

# Invisible Economies in the Ancient World

18–19 December 2023

## Organizers

Nathanael Andrade (University of Binghamton)

Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)



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## Table of Contents

<b>Outline</b> .....	4
<b>Programme</b> .....	8
<b>Abstracts</b>	
<b>Udo Hartmann:</b> The Palmyrene Trade and the Nomads.....	11
<b>Matthew Cobb:</b> Ground-up Spices: Investigating the Role of the Marginalized and Unseen in the Distribution, Processing, and Consumption of Spices and Aromatics in the Roman World.....	12
<b>Micaela Langellotti:</b> Cultural Capital and its Impact on the Economy: The Evidence from Roman Egypt.....	13
<b>Lara Fabian:</b> Cultural Capital at the Crossroads: Economic Networks in the Post-Achaemenid South Caucasus .....	14
<b>Rebecca Darley:</b> From Rain to River in Peninsular South Asia (First Millennium CE).....	15
<b>Kai Ruffing:</b> Economic Choices and Naval Transport between the Middle Euphrates and the Persian Gulf.....	16
<b>Stéphanie Guédon:</b> 'Tribes' and Invisible Economy in Roman Africa.....	17
<b>Julia Hoffman-Salz:</b> The Economy of Paideia in the Hauran (Southern Syria) in Roman Times .....	18
<b>Anna-Katharina Rieger:</b> How Rational is Religion? Economy as a Driving Force and Shaping Power of Sacred Places in Western Asia in a Comparative Perspective (Palmyrene and Hauran) .....	19
<b>Rubina Raja:</b> It's My Party (and I Will Organize it, as I Want to): Thinking through Economies of Religion in Roman Palmyra.....	20
<b>Michael Decker:</b> Harvesting in the Shadows: Farmers, Power, and Economy in Late Antique Syria.....	21
<b>Cam Grey:</b> (Re-)Constructing Rural Lifeways of North-Eastern Gaul in the Sixth Century CE .....	22
<b>Venues</b> .....	24
<b>Organizers</b> .....	25
<b>Conference webpage</b> .....	25



Photo from trench S, ev. J16-Sk-75, showing how the wall-paintings had fallen of the wall (© The Danish-German Jerash Northwest Quarter Project).

## Outline

A windfall of recent scholarship has cast new light on the roles and aspirations of peasants, craftsmen, and the enslaved in the ancient economy, along with the activity of 'invisible' actors more generally. Even so, the weight of past and present research on the ancient economy (or economies) has focused on large-scale agrarian production, long-distance commerce, and monetary exchange in some combination. The emphasis is understandable insofar as these phenomena tend to be most visible in the written and material sources. But the ancient economy was built upon the work, exchanges, aspirations, materials, and traditions of people who largely remain invisible to us. These included rural peasants, nomads, the enslaved, and both labourers and vendors who eked a daily existence. They include people whose livelihoods depended on the agrarian production, commerce, and monetary exchanges undertaken by others. How do we account for them as historical actors, individually or collectively? How do we comprehend their actions and decisions that impacted the economy but did not leave surviving traces that we normally define as 'economic'? How do we measure and usefully discuss the impact that the ancient economy, whether defined by local, regional, or 'global' contexts, had on their quotidian routines and decision-making?

With the environmental, social, and cultural factors that gave structure to economic enterprise as a point of departure, this conference seeks to address how the quotidian behaviours and strategies of ancient people largely invisible to us shaped economic life, and vice versa. One key area of focus is the impact that practices determined by environmental or social factors, including caravan trading, religious practice, competition for cultural capital, mobility and transhumanism, or maritime commerce had on local, regional and wider economies and their largely invisible actors. Another is the effect that the quotidian routines of the invisible, including peasants, nomads, and daily labourers and vendors, had on local economies and the formation of broader structures and patterns in the ancient economy writ large.

**Programme: Monday 18 December**9:00 **Coffee**9:30 **Introduction**  
Nathanel Andrade (University of Binghamton) and  
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

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**Caravan Economy (Moderator: Rubina Raja)**10:15 **The Palmyrene Trade and the Nomads**  
Udo Hartmann (Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena)11:15 **Ground-up Spices: Investigating the Role of the Marginalized  
and Unseen in the Distribution, Processing, and Consumption  
of Spices and Aromatics in the Roman World**  
Matthew Cobb (University of Wales Trinity Saint David)12:15 **Lunch**

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**Cultural Capital and Economy (Moderator: Nate Andrade)**13:30 **Cultural Capital and its Impact on the Economy:  
The Evidence from Roman Egypt**  
Micaela Langellotti (Newcastle University)14:30 **Cultural Capital at the Crossroads:  
Economic Networks in the Post-Achaemenid South Caucasus**  
Lara Fabian (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg)15:30 **Coffee Break****Sea and River Economy (Moderator: Andrew Wilson)**16:00 **From Rain to River in Peninsular South Asia  
(First Millennium CE)**  
Rebecca Darley (University of Leeds)17:00 **Economic Choices and Naval Transport between the Middle  
Euphrates and the Persian Gulf**  
Kai Ruffing (University of Kassel)18:00 **Drinks at the Academy (for all participants)**18:45 **Conference Dinner (for speakers)**  
Restaurant Noi, Nobis Hotel Copenhagen  
H. C. Andersens Blvd. 34  
1574 Copenhagen

**Programme: Tuesday 19 December**8:30      **Coffee**

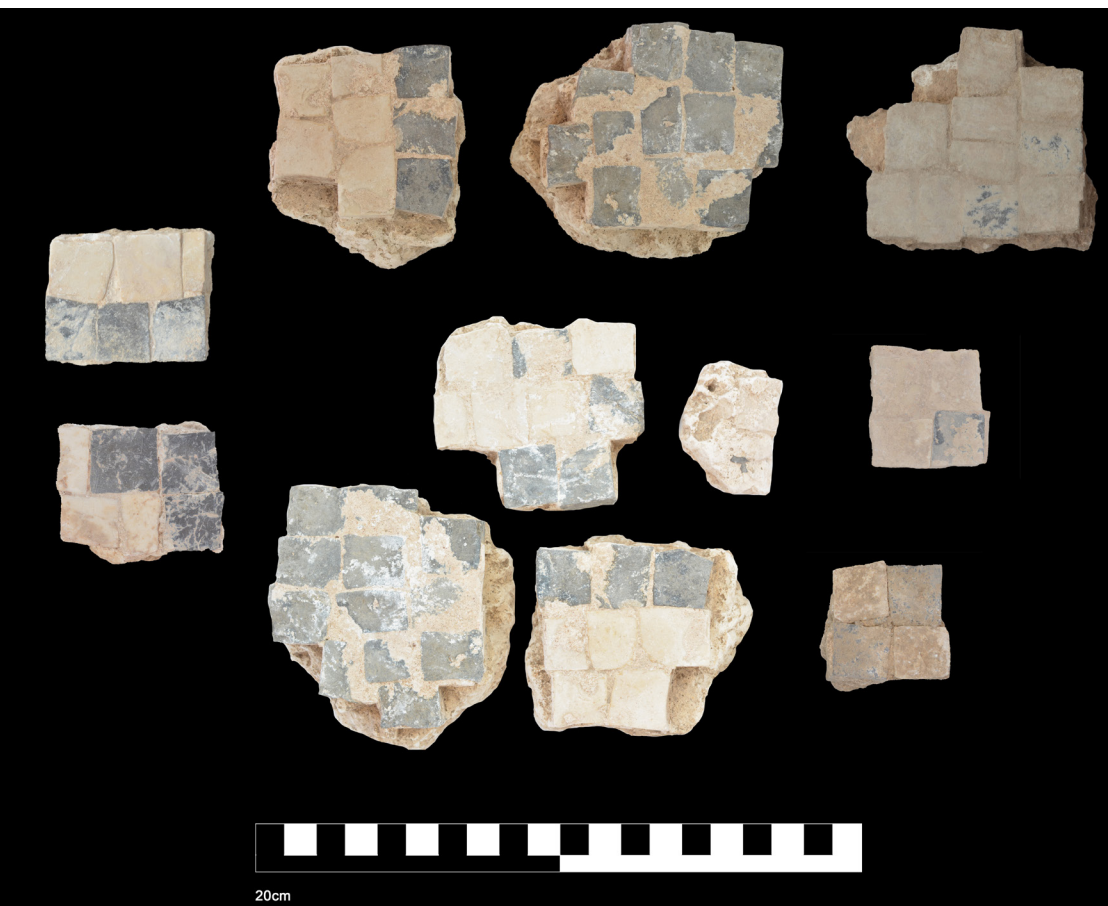
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**Mobile and Transhumant Economy (Moderator: Andrew Wilson)**9:00      **'Tribes' and Invisible Economy in Roman Africa**  
Stéphanie Guédon (Nantes University)10:00      **The Economy of Paideia in the Hauran (Southern Syria)**  
**in Roman Times**  
Julia Hoffmann-Salz (Freie Universität Berlin)

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**Religious Economy (Moderator: Christopher Hallett)**11:00      **How Rational is Religion? Economy as a Driving Force**  
**and Shaping Power of Sacred Places in Western Asia in a**  
**Comparative Perspective (Palmyrene and Hauran)**  
Anna-Katharina Rieger (Universität Graz)12:00      **It's My Party (and I Will Organize it, as I Want to):**  
**Thinking through Economies of Religion in Roman Palmyra**  
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)13:00      **Lunch****Village and Unfree Economy (Moderator: Olympia Bobou)**14:30      **Harvesting in the Shadows: Farmers, Power, and Economy**  
**in Late Antique Syria**  
Michael Decker (University of South Florida)15:30      **(Re-)Constructing Rural Lifeways of North-Eastern Gaul**  
**in the Sixth Century CE**  
Cam Grey (University of Pennsylvania)16:30      **Conclusion and Wrap-Up**16:45      **Drinks at the Academy**

## Abstracts



Fragments with black and white tessellation from a house destroyed in the 749 CE earthquake  
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## The Palmyrene Trade and the Nomads

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In the second century CE, Palmyra developed a trade network that extended from Syria through the steppe to the Euphrates and eventually to the Persian Gulf and India. The Palmyrenes secured the trade routes with a militia which consisted mainly of camel riders. Inscriptions from Palmyra mention officials who secured the routes against nomads and name 'Arabic' robbers who can be characterized as nomads. Therefore, the nomads in the steppe have so far been regarded as a threat to the Palmyrene long-distance trade. However, we know very little about these (in the ancient sources mainly invisible) nomadic groups in the Syrian steppe and Mesopotamia in the High Imperial period, about their ethnic identity, organization and culture. Probably, however, the trade network of Palmyra was also based on cooperation with these tribes. This paper will focus on the complex relationship between Palmyra and the nomads of the steppe in the second and third century CE.

## **Ground-up Spices: Investigating the Role of the Marginalized and Unseen in the Distribution, Processing, and Consumption of Spices and Aromatics in the Roman World**

Matthew Cobb  
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A confluence of new perspectives, techniques, and bodies of evidence is substantially altering our understanding of the economic and social impacts of spice and aromatic consumption within the Roman Empire during the early to mid-first millennium CE. Earlier discourses, which were heavily informed by textual analysis, often focused on the (negative) economic impacts of the 'spice trade' and elite conspicuous consumption. However, new methods of analysis and bodies of data (notably archaeobotanical remains) have made it increasingly apparent that a much wider proportion of the population were engaged in the consumption of these spices than has often been assumed (Rowan 2017; Cobb 2018; Simmons 2021) and that the volume of goods being moved presented a significant organizational and logistical undertaking (Cobb 2022). Furthermore, archaeometric methods (like residue analysis) are enabling a more complex understanding of the processing of these spices and aromatics and the materiality of the objects linked to their consumption (Ribechini et al. 2008; Cramp and Evershed 2015).

It is evident that marginalized individuals were (in)directly tied into this phenomenon. Particularly the enslaved, who played important roles in activities like incense production, perfume manufacture and food preparation, and non-elites involved in their transit (including nomads). Responding to the conference's key themes of the 'Caravan Economy' and the 'Unfree Economy', the present paper investigates the distribution, processing, and consumption of spices and aromatics from a ground-up perspective. Special attention is paid to way that new (archaeometric) techniques and bodies of evidence can be integrated into our historical analysis.

## **Cultural Capital and its Impact on the Economy: The Evidence from Roman Egypt**

Micaela Langellotti  
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This paper explores how and how far cultural capital affected the economy of the local communities of Roman Egypt. The focus will be on the accumulation of that cultural capital that enabled individuals to hold various administrative positions, a capital including (some) knowledge of Greek language, education, and institutions as well as familiarity with the Roman administrative structure. Indeed, Greek literacy was a key requirement for participating in the newly established Roman government, at both local and more central levels. The papyrological evidence from Roman Egypt provides us with a wide range of examples whereby this type of cultural capital played an important role not only in promoting the upward socio-economic mobility of individuals and communities, but also in encouraging the creation of a large group of administrative officials (e.g. village scribes, liturgists, notary officers) who supported the regulations and management of various economic activities at different levels. The aim of this paper is threefold: first, to investigate the dynamics that were behind the interaction between cultural capital and the economy, at both local level (e.g. everyday economic activities, such as sales of houses, animals and commodities, loans, and leases) and provincial level (e.g. larger economic enterprises, such as monopolies, state concessions, and large imports and exports); second, to explore the role of the actors involved in this process (mainly individuals belonging to the middling strata of society); third, to establish how far cultural capital had an impact on economic activities versus the role played by social and economic capitals.

## **Cultural Capital at the Crossroads: Economic Networks in the Post-Achaemenid South Caucasus**

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The South Caucasus, often regarded as a 'crossroads of civilizations', has long sat at the confluence of diverse socio-political systems. In the post-Achaemenid period, it bordered at three supra-regional socio-political systems: The wider Mediterranean, the Iranian, and the Steppe worlds. Beyond their distinct social and historical contexts, each of these worlds functioned according to a different (if in some cases related) economic framework.

The region's location enabled interaction with these diverse systems – and indeed necessitated doing so – creating a unique nexus of opportunities and pressures for local residents. The result was dynamic exchange, allowing for significant negotiation and the amalgamation of diverse elements into innovative social and material practices. This sort of multi-polarity is evident in the rich diversity of material culture(s) in the region, but its implications extend beyond the tangible, into processes that are immaterial (or largely immaterial) like the economy.

Using archaeological and textual evidence as well as economic theory, this paper explores the role of cultural capital – and particularly of access to different sources of cultural capital – in the structuring and maintenance of intricate local economic networks. This approach allows us to focus on inter-regional patterns of interaction that, although almost invisible today, played a critical role in shaping economic activities in the post-Achaemenid Caucasus.

## **From Rain to River in Peninsular South Asia (First Millennium CE)**

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It is well known that rivers in peninsular South Asia in the first millennium CE provided vital routes through varied landscapes, from arid semi-desert to lush jungle. Likewise, it is clear that household economies in many areas came to rely increasingly on so-called 'garden' plots, that made use of locally variable rainwater to produce fresh fruits and vegetables, sometimes at a level that might be considered cash cropping. Tracing both garden economies and activity along riverine routes, however, is challenging. Rivers have often moved dramatically over time, taking with them all traces of what may, in any case, have been ephemeral landing posts and meeting places. Many are today polluted and at risk of water shortage, threatening archaeological remains and, indeed, the archaeologists, amateur, and professional, who explore them. Reference to 'garden' agriculture is mainly found in inscriptions and literary texts and by analogy with modern practice. This paper brings together the often invisible economies of river – and rainwater in the first millennium to ask how triangulating the traces that remain via the medium of state formation might unlock new perspectives on a fundamental but contested change in South Asia.



## **Economic Choices and Naval Transport between the Middle Euphrates and the Persian Gulf**

Kai Ruffing  
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In today's research economic choices of actors in the trade and the commerce are rarely addressed. The economic choices of the individuals are either seen in a neo-classical perspective, i.e. as governed by the aim to maximize profits, or as socially defined, i.e. the higher the social position of an actor the more agriculture is preferred. Regarding the trade along the Euphrates and the commerce in the Persian Gulf the research has focused on actors from the Roman Empire and here especially the Palmyrenes although there were a lot of actors with a diverse cultural background. Often, if not normally, the people of the Parthian commonwealth are only addressed as an obstacle for a supposedly existing 'Roman Trade' or as middlemen who were the reason for high(er) prices for goods which came from the world of the Indian Ocean into the Roman realm. The paper addresses the question which role the cultural background of the actors played for making economic choices and argues that these choices are shaped by the cultural background and the socio-economic position of the actors as well, as far as it concerns the geographical range of their business. After some general remarks it aims at applying these structural phenomena to the naval transport on the Euphrates and in the Persian Gulf. Particular attention will be paid to actors from the Arsacid realm. By means of that it seeks to show that the concept of middlemen has serious shortcomings and that actors participated in the trade along the Euphrates route as well as in Persian Gulf who did not come from Palmyra.

## **'Tribes' and Invisible Economy in Roman Africa**

Stéphanie Guédon  
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This paper proposes to discuss the issue of economic activities of African populations, usually referred to as 'tribes', in the south-west of the Roman Empire. The aim is to challenge the prejudices associated with these local populations since Antiquity, linked to the perception of nomadism and the notion of tribe in historiography. A cross-reading of writing and material testimonies permits to shed a new light on their 'invisible economy'.

## The Economy of Paideia in the Hauran (Southern Syria) in Roman Times

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This paper will look at the different economic dimensions of (Greek) education in the Hauran during the Roman Empire. The Hauran was an agriculturally very successful region where the profits from agriculture were not only invested in large private houses, public and religious buildings, as well as funerary monuments, but also in a 'proper' (Greek) education. This education in turn also became an economic factor in the region on different levels. These too often invisible levels of economic impact of education can be traced in the Hauran thanks to an extraordinarily large epigraphic corpus from this rural region at the fringes of the Roman Empire.

## How Rational is Religion? Economy as a Driving Force and Shaping Power of Sacred Places in Western Asia in a Comparative Perspective (Palmyrene and Hauran)

Anna-Katharina Rieger  
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Much has been said about trade, related sanctuaries, and economically active groups as well as about the relation of sedentarily living and mobile people in Graeco-Roman Western Asia with its high ecological and social varieties. My paper will reconsider the connection of economic interests with religious places and practices against the socio-cultural backdrop of the interacting people. In this approach to the relation between religion and economy (following Weber 1921/22 and Koch 2014), religion is considered on a scale from an economic phenomenon in itself to a non-economic (socio-religious) but economically relevant phenomenon and an economically conditioned phenomenon.

Comparing the different ecological and economical settings in the Palmyrene and the Hauran and selected religious places (e.g., Sahr el-Leja, Khirbet Sannine) my paper aims at going beyond the interpretation of the sacred places as meeting points and places of exchange and markets. By applying a theory of religious economy (Iannacone 1998) adjusted to the circumstances in Graeco-Roman times, I claim that the immaterial goods – trust, information, value – had to be 'counterbalanced' with natural resources, or were 'transformed' at the sacred places to material goods, commodities, and products. A focus on the 'invisible' actors (i.e. with mobile life-strategies) dissects even better the various mindsets behind these operations. Such transformations of goods ('capital') with the purpose of setting values, minimizing risks, remedying information asymmetries, and at the same time searching for reciprocity can be traced in the location, the layout, and the activities at the sacred places reconstructed from image-objects and epigraphic sources.

## **It's My Party (and I Will Organize it, as I Want to): Thinking through Economies of Religion in Roman Palmyra**

Rubina Raja  
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In recent years much new research has appeared on aspects of Palmyrene archaeology, culture, and history. One of the central topics of research has also been that of religion and religious practices in Palmyra. Attempts have been made to understand the structure of the religious practices in the Roman-period city based on analysis of sanctuaries and texts relating to the religious practices undertaken there or even outside the sanctuaries. The evidence from Palmyra is despite being abundant also scattered. Most of our evidence comes from the large public spaces and the funerary sphere, and close to nothing comes from the domestic spheres. Therefore we rely – possibly too heavily – on skewed evidence from only one realm of the city's multi-faceted life.

While much has been said about the intriguing so-called banqueting tesseræ from the city, they have until now not been studied with respect to the broader economic implications that they carry. This iconographically rich group of material, of which more than 1200 types exist, give insight into the realm of religious banquets in the city. These tokens, most often made of terracotta, were used as access tickets to religious banquets. While this is widely accepted and the nature of the banquets and the priestly groups or individual priests behind the banquets have been addressed – also recently in scholarship – the banquets have not been discussed as events that not only drew on the cultural capital of the elite but also on the economic capital of it. This paper will address how we might be able to understand the iconography and inscriptions on the tesseræ in an economic perspective, pushing border for their implications for the broader understanding of the Palmyrene economy in the Roman period.

## **Harvesting in the Shadows: Farmers, Power, and Economy in Late Antique Syria**

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This paper explores aspects of the nature of farmers and farming in the eastern lands of the Late Roman/early Byzantine Empire in late Antiquity (fourth-seventh centuries CE). The region under consideration comprises so-called 'Greater Syria', lands whose social and environmental affinities were recognized by their being organized by the imperial authorities into the administrative district of the diocese of Oriens. Is it appropriate to call the majority of farmers 'peasants', and what do we know of power relations and changes in social structures occurring in late Antiquity? Reconsideration of recent scholarship on questions of power, prosperity, and related problems is possible due to a relative abundance of evidence from texts and archaeology. I apply these sources to regional case studies from which it appears that many farmers engaged in the wider market economy. That they did so was made possible – in certain times and places – by crucial environmental and social changes. Finally, I address if the present evidence supports an interpretation that better living conditions prevailed among most of those on the land, or if a more pessimistic scholarly view is warranted.

## **(Re-)Constructing Rural Lifeways of North-Eastern Gaul in the Sixth Century CE**

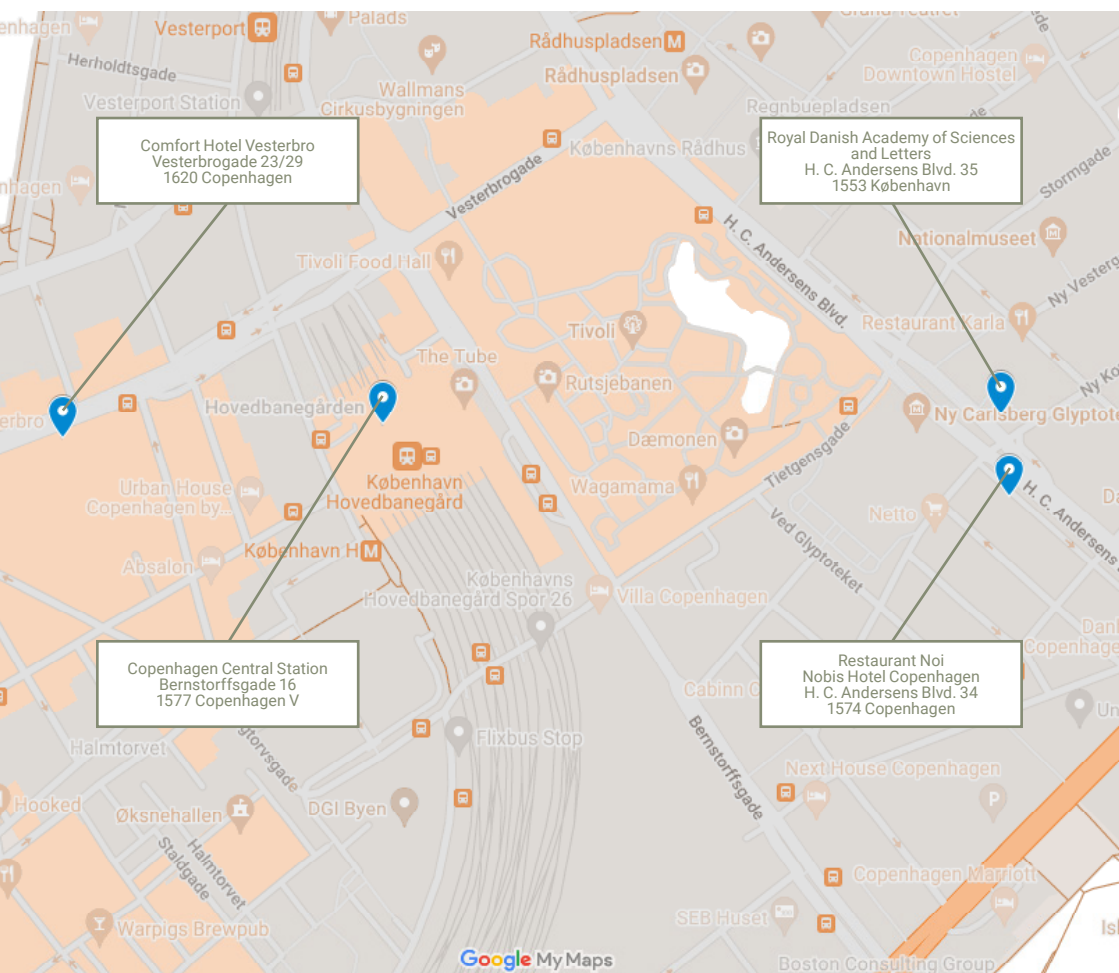
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Several decades of archaeological, archaeobotanical, and zooarchaeological research has placed our understanding of rural economies in the late Roman west on a new footing. But it is rare that these material and natural archives coincide with textual evidence of sufficient granularity to provide information about the quotidian, seasonal, and inter-annual rhythms of rural life. This paper focuses upon one such collocation, placing the *Life of Genovefa of Paris* and the *Will of the Bishop Remigius of Reims* alongside physical evidence for sylvo-agrarian and pastoral practices in the vicinity of Paris in order to explore rural lifeways in the region in the sixth century CE.



Trajan (98–117 AD), Rome mint, AE (Dupondius) 12.00 gr, 28 mm. Obv.: Radiate bust of Trajan to r.; [... TRAIAN]NOAUGGERDA[C...]; Rev.: illeg. (© The Danish-German Jerash Northwest Quarter Project).

## Venues



## Organizers



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## Conference webpage

<https://projects.au.dk/circulareconomy/events/2023/invisible-economies>



**Book of abstracts** Invisible Economies in the Ancient World

**Organizers:** Nathanael Andrade (University of Binghamton) and Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

**Editors:** Nathanael Andrade, Christina Levisen, and Rubina Raja

**Font cover:** Goat herding with ruins of tower tombs in Palmyra in the background, 1920s. Ingholt Archive (© Palmyra Portrait Project and Rubina Raja, courtesy of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek).

**Back cover:** The so-called 'Sale of Bread' fresco from the House of the Baker or Casa del Forno (c. 79 CE) in Pompeii, Italy (Public Domain).