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**A funny thing happened on my way to the market.
Reading Petronius to write economic history**

**PRAG Jonathan & REPATH Ian (edd.) *Petronius: A Handbook*, Oxford,
Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 125-139**

**Please note that this is preprint version before final revisions were made. For
reference purposes the print edition should be used.**

Petronius' *Satyricon* is a goldmine of data on occupations, sales, loans, investments and all things we now think of as constituting 'the economy'. No work in Latin literature is so rich in information on the living economy of the first century AD as Petronius' *Satyricon*. Yet as a narrative source few are as complex. The story is fiction; a mixture of satire and slap stick comedy. Although Petronius' characters and situations are recognisably rooted in reality, they are uniquely individual and clad in deforming stereotypes. If we want to use the *Satyricon* as a historical source on the Roman economy, it has to be interpreted with meticulous care. The 'data' need to be scrutinized, filtered and put in perspective before they can be accepted as 'evidence'. The effort can be strenuous sometimes but is always rewarding. However distorted Petronius' scenes and characters are, they infuse life and colour in the most dreary facts and figures.

A rogues' market and commodity culture

The episode of the stolen cloak is a good example (§12-5). Encolpius and Ascyrtos go to a street market to sell a precious cloak they stole in a previous (lost) episode. Here they encounter a peasant and a woman who come to sell a ragged tunic. Ascyrtos recognizes it as his own, previously lost by Encolpius, in the hem of which he had hidden a number of gold pieces. Encolpius' idea to threaten the peasant with a law suit should he refuse to give back the tunic is rejected by Ascyrtos. They are strangers in the town, no one would believe them. The courts are so corrupt that no judge would favour them without a bribe. So they decide to sell their precious cloak cheaply and buy back the old tunic. But when the peasant's wife inspects the cloak, she cries out: 'Thieves!' Promptly Asconius and Encolpius grab the tunic and accuse the peasant of stealing their shirt. The market dealers gather round laughing. Some night guards (?) are called in, who insist that the matter be brought to court and the disputed items be deposited in their care. One of the dealers quickly volunteers as trustee. Predictably, neither party wants a law suit and the episode ends with the peasant throwing the ragged shirt in Ascyrtos' face, grabbing the precious cloak and both running off as fast as they can.

On the surface, the episode paints a bleak picture of how Roman law affected – or failed to affect – market practices. The story appears to confirm the lack of effective legal institutions, one of the prime structural conditions for economic development (Scheidel e.a. 2007: 113-143). Closer analyses suggests a different reading. Ascyrtos' assertion that they were strangers whom no one would believe, makes sense in a world without passports or ID. But this reflects the limitations of the justice system rather than its defects. Although in theory Roman trials had to be initiated by the plaintiff (Johnston 1999: 112-32; Robinson 1997: 79-101), Ascyrtos and the peasant are practically forced into litigation against their wishes.

The legal system reflected and enforced the overwhelming importance of social status in Roman society. Complaints by lower-class persons against *honestiores* had little chance unless they were backed up by powerful patrons. Testimonies in court by *honestiores* carried considerably more weight than by *humiliores* (Garnsey 1970). But this is not what Ascyrtos is complaining about. His complaint relates to ordinary corruption. We have no way of measuring the degree of corruption of Roman courts. We may surmise that it was more common than in modern Western countries, but there is no reason to believe that it was as bad as Ascyrtos suggests.

We have a fairly large number of writing tablets related to legal proceedings preserved in Pompeii and Herculaneum (some drawn up in Puteoli, where the episode of the stolen cloak may be situated). Together with some inscriptions (particularly the municipal charters, like the *lex Irnitana*), these tablets are direct witnesses of legal practice on a local level. Contrary to Petronius' novel, however, they document an apparently effective justice system, that allowed litigants flexible and reliable remedies (Camodeca 1999; Gonzales 1986, Rodger 1990).

Local courts were the responsibility of yearly elected local magistrates. Litigation usually started with both parties accepting a *vadimonium* – a formal pledge that they would appear on an agreed date before the judicial magistrate. Sequestration of disputed objects as in Petronius' story was possible, but not obligatory in the case of a *rei vindicatio*, the procedure for restitution of property. If the defendant failed to appear he risked forfeiting his property to the plaintiff. If he duly appeared and denied the accusation, the magistrate consulted both parties on the terms of the case and the appointment of a judge. This two-step system, combining elected politicians, designated judges and public hearings limited the scope for corruption in ordinary trials. Roman cities were mostly small communities that loved gossip and back-talk. The fact that judicial magistrates were elected politician-aristocrats, whose *dignitas* depended on their reputation presumably helped to keep excesses in check (see Johnston 1999: 112-32; Robinson 1997: 79-120).

Curiously absent from the cloak scene are the magistrates responsible for market affairs, the *aediles*. Their absence is well in line with the odd timing of the market (at dusk) and the doubtful nature and origins of the articles for sale. This is no ordinary market. It's a rogues' market in a rakes' story.

This rogues' market, however, is not an isolated oddity. Material culture in Petronius' world is profoundly determined by market exchanges. The story is set in a commodity culture in which everything – goods and services – is produced, traded, bought and sold for money: vegetables sold by an old woman on a street corner (§7), knives of Noric iron (§70), whores and rooms rent by the hour (§8), meals and lodgings (§81-2, 92, 95-6), houses and landed estates (§44; 53), books (§46), haircuts and shaves (§94; 103), funerals (§38) ... Even the value of gifts is routinely expressed in money (§53).

Is Petronius depicting social reality – in his own distorted way – and whose social reality is it? The *Satyricon* is not unique in the prominent role it attributes to commodities. Fergus Millar noted a similar picture underlying Apuleius' *Golden Ass* (Millar 1981: 72). Anyone reading Martial or Juvenal is likely to be struck by the variety of goods and services that could be bought and sold. Scholars increasingly interpret commodity consumption as a typical feature of the economy of the early Principate. Greg Woolf described commoditisation and mass consumption as archaeologically detectable 'markers' for Romanisation in Gaul (Woolf 1998: 169-205; cf. Wilson 2008; Morley 2007: 52-542). Ward-Perkins interpreted the disappearance of mass produced good quality consumption articles as signifying the 'disappearance of comfort' and the decline of Roman civilization (Ward-Perkins 2005; 87-120).

This 'modernising' view of the Roman economy is strongly opposed to the 'old orthodoxy' of the 1970's and 1980's, when leading scholars under the influence of Moses Finley emphasized the primitiveness and non-market character of ancient economies (cf. Scheidel and von Reden 2002). In many ways the new views are a welcome correction to the often holistic views of the primitivist school. We should beware however of the anachronism to describe Roman society as just a 'commodity culture'. The existence of commodity markets is not enough to conclude that the Roman economy was a market economy. Even if commoditisation was a profound characteristic of urban life, only a minority (20% ?) of Romans lived in cities. Weekly trips to sell vegetables on the urban market hardly suffice to turn a peasant into a market oriented rural entrepreneur. The political elite largely consisted of large landowners whose dependence on markets was relatively limited. Gift-exchange and political redistribution (mainly through the *annona* and army supplies) remained important alternatives to market exchange. Autoconsumption by peasants and large households always remained an important ingredient of the ancient economy (Meickle 2002:

243; Saller 1982; Verboven 2002; Whittaker 1985; Scheidel e.a. 2007: 570-591).

These realities, however, are largely absent from the *Satyricon*, as if Petronius consciously cut them out of the picture. Martial or Juvenal differ substantially from Petronius in this respect. In their works patronage and (instrumental) friendship are central themes (Saller 1983; Cloud 1989). Gift-exchange and instrumental friendship in the *Satyricon* are prominent only as instruments of manipulation and deceit in the Croton chapters where the practice of inheritance hunting plays a central role (see the chapter by Hope on this).

The phenomenon of elite self-sufficiency appears to be illustrated by Trimalcio's obsession to produce everything needed for his extravagant dinner parties on his own estates. His determination, however, is a grotesque deformation of what Veyne called the favourite myth of Antiquity: *autarkeia*, an existence fixed on the satisfaction of a one's natural needs (Veyne 1979: 268-269; cf. Veyne 1961: 237; Finley 1973:109-110). Whereas autarky was traditionally associated with moderation, simplicity and the avoidance of luxury, Trimalcio's 'autarky' aims for excess as his natural 'condition d'être'. Exotic luxury items were typically goods that even the greatest landowner had to buy. The epitome of such items in Petronius' time were articles imported from Arabia and the Far East. Pliny the Elder, writing a decade or less after Petronius, claims that the value of these imports totalled 100 million sesterces (*Nat.* 12.84). Yet Trimalcio's exotic luxuries were produced on his own estates. He ordered Indian mushroom spores rather mushrooms and his pepper was home grown (§38).

Go to school and get a job

The social corollary of commoditisation is professionalisation. The *Satyricon* abounds with 'working class' characters whose social identity is defined by their profession. Almost all are freedmen, with the notable exception of Eumolpus' servant Corax, a freeborn barber who hired himself out as a servant (§103; 117).

The link between freedmen and economic occupations is confirmed in inscriptions and monuments. Up to 78% of funerary inscriptions in Rome that mention the deceased's profession are set up in commemoration of slaves or freedmen (Joshel 1992: 47). This is not a faithful reflection of social reality but betrays the need to compensate social discrimination (see also Valerie Hope). Professional success was the only way for most freedmen to achieve social status. Accordingly they were proud of their expertise and talent and felt respect for hard working professionals (Joshel 1992: 76-91; Hackworth Peterson 2006: 114-116).

The occupations practiced by slaves and freedmen were infinitely varied. There was virtually no profession that was not practised by slaves.

Inevitably, this often required a high degree of schooling and training. The freedmen in the *Satyricon* value education a lot, but not the idle cultural learning of the elite (although they appreciate the status attached to that). They prefer a practical education that teaches them profitable skills and crafts.

The fresco picturing Trimalcio's life shows Minerva – goddess of learning and crafts – as his childhood patroness (§29). He was bought on the slave market as a young boy and trained in calculation as a accountant (*ratiocinator*). Eventually he was made *dispensator*, the chief steward of his master's patrimony and the highest position a slave could achieve in a household. Trimalcio's own *dispensator*, Cinnamus, illustrates the wealth and power these men wielded (§30).

Echion the ragman's (*centonarius*¹) 'pet boy' Primigenius, attended the classes of a public teacher and was given extra-lessons at home by another tutor. Echion bought him some books on law, hoping that he would get the taste and become a lawyer because 'there is a lot of money in that' and it would help him manage his master's household and business (cf. Juv. 14.191-194). If the boy was resilient, Echion was determined to make him learn a trade; that of a barber perhaps, or an auctioneer or a barrister for 'learning is a treasure and a trade (*artificium*) never dies' (§46).

Exaggerated as Petronius' characters may be, they exemplify two basic realities: viz. that training and schooling could make the difference between poverty and comfort, and that masters were not opposed to educating their slaves. The latter is not surprising, because it was a necessary precondition for entrusting specialised tasks to slaves and 'upgraded' the market value of a slave. Cato the Elder made a business of training slaves to sell them for a profit (Plutarch, *Cat. Mai.* 21.6; Booth 1979; Forbes 1955).

Of course not all skills could be learned at school. Hard work and a business instinct could be equally important. Chrysanthus started from scratch but died leaving a fortune in cash, which he made as a businessman in wine. Presumably he grew riches buying grapes on the vine, a well attested lucrative but risky practice (§42-3, cf. Erdkamp 2005: 120-134). Pliny describes how the *negotiatores* who had bought up his vintage ran into financial straights when the harvest failed and found they had bid too much (*Ep.* 8.2.1).

Contrary to what Echion and Hermeros suggest (§ 58), intellectual skills too could be 'commercialised'. Encolpius and Ascyltos had been making a living of their *scientia litteris* (§10), although their schooling and 'expertise' was probably more basic than those of the rhetorician Agamemnon or the poet Eumolpus. Petronius paints a less than commendable picture of these 'professional' intellectuals. Their talent is mediocre, their high-flung words

¹ See the chapter by Andreau for another possible meaning of *centonarius*.

and ideals are betrayed by their dubious morals and they flock like parasites around the wealthy. But inscriptions and literary texts confirm that teachers, orators and poets could and did sell their services and sometimes even gained great wealth through it (Bonner 1977: 146-162). The famous grammarian Q. Remmius Palaemon, who taught Quintilianus and Persius, was first employed in his master's textile workshop. He learned his letters together with his master's son when he was appointed to accompany him to school. After Palaemon was freed he gained recognition as one of the best *grammatici* of his time, despite his arrogance and depravity. Suetonius claims he made 400,000 sesterces a year from his school while he also invested in textile workshops and expert viticulture (*Gram.* 23).

An alternative much preferred by *literati*, however, was patronage. Literary patronage is prominent in the works of authors like Martial, Juvenal, Horace and others, but it is conspicuously absent in the *Satyricon*. This is well line with the general absence of the aristocracy in the novel (see Andraeu on this). The talent of Petronius's characters was too mediocre to be courted by elite patrons, even though it sufficed to earn them an invitation to Trimalcio's party and duly impressed the barbarous Bargates (§95-6). Eumolpus explains his shabby appearance by saying that he was a man of letters of the kind that 'the rich were accustomed to hate' (§83), although he had (so we are told) once accompanied a *quaestor* to Asia – *stipendio eductus* (§85) – a privilege reflecting perhaps Catullus' journey to Bithynia in the retinue of its governor C. Memmius.

Petronius' would-be intellectuals remain outsiders to the world of the aristocracy, but this does not prevent them from looking down upon Trimalcio's lot. Echion who notices this is not impressed. Agamemnon and his companions may be culturally educated, economically they are a poor bunch. The 'professor' should come to Echion's *villa* some time to admire the 'little property'. They could eat some fresh country products and Agamemnon could meet Echion's *deliciae* whose prosperous future is assured (§46, compare also Hermeros invective §57-8).

The scene is a beautiful example of status dissonance, a typical phenomenon of complex stratified societies such as the Roman, where social position is determined by various criteria: birth, gender, ethnicity, wealth, education, talent, life-style etc. (Hopkins 1974: 105-106; Verboven 2007 : 860-861). Ideally high social rank depends on and implies the conjunction of different criteria. Status dissonance occurs when persons of lower rank become upwardly mobile and acquire some positive criteria attached to high social rank, but continue to lack others. Thus, Trimalcio's lot rank high on the wealth criterion, but low on the cultural (and birth) criterion. Agamemnon's lot rank (relatively!) high on the cultural criterion, but low on the wealth (and birth) criterion. While the former compensate their lack of education by overemphasizing their wealth, Agamemnon compensates his poverty by

overemphasizing his education and rhetorical skill. He does so discretely at the dinner party, but quite emphatically in his discussion with Encolpius on the decay of eloquence and the loss of literary taste (§3-5). Both groups, however, lack the composure of true *homines liberales* – that ill defined quality that distinguishes a respectable man from an upstart and which derives from the seemingly natural and unconstrained attitude of one who has assimilated all relevant status criteria as an inseparable part of his social identity.

Big business

Truly grand fortunes were made primarily in maritime trade. The exceptionable profitability of commerce was generally acknowledged (Patterson 1998). Lucilius spontaneously thinks of maritime trade when his friend Seneca suggests that he knows a fast way for him to become rich (*Ep.* 119.5; cf. also Cic., *Tusc.* 5.86; *Fin.* 5.91; Juv. 14.192-209). Trimalcio's decision to sell his master's estate and go into business, mirrors the protagonist of Plautus' *Merchant* who sold his father's farm to buy a ship and gathered a fortune in trade (*Mer.* 64-74).

Roman aristocrats considered commerce unworthy and base (Morley 2007: 82-5; Joshel 1992: 63-9). The legal ban on senators owning merchant ships that dated back to the late 3rd c. BC remained in force until Late Antiquity (Livy 36.63.4; *Dig.* 50.5.3; *Pauli Sententiae* (Leiden) 7-11). Livy claims the law was voted because profit-making was deemed unworthy (*indecorus*) for senators. A background in business did not legally exclude a person from becoming a municipal council member, but it was considered *inhonestum* (*Dig.* 50.2.12). Cicero asserted that the Carthaginians were not treacherous by nature, but because they were a trading nation (Cicero, *Agr.* 2.95).

Of course, these views are not shared by Trimalcio, who takes great pride in the fortitude he displayed in the face of his initial bad luck (§ 76). Lichas too is described as a *homo verecundissimus* (§ 101). Monuments and inscriptions commemorating businessmen confirm these positive self-images, but reflections of respectability enjoyed by wealthy merchants are found also in elite authors. Cicero describes them as 'wealthy and honourable men' (*Verr.* 5.154). He is especially lenient for wholesale traders who withdraw from trade to become large landowners (*Off.* 1,150-151) as Trimalcio eventually did (although he retained some interests in sea born trade (§39)). Lichas from Tarent as well invested part of his profits in landed estates while still continuing to run his trading house (*familia negotiatorum*) and to sail and conduct his business personally.

However, maritime trade was also dangerous (Morley 2007: 29-30). Like Trimalcio's first five ships on their maiden voyage, Lichas' ship, despite its robustness, was wrecked in a storm and his owner drowned (§114). Stories of ship-wrecks are common in ancient sources. The description of the

misadventure and wreckage of the ship which brought Saint-Paul to Italy in Acts 27 is a well known and elaborate example (cf. also Synesius, Ep. 5) In 62 AD a storm destroyed 200 ships in the port at Ostia (Tacitus, Ann. 15.18.3).

The dangers involved in maritime commerce were an additional reason why elite authors were apprehensive. As in most agricultural societies, Roman aristocrats were predominantly risk-averse in their economic strategies. 'It is sometimes better to seek wealth through trading, if only it would not be so dangerous (Cato, *Agr. praef.* 3; Kehoe 1997; Scheidel e.a. 2007: 549). Merchants are censured for their audacity and irresponsibility in the face of danger, driven by avarice (Cicero, *Fam.* 16.9.4; Juv. 14.256-302; Horace, *C.* 3.24.35-44; 29.58-64; *S.* 1.4.29-32). Trimalchio, on the other hand, presents his way of dealing with risk as strength of character and again his self-admiration is not without parallels in elite opinions. Although 'bent on danger and calamity', the merchant is 'strenuous and industrious', according to Cato (Cato, *Agr. praef.* 3; compare Cicero, *Imp.* 18).

This curious mixture of wealth and respectability, moral impropriety and admiration betrays the apprehension felt by Roman elites and their protégés for the potentially disruptive effects of trade on social order. Independent freedmen are well attested and talented and lucky traders had good perspectives to improve their social status (Garnsey 1981; Verboven 2007). Eumolpus laments that merchants, soldiers, flatterers and adulterers gathered wealth, while men of genius were never rich (§83). Similar scornful comparisons are found in Columella (1 praef. 07-10), Martial (*Epigr.* 11.66), Juvenal (14.193-195) and many others. The complaint is illustrative of the social criticism that growing trade provoked. Their servile background may have prevented upstarts like Trimalchio of ever truly arriving (Veyne 1961, compare Andreau's chapter), they were unmistakably knocking at the door for their children to pass.

Nevertheless, we should not be duped. Although aristocrats were rarely personally active as traders, they did invest through their slaves and freedmen, and in this way controlled more of ancient commerce than they cared to admit (Pleket 1983; D'Arms 1981). The silence of the *Satyricon* in this respect is illustrative of Petronius' non-elite focus.

The Late Republic and Early Empire witnessed an unprecedented increase in commerce, which in the eyes of many was bound up with the essence of the Empire itself ((Patterson 1998)). The Mediterranean is littered with ancient shipwrecks that testify to the flourishing of maritime trade. The peak it reached in the period 1st c. BC – 2nd c. AD, would not be matched until the 16th c. (Scheidel e.a. 2007: 571-573). The Roman empire experienced a moderate growth over the first two centuries AD that may have doubled or tripled GNP (Saller 2002; Scheidel e.a. 2007: 543-550; 619-620).

Strictly speaking, however, shipwrecks and archaeological distribution maps document movement of goods, not trade. The question what drove these movements has been hotly debated. Whittaker argued that market demands were not a decisive factor. What prevailed in his view were political motives (supplying food to the populace and the army) and social preoccupations of large absentee landowners who ordered the produce of their estates to be brought “home” to supply their extended families (including slaves) and to indulge in gift-exchange and public benefactions. The backbone of Roman commerce would have been a command and moral economy (Whittaker 1985). This view has been sharply criticised (Patterson 1998) and has now given way to much more varied model, relying heavily on New Institutional Economics, in which market forces, political interventions and gift-exchange are intertwined (Bang e.a. 2006; Scheidel e.a. 2007).

The *Satyricon*, however, shows little signs of a command or moral economy. Although Trimalchio aims to be self-sufficient and poses as a public benefactor, Petronius clearly does not intend us to believe that his fantastic wealth was used primarily to feed and cloth his *familia* or to be distributed to his fellow citizens. Neither is there any reason to suppose that when he was still a merchant Trimalchio only sold the produce of his own estates, or that Lichas did so. Clearly Petronius’ focus is on commerce, not on distribution or gift-exchange.

Money makes the world go round

Trimalchio survived to enjoy the fortune he made as a merchant. The ‘thirty million sesterces’ he expected to leave when he died are the proverbial expression of a millionaire’s fortune (cf. §45; 76; 88; 117; Duncan Jones 1997; Scheidel 1996). The golden bracelet he dedicated to Mercury as 1/1000th of his profits, weighed 10 pounds of gold, which puts the total of his profits at 10,000 pounds of gold, the equivalent of 42 million sesterces or 42 times the senatorial *census*. The sum is of course grossly exaggerated, in line with his supposedly immeasurable landed estates (§67).

When Trimalchio had amassed more wealth than his entire *patria* (his home city) possessed, he retired and started lending at interest to or through his freedmen (§76.9; see D’Arms 1981: 103). Interest bearing loans were a common investment among upper class Romans. According to Seneca an aristocratic fortune typically consisted of a handsome slave-staff, a beautiful urban residence, large landed estates, and much money put out at interest (*Ep.* 41.7). Pliny the Younger claims that he was almost wholly in real estate, but he had some money out on interest (*Ep.* 3.19.8).

By an amazing stroke of luck, we have 127 documents on writing tablets dating to AD 26-61 preserved from the archives of a private credit enterprise. The tablets were discovered in a wooden chest found near Pompeii, but document business conducted in Puteoli. The enterprise was

run by a freedman's son C. Sulpicius Faustus and his freedman Cinnamus and was later inherited by Faustus' brother Onirus (Camodeca 1999; Andraeu 1999: 71-79; Jones 2006).

The Sulpicii were moneylenders and credit intermediaries (*faeneratores*), who specialised in extending loans and sureties to maritime traders. Whether they were also deposit bankers (*argentarii*) is disputed, but they certainly provided services as middle men channelling funds from a variety of investors (from centurions to senators and imperial slaves) to long distance maritime traders. Petronius' expression *<per> libertos faenerari* suggests that Trimalcio used or set up credit enterprises like that of the Sulpicii to invest part of his fortune.

The Roman commercial economy could not function without credit. Any sizeable business enterprise relied on credit. Seneca admitted that 'if you want to do business you need to borrow' (*Ep.* 119.2). Inevitably this entailed the risk of bankruptcy. Several tablets of the Sulpicii document insolvency trials and the sale of securities and mortgages. One of Trimalcio's guests, C. Julius Proculus, made a fortune as an undertaker, but when his luck turned, his partners left him to the mercy of his creditors and he was forced to auction most of his luxury goods and mortgage the rest (§38). Another semi-fictitious example of a businessman going bankrupt, Damasippus Mercurialis, is found in Horace's *Satires* (*S.* 2.3). He was a dealer in real estate and art who incurred heavy debts at the *Ianus Medius* – the place where Rome's moneylenders and brokers convened.

To live off the land

Despite its apparent complexity, Petronius' economy remains rooted in agriculture. In the Ancient World, even in the most urbanised environment, the rhythm of the economy was determined by the seasonal fluctuations of agriculture. Roman cities, like their Greek counterparts, were very sensitive to their food supply. It was the prime responsibility of local magistrates and city-councils to take adequate precautions to ensure the supply. They were not always successful (cf. Erdkamp 2005; Rickman 1980, Garnsey 1988). At the time of Trimalcio's *cena*, a year of drought had caused food prices to surge. One of the guests, Ganymedes, worries that he will have to sell his 'little dwellings' (*casulae*). He accuses the *aediles* to collude with the millers and bakers and to accept bribes from them (§44–46); a familiar complaint that typically ignored the responsibility of the landowning elite and of wholesale merchants (Bang 2006: 71-74).

The dependency of the ancient economy on the land went much beyond the provision of food. Landed estates supplied important raw materials, as e.g. wool, leather and bone. Clay-beds and the ceramic and brick industry attached to it were often part of landed estates (Scheidel e.a. 2007: 559-566). Property (landed and urban) was both a token of status and a safe

investment and thus doubly appealed to the ‘nouveaux riches’ (Finley 1973: 95-122; Garnsey and Saller 1987: 44-45). Like Lichas and their host, the businessmen at Trimalcio’s table owned landed and urban property. ‘Let me take you to my humble farm and we will find some good stuff to eat despite the drought’, says Echion to Agamemnon (§46).

Trimalcio inherited large estates from his former master, which he initially sold to finance his trading ventures, but bought back and expanded afterwards (§67). His Cumaean estate alone would have yielded 500,000 *modii* of grain (§53), half the amount needed for the monthly imperial distributions in Rome. One of his estates, Trimalcio claims, touched the confines of Terracinum and Tarent. He was now hoping to buy Sicily, so that he could sail to Africa along his own lands (§48) yet if he would succeed in acquiring Apulia he would be satisfied (§77).

Clearly these claims are ridiculous, but the theme of concentration of landownership is common in the literature of the early Empire (Garnsey and Saller 1987; 66-71). In 8 BC, the freedman millionaire C. Caecilius Isidorus – like Trimalcio a former businessman – died leaving 60 million sesterces, 4116 slaves, 3600 ox-yokes (enough to work 360,000 *iugera* of arable land), and over a quarter of a million of other cattle (Pliny, *Nat.* 33.135).

Concentration of ownership does not imply that the estates merged into vast ranch-like properties suitable only for extensive cattle raising or cereal farming. Pliny the Elder thought that *latifundia* had caused the ruin of Italy (*Nat.* 18.35), but archaeological surveys show the persistence of small and medium sized farms and plots. Farm tenancy was a common feature in Italian agriculture. Columella recommended to lease out estates that were too distant to be visited regularly (1.7.6-7). For landowners who preferred not to rely on tenancy, the most common type of rural enterprise in the late Republic and early Empire, was the *villa rustica* – a moderate size enterprise run primarily by slaves, producing cash crops for urban markets. *Villa*-agriculture could not function without additional hired labour at peak periods. Significantly, Isidorus’ 4116 slaves were not enough to farm the 360,000 *iugera* his oxen could plough or to herd his cattle (Kehoe 1997; Garnsey and Saller 1987; 66-71; Scheidel e.a. 553-7).

Estate agriculture of any type in Italy was market oriented and was expected to yield a surplus in cash. Trimalcio’s Cumaean estate would have brought in 10 million sesterces (§ 53). Remmius Palaemon, the grammarian, once bought a neglected estate near Nomentum for 600,000 sesterces and hired a famous freedman viticulturalist, Acilius Sthenelus to (re)plant vines. Eight years later these brought in 400,000 sesterces *pendente vindemia* and Palaemon sold the estate to Seneca for 2.4 million sesterces (Plin. *Nat.* 14.48-51; cf. Plin. *Ep.* 6.30).

Slave exploitation is the norm in Petronius’ world. On Trimalcio’s Cumaean estate, 70 slave children would have been born in a single day (§ 53, the

figure is obviously grotesque). Hired rural labour is absent from the novel. Trimalcio himself had been sent off as *vilicus* to an estate by his master as punishment for sleeping with his mistress (§69). This was a flagrant (although comical) breach from sensible estate management as described by the agronomists. Columella advises ‘not to appoint an overseer from that sort of slaves who are physically attractive, and certainly not from that class which has busied itself with the voluptuous occupations of the city.’ ... A man should be chosen who has been hardened by farm work from his infancy, one who has been tested by experience.’ An illiterate slave is better than a literate one ‘because, not knowing his letters, he is ... less able to falsify accounts’ (1.8.1). It seems hardly possible to find a more anti-Trimalcio image than this. Petronius knew Columella’s work and it is tempting to think that the lines about Trimalcio’s stewardship were written with these words in mind.

Conclusion

Using Petronius’ *Satyricon* as a historical source for the Roman economy requires close critical reading and a constant adjustment and comparison with other sources. The novel is not situated in a fantasy world, but the scenery is as distorted as Petronius’ characters are. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that with proper care the data on economic reality woven into the story can be filtered out and used to substantiate our views on the Roman economy in Nero’s time.

Further reading

Kloft 1994 and Schnur 1959 offer general studies on reflections of economic reality in the *Satyricon*. Veyne’s study of Trimalcio (Veyne 1961) is a classic and indispensable to understand how this fictitious character relates to historical reality. It is worth while reading it together with the long chapter on ‘The ”Typicality” of Trimalcio’ in D’Arms 1981 (p. 97-120). Love 1991 offers an interesting Weberian analysis (p. 160-165).

Booth 1979 shows how Petronius’ novel documents the education of slaves in Roman society. Bonner 1977 provides a good introduction to education in ancient Rome. Those who want to know more about Roman law may start with Johnston 1999. Joshel 1992 gives a good basis for understanding how professional occupation helped to construct social identities in ancient Rome. Finley 1973 is inevitable if you want to study the ancient economy, although much of its basic ideas are now abandoned or disputed. Scheidel and von Reden 2002 offers a good reader of articles and papers on the ancient economy to supplement and correct Finley. Scheidel e.a. 2007 is the best recent survey on the ancient economy available. Morley 2007 is a good general introduction to trade in Classical Antiquity. D’Arms 1981 gives fascinating insights into the organisation of Roman commerce. De Ligt 1993 offers a thorough analysis of periodic markets and fairs. An excellent

introduction to all aspects of banking and money-lending is Andreau 1999. Garnsey and Saller 1987: 83-103 provides a quick intro to questions concerning food supply and the risks of famine. More thorough studies on the subject are Rickman 1980, Garnsey 1988 and Erdkamp 2005. On land holding and agriculture Garnsey and Saller 1987: 64-82 is a handy quick introduction. Pleket 1993 is helpful to put Roman agriculture in comparative perspective.

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Very short biography

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