

## Peasant Economics

### 1. Peasants

#### Definition

- all definitions of 'peasant' very contentious
- most definitions group together some very different populations

An approximate definition:

free workers, primarily engaged in agricultural production on their own and/or others' land; living, on, or close to, the land; and usually in families; *relatively* poor yet paying rent and/or tax, and so *relatively* disempowered by richer farmers, landlords and the state and especially vulnerable to external impositions, political crises, ecological change and the operations of the market

- free workers,
- primarily engaged in agricultural production
- on their own and/or others' land;
- living, on, or close to, the land;
- and usually in families; (division of labour, the lifecycle of a family)
- *relatively* poor yet paying rent and/or tax, and so
- *relatively* disempowered by richer farmers, landlords and the state and
- *especially* vulnerable to external impositions, political crises, ecological change and the operations of the market (Peasant societies as part-societies)

Peasants are usually distinguished from tribespeople, slaves, the non-agriculturist poor in town and country, but naturally have some similarities with all these.

#### Types of peasants

##### Subsistence peasants

eat most of what they produce and vice versa

##### "Wealthy" peasants

sources of wealth

how wealth is used: consumption, investment

role in village communities

##### Market orientated peasants

location, benefits, disadvantages

##### Part time peasants

additional activities: seasonal and supplementary

##### Urban, village and dispersed peasantries

2. Peasants and Risk

**What sort of risk?**

climate-generated crop failure:

esp. from low rainfall in Mediterranean environments (some regions more 'risky' than others), but also from hail, storms, fires

disease (human, animal or crop)

note interaction of malnutrition and diseases, food crises and epidemics

demographic chance (death rates, fertility rates, ratio of boy:girl children etc)

anthropogenic disruption (e.g. warfare) How serious in the countryside?

**Risk-buffering strategies**

- dispersed property holdings
- what sort of family you (try to) raise
- crop diversification (we have a little of everything)
- bad year crops
- storage:
  - hoarding of food and seed grain
  - animals
  - social storage (a friend in need)
- patronage (and other forms of dependency)
- community solidarity

**Responses to more serious crises**

migration (to towns, Rome, colonies)

joining the army (but only effective for single males)

famine foods

exposure of neo-nates

prostitution etc.

sale of land

selling one's self into slavery

NB: collective disasters to be distinguished from family or personal disasters

4. Peasants and the Market

**Opportunity or threat?**

a modern debate: price fluctuations and peasant agriculture

ancient views of autarky versus dependence

the romantic view of the peasant as a relic of pre-modern society

**Evidence for the purchasing power of ancient peasants**

field survey: TS

mortaria

coin-finds and monetarisation

**Access to markets**

density of urbanism in ancient Italy

periodic markets: on private estates (by permission)

touring small towns (nundinae lists)

**Market-exchange as a risk-buffering strategy?**

5. Peasants as tenants in Roman Italy

**tenants (coloni)** attested in Italy from C2nd BC, and growing importance ethnoarchaeology and anthropology: a variety of contracts taken by landless and smallholders on variously sized plots to farm a variety of crops

**advantages for tenants:**

- contracts might grant access to equipment, presses, draught animals, distribution.
- a way to make use of temporary surplus labour (e.g. unmarried adult sons)
- risk avoidance: multiple plots, sharecropping, landlords carry risk of disasters
- a least worst option, often compelled by those they depended on in other ways e.g. ex-masters, patrons, creditors

**advantages for landlords:**

- could compel labour intensive cultivation of smaller plots for higher productivity
- short term leases (5 years) gave more flexibility than investment of a slave run villa
- tenants carry some of the risk  
reduction in management costs (no vilici etc)

**owners, tenants and labourers as overlapping categories**

Note that the same individuals might own and rent land, and that some small-holders and tenants would have worked for wages on other's estates. Tenants might make use of slaves or wage-labour in addition to the labour of their own family. The lifecycle of the family, and other fluctuations of an individuals' fortune over the course of his lifetime would probably lead to changes in the mix.

5. Peasants and their wealthier neighbours: a case study

**The Ager Cosanus**

- fertile plain and low hills in Etruria with good communications south to Rome, and west to Gaul and Spain.
- early C3rd centuriated landscape around the colony of Cosa with c.2000 small-holdings
- by C1st BC replaced with a landscape dominated by 50 odd villas by late C1st BC, the estates of which perhaps occupied only 25 % of arable
- archaeological invisibility of poorest inhabitants:
- most probably a residual free peasantry, including small holders, tenants, landless labourers and some tenants, some living dispersed, some in villages, others in town

**Settefinestre**

a model villa, as described by the agronomists?

- villa in Ager Cosanus, peak activity 50 BC - AD 50
- pars rustica and pars urbana, master and slave accommodation, mill, ? livestock?1 oil and 3 wine presses, storage facilities all in combination with agronomists suggest a 250 jugera farm
- produced grain but also some oil (for domestic consumption?) and wine, perhaps some of that shipped in Dressel 1 amphorae with SES (Sestius) stamps?
- about 20 slaves could manage all this bar the vintage and olive picking

>>> 28% of annual labour needed had to be casual

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