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Introduction

As primary sources are the historian's most important resource, the quantities and diversity of evidence to be considered for the global study of connectivity pose the greatest challenge to world-historical research. The linguistic skills needed for discovering connections and relationships between texts, and assessing their impact, far exceed the capacity of a single scholar. Using non-textual sources in any meaningful and scientifically acceptable way requires further methodological expertise. New methodologies evolve constantly, and the stock of primary evidence increases through archaeological excavation, the discovery of new texts, and the vagaries of the art market. Historians have approached the source problem in different ways. For some critics, world history can never be a field of research, but just a method of instruction that directs students away from limited national perspectives toward broader contexts and connections.¹ It has also been contended that historians and sociologists not using primary sources are capable of only second-order interpretation.² Others are less pessimistic and practice world-historical research by using primary sources from one tradition, and relying on syntheses in secondary sources for comparative material.³ Alternatively, a mix of primary sources, published translations, and secondary sources are consulted to establish a solid historical grounding for research across disciplines. Yet other world historians turn to micro-histories, area studies, or material culture studies in order to reveal the ways the global (or wider) world is used, appropriated, or negotiated on the local level.⁴

These are legitimate interventions and methodological avenues out of a problem that threatens the credibility of world history as a field of research. It is our conviction, however, that the situation is improving. Translations, digitization, and digital communication have radically transformed the conditions of historical research. Only a few decades ago, large corpora of texts and data were enclosed in inaccessible volumes, difficult for outsiders to find, difficult to use, and impossible to read without the appropriate language skills. Over the last 20 years, a tremendous amount of academic energy has been devoted to developing more accessible, multi-language editions of texts, translations, and digital platforms presenting archival material. They have by no means made disciplinary training in reading and evaluating ancient material dispensable, nor have they made the encounter with

1 Weinstein 2012, 63–64.

2 Adas 2012, 232.

3 Weinstein 2012, 73.

4 Pitts and Versluys 2016.

the materiality of texts and objects that have survived from ancient worlds dispensable. Yet they enable nonspecialists with greater confidence than ever before, to familiarize themselves with edited texts, translations, and digital resources. The ever-wider availability of primary evidence from different regions of the world bears enormous potential, but also some dangers.

Against this background, the following chapters pursue two slightly contradictory goals. On the one hand, they aim to introduce readers to the scope of and access to, primary sources that can be used for particular questions of economic history in the vast expanse of the Afro-Eurasian region. They aim to offer guidance to the most important texts and editions, archaeological projects, and numismatic methods. They sample methods of interpretation – some of them well established and others more novel – and refer to study aids that in some disciplines are available in great quantity. On the other hand, we want to express a call of caution. We aim to show that at the foundation of the fascinating story of world historical connections and developments there lies a highly fragmentary and fragile body of evidence that is most difficult to make speak to the questions we wish to be answered. Great care must be taken not to overinterpret or decontextualize this evidence, or to appropriate it superficially for our contemporary concerns. Ancient texts usually have their very own argumentative purpose and are not open windows into the past. Archaeological data are by no means ‘raw,’ but reflect archaeologists’ interests and preoccupations; many bodies of material are difficult to date, and are spread unevenly across space and time.

As in the previous section, the chapters deal with different quantities and qualities of evidence. In the case of Greek, Roman, and Chinese sources, both their range and volume is so large that we have divided the chapters into subcategories. In many instances, we have relied on a combination of synthesizing overviews with deeper treatments of selected examples and case studies to bring out specificities in the sources. In the case of Indic sources, there are equally large quantities of texts, coins, visual, and archaeological material, but in each case it is rather controversial how to use them as sources for history and economic history in particular. Thus the discussions of that chapter deal primarily with this question. The history of Central Asia, moreover, is a rather young field of scholarship, given that the evidence is largely archaeological and numismatic. This chapter most comprehensively introduces the reader to the range of projects that are currently taking place, but which to date can simply promise to shed more light on economic questions that so far lie largely in the dark.

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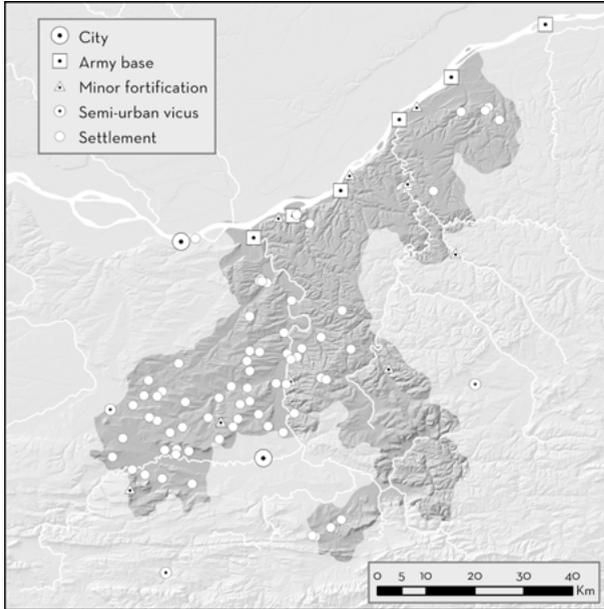
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8 Graeco-Roman Evidence

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8.A Material Evidence



Map 1: Roman settlement in the central part of the Lower Danubian plain, modern Bulgaria.

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I Introduction

It might be surprising to use a map to introduce a chapter on the sources of economic history in the Greek and Roman world. Other sources have a longer tradition of scholarship and are much more influential in current debates. This map, however, depicts a landscape as modeled in a geographic information system (GIS). It represents the ways scholars are using modern technology to expand the range of sources

Note: This chapter has benefited from the comments of several specialists. I would like to thank Nicholas Hudson for his comments on section 4 (pottery), Hannah Lau for her comments on section 5.3 (isotopes), and Demetrios Brellas for his comments on section 6 (faunal remains). Any errors remain my own.

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