Mary Beard

Did the Romans Laugh?

Laughter is one of the most difficult and intriguing historical subjects, one that defies firm conclusion or systematization. Beginning with Dion Cassius's first-person account of laughter in the Colosseum in 192 CE, this article explores some of the heuristic challenges of writing about the laughter of the past—particularly that of classical antiquity. It attempts to undermine some of the false certainties that surround the idea of a "classical theory of laughter" (which originated during the Renaissance) and argues that ideas about laughter in ancient Greece and Rome were much more diverse than one usually imagines. Important patterns in the discursive use of laughter in ancient Rome can nonetheless be observed. This article also examines the way laughter was used to mediate political power and autocracy in addition to how laughter operated on the boundary between animals and humans. It concludes with a reflection on the extent to which we can still share in the laughter of the Romans and under what conditions.

Koenraad Verboven

City and Reciprocity: The Role of Cultural Beliefs in the Roman Economy

Over the past decade, the New Institutional Economics have become a popular model for analyzing ancient economic history. However, the notion of cultural beliefs, which plays a central role in Douglass North's recent work and Avner Greif's analysis of institutional change, has been largely ignored. This article argues that a neo-institutional approach taking this notion into account offers a better means of understanding how ideology and moral values influenced the ancient economy than the Finleyan model. Rather than acting as a deterministic constraint on human behavior, cultural beliefs help to orient decision making and allow one to anticipate the (re)actions of others.

This article explores two key sets of norms and values in Roman culture that profoundly marked the economy's institutional framework. The first focused on reciprocity, which supported social networks beyond the confines of the *familia*-freedmen group and underlay the development of contract and agency law. The second was based on citizenship, which shaped political culture by creating individual rights and obligations that the political elite was given the authority to enforce in order to secure and stimulate both private and common interests. This resulted in Roman law and the distribution of justice. Ideologically, the Roman Empire presented itself as a meta-city that incorporated local communities, which were in turn gradually transformed to fit the *civitas* model.

Annales HSS 67, no. 4 (October-December 2012): I–III.

Both sets of beliefs lowered transaction costs without threatening the preeminent position of local and imperial aristocracies. Toward the end of the second century CE, local communities weakened as the imperial administration grew stronger, causing local and regional aristocracies to turn to the imperial court and army for status, influence, and power. The ideology of citizenship as the guiding principle of political culture gave way to that of the sacred emperor, who guaranteed divine justice and order.

François Lerouxel

The Private Credit Market, the Bibliotheke Enkteseon, and Public Services in Roman Egypt

This article examines the history of the private credit market in Roman Egypt between 30 BCE and approximately 170 CE. After examining how the notion of the market and the New Institutional Economics are employed with regard to ancient economic history, it explains the positive effect that systems of drafting and registering contracts had on the private credit market and, in particular, the role of the bibliotheke enkteseon, created by the Roman administration between 68 and 72. The article concludes with an explanation of how this institution was created by analyzing the interaction between the private credit market and the way public services were financed in the Roman world.

Claire Lemercier and Claire Zalc

For a New Approach to Credit Relations in Modern History

Credit relations have not been thoroughly examined by modern historians and are usually viewed through the lens of evolutionist narratives recounting the victory of “economic rationality” by means of the institutionalization, formalization, and modernization of these relations, although the veritable meaning of these terms are never precisely defined. This article examines the notion of credit relations by exploring their formalization and personalization, which are viewed as two relatively compatible elements. Drawing on a survey of recent publications on the subject, this article analyzes the complementarity of the various types of people involved in credit relations, the transformation of the tools for undertaking such a transaction, and the difficulties surrounding credit in addition to the (non-)existence of sanctions.

Pierre Gervais

Mercantile Credit and Trading Rings in the Eighteenth Century

Merchant credit was the main source of profit for economic agents in the eighteenth-century. Managing cash, commercial instruments, and account books, Atlantic traders such as Gradis of Bordeaux—who dealt in colonial products (including indigo, sugar, and coffee) and exported staples (flour and wine) to Quebec—or Hollingsworth of Philadelphia (an important dealer in flour and colonial produce) achieved market domination through specialized credit networks integrating market exchange and both moral and social interactions. Since a Weberian or a Homo Oeconomicus view of these complex credit activities leads to anachronisms, this article eschews standard economic approaches in favor of more historicized views of early modern economic activity, credit networks, and profit-making techniques.

Anaïs Albert

Working-Class Consumer Credit During the Belle Époque: Invention, Innovation, or Reconfiguration?

During the Belle Époque, widespread access to credit for the working classes led to the establishment of an economy of mass consumption. This phenomenon, however, represented more than a simple shift in scale, completely transforming the social order of the credit system, from economic identification to the authorization process. This article examines various aspects of the credit relationship through two documented cases: the credit organization created by the Parisian department store Dufayel for the working classes and reforms introduced by the January 12, 1895 law regarding workers' garnishment. The transformation of the credit system resulted in the joint emergence of new forms of mediation and distantiation in addition to new arenas in which debt figured—whether in commerce, court or the workplace.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2398568200000443 Published online by Cambridge University Press