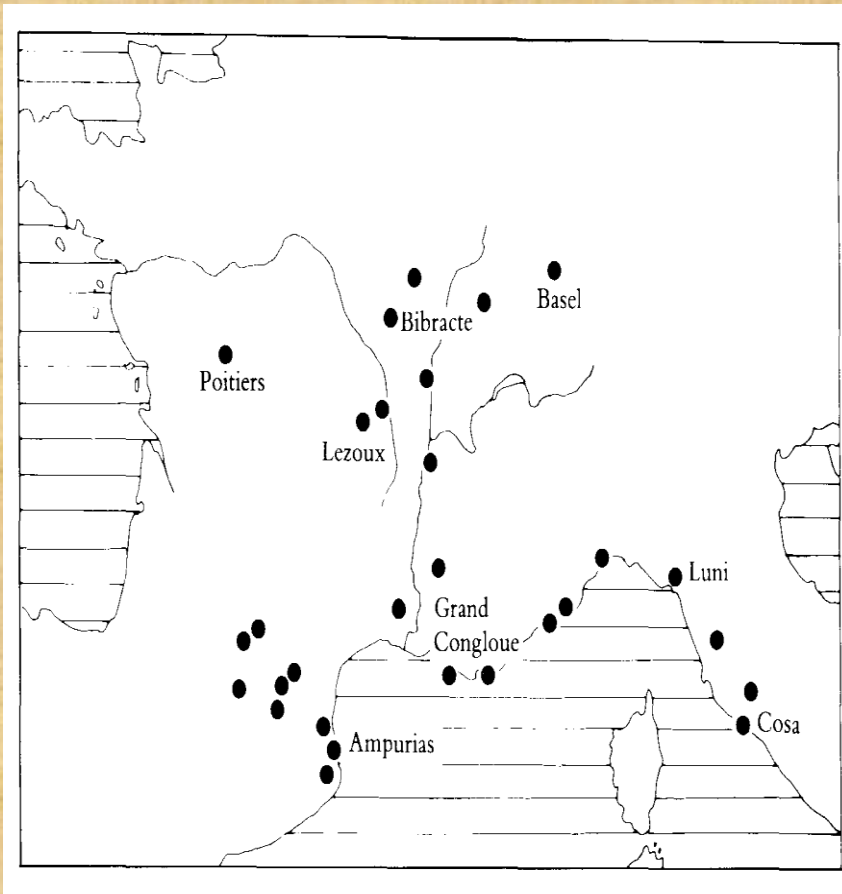
Imperial Estates

- The emperors were the largest landowners – estates across the Empire.
- Frequent procedure (at least in Africa at Egypt) was to lease parcels of land to *coloni* (farmers).

“Bassaeus Rufus and Macrinus Vindex to the magistrates of Saepinum, greetings. We have appended a copy of a letter written to us by Cosmus, freedman of the emperor and financial secretary... we warn you to refrain from abusing the lessees of the flocks of sheep to the serious detriment of the fiscus...” – *CIL* 9.2438 (AD 169-172).

Wine and Olive Oil

Wine for Slaves



Distribution of the stamp of Sestius on Dressel 1 amphorae.

“Consequently many of the Italian traders, induced by the love of money which characterizes them, believe that the love of wine of these Gauls is their own godsend. For these transport the wine on the navigable rivers by means of boats and through the level plain on wagons, and receive for it an incredible price; for in exchange for a jar of wine they receive a slave, getting a servant in return for the drink.” – **Diodorus Siculus 5.26.3.**

Rise in Provincial Production

- During the 1st century AD, Italy appears to have experienced a decline of trade, as opposed to the rise of the provinces (at least in the case of those products we can identify today).



Italic wine amphorae
distribution



Olive Oil

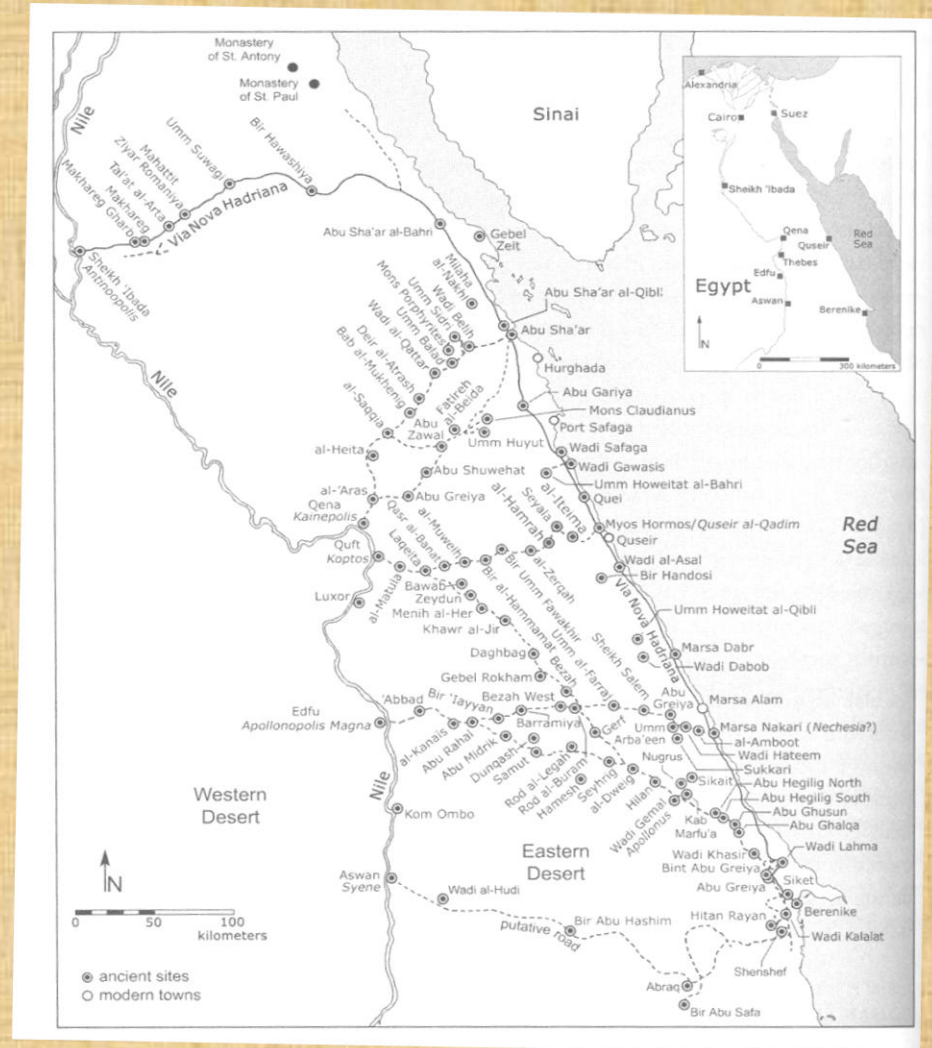
- Requisitions and redistribution, supplies for the army - distribution of Baetican olive oil?



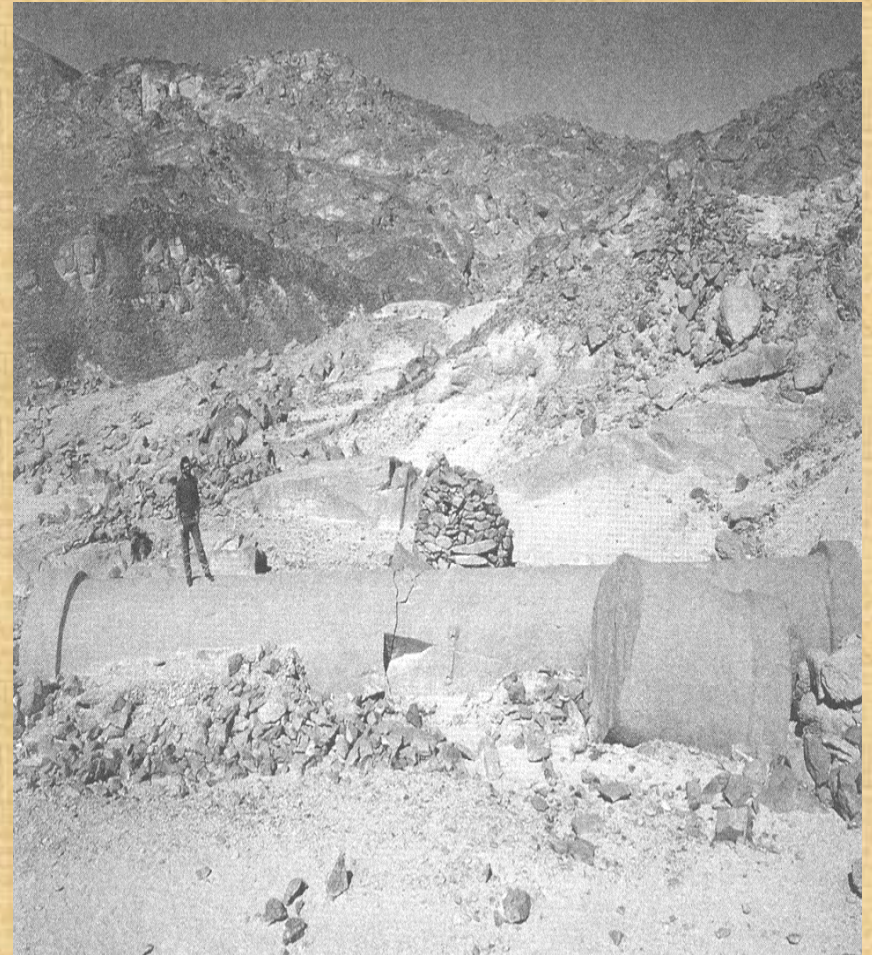
Mines and Quarries

Eastern Desert of Egypt

- Earlier scholarship had assumed workers at quarries slaves.
- Ostraka from Mons Claudianus reveal pay for workmen between 28-47 drachmas.
- Desiccated fruit seeds, and animals + fish bones at Mons Porphyrites.



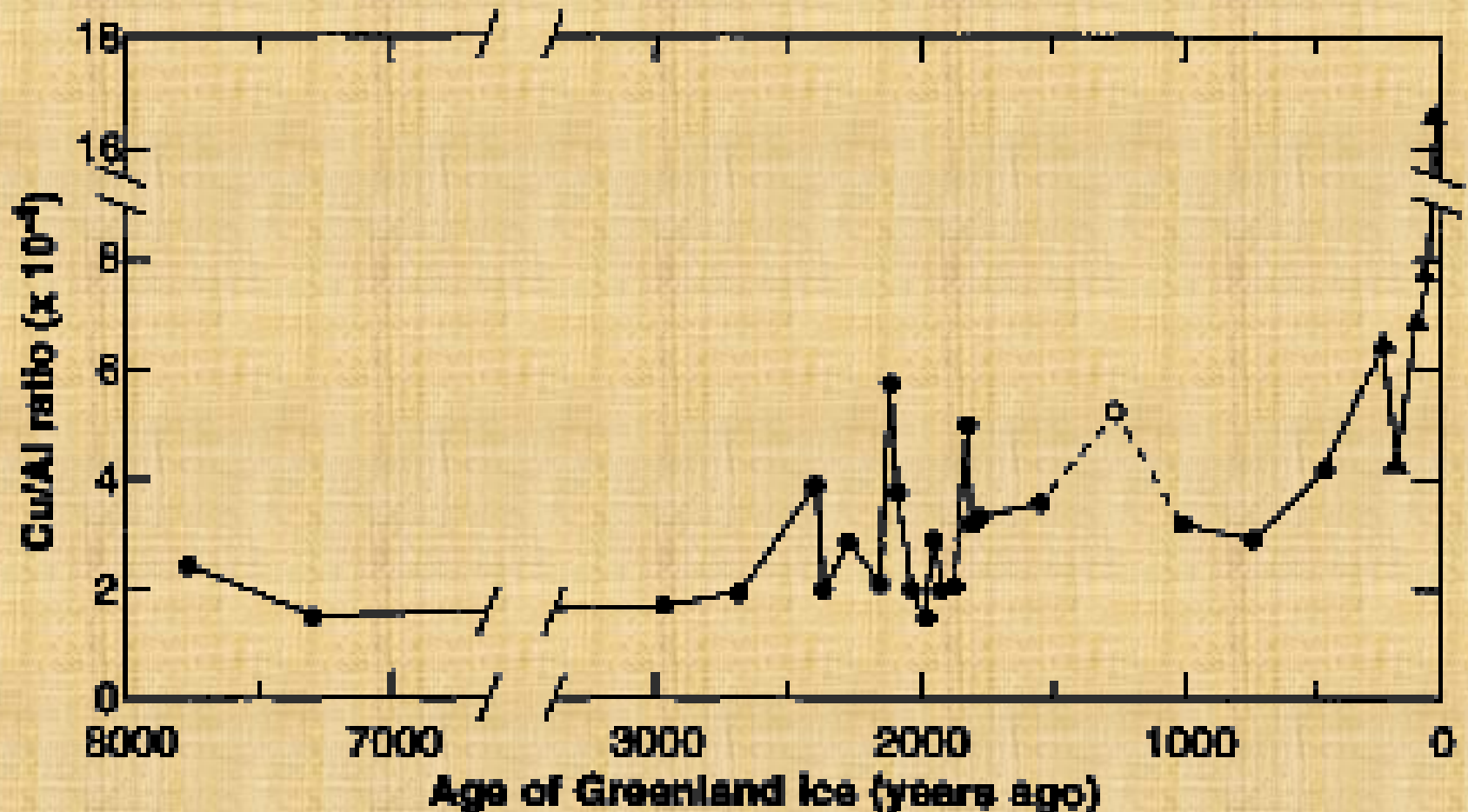
- ▣ Huge columns moved via the use of wagons pulled by camels/donkeys.
- ▣ Transported up Nile to Alexandria.
- ▣ Used in imperial building projects, e.g. Porphyry (Temple of Romulus) and Granodiorite (Basillica of Trajan).



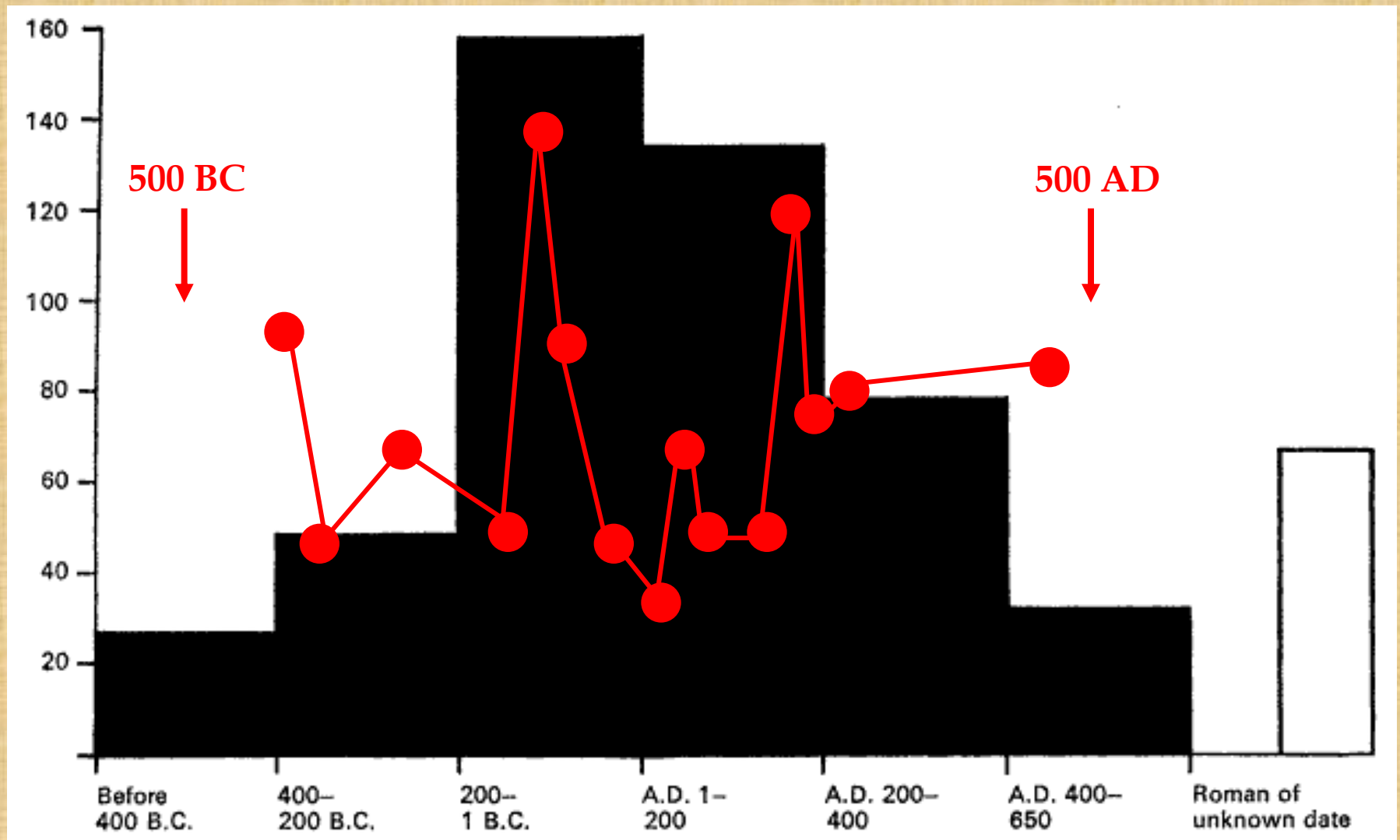
Abandoned column at Mons Claudianus (Egypt).

Environmental Impact of the Ancient Economy

Changes in Cu/Al rate in Greenland Ice (from Hong *et al.* in *Science* 272)



Hopkins and Hong *et al.* superimposed



Economic Impact of the Roman Army and State

Positive Impact?

- ▣ Building of Roads and other facilities by Roman army (or under their auspices)?
- ▣ Creation of security in frontiers – maintaining order?

“He [Augustus] also cleared out some of the canals and dug others over again, besides attending to other important matters...” – **Dio Cassius 51.18.1.**

“He reduced Egypt to the form of a province, and then to make it more fruitful and better adapted to supply the city with grain, he set his soldiers at work cleaning out all the canals into which the Nile overflows, which in the course of many years had become choked with mud.” – **Suetonius *Divus Augustus* 18.2.**

Negative Impact?

- ▣ Requisitions by the military – frequently abused – repeated official condemnations suggests impotence.

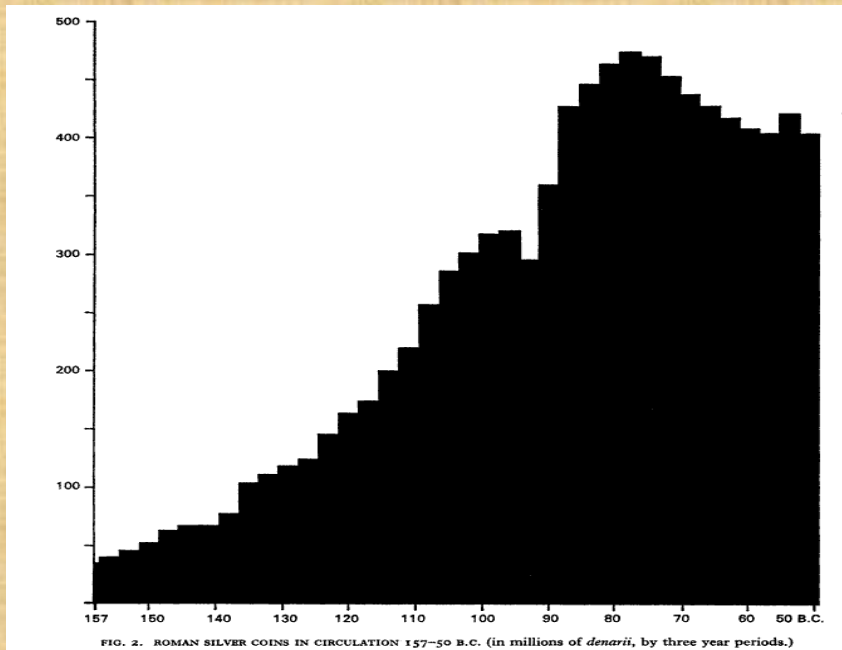
“[private persons have been] subject to arrogance and abuse and the army has come to be censored for greed and injustice.” - P.S.I. 446 (edict under Mamertinus, governor of Egypt – AD 133-37).

- ▣ *P. Grenf. I 48; P. Oxy. XII. 1414* – papyri (3rd C AD) mentioning the complaints of weavers in Oxyrhynchus who were forced to produce textiles at very low price.

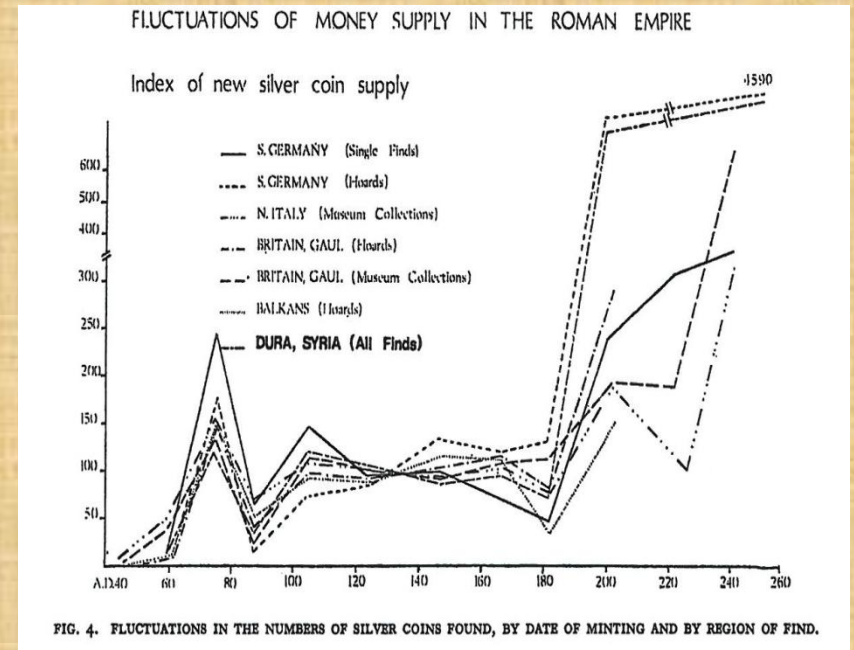
Money: Quality, Circulation, Inflation

Money Supply

- Increasing number of coins minted with the growth of Roman Empire.
- Production of money not necessarily consistent, emergency needs, commemoration of events – e.g. limited output in Nero's reign prior to AD 60.



Denarii in circulation – 157-30 BC.



Denarii finds in the provinces.

The Circulation of Money

- ▣ Hopkins (1980) – Taxes and Trade theory.
 - provincial towns produce goods to acquire cash to pay taxes,
 - taxes paid to Roman army - purchase goods locally – though level of impact is questionable.
- ▣ Millar (2004) - Practicality and desirability to transport large numbers of coins to Rome?
- ▣ Need to produce more coinage as coins become more worn through circulation.

Debasement and Weight

- ▣ Debasement – a reduction in the precious metal content of a coin, i.e. adulteration with base metals.
- ▣ *Denarius* (Roman silver coin) increasingly subject of debasement during Imperial period – also reduction in weight.
- ▣ Some reduction in weight of *aureus* (Roman gold coin).
- ▣ Ratio of 1 *aureus* to 25 *denarii*.
- ▣ During third century BC more dramatic debasement – by AD 270 *Antoninianus* (double *denarius*) about 2% silver.
- ▣ Causes – limited availability of precious metals?
Increased expenses? Deliberate policy?

Inflation and Prices

$$\text{Price}^{(P)} = \frac{\text{Money Supply}^{(M)} \times \text{Speed of Circulation}^{(v)}}{\text{Quantity of Goods}^{(Q)}}$$

- ▣ Relatively stable prices during first and second centuries AD.
- ▣ Increasing inflation during third century AD – more coins required to purchase goods.
- ▣ Impact on tax collection for Roman government – increase in use of taxes in kind?

Consumption

Surplus Income

- ▣ Means of determining prosperity of those lower down the social scale – meat consumption?
- ▣ Wealth massively concentrated into the hands of a very small elite.

“But most of all he was devoted to his secretary Narcissus and his treasurer Pallas, and he gladly allowed them to be honoured in addition by a decree of the senate, not only with immense gifts, but even with the insignia of quaestors and praetors. Besides this he permitted them to amass such wealth by plunder, that when he once complained of the low state of his funds, the witty answer was made that he would have enough and to spare, if he were taken into partnership by his two freedmen.” – **Suetonius** *Divus Claudius* 28.

Sumptuary Legislation

- ▣ A means of restricting the display of wealth – primarily directed at the elite.
- ▣ Attempts to hinder ruinous competition?

“The consulate of Gaius Sulpicius and Decimus Haterius followed [AD 22]: a year of quiet abroad, though at home there was uneasiness against the luxury which had broken all bounds and extended to every object on which money can be squandered. But other extravagances, though actually more serious, could as a rule be kept private by concealing the prices paid: it was the apparatus of gluttony and excess which had become the eternal theme of gossip and had awakened anxiety lest a prince of old-world thriftiness might adopt too harsh measures. For, when the point was mooted by Gaius Bibulus, it had been maintained by his fellow-aediles also that the sumptuary law was a dead letter; that the prohibited prices for articles of food were rising daily; and that the advance could not be checked by moderate methods.” – **Tacitus *Annals* 3.52.**

Price Controls?

Cassia	Best quality	50 <i>denarii</i>
	Lower qualities	5 <i>denarii</i> (variations in price)
Cinnamon		10 <i>denarii</i> (formerly as much as 1000 <i>denarii</i>)
Costus		5 <i>denarii</i>
Daphnitis (isocinnamon)		300 <i>denarii</i>
Frankincense	1 st quality	6 <i>denarii</i>
	2 nd quality	5 <i>denarii</i>
	3 rd quality	3 <i>denarii</i>

- **Tables – Prices mentioned by Pliny the Elder for certain spices/aromatics.**
- **Diocletian *Edict of Maximum Prices* (AD 301).**

Useful Reading

- ▣ Hopkins, K. (1980) 'Taxes and Trade in the Roman Empire (200 B.C.-A.D. 200)', *Journal of Roman Studies* 70: 101-125.
- ▣ Wassink, A. (1991) 'Inflation and Financial Policy under the Roman Empire to the Price Edict of 301 A.D.', *Historia Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 40 (4): 465-493.
- ▣ Hong et al (1996) 'History of Ancient Copper Smelting Pollution During Roman and Medieval Times Recorded in Greenland Ice', *Science* 272 (5239): 246-249.