
David B. Hollander
Iowa State University, dbh8@iastate.edu

Abstract
War, no doubt, sells better than agriculture and perhaps this explains the choice of main title for Nathan Rosenstein's book. Thus, it is important to emphasize that Roman farming is at the center of his important new study that proposes an alternative explanation for Italy's agricultural crisis in the late second century BCE. The first chapter treats Italian agriculture from the Second Punic War to the tribunate of Tiberius Gracchus. Rosenstein begins by presenting the prevailing explanation for the crisis. This interpretation suggests that after the Hannibalic War, Rome's smallholders suffered increasingly from competition with large, slave-staffed estates and "the city's demands for soldiers began to conflict fundamentally with the needs of husbandry" because soldiers, now fighting abroad in Spain and elsewhere, were no longer able to return to their farms between campaigning seasons (3). This introductory chapter provides a useful overview both of the author's critique of the prevailing view and his own interpretation.

Disciplines
Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Ancient Philosophy | European History | Family, Life Course, and Society | Medieval History

Comments
This book review is published as Hollander, D.B., Rome at War: Farms, Families, and Death in the Middle Republic. By Nathan Rosenstein. Agricultural History, 2008, 82(2); 242-244. Posted with permission.
Review
Reviewed Work(s): Rome at War: Farms, Families, and Death in the Middle Republic by Nathan Rosenstein
Review by: David B. Hollander
Source: Agricultural History, Vol. 82, No. 2 (Spring, 2008), pp. 242-244
Published by: Agricultural History Society
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20454823

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Agricultural History Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Agricultural History
practiced by Jingpo, Bulang, Wa, Jinuo, and Dulong ethnic groups, with particular emphasis on technical practices, social institutions, and agricultural diversity cultivated or managed within swidden-fallow fields. The cross-cultural comparison of swidden agriculture in Yunnan is well represented in Part III of the book. Finally, Part IV argues that swidden agriculture as a co-evolution of a cultural-ecological system calls for deep understanding of forests; appreciation of ethnic characteristics of highland people; supportive policies for intensification and transformation to market economies such as agroforestry, terraced agricultural and niche forest products, and cash crops.

However, the book could be strengthened by looking at how original and amended state policies have shaped the landscapes and livelihoods of swidden cultivators, and by examining their responses and adaptations during the state-building process and the transformation to a market economy. Following decades of state discouragement, indigenous peoples in southwest China might once again be able to follow their cultural beliefs, knowledge systems, and land practices in pursuing their livelihoods, although in somewhat different forms.

This is a highly readable book of serious scholarship, suitable for people with an interest in indigenous people and land use in southwest China. It explains the diverse, dynamic, and flexible swidden agricultural systems practiced by various ethnic groups and is a rich cultural anthropological work that illustrates how indigenous people manage land-use practices in the cultural frontiers that might clash with state visions for land use and landscape management.

Xu Jianchu
Kunming Institute of Botany

Europe


War, no doubt, sells better than agriculture and perhaps this explains the choice of main title for Nathan Rosenstein’s book. Thus, it is important to emphasize that Roman farming is at the center of his important new study that proposes an alternative explanation for Italy’s agricultural crisis in the late second century BCE. The first chapter treats Italian agriculture from the Second Punic War to the tribunate of Tiberius Gracchus. Rosenstein begins by presenting the prevailing explanation for the crisis. This interpre-
tation suggests that after the Hannibalic War, Rome's smallholders suffered increasingly from competition with large, slave-staffed estates and "the city's demands for soldiers began to conflict fundamentally with the needs of husbandry" because soldiers, now fighting abroad in Spain and elsewhere, were no longer able to return to their farms between campaigning seasons (3). This introductory chapter provides a useful overview both of the author's critique of the prevailing view and his own interpretation.

Chapter two examines the view that Roman imperialism began to place too great a strain on agricultural labor in the second century. Using the fasti triumphales and literary sources, Rosenstein shows that Roman warfare had relied on year-round military service since the late fourth century. To explain how such service could coexist with subsistence agriculture both before and after Hannibal, chapter three examines various models of the Roman family farm. Rosenstein begins by taking a hypothetical family and estimating its annual requirements of food, land, and labor. Some families, he shows, would have had plenty of surplus labor at their disposal. Provided military service took place at the right stage in a family's life cycle, one or two sons could easily serve in the army for several years without imperiling the subsistence of the rest of the family. Furthermore, since most recruits were young and Roman men married relatively late, few fathers with young children—the most vulnerable family configuration—would ever have been called up.

In chapter four Rosenstein considers how many Roman soldiers died in military service between 200 and 133 BCE. He estimates combat casualties, the likely proportion of wounded soldiers, and how many of the wounded would eventually succumb to their injuries. Here as elsewhere extensive use is made of comparative evidence. Convincingly, if counter-intuitively, Rosenstein argues that those wounded in Rome's wars were more likely to survive than their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European and American counterparts. He suggests that at least 312,000 Roman and Italian soldiers died in this period, or "between 34 and 40 percent of all those . . . who left to fight Rome's wars might never have come back" (137).

The final chapter presents Rosenstein's new interpretation of the agrarian crisis of the late second century. He argues that military mortality, rural epidemics, and migration to urban areas initially produced conditions quite favorable to Roman and Italian smallholders, leading to changes in their reproductive practices and a "very rapid expansion" of the population (154). In the long run, however, the rural population increase coupled with less lucrative wars and the practice of partible inheritance created a growing class of impoverished Roman farmers without access to sufficient amounts of land. It was from this group that Tiberius Gracchus drew much of his support.

*Rome at War* is an eminently readable book, no small achievement con-
Agricultural History Spring

considering the number of pages devoted to ordinarily dry topics like demography. By translating nearly all Latin and Greek terms and confining most discussions of the secondary literature and more abstruse issues to the notes and seven appendices, Rosenstein has produced a work that is accessible to a wide audience. Nevertheless, long, complex sentences occasionally obscure the author’s meaning and sometimes it is hard to follow his reasoning. It is not clear to me, for example, why the lack of inscriptions in which wives commemorate husbands who died young “strongly suggests that the lack of financial means to support a family cannot be a satisfactory answer for the practice of late male marriage under the empire” (83). Furthermore, how could yeomen be “self-sufficient” if they “bought much of what they needed to survive” (99)? These are minor complaints, however. This well-produced and closely argued work presents a compelling new vision of Roman smallholders and should be required reading for all students of the Roman economy.

David B. Hollander
Iowa State University


This is a timely book: as more and more researchers are turning their attention to social capital and flexible systems of production in search of the deep determinants of economic success in a post-Fordist era, Narotzky and Smith use their in-depth study of a Spanish rural district to argue that there may be a dark side to (at least some of) these success stories. In contrast to idealized images, the authors take a historical perspective to show that social capital can sometimes be the result of persistent inequalities and hierarchies in local society. In addition, their anthropological fieldwork, conducted at different periods in the 1970s and 1990s, gives a convincing account of how supposedly positive features (such as economic flexibility) translate into risk, uncertainty, and unrest in everyday people’s lives.

The book is focused on the Vega Baja del Segura, a small area in the Spanish Mediterranean province of Alicante that underwent great changes in the twentieth century, among them an increasing involvement of rural populations in manufacturing. From the historian’s viewpoint, the book is very interesting in its identification of the complex economic, social, and political networks that drove the transition from a traditional agrarian society to today’s industrial district. This is combined with a rigorous theoretical framework in which elements of Marxist and neo-Marxist thought are probably dominant.