

University of Groningen

## The Roman Peasant Project 2009–2014: Excavating the Roman Rural Poor

de Haas, T. C. A.

*Published in:*  
 American Journal of Archaeology

*DOI:*  
[10.1086/723514](https://doi.org/10.1086/723514)

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
 Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
 2023

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

de Haas, T. C. A. (2023). The Roman Peasant Project 2009–2014: Excavating the Roman Rural Poor. *American Journal of Archaeology*, 127(1), E022-E023. <https://doi.org/10.1086/723514>

### Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

### Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*

# The Roman Peasant Project 2009–2014: Excavating the Roman Rural Poor

Edited by Kim Bowes (University Museum Monograph 154). 2 vols. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2021. Pp 824. \$120. ISBN 9781949057072 (cloth).

REVIEWED BY TYMON DE HAAS

Our knowledge of the Roman countryside is traditionally biased toward elite contexts: many Roman rural villa complexes, particularly their elaborate residential quarters, have been excavated, and there is a substantial body of literature on the sociocultural and economic aspects of such elite villa estates. But while survey archaeology has done much to confirm the omnipresence of non-elites in the rural landscape, excavations and in-depth studies of nonelite farms and houses remain extremely rare. As a consequence, our understanding of peasant culture and lifeways remains fragmentary. The present volume forms the final publication of the Roman Peasant Project, which set out to fill this lacuna. The starting point for the project was a field survey in the municipality of Cinigiano, Tuscany, in central Italy, carried out previously (and published separately) by one of the team members. From this survey data set, eight locations that had been identified as nonelite sites, mostly farms, were selected for systematic study through remote sensing, excavation, and environmental sampling, supplemented by a range of artifact studies, palaeoecological analyses, and computational approaches.

The two-volume publication reflects the high-quality, ambitious academic agenda and interdisciplinary setup of the project. Volume 1, besides framing the project and its approaches within broader traditions of peasant studies, presents and integrates in an exemplary way the different kinds of evidence collected for each of the eight sites in chapters co-authored by the entire research team. Analysis of the combined structural, artifactual, zoological, and botanical evidence shows that this set of sites—which on first view might be taken as a series of farmsteads—varies substantially in size, material remains, and functions. Much of the primary data is presented clearly in maps, tables, and figures. One hopes that such an important and exemplary data set will also be made available electronically for reuse in its totality.

Building on volume 1, volume 2 explores the evidence in full, in order to build a new synthesis on all

aspects of the Roman peasant. Central to this contextualisation is the concept of *locale*, the geographic setting in which peasants engaged in social interactions. This includes studies of habitation, foodways, agricultural and nonagricultural production, and markets and trade, but also of relatively lesser-known subjects such as recycling practices and mobility. All these chapters provide excellent thematic syntheses and present stimulating new insights. Let me here highlight two of the key ideas that have particular importance for our understanding of the Roman rural landscape.

One key idea concerns our conceptualization of peasant farm estates, which are generally seen as discrete landholdings centered on a single farm building. Based on the interpretation of the eight sites, the book introduces an alternative model: that of “distributed habitation.” This idea envisages Roman peasant estates rather as an array of dispersed landholdings structured through a network of locations that fulfilled different functions within the estate’s economy, and which were accordingly occupied with different frequencies and intensities. Importantly, some such facilities, for example an oil press, may have been shared by multiple estates and thus may have taken on a central position within the landscape. This model indeed fits well the structural, artifactual, and environmental evidence from the excavated sites, which clearly range from permanently occupied dwellings to occasionally (or seasonally) frequented sheds and pressing facilities.

A second key point concerns the particular socioeconomic context in which this distributed habitation evolved. All excavated sites in the area pertain to a fairly restricted time frame, between the first century BCE and the late first century CE (several also have late antique occupation phases). Based on the environmental evidence, this period seems to be characterized also by a particular agricultural practice referred to as an “extensive-intensive” agricultural system. This system combines a rotation of intensively managed pasture and

cereal cultivation with specialization in cash crops such as olives and wine. This relatively short-lived phase of intensive occupation and exploitation—of an area that may be considered remote in terms of its proximity to urban centers and that was only sparsely settled in the preceding and subsequent periods—seems to reflect a kind of boom-and-bust cycle of economic intensification that coincides with a much broader phase of economic (and demographic) expansion in the wider Roman world.

The various implications of these central ideas are masterfully explored. They include refined, data-driven approaches to topics such as mobility, economic integration, and peasant culture, as well as an insightful reassessment of the static Braudelian *longue durée* of unchanging or conservative peasant lifeways into a much more dynamic frame that links into short- and medium-term history. Also, some important methodological reflections are presented concerning current uses of field survey data as proxies for demographic and economic developments. The authors are particularly critical toward such approaches: where most of the eight sites investigated by the project were, based on the survey data, interpreted as farms, the excavations show that probably only a few were permanently occupied. If this reinterpretation has broader validity, a much larger proportion of sites in survey data sets are not permanently inhabited farms and their numbers cannot readily be translated into population figures. Their application in long-standing debates over Roman population levels and trends thus becomes all the more problematic.

While such criticism concerning the use of survey data is certainly justified in this particular regional context, its universal applicability remains to be seen. The conclusions are based on survey data that have been

collected with a site-oriented approach that is arguably more sensitive to such problems of interpretation than are more intensive off-site surveys. Also, the data set itself shows very particular chronological patterns that deviate from many other parts of central Italy (where long-term continuity of occupation is much more common). It therefore remains to be seen whether the proposed distributed habitation model indeed applies to other chronological and geographic contexts. Here we touch on a core issue: can the ideas and models developed for this area in southern Tuscany be extrapolated to other regions, and if so, how widely? The fact that in its synthesis this volume only draws on a few studies in other regions of the Roman world (mainly in Italy, Gaul, and the United Kingdom) makes clear that at present we have little by way of comparative data to evaluate such questions.

This observation does not diminish the accomplishments of the Roman Peasant Project publication. As the authors indicate, whether the ideas and models proposed will stand the test of time remains to be seen, and this in fact is exactly the crucial importance of this volume: it both sets a standard in the field for the investigation of nonelite sites and proposes a clear set of questions and models that can be evaluated in other regional contexts through such field investigations. The Roman Peasant Project thus forms a true landmark in the study of the Roman countryside.

Tymon de Haas  
Groningen Institute of Archaeology  
University of Groningen  
Tymon.de.haas@rug.nl