

MOBILITY AND MIGRATION IN ROMAN ITALY

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Introduction

The study of demography basically consists of three components: mortality, fertility, and migration, but only the first two have received much attention in modern studies of the ancient world. There may be good reasons for this: while ancient demography in general is plagued by a scarcity of quantifiable source material, the shortage of evidence is more easily circumvented regarding mortality and fertility than regarding migration. Biological and environmental factors have a larger and more predictable role in the death and birth of humans than in their mobility. Hence, selecting the right ‘model life table’ solves a sufficient number of the ancient demographer’s problems to allow him to continue investigation. Several scholars have followed the lead of Keith Hopkins and have reached important conclusions about fertility and mortality in ancient society, but not about migration. The extent and nature of mobility in each society is determined by economic, political, social and environmental circumstances that are so changeable and interwoven that it is impossible to create a model of migration in the same way as one can of births and deaths. There are no tables that would offer a quantitative context for the few real data. Hence, few studies have been published on mobility and migration in Antiquity.¹

This article intends to analyse the extent and diversity of mobility and migration among the freeborn population in Italy, limiting itself primarily to the second century BC, although evidence for other periods – ancient and later – will be referred to. Many people were forced to move as a result of slavery, but this aspect of mobility will not be covered, since the explanations for this phenomenon are quite unrelated to the forces and desires that motivated the movement of free people. Slavery will be important though as a factor influencing the behaviour of the free population. Scholars of more modern migration may perhaps criticize my approach as one-sidedly material and economic, with little attention to the cultural and emotional aspects. However, while I have sufficient evidence to construct an economic model of the motives and constraints of mobility in the republican era, I would be forced to rely completely on projection of anachronistic material concerning cultural values, spiritual needs and emotional attitudes to family. In short, non-material factors are acknowledged, but will play no important role in this study.

¹ T.G. Parkin, *Demography and Roman society*, Baltimore 1992, 135f acknowledges the importance of migration for ancient population studies, but sees no way to get around the lack of evidence. The brief section on migration in W. Scheidel, ‘Progress and problems in Roman demography’, in: W. Scheidel (ed.), *Debating Roman demography*, Leiden 2001, 1-81, 46ff mainly stresses the problematic nature of the evidence. B.W. Frier, ‘Roman demography’, in: D.S. Potter and D.J. Mattingly (eds.), *Life, death and entertainment in the Roman Empire*, Ann Arbor 1999, 85-109 takes no notice of migration. R. Laurence, *The roads of Roman Italy. Mobility and cultural change* (London 1999) devotes no more than one page to migration (p. 146f). One of the first full-scale studies of migration in the republican context is W. Broadhead, *Internal migration and the transformation of Republican Italy*, Ph.D. University College London 2002. C. Moatti, ‘Translation, migration and communication in the Roman Empire. Three aspects of movement in history’, *Classical Antiquity* 25 (2006) 109-140 announces a project on various aspects of mobility.

The issue of definition is not of great concern to us. We are dealing with several broad categories of mobility whose essence is clear enough, although margins cannot be clearly marked. Migration is considered to be (1) the movement outside of one's community (whether this is a town or city, a village or group of villages, or dispersed habitation in the countryside), (2) which implies a shift in subsistence strategy, either between jobs, or between farms. For the nature of our discussion, this will do. We are not dealing with statistics, in which definition greatly influences numbers and thus outcome.

Human mobility in ancient history

The most important study of Italy's population is undoubtedly Peter Brunt's *Italian manpower* (1971), and it is revealing of the book's approach to mobility or migration that neither word occurs in its indices, though 'emigration' is. As far as the movement of people is concerned, the emphasis is on emigration, but only to deny that large numbers of migrants left Italy. Brunt's disregard of migration was determined by contemporary views, according to which mobility in pre-industrial societies was restricted to short distances, while men – and women even more so – lived their lives within a short range. Brunt refers to a study of rural England to point out the general ignorance of country dwellers of their neighbouring regions. "There was a deep ignorance of any kind of life more than 10 or 20 miles away." Would the ancient Italians have found it easier to move into the unknown, Brunt rhetorically asks?

Although Walter Scheidel's study 'Human mobility in Roman Italy' is published more than a generation later, his approach is actually not very different from Brunt's.² Scheidel explores what he terms 'the state-sponsored resettlement of citizens', i.e. the colonization schemes and *virgatae* distribution of land. He rightly concludes that by such schemes the state caused an exceptionally high degree of migration, in particular during the first century BC. Two of his main points may be emphasized here: (1) It was the coercive means of the Roman state that made possible population transfers on such a large scale. (2) Since the population of the city of Rome could not reproduce itself, the city required a huge influx of immigrants in order both to maintain its population and to multiply its size between the Hannibalic War and the age of Augustus. Two important estimates may be selected from his many calculations: 1 to 1.25 million individuals were re-settled in colonies or *virgatae* allotments during the last two centuries of the republic, and an equal number of people moved from the countryside to Rome or to any of the over 400 other cities. In addition, two 'negative' results of his analysis may be mentioned. (a) Private migration was on no comparable scale to state-sponsored population transfers, and (b) the movement from the countryside towards Rome left little scope for further migration within Italy.

Robin Osborne's 'The potential mobility of human populations' approaches the issue from a much different angle.³ He points out that scholars working on modern England discovered that the populations of pre-modern societies were less immobile than previously thought. (Interestingly, the first of these articles was available before Brunt published his *Italian Manpower*.) This paradigmatic shift was based on two case studies in seventeenth-century England: Cogenhoe (Northamptonshire), for which evidence is available for the years 1618 and 1628, and Clayworth (Nottinghamshire) in 1676 and 1688. It turns out that many individuals and households appeared and disappeared in both communities within a short

² *JRS* 94 (2004) 1-26.

³ *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 10 (1991) 231-252.

period, indicating a mean annual population turnover rate of roughly five per cent. Osborne gives corroborative evidence for a variety of communities from the continent. Based on this evidence, he urges historians of Antiquity not to underestimate the degree of mobility of ancient populations. He writes: “it is quite likely that half the population will have arrived within the last ten years and that half the population will depart within ten years.”

If we would project Osborne’s rate of mobility onto Republican Italy, the population of which Scheidel estimates to have been 4 million, we would arrive at 40 million individual migratory movements within the last two centuries BC! If valid, such numbers would dwarf Scheidel’s figures. Even if we would assume a much more conservative rate of mobility – not half but only one tenth of the population leaving or arriving every ten years – we would still arrive at 8 million individual movements within the same period. Any further lowering would imply a downright denial of Osborne’s argument concerning the mobility of ancient populations. However, comparing Scheidel’s 2 to 2.5 million migratory movements to the much higher figures suggested by the early-modern parallels would be comparing apples and oranges, if only because part of the English figures merely reflect the movement from one parish into the next. Osborne’s figures for seventeenth-century England cannot be simply projected into the context of second-century BC Italy.

A spectrum of migration and mobility

People move. All the theorizing and labelling in modern literature merely reflects the need to simplify and categorize individual behaviour in order to be able to analyse and understand it. The categories itself may be misleading in the sense that they suggest clearly distinct types and patterns that are absent in ‘historical reality’. Nevertheless, divisions are necessary. We may emphasize three criteria on which categories can be based: (1) One distinction that can be made is between the movement of individuals and that of households. It makes a difference to our understanding of migration whether an individual leaves his/her household, or a conjugal unit leaves a complex household to settle elsewhere, or the entire household leaves its home. (2) The urban-rural dichotomy leads to four types of migration: rural-rural (i.e. from countryside to countryside), rural-urban, urban-rural and urban-urban. As the distinction between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ is sometimes arbitrary, so are these types. (3) A distinction commonly made regarding mobility in later times is that between seasonal, temporary and permanent migration. The terminology is obvious.

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Seasonal mobility

Mobility should be seen as part of a spectrum, at the one end of which we may situate some of the forms of travel we have just seen. Migration may be distinguished from travel by the change in subsistence strategy that it implies. Travelling to a market or festival – or even the seasonal movement of herds – does not imply a shift in livelihood in the same way as the migration of individuals and households does.

Migration is commonly differentiated as seasonal, temporary or permanent. The principle behind seasonal mobility is that in certain seasons people can earn a higher income elsewhere than by staying within their own household. In early-modern Europe, seasonal migration gave rise to interregional networks of integrated labour markets. In Italy, for example, there were two such large networks, one of which connected the mountainous areas

in central Italy to the cities and their hinterland in the western plains, the other connected the western Apennines and the Alps to the prosperous cities and countryside of the Po-plain. In the eighteenth century, an estimated 100,000 people annually left their homes in central Italy to seek employment either as harvesters in the western plains and on Corsica and Sardinia, or in urban construction, harbours, and overland transport. The northern network involved on estimate 50,000 people who were seasonally employed in the rural and urban sectors.

Economically, seasonal migration was a question of supply and demand of labour. On the supply-side we may make a distinction between structural and seasonal underemployment. Structural underemployment occurs when more labour capacity is available than can usefully be employed. If too many hands have to be employed on too small a farm, the farmer can seek a more labour-intensive exploitation of his land, but he may be restricted in his production strategy by the absence of markets and his primary aim to produce the food his household requires. Fluctuation in the requirement for labour within the year is caused by the seasonality of much of the work on arable farms. Farmers could reduce the seasonal peaks in labour demand by varying their crops, but again the peasant may be limited in diversifying the tasks on his farm by his primary production goal.

Relative underemployment of peasant labour was characteristic of most of the pre-industrial world, but it did not automatically give rise to seasonal migration. Underemployment is in fact a misleading term, since it implies a definite level below which labour is not usefully employed. The overcapacity of labour is better understood as leading to gradually diminishing returns on the input of additional labour in farming. With lowering income alternative employment strategies (or not working at all) increasingly become attractive. As a rule households of smallholders rely on many diverse income earning activities. Seasonal migration is governed economically by the seasonally shifting balance between various employment strategies. In other words, as wages rise in certain seasons, wage-labour becomes a more attractive alternative. Three elements are required for the emergence of seasonal migration: (1) a seasonally fluctuating outside demand for labour; (2) the presence of a large pool of available labour and (3) conditions that allowed the emergence of an integrated labour market in a wider region. Concerning the second point: many regions in second-century BC Italy offered a large number of workers who were temporarily available and free to undertake any work they liked, unrestricted by lords or guilds. The third condition seems satisfied by the *pax Romana* and the normality of interregional travel in most parts of second-century BC Italy.

Concerning the first condition: both rural and urban seasonal labour did undoubtedly occur in Italy in late-republican times. The sources are sparse, but they explicitly show its existence at least in the rural context. Further considerations make the presence of seasonal labour a very likely hypothesis, also in the urban economy. Many economic activities were seasonal, which is largely a reflection of the importance of agriculture in pre-industrial society. Three elements may be mentioned that applied just as much to ancient as to early-modern Italy. (1) The agricultural calendar created peaks in labour demand, in particular when grain, olives and grapes were harvested and processed. (2) Some sectors of the pre-industrial economy were seasonal precisely because they depended on cheap labour, which was available in large numbers at certain times of the year. This did not only involve human labour, but also that of farm animals who were primarily used to provide power in construction and transport. To give an idea of the number of animals involved in transport: records from Eleusis show that in Attica in the 320s BC it took thirty-three teams of oxen

three days to move a single column drum of about 7.5 tons from Mount Pendeli to Eleusis. The inscriptions from Eleusis also show that the transport of building stone was undertaken between July and September, which is precisely the time of year that oxen were not needed on the land. It also follows, by the way, that not only poor peasants were attracted by such labour: only prosperous farmers employed a team of oxen. Hence, much non-agricultural employment had to be timed in accordance with the agricultural calendar. (3) Many non-agricultural activities depended on transportation. Since in the Mediterranean many forms of transportation – in particular seafaring, but also river transport – were seasonal, so are the activities that depend on them. Urban economies were therefore governed by an annual cycle of expansion and contraction.

A reference to seasonal migration in relation to harvesting is found in a brief remark in Suetonius' *Life of Vespasian* (1.4), according to which the emperor's grandfather had been "a contractor for the day-labourers who come regularly every year from Umbria to the Sabine district, to till the fields". Vespasian's grandfather's alleged involvement in the migration of labour should be dated to the second half of the first century BC, but the migration from Umbria to the Sabine country is mentioned by Suetonius as something still going on. Day-labourers were especially needed for such tasks as the grain harvest or vintage, but this need not have involved itinerant labour. Three elements may explain the bringing in of outside labour into Sabinum. (1) In Sabinum the work may have been earlier than in Umbria, so that Umbrian labourers were available while Sabine farmers were working on their own land. (However, seasonal labourers in later times often left it to their wives to harvest their own crop.) (2) In Sabinum commercial farming may have replaced peasant farming to such a degree that there were few local households seeking additional employment, creating the necessity to import day-labourers from Umbria. (3) The Umbrians may have accepted lower wages than the Sabine farmers would have.

There is good reason to believe that the annual cycle of expansion and contraction that governed the economy of early-modern cities also characterized their ancient counterparts. The main conditions that determined the annual fluctuation in urban economic activities – the seasonality of transportation – also applied in the Roman world. Shipping almost came to a halt in wintertime, and most of the shipping that did occur in winter was coastal and short-distance. Already in the fourth and third centuries BC, the ports of Italy must have needed many men to man their ships or to work in the harbour and related trades. The growth in the second century BC of the city of Rome and of the shipping in Puteoli and Ostia only increased the need for such labour.

To the extent that manufacture relied on overseas materials, it was also tied to the seasonal cycle of seafaring. Some sources mention the sawing of imported timber and the cutting of marble at the harbour. As far as building material was shipped-in from afar – and marble and timber often were – the building trade also experienced a wintertime slump. Frontinus (*de aquis* 123) informs us that building was best done between April and November, which was probably not so much due to frost as to heavy rains.

In short, the seasonal expansion of urban economic sectors in summertime led to a temporary rise in employment opportunities at that time of year. Work on ships, in harbours and in construction was unsuited for slave-labour for two reasons. (1) Wages for unskilled labour were nearly at subsistence level; therefore there was hardly a financial advantage to be gained by employing slaves rather than wage-earners. Scheidel has shown that in Roman Egypt and Italy the prices of slaves, the costs of their maintenance and the wages of unskilled

labourers were such that servile labour was hardly cheaper than free workers. (2) The slave-owners would have faced serious difficulties in finding meaningful employment for all their slaves in winter.

The question is whether all the work in towns and cities was performed by the urban populace itself. If so, the fluctuation in employment must have meant that many labourers were without work and income for large parts of the year. This might fit the commonplace of an idle proletariat living off the dole, but in fact the urban masses needed to work for a living. The proletarians were too insignificant to be supported in large numbers by rich patrons, and public welfare did not exist. The distribution of food, money or other gifts never favoured the destitute. In other words, private charity as a means to support the poor was non-existent. When Gaius Gracchus created the corn dole in 121 BC, this only meant that grain was sold cheaply – not handed out for free. Apart from a few beggars and vagabonds, the urban populace needed work in order to have food, housing, fuel and cloths. The same undoubtedly applies to the other towns and cities. Even if they earned sufficient in summer, the wages of the unskilled labourers were insufficient to build up reserves to tie them over prolonged periods of unemployment, the more so as prices tended to rise with the progress of winter. The common people buy their food day-by-day, Tacitus (*Hist.* 4.38.2) writes, and this undoubtedly goes for the second century BC as well. In short, if we reject the idea that large parts of the urban populace were unemployed in winter, we must assume the influx of labourers in summer, most of whom were attracted by the season's opportunities to earn an income on the ships, in the harbours and in related trades.

In sum, not all cities grew in the second century BC, and the emergence of urban centres did not occur in central Italy before Augustan times. Much of the growth in Italy passed the mountainous areas by. Lack of land and seasonal unemployment on their farms had always plagued the smallholders of the interior, but in the second century BC they saw increasing opportunities to earn money in the cities and countryside of the prosperous plains. The city of Rome grew in size, and so did cities like Fregellae, Minturnae, Puteoli and Ostia. Agriculture in coastal regions intensified and commercialized, owing to the growth of internal and external markets for its products. Because in parts of central and southern Italy commercial farming already existed in the third century BC, it is likely in the third and second century BC conditions similar to those in Sabinum and north Africa gave rise to migratory flows of wage-earners. As slave-run farms emerged and local smallholders intensified their farming practices, the need for outside labour in peak times increased.

Temporary migration

Employment opportunities encouraged people to leave their homes, sometimes for a season, sometimes for a number of years. While the reason for seasonal mobility is mainly to be sought in the fluctuation of income-earning opportunities within the year, the principle behind temporary migration largely lies in the life-cycle of the families and individuals involved. In early-modern Europe many young adults (from their early teens onwards) would spend up to fifteen years away from home, either in cities or in rural areas offering wage-earning opportunities. Women would generally be employed in domestic service, while male migrants largely found work in manual labour, in particular construction, mining, canal or road building, and in handicraft, or they would serve in the army, navy or commercial fleet. In another pattern of temporary migration young teens entered the households of more prosperous relatives who lacked children of similar ages. Both movements – young adults

leaving their households and teens entering the households of relatives – were means to deal with the changes over time in the labour requirement and composition of households. At certain stages in this so-called family-cycle, many households could do without the additional labour of teens growing up. Tension between siblings sharing the same household may also have played a role. Seeking employment outside the household did not necessarily imply moving over a considerable distance, but for those growing up in regions offering little work, it usually did. Most temporary migrants returned when at the age to form one's own household. In western Europe this meant that many men and women returned after their mid-twenties. In the nineteenth century, many migrants sent money to their families. This can be ruled out in earlier times when the households that were left behind did not benefit from the migrant's wages, but from the withdrawal of excess labour and an extra mouth to feed. But again, temporary migration was also based on the consideration of income earning opportunities at home and elsewhere. The dividing line between temporary and permanent migration was obviously thin, as many men and women intended to return but never did, some because they found husbands or wives elsewhere, others because they died young.

With regards to temporary migration in Antiquity, a distinction should be made between men and women. The sparse evidence on age of marriage of men points to an average in their late twenties or around thirty. Hence, the age of marriage of rural men allowed them to leave their households and return after a long period of outside employment in order to marry.

The conditions that created labour mobility in early-modern Europe were also present in Antiquity. Labour capacity and employment opportunities were not evenly spread across space, while especially the latter were subjected to short-term fluctuations in time. In an integrated labour market supply and demand created movements of people between one area and another. Times of peak demand may have attracted men from smallholding households, who returned to subsistence agriculture as demand decreased. It has been estimated that in the late republic and early principate, four to six per cent of the total population of Rome could have been employed in the building industry. I cannot judge the accuracy of this estimate, but surely the changeability of the labour demand must be taken into account. Large projects offered much work for the urban population, but undoubtedly also attracted many unskilled workers from the countryside. C. Nicolet identifies periods of heavy building in and near Rome in 194-174 BC, when the river port of Rome and the large warehouses were built, and in 144-136 BC, when the Aqua Marcia were constructed. Increased demand for labour meant higher wages, which in turn strengthened the 'pull' of the city. When large projects were finished, there was nothing to retain many unskilled workers, who were therefore happy to return to the countryside.

Temporary migration does not mean that the employment opportunities were necessarily short-lived. It were rather the changes within the life-cycle of the individual migrants that determined its temporary nature. Hence, many migrants found work that was more or less permanent, but decided to leave nevertheless. Domestic service in early-modern Europe provides a good example: both men and women left it because they had other plans, not because the need for servants stopped. The important point is that the male labour pool in second-century BC Italy (just as in early-modern times) was partly very flexible and transitory, owing more to the needs and nature of rural households than to the uncertainty of the economy, which is not to deny that such labour was well suited to respond to short-term fluctuations in labour needs.

The situation was much different for women in Antiquity than in early-modern Europe, when most migrant women were employed in domestic service. Ancient women would have found little work in the households of the rich, because slavery blocked domestic service of the freeborn. Those households that could afford to employ people in their households would buy slaves. The preference for slaves was probably largely caused by the status they offered. The only exception may have been wetnursing, the temporary nature of which obviously suited wage-labour better. Social values more so than practical considerations or biological constraints meant that there were very few other employment opportunities for women. Female labour outside the context of the household was either performed by slaves, or it was regarded as indecent. Egypt has provided some evidence of craftswomen in the form of apprenticeship contracts. Two elements are noticeable: (1) apprenticeship contracts for freeborn women are few in number compared to those for men: 3 against 28; (2) crafts were mostly practised in the domestic sphere. This is not to say that the work of women was unimportant. Within the household they may have exploited wage-earning or commercial activities outside the primary subsistence activity.

Because temporary migration was not an option open to many ancient women, there was no point in postponing the marriage of daughters, which agrees very well with our evidence for the age of first marriage of women. Although the evidence is to be treated with the same caution as for the age of marriage of men, it points to a fairly young age. While in western Europe rural women married in their late twenties, ancient women generally seem to have married much earlier: in their late teens or early twenties, while some girls may have married even earlier. Such an early marriage precluded a previous phase of wage-earning employment outside the household. In short, individual women were surely much less mobile than individual men, and in this respect the second century BC meant little change. As far as women were mobile, it was mostly in the context of the household they were (to be) part of. Seasonal and temporary migration were generally forms of individual male mobility.

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Conclusion

The fact that the population of early-modern England was incredibly itinerant does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the inhabitants of Republican Italy were equally mobile. We have seen several features of Roman and English rural society that indicate otherwise. A smaller share of landowning peasants and, conversely, a larger share of landless rural labourers in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England raised levels of mobility compared to republican Italy. Employment opportunities in Antiquity were constrained by the existence of slavery, which meant that certain types of employment in town and countryside were less available to free-born people or not at all. This obstructed in particular the mobility of women, in contrast to England, where many thousands of girls found work in domestic service each year. In England the predominance of primogeniture imposed a high degree of mobility on younger offspring, who were forced to seek subsistence elsewhere, while the partible inheritance in Antiquity stimulated seasonal and temporary employment migration, but may have lessened the permanent migration of young adults. Also the lease of small plots may have offered an alternative strategy to cope with fluctuations in labour capacity and consumption needs of individual households.

However, while mobility may have been not as high as in early-modern England, it certainly was not low. In particular the economic developments in Italy before and during the second century BC seem to have boosted mobility levels, as Rome and other towns and cities grew, and overseas trade, urban markets and commercial agriculture expanded, thereby offering more employment opportunities than ever before. The growth of Rome itself reflects the attractiveness of the city to country-dwellers, since the growth in population cannot be explained without high levels of rural-urban migration. Less spectacular, but equally significant is the growth of cities like Minturnae, Fregellae, and Ostia. Irrespective of colonization and land distribution, the existence of tenancy and a land market meant that the households of smallholders could acquire the necessary means to continue farming away from home. In short, despite many differences with such a highly mobile society as seventeenth-century England, the population of second-century Italy was far from immobile, inert or stationary.