

THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND THE THIRD CENTURY ECONOMIC CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

(Full paper will be available at the conference)

THE PERFORMANCE OF THE ROMAN ECONOMY IN THE THIRD CENTURY AD

In this paper, I attempt a fresh look at some of the evidence for the performance of the Roman economy in a period of supposed crisis. We lack sufficient evidence which would allow us to quantify this on an empire-wide scale and most analysts have drawn conclusions from a rather restricted number of indicators, several of them drawn from the documentary evidence of the province of Egypt. Central features include debasement of currency, decline of civic prosperity and increase in the burden of compulsory public service, increased demands for *annona militaris* and reversion to taxation in kind, decrease in agricultural productivity. Interpretation of all of these features is subject to some degree of uncertainty. Approaching the subject in a slightly different way, I attempt some characterisation of economic behaviour in this period in three sectors, imperial, civic and private, and ask whether that gives us some indicators of how (dys)functional the economy was in the second half of the third century. The simplest and most effective approach is to look at the documents of the period from Egypt, particularly c. AD 260 – 290 and see what indicators they offer and see what indicators they offer for consistency or change over the period of supposed crisis.