PROBLEMS

Aspects of the Economic History of the Roman "Campagna" in the Modern and Contemporany World

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Before looking in detail at the economic problems posed by this region it is essential to start by outlining the principal historical events which have touched on it and at the types of problems that have been posed by these same events. I have recently published a detailed descriptive study of the region of Lazio, more generally referred to as Campagna in the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries and by way of introduction I shall draw on some of the findings of this study. It is important, in particular, to distinguish between those problems which were experienced and resolved during the centuries in question, and those which remained unchanged until much more recent times.

In the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries, as earlier, the Roman Campagna constituted a vast plain which was barely undulated by a few low lying hills, but hemmed in by a mountain chain formed by the Lepini, Albani, Tiburtini, Prenestini, Cimini and — at a greater distance — the Corniculari and Sabatini hills, which had been thrown up from the Mediterranean floor in the tertiary and quaternary periods. All were volcanic in origin and subject to seismic movements, and from the quaternary age onwards had provided the Campagna with a series of lakes of varying depths: at Bracciano, Vico, Nemi and Castelgandolfo. There were also numerous swamps and the region was crossed by the final stages of numerous rivers which discharged into the Tyrrhenian Sea along the coast at points that had altered considerably over time. Over the centuries these rivers had formed water-falls, cut out river beds and subterranean channels sometimes right through the centre of the city of Rome itself, as in the cases of the Tiber, Aniene and Tritone. The behaviour of these rivers was determined by the 15 degree declination from the mountains to the coast, as well as by the geological structure of the rock and soil formations, which

influenced both the development of cultivated fields and the replacement cycles of the waters. The volcanic nature of the region also endowed the Campagna with numerous mainly sulphurous mineral sources, such as those at Tivoli, Sabaudia and Saturnia and other lesser spas. But although the permanent watering of the Campagna plain guaranteed good vegetation and agricultural yields, the disorderly course of its rivers also subjected large areas to permanent flooding or risk of flooding. As a result the nature of the soils varied greatly, varying from friable to dry, and including those that were rich in minerals and those that were highly deficient.

One final point: then as now, the Lazio region was on the whole well protected from the wind and therefore from strong atmospheric disturbances. Nonetheless, over the centuries the region was always subject to heavy dews at night, varying degrees of frost and long periods of drought, resulting in long mild winters and long dry summers. Where stagnant waters accumulated it was easy for insects to breed, in particular the malaria-bearing mosquito. The whole of the south-western part of the region, from the slopes of the Sermoneta, Cisterna and Maccarese hills to the sea was infested with malaria. One should also add that down to the modern era the Campagna remained endowed with the network of the magnificent road system of ancient Rome. This network, with Rome as its centre, radiated towards the Mediterranean, along the length of the Italian peninsula towards the European continent. The principal Roman roads were the Appian, Aurelian, Cassia, Flaminia, Labicana, Latina, Laurentina, Nomentana, Ostiense, Portuense, Prenestina, Salaria, Tiberina, Tiburtina, Subaugusta, Trionfale, Tuscolana, Valeria ways — together with many others. But although this network of Roman roads criss-crossed the Campanga, it did not always serve it well in the centuries that now concern us.

From this rapid survey of the geo-physical aspects of the Roman Campagna, let us begin by considering the problems they posed and the ways in which these were resolved in different periods. Since the land sloped down towards the sea, the waterways followed a chaotic path and rather than spend their force in meanders tended to leap down the declines through crevices and gorges. A good example of this is the Tiber with its outlet to the sea at Fiumicino, although previously its mouth had been at the level of Passo Scuro. Given the temperamental character of these rivers, it was impossible to rely on any constant humidity in the soil such as would guarantee adequate and varied crop yields. The problem of the changing levels of humidity in the soil of the upper plain was aggravated by the effects of rain water, which in various periods falls heavily on the Campagna and tends to wash away vital chemical and organic elements from the top-soils of the higher land, or else to drown them in suddenly swollen and uncontrolled torrents.

Against these obstacles to a more orderly or productive use of the land which was so frequently subjected to the unpredictable action of the water

course, and to the erosive effects of the spring and autumn winds, human enterprise could offer little resistance, and it was not until the XXth century that this region of Italy was to benefit to any significant extent from modern technologies capable of harnessing the unruly waters and imposing a more rational discipline on them by means of canals and embankments, thereby establishing more permanent courses and protecting the land from the whims of the weather.

As far as the enrichment of the soil is concerned, at least down to the end of the XIXth century this depended entirely on natural manure from pasturing animals. There was to be no significant change until the advent of chemical fertilizers in the second half of the XIXth century, when nitric and phosphate fertilizers became available: but the resistance shown by the majority of the farmers meant that it was only in the XXth century that these began to be applied in a rational and systematic way. The question of rotations was closely related to that of fertilizers, and the systems of rotation traditionally employed in the region had changed little, if at all over the centuries. Here again there was little progress until the technical misunderstandings of the farmers had been overcome, as well as the attitudes of the landowners who tended to favour the preservation of farming systems which provided a steady and traditional return. As far as rotations are concerned, there were no real innovations until the resistance of the landowners, the leaseholders, the intermediaries and the agricultural labourers had been overcome in the first half of the XXth century.

There was also another even more serious problem which resulted in this period from the combination of natural disorder and lack of human technical understanding. This was the problem of the swamplands, and the related presence of malaria which over the centuries constituted one of the major plagues of the Campagna and a principal obstacle to the well-being of both men and the land. Those who lived for any length of time in the Campagna paid a heavy toll through the mortality resulting from malaria which had existed from the earliest times but which survived until the third decade of the XXth century, and reached epidemic proportions in the XVIIIth and XIX centuries. On the other hand, those who could fled from the malaria and this caused major deplacements of the population towards areas that were less unhealthy. The hill towns and villages of Lazio became overcrowded, whilst many centres on the plain like Ninfa, Astura and Galeria went into steady demographic, economic and social decline. These movements in turn set off a chain reaction of further negative consequences: farming, grazing, building, the distribution of wealth, roads and communications, welfare institutions, all felt the impact of these changes in the internal equilibria of local rural demography, especially along the axis from Sermoneta to Maccarese. It was not until the second half of the XXth century that any hopes of life returned to the settlements of this region. The vastness of the problem and the social implications that it bore with it did not escape

the attention of the administrators of the Papal States, under whose jurisdiction the Roman Campagna fell. In the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance period the swamps had troubled the Pontiffs, but their concern went little further than to acknowledge the seriousness of the threat from malaria, to recommend frequent bonfires and even more damaging forest clearances in the misguided belief that this would clear and purify the air and discourage the mosquitoes.

In the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries the problem of malaria became even more acute, and caused several Popes to seek more effective and energetic measures to combat it. More energy, capital and technical knowledge was devoted to draining the swamps, and to reclaiming the Campagna in general in order to recover the land that had become destined to decay. The papal land reclamation schemes in Lazio had many successes, thanks to the skill of a number of the lay and ecclesiastical engineers employed, but these were far from complete and many of the areas infested with malaria remained untouched. After 1870 the problem passed on to the new unified state, but little was attempted and it was not until the 1930s that the problem of coherent reclamation and drainage was tackled systematically. Following the twenty years of fascist rule and the Second World War, the area around Sermoneta, Maccarese and the Agro Pontino seemed once more to have regained its fertility and suitability for cultivation. But this was not until the second half of the present century.

The problem of roadways and communications was similarly neglected, and the problem lay not so much in the lack of roads — since antiquity had left an extensive network — as in their rational utilization. What was needed was better maintenance and repair, together with more functional bye-roads and connections, together with the building of new sections and extensions. On the whole, such initiatives were lacking when either natural causes or human intervention caused the old Roman ways to be torn up or damaged. These difficulties slowed down traffic and made communications increasingly difficult. Again, it was only in the second half of the XXth century that an articulated and rational road system was completed which linked the main inhabited centres in the Campagna and provided adequate lateral transit.

Agriculture posed further problems, and the Campagna was devoted primarily to three types of production: cereals, trees and vegetables, and livestock. Cereal cultivation was based mainly on wheat with lesser cereals like rye, barley and millet which had all been grown traditionally in the region, together with the more recent maize that was regarded with suspicion. On the vast estates that dominated the province, wheat was the primary crop and the lesser cereals only offered feeble support: they were never capable of providing an alternative to the commercial and subsistence needs of the Roman states, let alone for foreign trade. Much the same was true of the other branches of production. The Campagna was well endowed with trees and there were plentiful plantations of firs, beeches, oaks, cypresses, olives and fruit trees. In addition, there were numerous vines and varieties of vegetable production that

had existed since time immemorial, together with newer crops like tomatoes, potatoes and beets. Mulberries were few, as were other vegetable sources of textile materials. As far as livestock was concerned, the preference was for sheep and cattle although there were also many herds of domestic buffalo. There were large numbers of farmyard animals, especially pigs, as well as draught and riding animals, and horses were bred both in the wild and domestically.

All in all, the Campagna had little difficulty in meeting the demands of the capital and rural population, and provided abundant supplies of flour, milk, oil, cheese, meat, animal fats, wool, timber and charcoal, together with smaller quantities of honey, silk and hemp. But what part of this was destined for trade? The charcoal was insufficient to meet local needs for heating and cooking, and the furnaces of the capital had to rely on extra imports from the Abruzzi and Emilian mountains. Wheat production provided only a small surplus and in poor years, or when some particular religious motive drew additional tourists to the Eternal City, additional supplies were imported from Sicily and emercency reserves were built up. The same was true for the wool from the vast flocks of sheep on the latifundist estates, which was of very poor quality and could be used only for making cloth to be worn by soldiers or the poorest sections of the population. The same was also true for cotton, and manufactured products were very poor because of the primitive spinning and weaving equipment used. The timber plantations provided materials for the furniture-making trades of the capital; dried and fresh fruit adorned the dining halls of the capital; quarries provided building materials; the herds of sheep provided the famous kid and baby-lambs for which the cuisine of Rome was famed; while the artisans of the capital could find in the Campagna a range of materials, kaolin, clay, timber and vegetable dyes with which to produce the souvenirs that were sold to the tourists who visited Rome for the papal Jubilees in the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries. But the Campagna produced no valuable timber, no fine silks for furnishing or for ecclesiastical apparel and lay fashions, nor fine hides that could be used in book-binding or in saddle-making. In the end, the Campagna could perhaps only guarantee a surplus production of wine, and this was generally sold in exchange for corn. The widespread consumption of wine is indicated by the large number of inns and taverns in the Campagna: indirect evidence comes from the numbers of artisans engaged in making barrels and bottles, or in decorating the capacious wine carts that were typical of the region and which carried the wine from its place of origin to the market. The wines of the Campagna were consumed in considerable quantities by the local population, provided for the needs of the princely and priestly residences of the capital, and found their way into international trade. Here they found success against their Tuscan, Piedmontese, Venetian, Apulian and Sicilian rivals, and while their alcoholic content was not high they had the advantage of withstanding travel well and retaining their purity and original composition well as they moved from region to region.

These varied historical and natural obstacles meant that the agricultural production of the Campagna developed only very slowly despite the attempts by energetic Popes, and the introduction of legislation designed to speed up technical improvements and development. The reforms introduced by the French, the reclamation schemes encouraged by the Popes, the projects for reform introduced by the governments of the Italian state in the XIXth and XXth century, all fell in silence on the sleeping economy of the Campagna. No combination of political and economic interests seemed capable of providing the radical solutions needed to stimulate the agriculture of this lethargic yet romantic region. But much as it might appeal to poets, archeologists and painters, it was quite incapable of creating balances between wine and cereal production, or producing livestock, industrial raw materials or other products capable of sustaining competition and trade. To have made such progress it would first have been necessary for much greater cooperation within the agrarian hierarchy from the landowners down to the humblest hired agricultural hands. But such cooperation was impossible for two reasons: ignorance and suspicion.

If by suspicion we imply only the mistrust and brazen profiteering of the landowners, it must also be said that the ignorance of the agricultural labourers greatly aggravated the problems of production in general. Their psychology was still rooted in superstition which caused them to reject technology out of hand, while they saw religion as a form of pagan rite that had to be applied to agriculture. The relationship between man and land was seen in purely aggressive terms, just as their subordination to the world of the rich and powerful was total, but induced apathy and acquiescence in the face of violence and banditry. These shortcomings accounted for the carelessness evident in many agricultural operations, as well as the deep hostility that greeted any attempts to introduce new crops. So the pace of development was held back and as the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries passed by the problems were handed down unresolved to the XXth century.

When, on the other hand, the ignorance of the rural masses came into conflict with the greed and suspicion of the landowners, the tenant farmers and the agents responsible for recruiting hired hands, then the problem of the land became even more neglected in the bitter and savage struggle between men and masters, except in those few instances where the two came together to celebrate the traditional rural feasts and festivities on the threshing floor or in the taverns. Yet the problem of the lack of communication between the two social orders remained unresolved: one side representing capital in the form of investment funds and landownership which under-pinned the supply of labour and the provision of wages, the other representing capital in the form of labour and experience which constituted the basis for the demands for work and for wages that did not fall too far below subsistence levels — as was often the case — and for recognition of the high health risks run by those who worked in the more desolate regions of the Campagna. The Papal States had attempted

to respond to these problems with convents, hospices and even some hospitals, but there were to be no obligatory welfare schemes for the rural poor until the XXth century.

At the root of the economic history of the Campagna region there was, however, an even more complex problem: this lay in the medieval concepts of property rights that prevailed and in the reluctance of the landowners to adapt to changing times. The origins of property rights in the Campagna were rooted in ancient hereditary patrimonies, which were either the result of medieval emphyteuts or Norman military concessions. The result was a proliferation of heraldic titles, some of which dated from antiquity, others being the fruits of administrative services to the papal government. It was during the XVIth century that the papacy imprinted its mark most firmly on the rural Campagna, and in this age of nepotism nearly every branch of the Roman nobility received some feudal title, whose names can still be seen today decorating the palaces of Rome. Only a minute fraction of these families owed their possessions in the Campagna to legal purchases. During the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries there were new middle class purchasers of land in the Campagna, the owners coming from the political, mercantile, artistic and even artisan classes of the capital. But in general terms, the structure of landownership remained dominated by the wast estates in the hands of a small group of wealthy landowners, who were closely tied to the papal Court at which they held various honorific titles and revenues.

Largely concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy families, the greater part of the Campagna was devoted to extensive production. This enabled the landowner to extract a steady return from short-term leases. The annual rents from these leases arrived punctually and were never changed. The importance of this type of agrarian rent was not devalued during the two centuries in question, since the prestige of the Papal State to which the nobility looked as the main fount of loyalty remained high and unshaken. The changes of the Napoleonic era had little longer term effect on the economic and institutional structure of Roman agriculture, which continued to survive and prosper from the Restoration to Unification.

The leaseholders in turn also prospered, carefully balancing costs and expenses, including the wages paid to casual and permanent labourers, against profits. Between them the landowner and the lease-holder managed to extract increasing profits by changing types of production, by substituting, for example, vineyards and livestock for extensive cereal production, in order to speed up the cycle of production and to enable faster realization of profits. There is clear proof that over the centuries productivity did increase, but there is no less proof that the Campagna remained without a rational pattern of farming: the realities of the region's agriculture were bound up in the imbalances of its system of landownership which remained essentially feudal.

What was the political character of feudalism in the Campagna? One might

answer that feudalism meant loyalty, submission and safety for the Papacy. The aristocracy represented the Pope's capital, his army, his culture and prestige in international relations. The Popes were nearly always chosen from the great Roman noble families, and whenever a Pope showed any inclination to listen to popular grievances over the food supply or the organization of agriculture, he was likely to be rewarded with the scarcely welcome title of revolutionary, rather than paternal guardian of the historical and economic tranquility of the peculiar state over which he presided. Yet there were many Popes who did show did such concern, and many of them were also members of the leading noble clans of the Campagna. It should also be remembered that huge tracts of the Campagna belonged directly to the Church, either in the form of monastic lands or through the churches dependent on the Roman curia.

The Papal State was affected like the rest of the peninsula by the French Revolution and the invasion of the Napoleonic armies, and as a result saw the abolition of feudalism. But whereas the Napoleonic legislation found fertile terrain in the Po Valley, in the Papal States it met fierce but passive resistance, despite the fact that the XVIIth and XVIIIth century land registers drawn up by two extremely able Popes provided an excellent basis on which to discover the reality of developments over the previous centuries and to launch an effective reform.

During the XIXth century there were no substantial or radical changes in the economic and institutional structure of property rights. Following Unification, many of the Church lands found their way into the public domaine, while on the periphery of the great estates there was a constant process of fragmentation at work, and more land was being drawn into the town for building purposes towards the end of the century and especially around Rome and its suburbs. But there was no questioning of the absolute rights of ownership or of the arbitrary control over production or of the relationship between landowner and worker. The debates on cooperatives and common property rights which shook France in the XIXth century left the Campagna untouched, without debate or innovation. When they did occur, new legislative innovations were met without violence or open resistance, yet there was a very marked laziness apparent in the ways in which they were implemented which was reinforced by the disinterest of the great families of European reknown. Added to this was the conciliating presence of the universal church and the peculiarly Roman art of procrastinating and deferring, all of which served to minimize the pressing problems posed by the Campagna. Werner Sombart was keenly aware of this and perceptively analysed the causes and effects at the end of the XIXth century. But the problem of the land remained unsolved at the close of the papal regime, and after Unification these problems were to be overshadowed by colonial and world wars, then by twenty years of dictatorship, and were to be handed down for solution to the generations now living.