Sitta von Reden

Introduction to the Second Volume

The second volume of this handbook surveys economic structures and developments that allowed resources, goods, and capital to concentrate in hubs of exchange and to spread across the Afro-Eurasian world region. The greater spread of goods and resources is well attested in our textual and archaeological evidence: by the first century CE, large amounts of precious textiles, stones, pearls and animal products, spices and unguents, but also live animals, people, and foodstuffs moved between China, the Asian steppe, India, Iran, and western Asia, as they did along the maritime routes along the China Seas, the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and Mediterranean. Since the influential work of the geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905), these movements have been fathomed in terms of Silk Road trade. Yet despite its popular and academic appeal, Richthofen's Silk Road is a simplified version of the economic connections that spanned the Afro-Eurasian region. Subsequent scholarship has qualified the notion of Silk Road trade, new texts and archaeological evidence have come to light, and many valuable studies have improved our knowledge of particular segments of the maritime and transcontinental routes. Yet the anatomies of the very different economies that contributed to the long-distance movement of goods have never been brought into interdisciplinary dialogue, nor has the concept of Silk Road trade been seriously questioned. This volume aims to do the former, while the latter is reserved for the third volume of this handbook.

Over the last generation, economic history, archaeology, and anthropology have seen large amounts of theoretical work, which has refined our understanding of economic development in vastly different social, political, and ecological settings. The specific nature of ancient states and empires has also been intensely discussed both theoretically and in a comparative historical perspective.¹ These discussions have led to a better understanding of the differences between empires and territorially bounded, politically and economically more strongly integrated nation states. We define empires as “territorially extensive, multi ethnic, or composite political spaces with variable degrees of political integration and ideological penetration.”² The particular nature of empires has important implications for approaches to the economies that developed within and across these empires.³ The chapters of this volume use globalization and network theory in order to develop models of explana-

¹ See von Reden, vol. 1, 1–10, and the long-awaited two-volume handbook edited by Bang, Bayly and Scheidel 2021, which appeared just days before this volume went into press.

² Von Reden, vol. 1, 13.

³ Haldon 2021 for a succinct and helpful discussion; further literature in von Reden, ch. 2, this volume.

tion that are suitable for research on economic connectivity at a global, Afro-Eurasian scale.

The two opening chapters situate our analyses within wider debates on ancient globalization and economic history. As these debates have developed largely independently of each other, we draw out some common ground by asking how the concepts of globalization theory can be brought to bear on the economic history of empires. We argue for the dissolution of unhelpful distinctions between local, regional and imperial economic contexts, as these contexts are much better described as connected dimensions of economic activity, even at their local and inter-imperial extremes. The title of this volume is thus programmatic. As the chapters of this volume show, much of our evidence is local in origin. From evidence of tax collection and royal orders to archaeological remains, coin hoards, and excavated texts, our testimonies are snapshots of local activity and practice. Yet we derive from them, and they were part of, economic patterns and relationships that had multiple dimensions and scales. In order to globalize ancient economies, we need to get away from the reification of economic contexts, and establish new analytical units within which we can understand the multiplicity of dimensions and scales of economic activity.

Network approaches have received increasing attention in recent research, both within globalization theory and research on ancient economies. In the chapters of parts I–III of this volume, we use network approaches in two ways. First, they provide a useful terminology for describing multipolar relationships whose function cannot be reduced to a single economic, social, or political purpose. At a more fundamental level, we adopt network approaches in order to suggest new avenues for exploring economic activity and connectivity in the ways they unfold over spaces and landscapes of different scale. Our investigation is divided into ‘actors’ and ‘tools’ that stimulated extraction, concentration, and circulation through consumption, production, and exchange. As actors we define the overlapping categories of cities, rulers and their courts, local elites, armies, temples, households, and various types of producers. These actors deployed or acted upon certain tools of extraction, concentration, and circulation: Fiscal regimes and institutions, money and credit, law, infrastructures, technologies, and various standardization practices, such as administrative languages, scripts, weights, and measures. Through these broad categories of analysis, we hope to explain different kinds and scales of economic development across the Afro-Eurasian space without underserving regions that have left notoriously difficult evidence. In the final part of the volume, we bring together actors and tools in order to explore how they formed and transformed economic processes over time.

The great challenge of research on imperial economies is how to divide the spaces that were controlled by different actors and changed affiliation to different imperial centers over time. As in volume one of this handbook, we have decided to adhere to disciplinary dividing lines, as the evidence that needs to be considered

requires special disciplinary expertise. We have made an exception regarding the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, an imperial space whose actors and tools show enough imperial continuity to be treated in one collaborative chapter across the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Some parts of this space fell under Arsakid control in the second half of the second century BCE, which led to some changes in the nature of economic actors and tools. We have also divided the final chapters on economic processes in this space, as these processes started to change significantly in the course of the Roman period, despite certain continuities in the nature of economic actors and tools.

The chapters of this volume were written in fruitful dialogue made possible by daily conversations in a shared workspace, until the pandemic struck. In digital meetings, we continued our conversations in order to sharpen concepts and shared themes. But we have deliberately avoided uniform structures for the chapters, in order to leave sufficient flexibility to respond to historical variation, different kinds of evidence, and different intensities of research that particular themes have received in disciplinary scholarship. The result is a collection of chapters that invite comparison, but do not exercise comparison themselves. Most importantly, they provide the backdrop of the discussions of inter-imperial frontier zones that will be the central theme of the third volume of this handbook.

References

- Bang, P. F., C. A. Bayly, and W. Scheidel (eds.), 2021, *The Oxford world history of empires*. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haldon, J. F. 2021. "The political economy of empire: "Imperial capital" and the formation of central and regional elites." In Bang, Bayly, and Scheidel (2021), vol. 1, 179–202.