Did Techniques and the Economy Stagnate or Develop in Antiquity? Answers from Archaeology

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EDITOR'S NOTE
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1 How could such a powerful and well-organized empire as that of Rome disappear? This question has fascinated the West since the Renaissance. A number of historians have offered at least partial answers. What information is available to us?

2 More or less all the written sources from Antiquity disappeared during the Middle Ages. To write a complete history, we have only partial factual reports. Record keeping documents (which were numerous) are almost completely absent, likewise technical treaties and archival records.

3 This scarcity of documentation has given rise to contradictory economic models. It has raised questions on the role of technology used in Antiquity that led to the idea of a stagnation of technology after the Hellenistic period. This is not surprising: the huge gaps in written documentation mean that historians are silent on matters such as the economy or technology.

4 Should we thus lose hope for ancient history? The answer is no. We now have documentation from archaeological excavations, and this continues to grow. Thanks to the activities of a generation of researchers, public opinion and the political powers have realized that it is necessary to take measures to understand and thus to add value to our underground archives. In France, the law of 27 January 2001 recognized that the archaeological heritage must be materially preserved or protected through scientific study.
In terms of human, financial and intellectual resources, everything changed: over 4,500 archaeologists work in France, and about 15,000 researchers in the whole of the Mediterranean region. Even if they are not evenly spread, these figures suggest the possibility for the collection of a significant amount of data, which carries two dangers.

The first one is thinking that it is enough to undertake an adequate excavation to completely understand underground archives. Now, our successors will develop new questions provoked by the challenges of their time and they will invent methods to answer them. We must therefore, other than for essential emergency archaeology, do everything possible to preserve virgin territory for future archaeological investigations.

The other danger lies in the disorderly accumulation of these new documents. For archaeology to be made up of independent sources and scientific facts, actors must agree on protocols of identification and easily accessible data formatting, which will make archaeological remains useful to historians.

If we can overcome the obstacles arising from the abundance and complexity of the archaeological documentation, it will be possible to reveal basic phenomena such as development, stability and decline, and to provide minute details on regions. Our observations on the regions are all the more precious when the analytical points of view cross, thanks to interrelated analyses by a group of specialists from pollen, to dendrochronological, to 14C dating, or to quantities of 13C in bones for tracing paleo-diets, etc.

What questions would we like to ask of this new documentation? We would like to ask questions of the past that are relevant to our future.

Today, the questions are really diverse. They look at population, illness, food, economy, technology, environment, and climate. I personally concentrate on the study of production, an essential element that embraces the infrastructure of society and reconstructs the remains left by ordinary people who have neither the power nor the culture to provide written evidence.

Such studies compensate for the permanent bias present in history that favours those in power. In the coming years, I intend to present the state of research on the archaeology of technological innovations, energy, manpower and agriculture, especially specialized agriculture, the infrastructures of trade and the proto-industrial evolution of certain artisans.

Archaeology, through its mass of scientific information, can help us to draw a few lessons in the better understanding of economic and technological systems as well as the conditions for the collapse of ancient civilization, making our investigations more current.

• Videos of lectures available online at www.college-de-france.fr
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Technology and Economy in the Ancient Mediterranean