

Financial Intermediation in the Early Roman Empire

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Abstract

In this paper I use a theoretical hierarchy of financial sources to evaluate the effectiveness of financial markets in the early Roman Empire. I first review the theory of financial intermediation to describe the hierarchy of financial sources and survey briefly the history of financial intermediation in pre-industrial Western Europe to provide a standard against which to evaluate the Roman evidence. I then describe the nature of financial arrangements in the early Roman Empire in terms of this hierarchy. The issue turns out to be not whether financial markets in Rome resembled those in other advanced agricultural economies, but rather which 18th century European economy did it resemble most closely. This exercise reveals the extent to which the Roman economy resembled more recent societies and sheds light on the prospects for economic growth in the Roman Empire, for good financial markets and institutions help people who have ideas for production get resources to implement those ideas.

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The ghost of Moses Finley hovers over recent analyses of the Roman economy. His “primitivist” view was amplified by Garnsey and Saller (1986), who termed the Roman economy primitive and underdeveloped. Greene (2000) recently organized a review of the archeological evidence of Roman agriculture around Finley’s claims. A recent survey of non-agricultural activity in Rome is constructed as a test of Finley’s ideas (Mattingly and Salmon, 2001).¹

I argue here that we need a new starting point for the analysis of the Roman economy. Observers of modern economies have seized on the idea that good financial markets promote economic growth. I use the study of financial markets as an example of how the Roman economy functioned, arguing that the Romans had a very sophisticated financial structure. It is not simply that there was a market economy in the early Roman Empire; there was an economy that was comparable in several dimensions to the most advanced agrarian societies that are known to us.

Loans between individuals are an important part of any financial system, but they do not by themselves show the existence of a sophisticated web of financial transactions. For example, the presence of interest-bearing loans informs us only about one way of raising funds for someone seeking to start or expand a business activity. Money from family and friends has been a resource throughout the ages, while selling equities (stocks) has become frequent only in the twentieth century. Financial analysts organize the

¹ Saller (2002) argues for a middle ground between Finley and Rostovtzeff, the use of appropriate more recent parallels, and the use of modern economic concepts. This paper is in that tradition.

variety of ways to raise money by recognizing a hierarchy of financial sources of business activities.

I propose to use this theoretical hierarchy of financial sources to evaluate the effectiveness of the financial markets in the early Roman Empire. The goal of this exercise is two-fold. First, it reveals the extent to which the Roman economy resembled more recent societies. We do not think that the Romans operated in a twentieth-century mode, but most of the financial institutions that we take for granted today are less than two centuries old. More relevant is how the Roman financial system compares with the agrarian economies of the 18th century. Second, this exploration sheds light on the prospects for economic growth in the Roman Empire. Good financial markets and institutions help people who have ideas for production get resources to implement those ideas (Levine, 1997). Without these markets and institutions, the prospects for economic progress are far more limited.

This paper proceeds by stages. I first review the theory of financial intermediation to describe the hierarchy of financial sources and its relation to the functioning of the economy as a whole. This provides an abstract evaluation of the Roman evidence, but not a historical one. I then survey briefly the history of financial intermediation in pre-industrial western Europe to provide a standard against which to evaluate the Roman evidence. Finally, I describe the nature of financial arrangements in the early Roman Empire in terms of this hierarchy. The issue turns out to be not whether financial markets in Rome resembled those in other advanced agricultural economies, but rather which 18th century European economy did it resemble most closely.

Garnsey and Saller adopted an ambiguous attitude toward Roman banking. They said, “the Principate saw no major developments in the Roman law of banking. ... But texts of Antonine and Severan jurists recognize an investment account at a bank as a category of *depositum* and admit the payment of interest to the depositor (*Digest* 16.3.28,24,26.11) (Garnsey and Saller, 1987, p. 55).” If there were no changes in the law, then these deposits must have been present earlier as well, despite the dismissive tone of the first sentence. Duncan-Jones analyzed the coinage of Rome in his monumental *Money and Government in the Roman Empire* (1994). By treating the volume of coinage as the stock of money, he implicitly assumed the absence of the bank deposits noted by Garnsey and Saller, since they too would be part of the money supply. Andreau in *The Cambridge Ancient History* asked, “Should the ancient bank be compared to that of the nineteenth century, or even to that of the eighteenth? If the question is put this way, then the reply is clearly negative (Andreau, 2000, pp. 775-76).” But while Andreau noted the variety of financial conditions around the Roman Empire and noted the variety of financial conditions around the Roman Empire, he implicitly assumed that all of modern Europe was the same. He placed the agrarian economy of Rome against the industrial economy of the nineteenth century. In this paper, I make the comparison with pre-industrial Europe and stress the range of financial structures that existed even among even the most advanced economies of the eighteenth century. I argue that the reply to Andreau's question, rephrased to focus on the eighteenth century, should be a qualified yes.

“Financial systems facilitate *pooling*, or the aggregation of household wealth to fund indivisible or efficient-scale enterprises (Sirri and Tufano, 1995, 81).” This is the opening sentence of an essay on the pooling of resources in a Harvard Business School volume about the functions of a financial system today. The authors go on to explain, “Without pooling aggregate wealth to fund enterprises, firm size would be constrained by the wealth under the control of a single household. Pooling relieves society of this limitation, bridging firms’ capital needs and households’ investing needs (Sirri and Tufano, 1995, 88).”

The economic problem of funding economic activity was raised to prominence by John Maynard Keynes when he observed that in industrial systems, savers were not necessarily investors. One group of people had accumulated resources by not consuming all their income, or by being the children of people who had been abstemious. Another group had ideas, projects, or business enterprises for which they needed resources. The problem of a capitalist system was to bring them together. In Keynesian economics, mass unemployment is the result of an aggregate mismatch between the amount that savers want to save and investors want to invest. While macroeconomics has progressed speedily since Keynes wrote in the 1930s and many economists today dispute the relevance of Keynesian economics, this insight has remained central to policy planning in industrial societies.

We do not observe Keynesian unemployment in mostly agricultural societies. That is because large savers typically are large investors. Large land-owners often have incomes that exceed even their large consumption, and they have projects of land improvement or transport enhancement that can absorb the extra resources. There is no

need for financial intermediation in such a system because there is no need to intermediate between distinct savers and investors. Of course, there may be mismatches between savers and investors in such an economy, if a landlord is particularly profligate in his consumption or if a poor landowner sits on a bend in the river where canalization would make transport easier. These mismatches would not lead to Keynesian unemployment; they would make the economy function less efficiently than if a financial system could eliminate or reduce the mismatches.

Most economic organizations in history operated somewhere between the conditions of modern life and this purely agrarian case. In order to assess the financial systems of historical economies, we need an index of financial sophistication that we can use to evaluate any specific society. A suitable measure can be constructed from modern discussions of the sources of capital for modern businesses. These discussions are summarized in Table 1, adapted from the essay quoted earlier. The table lists a hierarchy of sources for resources, also known as capital, for investment, in the first column. The second and third columns distinguish sources by the type of the obligations between the parties involved. Debt capital consists of loans, typically with fixed lengths and interest rates. The lender gets the assurance of a known rate of return, while the borrower has the right to keep any earnings over the cost of his loans. Equity capital participates in the ownership of the investment. The investor shares the risk of the operator who is doing the work; he has the possibility of earning far more than a lender—and also of earning less.² The operator shares his risk with the investor, and the extent to which the risk is

² I use the masculine gender since the borrowers and lenders were primarily men in the pre-industrial world that is the subject of this essay.

shared depends on the legal context in which this transaction takes place. This distinction corresponds to the difference between bonds and stocks today.

The entries in the first row list the sources of capital for autarkic farms or businesses. They find their resources within the organization, that is, from internal sources. The owners of the farm or business can loan money among themselves for individual projects or they can share the results of their joint earnings from old investments to take shares in new projects. In each case resources are found within the enterprise to make an investment; the difference is in the allocation of risk and reward among the people involved. This source of capital is still used today, even in our sophisticated economy. Businesses today are hardly autarkic, but they often find that internally generated resources are cheaper than those obtained through one of the other types. Retained earnings are an important source of capital even for very large firms.³

The informal external sources of capital described in the second row of Table 1 are those used in societies without highly developed financial systems. Although, like retained earnings, they also are used today as components of a finely tuned and articulated financial system. This source anticipates getting capital from outside the farm or firm desiring to make an investment, but still within the circle of family and friends of the owners. The owners can borrow from their relatives and friends because they are known to their relatives and friends. If a person borrows from a member of his local or religious community, he is far more likely to repay the loan than he would be to a stranger, particularly if the legal system is not very good at finding and punishing people who renege on their financial obligations (Matthias, 1999). Potential investors who lack

³ Froot (1995) discusses the distortions that can come from using a combination of cheap internal funds and more expensive external capital.

rich relatives or associates who know them are forced to go out into the wider world and attempt to borrow from strangers. This in general will be almost impossible, for strangers will not be able to judge whether the aspiring investor is credit worthy or a con man. In some contexts, lenders may be so suspicious of aspiring borrowers that even a credit-worthy borrower will be unable to distinguish himself from the con men, and there will be no loans at all. In the language of economics, the investor has asymmetric knowledge. He knows if the investment is good, but the putative lender does not.⁴

There are two institutions in which this problem of asymmetric information can be attenuated. Merchants are engaged in many repetitive transactions with each other, during which they are able to gather information about each other. The merchant who pays his bills on time quite possibly is the one who will repay a loan on time. A responsible merchant gains a reputation for honoring his obligations, and a good reputation may substitute for a family connection or personal friendship in providing enough assurance to a lender to justify making a loan (Greif, 1994). In addition, brokers who bring lenders and borrowers together solve a variety of information problems. They find people who want to borrow and bring them into contact with people who want to lend. They also may investigate aspiring borrowers to make sure that they are responsible.⁵

The same problems of information arise when investors contemplate sharing the risk with strangers, that is, to raise equity capital instead of debt capital. The problems in fact are more severe for equity than for debt because the equity purchaser assumes more

⁴ This asymmetric knowledge can lead to the market failure due to “lemons” first analyzed by Akerlof (1970) and extended to finance by Stiglitz and Weiss (1981).

risk than the lender. People therefore typically only make equity investments with people that they know. Neither reputations nor brokers are strong enough to overcome the problems of asymmetric information when equity investment is involved. In an economy where there are few financial intermediaries, we expect to find more loan activity than equity investments.

The entries in the third row of Table 1 introduce financial intermediaries and pooling institutions for the first time. Financial intermediaries collect funds from people with resources they have saved, pool them together into a single fund, and then make loans from this pooled fund of resources. Individuals lend money to banks by depositing money in them, and the banks then lend their accumulated funds to other individuals. There is no direct connection between the final borrowers and lenders; they communicate only with the financial intermediary. The presence of this intermediary, which we can call a bank for its simplest manifestation, solves a lot of the information problems present in the conditions of the preceding row. The bank solves the problem of finding borrowers and lenders because they each know to go to the bank to place their excess purchasing power or to borrow. It also assumes the risk of not being paid back by a borrower. The lender need not worry, unless the bank operates with such bad judgment that it has so many failed loans that it fails itself. The bank has the responsibility for evaluating potential borrowers, and banks typically develop expertise or staffs in making these kinds of decisions.

Financial intermediaries that provide equity investment are harder to characterize than banks. In the modern world, intermediaries that provide equity capital on an

⁵ Brokers try to overcome the problems of symmetric information—finding a lender if you are a potential borrower, or a borrower if you are a potential lender—and the problems of asymmetric knowledge that

individual basis are known as venture capitalists. In earlier economies, some joint-stock companies acted in this way. They served as financial intermediaries if they engaged in varied activities, that is, if they used their resources to fund several activities and groups. Savers bought shares of these companies to participate in the average fortunes of these ventures. They were not making a bank deposit with its sure, albeit limited, return; they were participating in the equity of the joint-stock company to grow rich or poor as the company's investments did. Joint-stock companies that sent out expeditions and made other investments from the pool of resources raised by selling shares were financial intermediaries. (Companies that used their resources to fund a single group performing a single activity used stocks to pool resources, but they were not financial intermediaries.) We think of early joint-stock companies in terms of their activities in various parts of the world, but some of them were financial intermediaries and precursors of modern conglomerate firms.

The modern type of capital raised in public markets by large companies today is shown in the final row of Table 1. These companies are large enough and the information about them is plentiful enough that there are public markets in which people can loan to them by purchasing their bonds or participate in their activities by purchasing stocks. There is no need for financial intermediaries at this stage.⁶ Unrelated individuals can choose which companies they want to lend to or invest in, and they can make their purchases of bonds or stocks at reasonable cost. New financial intermediaries have grown up to solve some of the information problems facing savers who do not have the time or interest to gather the information needed to choose which company to buy or sell

derive from the opaqueness of strangers.

or do not have enough resources to diversify their investments easily by themselves.

Mutual funds are the modern analogue of the older joint-stock companies that financed varied projects. This analogy allows us to describe some joint-stock companies as early mutual funds and illuminates the differences between those companies that acted like a mutual fund and those that conducted a single business.

Even today, however, most companies are too small to go to the open market for their capital. They start with internal and informal external sources of capital; they progress to the use of public markets only if they are very successful. They may have the form of joint-stock companies early in their history, but only after they are known outside a small circle can they “go public” and sell shares on the open market. The types of capital sources shown in the rows in Table 1 can be seen as a progression of funding sources for a modern enterprise that starts with capital from an individual or a family and progresses through the types of sources shown in the table to arrive finally at the New York Stock Exchange or the Nasdaq Market. While it is not necessary for all companies to go through all these stages, the progression shows an idealized history of modern firms. In the modern world, we expect to see all types of capital co-existing (Calomiris 1995).

We can use the same progression as a measure of financial sophistication of economies from the past. If only the first type of capital, internal sources, is available to people who want to engage in economic activity, then that economy should be described as lacking a financial system at all. If informal external sources also are available, then the economy has a limited financial system. If financial intermediation is available, an

⁶ Of course, the public information may not be accurate, as the recent failure of Enron makes clear. It is not yet clear how a modern economy deals with this problem, much less an ancient one.

economy has a very good financial system, adequate to finance many activities, certainly any activity of the pre-industrial world. And the presence of public capital markets indicates the kind of modern financial system that we find in advanced industrial countries.⁷ If we compare financial markets in ancient Rome and in early modern Europe, then it is likely that we will be looking at the differences between informal external sources of capital and financial intermediation. Were there financial intermediaries such as banks, or only brokers? Were the trade credits that arose among merchants accessible to other people? Were joint-stock companies prevalent? These are the kind of questions we need to pose.

II

In order to evaluate the capital markets of Rome, we need a standard of comparison. In this section, I briefly survey the capital markets of early modern Europe to provide a relevant standard. The most advanced capital markets were in Amsterdam and London, and the most common way that credit was extended there was by book credit on the part of a merchant. The merchant loaned money to his purchasers by not requiring payment immediately. He loaned money to his suppliers by paying them quickly or in advance for goods he received. There was no intermediation; the merchant had excess resources that he loaned to others. The bill obligatory or promissory note was a more formal form of credit. This was a way for prominent merchants and individuals to borrow on their good names. A bill obligatory could be sold to a third person in England, but it did not travel far because it had to come back to the borrower for payment. The

⁷ Public capital markets are more important in Anglo-Saxon economies than in many others. There is no unique constellation of financial institutions in industrial economies.

original bill obligatory did not need intermediation; it was a simple loan. If a third party bought a bill, there was simple intermediation but still individual placement of loans.

More extensive credit intermediation was accomplished through bills of exchange in the course of international trade. Bills of exchange were a way of financing trade by arranging for payment at a distance and a later time. Sellers like to be paid when and where the goods are shipped from, while buyers like to pay when the goods are sold and at their eventual destination. The bill of exchange was a way to deal with the ownership of the goods in the gap between these two events, which could easily be three months or more in time and across an ocean in space. A seller drew a bill on a buyer who accepted the obligation in the bill. The accepted bill could be sold to a third party.

The sale of accepted bills was a form of financial intermediation; merchants or others who bought bills were extending credit indirectly. The presence of a uniform credit instrument allowed people who had resources to lend to find people who wanted to borrow. The use of multiple signatures on the accepted bills reduced the need for the lender to know all about the credit-worthiness of the borrower. The drawer and the acceptor both stood behind the bill, as did other people who had purchased it on its way to the eventual holder. Because bills could be bought and sold, because they were assignable, they facilitated credit intermediation (Neal, 1994).

Inland bills of exchange were used to finance trade within England. They were given the same legal standing as foreign bills at the start of the 18th century. An inland bill could be drawn and made payable in the same place, making the provision of credit much simpler. In fact, it could circulate in a local area where potential purchasers of the

bill knew the people involved in its origins. After 1765, it could even be made payable to bearer, making it suitable for use as money.

These are all short-term debt instruments, typically for three months. Longer loans could be secured by rolling over these bills, and often was. The English and French governments both found themselves with a lot of existing debt at the start of the 18th century from their wars in the previous century. They experimented with schemes to reduce the burden of these debts under the influence of the notorious John Law, and experienced financial panics around 1720. The English government retreated into offering three percent perpetual bonds, that is, loans that never came due. These bonds were collected into the Three Per Cent Consol—for consolidated loan—in 1751. Consols became in time the safest and most liquid (that is, saleable on short notice) financial assets available for potential lenders.

There were several kinds of financial institutions in 18th century England, mostly specialized to a particular kind of credit. Goldsmiths and scriveners, who performed research into land titles, had begun to accept deposits in the 17th century on which they paid interest, suggesting that the funds were loaned out. Merchant banks, which loaned both to the government and to merchants, grew during the 18th century. They “accepted from merchants and large landowners deposits on both current account and on term; they lent money at interest by opening credit on current account or by advances, and discounted inland or outland bills and various official securities (Van der Wee, 1977, p. 351).” They built on Dutch models, but the common law allowed private and then joint-stock banking to flourish in Britain. The reform of government finance and the creation

of Bank of England further stimulated the growth of English banking and the use of its bank notes as currency.

England in the 18th century therefore had a variety of financial intermediaries from which aspiring borrowers could choose. They also had a means of payment that derived from the actions of these intermediaries, namely their obligations. The most useful obligation was Bank of England notes, which became paper money. This further facilitated the pooling of resources for business by making it easier to transfer money from place to place. There had been some use of short-term loans as money in the 17th century, but the success of the Bank of England in the 18th provided England with a new and better form of money. The wide-spread use of bank notes increased the supply of money beyond what the use of coin would have permitted.

Joint-stock companies multiplied and grew during the 17th century. The financial bubble and collapse in 1720 led to restrictions on these companies, and they did not grow much if at all in the 18th century. Joint-stock companies clearly pooled resources, and they facilitated equity investments by informed participants, as described in the second row of Table 1. Some joint-stock companies engaged in a variety of activities, subcontracting their operations to many smaller operations. They were financial intermediaries, as described in the third row of Table 1. It is however hard to see in the surviving records how these companies were administered. Modern accounts discuss the operations of the companies as if they were administering their activities from London, implying that they were pooling funds but not acting as financial intermediaries (Scott, 1995).

The French credit market in the 18th century appears to have been far more limited than the English. Inland bills never became legal instruments and could not circulate. Bills of exchange were only allowed when currency exchange was involved, and the credit market for merchants could not spill over into more general credit provision as it did in England. Interest rates were fixed by law and did not vary. Joint-stock companies were exceedingly rare. Payments typically were made in coin; there was little paper money. The French fiscal system was based on farmed taxes that did not raise enough revenue to make government debt secure. Frequent defaults by the French government did not encourage the growth of private finance (North and Weingast, 1988).

Short-term domestic loans were made with the French version of the bill obligatory, an unsecured note backed by the reputation of the borrower. Longer credits were arranged through notaries who recorded them for legal reasons and preserved them in order to provide credit histories of borrowers. There were exactly 113 notaries in Paris throughout the 18th century. This number is more than sufficient to create a credit market, but probably not enough to make credit available throughout the economy. They were not banks that separated the acquisition and disbursement of funds in deposits and loans, providing intermediation where borrowers need not borrow for the same period that lenders want to lend. Notaries were brokers who brought borrowers and lenders together.

The rate of interest on loans in France did not vary. Usury laws restricted the maximum rate of interest that could be charged to five percent for the entire century (with a few short suspensions). This maximum rate was binding, and almost all loans arranged by Paris notaries were at this rate. Only a minority of English loans were at their

maximum, contrasting sharply with the virtually exclusive use of this rate in France. A recent study of the Paris notaries describes the French credit market as a priceless market—meaning without variable prices rather than very expensive (Hoffman, et al., 2000). A financial market with a fixed interest rate provided credit, but the absence of price flexibility restricted its range of operations. Faced with a risky prospective borrower, the French notary could only decide to arrange a loan or not; he could not raise the interest rate in response to the added risk. Credit was far harder to obtain for moderate risks in Paris than in London in the 18th century.

One view of the French financial market comes through the eyes of Voltaire, who mentioned his financial dealings in his letters. The primitive state of the French financial markets can be seen in a letter from Voltaire to his agent in Paris, monsieur l'abbé Moussinot: “You can very safely place the 300 L. well packed into the stage coach without declaring them and without paying anything as long as the crate is correctly and duly registered to the address of Madame la Marquise, as precious furniture (Voltaire 1977-, lettre 872, vol. 1, p. 1004).” A few days later, Voltaire asked for a promissory note of 2,400 livres tournois, showing that smuggling cash was not the only way to move credit around the country.

In fact, Voltaire was engaged in both lending and borrowing money, apparently making all the arrangements himself. He worked through a notary from time to time, but there is no sense that he could deposit money with the notary without specifying a specific use for it. This can be seen in his own summary of a complex set of instructions to his agent in January 1738, “The result of all this verbiage is that you would place twenty five thousand livres in life annuities to the last 20 and that you would try at your

leisure to assure towards the month of April a loan of around 20 to 30 thousand livres to place by privilege on a land of 3000 livres tournois of rent. That would not, I think, be difficult (Ibid., lettre 911, p. 1063).” While the details of this request are not totally clear, Voltaire appears to have been lending half of a sum of money to the government in return for an annuity and seeking to place a loan himself with the other half that would yield between 10 and 15 percent. There is no evidence of credit intermediation.

Credit markets elsewhere in the world were less developed than in France.⁸ Adventurous people who wanted to engage in economic activity had a hard time accumulating the needed resources; there were few opportunities for pooling wealth. Economic activity therefore had an accidental quality, happening only if an entrepreneur happened to be rich or related to rich people. There is less information about credit markets outside England, Holland and France because they did not exist in any real sense.

These historical observations can be summarized with the aid of Table 1. Investors in England in the 18th century could make use of internal sources, informal external sources, and financial intermediation, that is, the sources of capital in the first three rows of the table. There were banks, at least in London, and a few joint-stock companies. Some investors in Holland had the same opportunities, but not all. French investors by and large were restricted to the sources listed in the top two rows; they did not have access to financial intermediaries. Potential investors in other countries were like France, although perhaps even more dependent on the internal sources listed in the first row. Only England had a good financial system; other countries had only limited ones.

III

It is clear from the literature that Rome had a financial system that included internal and informal external sources of capital. This by itself is impressive, but still provides only limited support for economic endeavors. The question is whether Roman investors could make use of financial intermediaries, that is, whether the financial system of Rome was adequate to demands that might have been put upon it. Phrased differently, the question is whether or to what extent banks were present in the early Roman Empire.

To start with informal external sources of capital, we know that Romans loaned money to each other with great frequency. And while some of these loans surely were to finance consumption, many more were for production. Columella (3, 3, 7-11) advised people setting up vineyards to include the interest on borrowed money among their costs as a matter of course: “[And] if the husbandman would like to assess his debt according to the vineyards like the moneylender does with the debtor, the owner may [consider] the preceding 1/2% per month on that total as a perpetual annuity; he should take in 1950 sesterces every year by this calculation, [since] the return on seven iugerum, following from the opinion of Graecinus, exceeds the interest on 32,480 sesterces.” Columella clearly understood that investors need to think about the cost of invested funds, whether borrowed or not. His advice shows financial sophistication in addition to suggesting the presence of productive loans.

We also know of many loans made to finance trade. Merchants typically were at the center of European capital markets before the Industrial Revolution, and they appear to have been in antiquity as well. Cohen (1992) documented the extensive use of loans to

⁸ England’s American colonies participated to a limited extent in the credit markets of England. Colonial merchants were connected with their fellows from London and Liverpool, but mercantile credit had little

finance maritime trade in classical Athens. Rathbone (2000) argues that the Muziris papyrus is the “master contract” for a standard maritime loan of the early Roman Empire. The careless grammar and syntax, the general sloppiness of the document, suggest a scribe copying the boilerplate of a standard contract. In other words, maritime loans were common enough in the early Roman Empire to have a standard form known to all the merchants and their clerks. This particular loan was for a shipment worth 6,926,852 sesterces, twenty times the size of Columella's agricultural loan.

The business nature of these loans indicates that they were extended to business associates, not to friends or relatives. We must presume that markets in ancient times were far from the anonymous markets of today; the land-owners and merchants were known at least by reputation by moneylenders. They constituted the kind of loose commercial groups known from other agricultural economies. They were numerous, and the loans were numerous enough for commentators to speak of a market rate of interest. That is, they could speak of the rate of interest separate from the rate on any particular loan. This has meaning only if it was possible for people to borrow at this rate more or less on demand. For example, Cicero (*Att.*, 4, 15, 7) commented that monthly “interest rates went up on the Ides of July from 1/3 to 1/2 percent.” Livy (7, 27, 3-4) reported that in the peaceful consulship of Titus Manlius Torquatus and Gaius Plautius “the interest rate was reduced to 1/24 percent from 1/12 per month.” These of course are very low interest rates, indicating not only peace but prosperity.

More often we see loans at one percent a month or 12 percent per year. This was the official maximum, and it appears to be the default rate on many loans. Bogaert (2000) catalogued dozens of loans in Roman Egypt for 12 percent. The presence of so

impact on other investments.

many loans at this fixed rate indicates that this market probably was not a totally free market rate, for the random movement of a market rate would not return to any given value so often. It also does not mean the opposite, that interest rates could not vary. As just noted, we find many comments that interest rates were below 12 percent and variable. We also have examples of rates above 12 percent. Livy (35, 7) reported that prohibitions against higher rates were evaded in the late Republic by transferring the loans to foreigners who were not subject to rate restrictions. This has a modern ring to it both because of the picture of financiers evading regulations by going “offshore” and because it appears to have been easy to transfer ownership of commercial loans among interested parties.

The inscription of a second-century Dacian loan says that the borrower will repay whomever is holding the loan when it comes due (Sheldon, 1998, pp. 136-37). This contract exemplifies the assignability of loans assumed by Livy. If the obligation went directly from the borrower to the eventual holder of the loan without involving the original lender, then the loan was negotiable as well. If so, then the loan might have functioned as money, as notes obligatory did in 18th century England. The inscription survives because it was immobile and largely indestructible; we do not know if there was a wax copy that could circulate as paper contracts did later in England. In the absence of documentary evidence for paper money, historians have tended to assume that all transactions were made in coin. The existence of assignable loans at least raises the possibility that there was “paper” money in use as well.

Loans are one thing; banks are another. It is the difference between informal external sources of capital and credit intermediation in Table 1. In order to evaluate the

sophistication of the Roman financial market, we need to know if there was credit intermediation. We need first to decide how to recognize a bank. Cohen (1992, 9) opened his discussion of Athenian banking by quoting the legal definition in use in the United States today. This same definition can be found in a recent textbook on financial markets and institutions, which states: “Banks are financial institutions that accept deposits and make loans. (Mishkin, 1998, 8).” The text explains that, “Banks obtain funds by borrowing and by issuing other liabilities as deposits. They then use these funds to acquire assets such as securities and loans (Mishkin, 1998, 322-23).” Deposits are bank liabilities. They are distinguished from loans by carrying a lower rate of interest. The bank pays low charge for deposits because it furnishes services in place of interest payments. Demand deposits, which are available on demand, that is, totally liquid, typically do not pay any interest today. Savings deposits, which are available only with a delay, pay a low interest rate, and time deposits, available at a predetermined time, typically pay more. Deposits therefore are simply bank borrowing for which banks furnish services in place of paying interest, either in part or in full.

This definition has been used by ancient historians investigating the financial markets. Bogaert (1968) defined banks, typically identified as *argentarii*, as accepting deposits and making loans. Andreau (1987, 17) expanded this definition slightly by adding a third function: “La banque est une profession commerciale qui consiste à recevoir des dépôts de clients auxquels le banquier fournit un service de caisse, et à prêter les fonds disponibles à des tiers en agissant en créancière.” By adding “service de caisse,” Andreau appears to be saying that banks must have dealt with the day-to-day needs of their clients for cash even if most deposits were not available on demand. There

were, in other words, something like demand deposits in addition to other, less available, deposits.

Andreau (1987, 538-44) summarized his detailed description of Roman banks with an attempt to synthesize a wide variety of practices with regard to deposits and loans. Some deposits were sealed, some did not pay interest, while others were not sealed and paid interest. This range of practices faces us with a problem of method. If we assume Roman banks were like modern ones, we can search for reasons why some deposits earned more than others—as they do today. If by contrast we assume that Roman banks were run for motives other than earning money, that is, for motives other than profit, the diversity chronicled by Andreau appears essentially random in the absence of a coherent aim. In either case, there were many banks in the early Roman Empire that received deposits and made loans.

There were banks in Greece before Rome came that continued in operation after the Roman conquest. The most famous banks were on Delos, where there were both temple and private banks. There appears to have been a constant number of private banks, suggesting that the banks continued to operate over time with great stability. The Temple of Apollo appeared to give loans with houses as security, what we now would regard as a mortgage. There can be no doubt that these institutions were what we call commercial banks (*Inscriptions de Delos*, 1926-; Frank, 1933-, v. 4, pp. 357; Reger, 1992).

Bogaert (2000, 255) noted that bank deposits in Roman Egypt had fixed terms. He argued that, “Ces dépôts étaient en réalité des prêts déguisés en dépôt.” All deposits are loans; a financial intermediary accepts loans from one set of people and makes loans

to another. Roman deposits may have been time deposits, or certificates of deposit, not demand deposits. This does not disqualify the institution from being classified as a bank because there is no need for all banks to offer all kinds of deposits. If Roman banks offered only time deposits, they were no less banks. If they also furnished “service de caisse,” they were what we would call commercial banks.

Argentarii in Rome therefore received deposits and made loans (Andrea, 1987, 528, 646). But Lucius Caecilius Jucundus, perhaps the most famous Roman banker, does not appear to have been a banker under this definition. He made many loans, but they all were connected with sales (Andreau, 1974). He appears to have been a merchant who extended credit to his customers, as all merchants have done since time immemorial. He was not the merchant who imported goods across the sea, but rather the one who sold them to the residents of Pompeii. There is no evidence that he received funds to be loaned out as a financial intermediary.

Josephus (*Jewish Wars*, 8, 56-62) reported that debtors burned down the center of Antioch in the hopes of destroying debt records and therefore evading the need to repay them. While this is not direct evidence of banks, the story presupposes the existence of professional moneylenders in the center of Antioch who loaned to people known only through their explicit agreements. If these moneylenders held deposits, as opposed to being merchants or very rich, then there were banks in Antioch during the Jewish Wars.⁹

Cicero (*Pro lege Manilia*, aka *De imperio Cn. Pompeii*, 14-19) noted the interconnection of financial markets around the Roman world:

For, coinciding with the loss by many people of large fortunes in Asia, we know that there was a collapse of credit at Rome owing to suspension of payment. It is,

⁹ Josephus told the story because the fire was blamed initially on the Jews. Only later were debtors found to be the real arsonists.

indeed, impossible for many individuals in a single State to lose their property and fortunes without involving still greater numbers in their ruin. Do you defend the commonwealth from this danger; and believe me when I tell you - what you see for yourselves - that this system of credit and finance which operates at Rome, in the Forum, is bound up in, and depends on capital invested in Asia; the loss of the one inevitably undermines the other and causes its collapse.

This passage clearly talks of linked financial markets. It is possible that all these connections were made by loans from one individual to another, but it would be unprecedented in the history of commerce. It is far more likely that Roman loans to Asia were done at least partly through financial intermediaries, what we probably would call banks even if they did not.

Endowments were not quite banks. They received resources that were used to fund various sorts of religious activities. If these resources were in the form of money, as they often were, then the funds had to be loaned out to earn interest and support the activities of the endowment. While some endowments were established by committing land, we know of many endowments established with money (Laum, 1914; Andreau, 1977, 1; Sosin, 2000). In one inscription from the reign of Antoninus Pius, the donor gave 50,000 sesterces in coins to the Collegium of Aesculapius and Hygeia near Rome with instructions to the 60 members of the association to loan out the funds and use the returns to fund their feasts and other activities (CIL 6, 10234; Laum, 1914, Vol. 2, Latin 6; Dessau, 1962-, Vol. 3, p. 739, #7213). This explicit injunction must have been a normal, if implicit, one for all endowments financed with a cash donation.

The endowment accounts often anticipated an expenditure at or near 12 percent annually, implying that the funds had to earn at least 12 percent to preserve the endowment (Sosin, 2001). The temples holding the endowments had to have an aggressive loaning policy to earn this much. Either they had to loan at rates above 12

percent or they had to be fully loaned all the time to such credit worthies that there was no risk of default. A Roman businessman looking for funds could have looked to temples in order to acquire funds for his enterprises. Not all temples had endowments, although we know of hundreds of geographically dispersed endowments (Laum, 1914; Andreau, 1977), and we suspect that few endowed temples would loan to strangers. Nevertheless, temples were an important means of “pooling” investment funds in the early Roman Empire.

Bogaert (2000) decried the absence of evidence on bank loans in his exhaustive survey of banks in Roman Egypt. He found ample evidence of loans between individuals. Some of these may have been banks, since private banks did not have a separate legal existence. Roman bankers accepted deposits and made loans in their own name, but were no less banks for that. Unfortunately, the limitations of our sources preclude the firm identification of such individual bankers. Bogaert (2000, 265-66) argued that our sources limit our knowledge of Roman banks in other ways: “Nous croyons qu'en Égypte les prêts bancaires et plus spécialement ceux de sommes importantes se faisaient surtout à Alexandrie, parce que là se trouvaient les grands banquiers.... Le fait que presque la totalité des documents établis à Alexandrie est perdue peut expliquer la grande rareté des données sur les crédits bancaires.”

Andreau and Bogaert, both using the modern definition of a bank, chronicle an impressive volume of banking activity in the early Roman Empire, and they both argue that there were many *argentarii* and other banks. The evidence compiled by these historians therefore shows that there was extensive credit intermediation in the early Roman Empire, although accomplished in a particular Roman way. Deposit banks of a

modern type do not appear to have been common at this stage of our knowledge. People with lots of money could make loans through banking institutions, but they may not have been able to recover their funds easily on demand. Rich Romans probably had to keep more cash on hand than modern people. Romans seeking to acquire resources to conduct business were in better shape. They could borrow widely in the economy. In addition to individuals, merchants and private banks who loaned money, temples holding endowments typically were looking to place loans. While not all temples had endowments, temples with endowments appear to have been common throughout the Roman Empire. Loans could be quite large, as shown in the Muziris papyrus, and Romans surely could have pooled funds by taking out more than one loan at a time.

IV

The early Roman Empire consequently pooled funds with the aid of financial intermediaries, albeit not through many private banks. Interest rates for loans could vary, making the Roman financial market more accessible and flexible than the French 18th century financial market. But there was not a plethora of private banks as there was in 18th century London. Banks outside London were rare in the 18th century, and banking conditions in the rest of England may have been not too far from those in the early Roman Empire.

Even if they did not have local banks, rural English people had access to Bank of England notes. The availability of a paper currency facilitated business and financial transactions even in the absence of institutional financial intermediaries. The Roman Empire lacked a national debt and a centrally chartered bank. Daily transactions outside

the principal cities in the early Roman Empire probably therefore were more like those in 18th century France.

This paper has reached these conclusions by describing a hierarchy of financial services and alternative sources of capital. This abstract “model” was used to give a capsule description of pre-industrial European financial conditions. As everyone knows, conditions varied in early modern Europe; Britain and Holland were more advanced in many ways than other countries. Conditions in the early Roman Empire therefore cannot be compared with those in Europe because European financial institutions varied so widely. I therefore have tried to compare Roman financial institutions to those of specific countries. The surprising result is that financial institutions in the early Roman Empire were better than those of 18th century France and not too far from those of 18th century England and Holland.

Saller (2002) drew a schematic graph of Roman per-capita production, reaching a maximum around 100 CE. He concluded that Roman growth was both modest and limited. But it is not a fair inference from any decline in productivity in the late Empire that the possibility for growth in the early Empire was limited. The existence of financial intermediaries in the early Roman Empire suggests, at least as far as economics can tell us, that there was a reasonable potential for economic growth if other factors had not intervened.

Table 1

Sources of Capital for Private Investments

Type	Debt Capital	Equity Capital
Internal Sources	Loans from owners	Retained earnings
Informal External Sources	Loans from family and friends; trade credit	Investments by informed participants
Financial Intermediaries	Lending by financial institutions (banks)	Some joint-stock companies
Public Markets	Bond issues	Stock issues

Source: Adapted from Sirri and Tufano, 1995, 98.

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