

Grain market intervention in the Roman world

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Introduction

Most modern authors are sceptical regarding the interest of the authorities in the Roman world in the food supply of the common people. Those instances that seem to indicate otherwise are either explained as mere symbolic expressions of governmental responsibility, or as forms of euergetism that by their nature are unrelated to the workings of the market. Hence, they assume that the role of the government and of the local elites was inefficient or limited to occasional acts of beneficence towards a privileged few. The consensus seems to be that both central and local authorities did not seriously address the urban food supply, which was largely left to the forces of the market. It is not denied that the gift of food or the selling of cheap grain by private citizens was often purely an act of beneficence, intended not so much to address the problems of the urban food market as to confirm the social position of both parties that were involved. However, we have ample evidence that permanent institutions existed that did not rely on the initiative of private citizens, and whose prime purpose was to ensure in all years an adequate supply of grain.

The following investigation of governmental intervention in the urban food supply outside Rome will concentrate on direct market intervention. Direct market intervention includes those actions in which the central or municipal authorities participated in the supply, storage and/or distribution of grain. Indirect market intervention is defined as those measures that regulated the workings of the market by either stimulating or discouraging certain behaviour.

Grain funds in Asia Minor and elsewhere

The prime source for their widespread existence consists of the epigraphic attestations of grain funds and their officials. Asia Minor has yielded particularly many inscriptions on the municipal *sitionia* and its officials the *sitonai*. Most of these inscriptions date to the second or early third century AD, but the scarcity of attestations in the first century AD or the second half of the third century AD does not imply that the *sitionia* was not in existence at these earlier or later periods.¹ Direct market interventions that were similar to the *sitionia* existed in Asia Minor in the Hellenistic period, but the *sitionia* became a permanent magistracy during the Principate.

The *sitionia* or similar schemes also existed elsewhere in the Roman world, in particular in the East, but the attestations are not as widespread as regarding Asia Minor. Are we to assume that grain funds as a permanent institution were not as common elsewhere? The profuseness of evidence regarding Asia Minor does not necessarily indicate that urban policy towards food supply was significantly different here than in all other regions of the Empire. First, regional differences in the epigraphic attestation of grain funds may be caused by differences in the number, nature and content of inscriptions honouring leading citizens. Secondly, in many cities of Asia Minor the existence of the *sitionia* is solely attested by the mention of a *sitones*. In other places, in particular the smaller ones, the same functions may have been performed by magistrates who were more generally involved in the market or food supply, such as *agoranomoi*.² In Caere in AD 114, we find an aedile in charge of the grain supply.³ The fact that,

¹ Strubbe (1989) 101.

² As probably in Aphrodisias, Prousius and Pessinus. Strubbe (1989) 105. Possibly also in Hellenistic Kallatis. Stefan (1974) 656, who also observes that *archontes* sometimes dealt with matters of food supply. Foster (1970) 128 (and further) rightly points out that 'the Greek word *agoranomos* had a long history and meant the same thing at different

according to a ruling from Severan times, *aediles* were punishable for the inadequate supply of their town supports the supposition that provisioning of the market in many towns in the western half of the Empire was mainly the responsibility of *aediles*.⁴ The existence of a grain fund may thus be hidden by a less specific title.

On the other hand, the municipal policy towards food supply seems indissolubly connected to the political and social structure of the urban community, which means that grain funds like the *sitionia* in Asia Minor, though common in many parts of the empire, need not have existed or functioned in the same way everywhere. No grain funds are known in Egypt, despite the wealth of evidence concerning food supply.⁵ In the western provinces, it may have been more common to appoint prominent citizens when the need arose.⁶

Further evidence is offered by literary and legal sources. Herodian offers the following remark concerning the tyrannical reign of Maximinus Thrax: ‘If there were any public treasuries, gathered on behalf of food stores or reserved for theatres and festivals, he expropriated them.’⁷ The passage invites three observations. First, Herodian apparently regarded grain funds as being among the most common in the cities of the Roman Empire. Secondly, he makes no distinction between grain funds and financial reserves for theatrical plays or festivals. Thirdly, Herodian states that the public funds were intended to gather food reserves. Herodian apparently associated such funds primarily with the collection of stores rather than with public meals or free gifts.

The writings of the jurists leave no doubt that the grain funds were considered of special importance. The following is one of several rulings in the *Digest* that were taken from the writings of the Severan jurist Ulpian:

A debtor to the corn account is to settle as soon as possible from his own resources. For the corn account which is necessary to all communities must not suffer from delayed payment, but debtors may be forced to payment by the governor of the province if he has any in this position.⁸

This ruling explicitly regards grain funds (*frumentaria pecunia*) as a necessity for all towns, which would have made little sense if most towns and cities were without a grain fund. Grain funds were apparently not only common in the early third century AD, they were also regarded as crucial for the functioning of a city.

Grain funds and euergetism

Most modern historians observe that the market intervention in the Greek East depended on private benefaction, due to the cities’ chronic shortage of public capital.⁹ Garnsey and Morris go even further and state that: ‘the dependence of the cities on private benefaction only advertises

times and different things at the same time’. See also pp. 131, 134f. On officials dealing with food supply in Egypt, Alston (2002) 190ff.

³ CIL 11.3614 = Freis (1994) nr. 95.

⁴ *Digest* 16.2.17.

⁵ Sharp (1998) 310.

⁶ Dardaine and Pavis D’Escurac (1986) 293. The sole attestation of a private contribution to a grain fund in the western provinces is CIL 8.21077 = Dardaine and Pavis D’Escurac (1986) nr. 15. Cf. Dirscherl (2000) 14.

⁷ Herodian 7.3.5.

⁸ *Digest* 50.8.2.3.

⁹ Kloft (1988) 129; Quaß (1993) 247.

the weakness of the public response to the inevitability of food shortage'.¹⁰ Several inscriptions commemorate the private gift of money to a municipal grain fund. Typical is the legacy of the imperial freedman Publius Aelius Onesimus to the grain fund of Nacoleia (Phrygia). The inscription is dated to the reign of Hadrian. Aelius Onesimus legated 200,000 HS, which sum had to be lent out at interest. 'The interest that accrues they should deposit in the grain fund (*sitonika*) during the next three years in order to buy annually as much grain as the money allows.'¹¹ After a period of three years, the interest was to be divided among his fellow citizens. Although the inscription informs us that during the first three years grain had to be bought, it does not say whether the grain had to be distributed annually or whether the three consecutive acquisitions were intended to build up a grain reserve. If we assume that the interest was 6 %, that the price of a modius of grain was HS 2 ½ and that the average adult consumed 3 modii per month, Onesimus' capital might have bought annually enough grain to feed 1,600 people for a month. If the intention was a grain reserve, three years were sufficient to accumulate enough grain to feed the entire population of a small town for a month. Note, however, that this is merely one contribution to the grain fund. We do not know how much more capital or grain the fund possessed.

Mere attestation of a gift to a grain fund or of an official like the *sitones* offers little information concerning purpose and functioning of such schemes. The main task of the *sitonai* obviously was to acquire grain. This is confirmed by the *Digest*:

Also, the supervision of the purchase of corn or oil – for supervisors of these goods, who are called *sitonai* and *elaionai*, are regularly appointed – fall among the personal *munera* in some communities.¹²

The passage shows that the main task of *sitonai* was to buy grain. The statement that the office was a *munus* in many towns derives from the writings of the late-Roman jurist Arcadius Charisius. We cannot be sure to what degree this applied to the second or third centuries AD. However, a ruling from the reign of Hadrian states that philosophers, rhetors and doctors were exempted from the duty of gymnasiarch, *agoranomos*, *sitones* and *elaiones*.¹³ This seems to imply that already in Hadrian's time, these functions were seen as *munera*.

In the above passage from the *Digest*, 'oil-buyers' (*elaionai*) are mentioned as a parallel to 'grain-buyers' (*sitonai*). A decree of the emperor Hadrian sheds light on the mechanisms that the city of Athens employed in the acquisition of olive oil. Hadrian decreed that local producers had to sell one-third of their olive oil to the official 'oil-buyers':

Oil producers shall deliver one-third [...]. They shall make delivery in installments at the beginning of the harvest, in proportion to the amount being harvested, and they shall [give it] to the *elaionai* who look out for the [public requirements].¹⁴

¹⁰ Garnsey and Morris (1989) 104.

¹¹ CIL 3.6998 = Strubbe (1987) nr. 53 = Eck (1993) nr. 343.

¹² Arcadius Charisius *Digest* 50.4.18.5, taken from his work *de muneribus civilibus* (on the public duties of citizens).

¹³ Modestinus *Digest* 27.1.6.8. However, Hadrian's measure was partly reversed under his successor. Quaß (1993) 381.

¹⁴ IG II/III² 1100 = SEG 15.108, 21.501 = transl. Oliver (1953) 962. Cf. transl. Freis (1994) nr. 85. See Boatwright (2000) 91 on the extraordinary nature of Hadrian's involvement in this case.

Dispensations were given in the case of an exceptionally good harvest:

If from an abundance of oil at any time the amounts of one-third [...] being deposited are in excess of the public requirements for the whole year, it shall be permitted as follows to those who have not as yet delivered either all or part of their oil.¹⁵

As the strict regulations for the control of exports show, the law was not just a scheme to ensure a cheap supply of oil to the city's gymnasia. The control of export and the purchase by public oil-buyers of one third of the entire output leaves no doubt that the purpose of this law was to ensure an abundant and stable supply of the local market.

Athens was not just any Greek city to Hadrian – the situation prescribed by his decree may therefore have been out of the ordinary. However, the decree uses the widely known term *elaionai* for the ones who bought the oil, and we know from Arcadius Charisius *Dig.* 50.4.18.5 that the main task of *elaionai* and *sitonai* in general was to buy oil or grain. Although the mechanisms employed in Athens were probably not exactly the same as those in other cities, the use of coercive purchase may have characterized the means employed by 'oil-buyers' and 'grain-buyers' elsewhere. Support for this hypothesis comes from a ruling in the *Digest*, which shows that some cities used political force to claim their share of local produce:

Furthermore, some communities have the right to demand that those who hold properties in their territory provide each year a certain quantity of corn according to the extent of their land.¹⁶

Similarly, Ulpian mentions that it was usual for landowners to sell part of their produce to neighbouring cities at a low price.¹⁷

Coping with shortages?

The purpose of the grain funds is disputed. Strubbe rejects the idea that the grain funds were intended to cope with local shortages.¹⁸ He sees grain funds mainly as a private concern. Indeed, in Asia Minor funding appears to have been primarily private and voluntary.¹⁹ However, we should not confuse private contributions to public funds with, for instance, the establishment of private funds that were intended to finance private benefactions, such as banquets or *sportulae*. In addition, the epigraphic sources, which remain silent on other kinds of funding, may distort the picture somewhat by focussing too much on honourable activities of equally honourable benefactors.²⁰

The *Digest* sheds additional light on the grain funds. As we have seen above, strict regulations regarding debts that were owed to the grain fund clearly show the authorities' concern for its solvency. Payment of debts to grain funds was considered important enough to involve the provincial governor. The other rulings from Ulpian confirm these conclusions. Financial reserves that had been transferred from the grain fund for other purposes had to be refunded with

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Digest* 50.4.18.25.

¹⁷ *Digest* 7.1.27.3.

¹⁸ Strubbe (1989) 116.

¹⁹ Migeotte (1998) 237 shows that some funds in the Hellenistic world received funding annually.

²⁰ Thus, the comment by Pleket in SEG 39.1775.

interest.²¹ Debts to the grain fund were not to be settled with expenses for other municipal purposes.²² No such regulations are known concerning financial reserves on behalf of theatrical plays or gladiatorial games.²³ The legal evidence seems to show that at least in the early third century AD grain funds were a municipal, not a private affair. More so: the financial standing of the towns and cities was of great concern to the Roman authorities, and this interest apparently significantly involved the grain fund.

While Strubbe argues that grain funds in Asia Minor lacked the means to be effective in times of dearth, the point of a permanent grain fund may have been precisely to avoid the necessity of having to buy grain during a shortage.²⁴ Early modern grain funds may offer some clarification in this regard. The purpose of the grain funds in pre-industrial Europe was to store grain reserves in good years to be used in bad years. The idea was that grain could be bought cheaply in years of abundant harvests and sold below market prices in bad harvest years. Communal granaries in medieval Italy also sold grain in the pre-harvest period.²⁵ In other words, grain funds were a response to the lack of sufficient carry-over on the market. In practice, however, these schemes suffered chronically from a shortage of funding. The main problem was that bad harvests were unpredictable events. K.G. Persson points out that carry-over by public granaries was as unprofitable as speculative carry-over by merchants. ‘With few exceptions, public granaries were unable to remain financially solvent over long periods.’²⁶ Hence, the operation of these funds slackened after a row of good harvests, while the municipal stores deteriorated. As a result, whenever it became clear that the next harvest would fail, or when shortage occurred unpredictably, the municipal magistrates had to buy grain at high prices, which they subsequently sold to the urban populace below market price. However, despite the high costs involved and the often catastrophic failures of such schemes, they were never abolished.

As the activities of private citizens in times of shortage show, private and public mechanisms are indistinguishable in the Roman world. *Sitonai*, *agoranomoi* and other magistrates often financed their ‘public’ activities from their own, private funds.²⁷ In addition, there is ample evidence that the wealthiest citizens stepped in during shortages and supplied the market with cheap grain – or rather, they made corn available at a price that was below market level, but probably still high. While grain funds were permanent institutions, which received funding more or less regularly, there appears to have been a wide range of interrelated responses to immediate shortages that included public decrees to increase the available capital of the grain fund, or private initiatives to contribute capital to the grain fund or to (purchase and) sell grain cheaply.

²¹ *Digest* 50.8.2.2.

²² *Digest* 50.8.2.4.

²³ On the contrary: money that had been legated to a town with the express intent of organising games was not to be used for that purpose. However, *Digest* 50.8.6(4) is late Roman.

²⁴ Cf. Migeotte (1998) 229, who argues that grain funds in the Hellenistic Greek world were not intended to take over the urban grain supply, which depended on private trade, but to intervene in the market when private supply was lacking and/or grain prices high.

²⁵ Peyer (1950) 138ff.

²⁶ Persson (1996) 709. See for example the grain fund in Cuenca (Castile), Reher (1990) 160.

²⁷ Dardaine and Pavis D’Escurac (1986) 294ff. Regarding the Hellenistic period, Quaß (1993) 247ff notes that the function of officials involved in grain supply required that they possessed personal wealth. See also pp. 264ff on the imperial period.

Social networks

The effectiveness of direct market intervention by municipal institutions depended not only on adequate funding, but also on the degree to which magistrates had access to grain. The inadequacies of the free market necessitated the intervention of municipal institutions in order to make more grain available at lower prices to the community's citizens. However, the question remains whether the mechanisms that were available were sufficiently strong to improve on the workings of the market. The municipal schemes had three advantages in comparison to the free market. First, the capital that was amassed by the local elite offered more buying power than the urban populace itself could have realised. Secondly, the prestige and standing, not only of the magistrates, but also of the individual members of the elite that were involved, offered an additional incentive to landowners and merchants to supply grain. Thirdly, local authorities had the means to use coercion to enforce the supply of the market.

Unfortunately, the sources are often silent on the origin of the grain that was made available by the intervention of municipal institutions. One case from imperial times sheds more light on this matter: a *sitones* from Sparta, who held this post three times, informs us that he travelled to Egypt in order to buy grain. He also emphasises that he managed to ship the grain home without losses.²⁸

The status of a city and its leading citizens was of the utmost importance in gaining access to the vast resources of the emperors.²⁹ Three *sitonai* are known from Tralleis who imported grain from Egypt, and gratitude is expressed to the emperor Hadrian for allowing such imports. The well-known grant of grain to Ephesus may have been in response to a request from the city's grain officials as well. Cassius Dio praises Hadrian for his generosity in giving the cities of the empire public works, money or food.³⁰ Imperial involvement is also attested in an inscription from Concordia, in which we are told that C. Arrius Antoninus, prefect of the *aerarium Saturni* and *iuridicus* in Italia Transpadana, was sent by the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus to deal with the supply problems that had struck the town.³¹ In general, the *Historia Augusta* informs us, 'in times of famine he [Marcus Aurelius] furnished the Italian communities with food from the city'.³² Such cases may indicate that, in addition to transactions with merchants and the dispersed landholdings of the municipal elite, the urban elite sometimes offered access to the resources of the imperial government.

Conclusions

The care of the community's food supply was part of the social structure of the Roman town. However, the relations between urban elites and the masses did not conform to a uniform pattern throughout the Roman world, which may explain the regional differences in policy, and the probable absence of permanent mechanisms of direct market intervention in some parts of the empire. The evidence may suggest more reliance in the western provinces on prominent citizens who occasionally and temporarily took care of the communities' food supply. In contrast, permanent institutions and regular magistracies seem to have predominated in the Greek East.

²⁸ SEG 11.491. Quaß (1993) 268.

²⁹ On the role of prominent citizens in attracting the beneficence of emperors, Millar (1977) 379ff; Boatwright (2000) 204ff.

³⁰ Cassius Dio 69.5.3.

³¹ CIL 5.1874. Mrozek (1994) 98.

³² *H.A., Marc.* 11.3.

K.G. Persson makes the following observation regarding markets in early modern Europe: 'The near self-sufficiency of many nations under normal conditions also hampered the development of a suitably large class of merchants, in whose absence the state or a city had to act as a substitute when unexpected local harvest failures occurred.' The necessity for authorities to intervene directly by buying and importing grain reflects the weaknesses of the market to deal with food crises. This is true of ancient as well as early modern cities and explains the role of public institutions. On the basis of grain funds, municipal authorities participated in the market as buyers and sellers of grain. The prime purpose of grain funds was to alleviate the impact of harvest shocks by making grain available on the market, probably below market prices. This was the more necessary, since most towns and cities were largely sustained from their immediate hinterland. Though the main purpose of grain funds was related to harvest shocks, they were not merely incidental responses to supply problems. The permanent possibility of public intervention, even if only realised in bad years, constituted a continuous and thus structural factor in the urban food market.