

# Review

CLARA BENNENDONNER, *LE PEUPLE ET L'ARGENT; ADMINISTRATION ET REPRÉSENTATIONS DU TRÉSOR PUBLIC DANS LA ROME RÉPUBLICAINE* (509–49 AV. J.-C.). (Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 404). Rome: École française de Rome, 2022. Pp. 578. ISBN 9782728315598. €35.00.

Before exploring Berrendonner's examination of the Roman republican treasury, I note that it is one of the Publications de l'École française de Rome, with its wonderful practice of releasing open-source research via [books.openedition.org](https://books.openedition.org). The hard copy is not overly expensive, but making a monograph — especially one that aims to be an authoritative reference work — available without charge globally is a service to the field that must be acknowledged as such.

And B.'s work will rightly be a standard one for those interested in the Roman republican 'state' (a term rejected at 42 and 356), finance and politics. It comprises an introduction, four chapters and nearly 100 pages of tables recording references for booty and public building, the text of *Lex Cornelia de XX Quaestoribus*, the *Lex Repetundarum*, the RRC details for all quaestorian coins, and a long table of attested financial activity by magistrates. The data in these appendices reflect B.'s grounded, positivist approach; she reconstructs what the Roman treasury — and Roman public finance in some broader sense — was and how it worked.

B. excavates centuries of scholarship to erect a target for demolition (esp. 31–4). According to this old view, an inability to distinguish the concepts of public and private crippled the development of Roman financial administration. There was thus no effective fiscal system because these Romans could only think of specific revenues earmarked for specific expenses, and failed to develop the fungibility and credit mechanisms needed for more complicated public finance. Archives were rudimentary, and quaestors were inexperienced young men who cycled out of the job before they could learn it. The common thread here is the notion that the bureaucratic practices of a treasury were anathema to an aristocratic city-state (122). B. is justly dismissive of these assumptions and sets out to show either why they are wrong or why they do not imply the sorts of primitivism alleged by earlier scholars. At the same time, however, she is keen to avoid any modernising or anachronising interpretation. Embedding finance in its own peculiar historical context, her mission instead is to establish how the Romans imagined the relationship between the Roman people and the Roman treasury (43).

The first chapter examines the temple origins of the *aerarius*. An *armarium* stored *arma*, so an *aerarium* must have stored *aes* (112–13), and over time it grew to manage resources for war and emergency food supply. Central to B.'s conception is that Rome's adoption of coinage followed a long familiarity with a unit of account expressed in bronze. In the second chapter, B. explores the administration of public finance and argues that it was characterised by rote procedures that were familiar to treasury officials. Moreover, those officials were organised hierarchically and rationally, with little need for quaestorian oversight (esp. 225). The system worked in part because it relied only minimally on elected aristocratic novices, and in part because it kept its job simple. Yet this was not a powerful institution. The third chapter argues that the senate authorised grants to magistrates, but that magistrates enjoyed great leeway in how they used those funds. There were never strong public controls on state spending, and financial skill was rarely a desideratum for voters in electing magistrates. The fourth chapter makes the book's central argument, that public finance was central to the Romans' own conception of the community, and so potent political controversies — familiarly framed as those between *optimates* and *populares* about issues such as the grain dole — make little sense without a fiscal focus.

The book joins recent work such as France's *Tribut. Une histoire fiscale de la conquête romaine* (2021), Taylor's *Soldiers and Silver: Mobilizing Resources in the Age of Roman Conquest* (2020) and Pearson's *Exploring the Mid-Republican Origins of Roman Military Administration* (2021). Together, they provide a clearer view of Roman finance and administration and the ways in which Rome was effective without conforming to Weberian notions of state formation.

More controversially, B. insists on eliding the difference between the treasury and the public finance system in general, which will provoke debate. Throughout, limitations of evidence necessitate speculation and B. is happy to comply. I have a high tolerance for such daring, but some readers will wonder whether the rewards justify the risk. Elsewhere, I would encourage more

speculation. Her trust in the sources, for example, leads to claims that the evidence coincides with a practice's emergence. For example, 'Les sénateurs spécialistes des finances, comme les Cornelii Balbi, apparaissent à l'époque césarienne' (82–3); that may be true, but perhaps we would see such men earlier if something like Cicero's letters were available for earlier periods. 'Le terme *peculatus* apparaît au début du IIe siècle' (295), but so do our sources, so it is hard to say whether *peculatus* had existed for years, decades or centuries. Such a tendency, however, merely reflects B.'s rigorous approach to sources.

Conceptually, the book asks whether the treasury was suited to the tasks that it was given, and B's answer is in the affirmative. That is a service to the field, but one can also ask why it was given those tasks and not others. Comparison with other city-states or with the empire might allow us to ask whether the treasury was tailored to the tasks, or whether the tasks were constrained by the limitations of the treasury. Nonetheless, this is a learned, valuable book that will be cited well into the future.

University of Sydney  
[james.t@sydney.edu.au](mailto:james.t@sydney.edu.au)

doi:10.1017/S0075435823001004

JAMES TAN

© The Author(s), 2024.

Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.