

Review

MARKUS SACHS, *BETRIEBSWIRTSCHAFTLICHES DENKEN UND HANDELN IM ANTIKEN ROM* (Philippika: Marburger altertumskundliche Abhandlungen 161). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2022. Pp. ix + 343, illus. ISBN 9783447118705 (hbk). €89.00 ; 9783447392921 (eBook).

Markus Sachs' book is the revised version of a 2021 dissertation submitted at Oldenburg University. The title is a fair summary of the book's content: 'The thought and practice of business management in ancient Rome'. S. asks how ancient Romans planned economic tasks, supervised their execution, made decisions and gathered advice. For his answers, S. deploys the terminology of modern management theory. As he declares early on, the aim of the study is to discover both the conscious and unconscious patterns of managerial and entrepreneurial activities in Rome (11). The focus is on Rome and Italy from the third century B.C. to the third century A.D., but S. draws on source material from outside this geographical frame where it seems justified (4f.).

S. describes his book as the first general study of Roman business management. Earlier scholarship, according to the author, focused on the macroscopic level of growth and the market economy or dealt only with individual aspects of business management, like Jean-Jacques Aubert's book on Roman business-managers (1994). S. undoubtedly captures the prevailing scholarly trends correctly, and his argument that current interest in institutional economics would merit more scholarly interest in internal economic organisation is well founded. However, he tends to exaggerate the void by omissions. The fact that there is not a single monograph on a subject is not in itself proof that it has been neglected. Two much-cited articles by Gunnar Mickwitz that deal squarely with the question of ancient business management (*English Historical Review* 52, 1937; *Vierteljahresschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 32, 1939) are missing from the bibliography, and so is Geoffrey de Ste. Croix's much-debated chapter on ancient accounting (1956). Finally, it might have added to the book's conceptual scope had S. discussed recent scholarship that has suggested models of household economy as a conceptual framework to study ancient Greek business. Given that S. includes references to ancient Greek economic thought like Xenophon's writings, it would have been interesting to learn his views on applying the household model to economic management in the Roman world.

The book is systematically organised in four chapters framed by an introduction and a conclusion. Whatever else S.'s choice of applying a deliberately modernising framework does, it has the merit of giving the book a clear structure. The core chapter, covering more than two-thirds of the book's length, is ch. 5, which describes the 'spheres of competence' ('Kompetenzbereiche') of management. The five spheres are 'entrepreneurship', 'management', 'leadership', 'growth and transformation' and 'decision-making and consultation'. Such a decidedly modernist managerial perspective is surely original and helps the reader access individual aspects of ancient business management. Under these original headings, however, much familiar ground is covered. It will surprise few specialists to find that the Roman agronomists are by far the most important source. Regarding this much-discussed material, the study becomes most stimulating where it traces diachronic changes. According to S., for example, from Cato to Columella, greater unit size and degrees of division of labour on large estates resulted in a change from an emphasis on direct owner control to ideas of incentivising good management by agents (143–8, 189f., 202f.). S. then contrasts this trend with Palladius' advice from the third century A.D. to point out that these trends were not linear (208–14).

Another strength of the book is how it looks beyond agriculture and discusses legal texts, funerary inscriptions and excavation results to bring trade and manufacturing into the picture. At the same time, S.'s analysis of this material most clearly highlights the limitations of the study of ancient business management. Maritime loans, lease contracts, occupational associations and patron-client relationships are all important aspects of ancient economic organisation, and S. has relevant things to say about them. In theoretical terms, however, none of these institutions is part of *internal* organisation as defined by modern economics.

Turning to substance, Sachs quite clearly sides with those that consider Roman economic actors as interacting with a developed market economy (esp. 323). Where Sachs voices explicit disagreement with particular scholarly opinions, these are mostly situated in the 'Finley camp' (e.g. 142f., 280).

On the whole, however, S. resists the temptation to bend the material to support a one-sided modernist reading. Throughout his study, he perceptively points out where ancient Roman thought and practice differed from the practice of modern business management. I particularly liked his discussion of the role of honour as a motive in chasing entrepreneurial success (128–34). To pick another example: S. uses the Roman jurists to trace how a transferral of oversight over a workshop was entirely possible, but apparently not grounded in formalised structures of agency (221–3). To summarise his analysis: Roman businesspeople were looking for profits, and rationally planned, took risks, and even innovated to realise these profits. But they never developed their practical knowledge into an integrated specialised body of knowledge, that is, a general concept of business management.

S.'s study makes a convincing plea to focus more on internal organisation in the study of the ancient economy. There will surely be disagreement over whether his modernist framework is best suited to pursue the study of internal organisation he advocates. Nonetheless, his thoroughness in applying this framework without bending the evidence has the merit of delineating both the potentials and limitations inherent in our concepts and available sources.

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