



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The Roman world of work : social structures and the urban labour market of Roman Italy in the first three centuries AD

Groen, M.J.

Citation

Groen, M. J. (2017, May 24). *The Roman world of work : social structures and the urban labour market of Roman Italy in the first three centuries AD*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/49229>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/49229>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/49229> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: Groen-Vallinga, M.J.

Title: The Roman world of work : social structures and the urban labour market of Roman Italy in the first three centuries AD

Issue Date: 2017-05-24

Chapter 2

The urban labour market

INTRODUCTION

Labour market theory revolves around the commodification of free labour, and the understanding that labour and labourers can move to the market. The existence of forced labour – slavery – in a historical society effectively negates the existence of a labour market in theory. However, scholars are increasingly aware that price theory is subject to various non-economic restraints. The most important of these is labour market segmentation: restrictions and limitations will occur in any given labour market on the basis of various socially and culturally determined factors for discrimination, such as gender. It is my contention that in Roman society, legal status is just another such discriminating factor. Slave, freed and free certainly were not always interchangeable, but it is my contention that they were part of the same labour market.¹ Therefore, I believe that an integrated analysis of the labour force in its entirety is the only way to comprehend the workings of the Roman labour market and to bring out the options available to any one individual. This chapter lays out the conceptual framework for a structural analysis of the functioning of the urban Roman labour market in the remaining chapters.

That there was such a thing as a Roman labour market is not commonly accepted. *Der Neue Pauly* offers a recent entry under ‘Arbeitsmarkt’ that may serve to illustrate this:

Mit Bohannon und Dalton ist zwischen dem Markt a) als Ort und b) als preis-regulierendem Mechanismus von Angebot und Nachfrage zu unterscheiden. Während sich ein A. im Sinne von b) in der Ant. nicht herausbildete, war Arbeit wie andere Waren auf dem Marktplatz erhältlich. Entweder konnte sie dauerhaft in Form eines Sklaven gekauft, oder temporär von einem freien Lohnarbeiter “geliehen” werden (lat. *locatio*; ...). Umgekehrt konnte jeder seine Arbeit auf dem Markt anbieten.²

This reference article may be labelled ‘labour market’, but it negates the existence of a labour market in Antiquity, as opposed to a market for labour. In this view, moreover, the market for labour appears to be limited to the actual marketplace. The author is a well-respected scholar working on the ancient economy, whose views may be expected to have wider support. This chapter therefore aims to convince the reader that it is useful to analyse Roman labour and labourers in terms of a Roman labour market, taking into consideration that the concept of a labour market is more complex than merely serving

1 Cf Temin (2004a), (2013a) 114–38.

2 Von Reden, *Der Neue Pauly* s.v. ‘Arbeitsmarkt’. Brill Online, first appeared online 2006. The English version translates it as ‘job-market’.

the law of supply and demand. And if we can speak of a labour market, then in what ways can labour market theory contribute to our understanding of the Roman situation?

Chapter outline

Neither the active presence of market economics, nor the reality of an integrated labour market, is entirely self-evident in a slave society that was predominantly leaning on agriculture. It is therefore necessary to justify the use of such modern economic concepts in a Roman context. I will argue that the question whether or not the Roman economy was a market economy is the wrong question to ask. Few historians would deny that sources for the Roman economy attest to market transactions and market forces at work. The focus of research should be on how the Roman market functioned, and in what way economic theory can contribute to an understanding of it. It will become clear that Roman market economics demonstrate the existence of market regions rather than an integrated market economy.

This chapter explores the idea of a Roman labour market. According to economic price theory, a labour market is characterized by freedom of movement and wages that move in response to supply and demand.³ This narrow definition does not take into account that societies are governed by social and cultural factors that will always lead to market segmentation, and it will therefore be argued that a broader concept of labour market is necessary to operationalize it for the Roman world. The subsequent investigations into labour mobility, therefore, focuses not only on possibilities and factors that facilitated movement, but also on restrictions to (labour) migration within Roman Italy.

The very idea of a free labour market, with wages that move in accordance with the laws of supply and demand, seems irreconcilable with forced labour in a slave economy. The question to what extent slave and free can be considered to have been part of a unified labour force will therefore have to be dealt with in some detail. The percentage of slaves is thought to have been significantly higher in Roman Italy than for the rest of the empire, which makes the matter all the more interesting in the context of this thesis.⁴ It is not just the dichotomy between slave and free, however, that might preclude full labour market integration. The same holds true of the historically unstable balance between male and female workers, and that between skilled and unskilled work. The Roman labour market is likely to have been made up of multiple local labour markets with limited movement between them. Market segmentation explains this pattern of restrictions to individual movement and opportunities within the Roman labour market.

3 E.g. Temin (2013a) 115; Temin (2004a) 515.

4 De Ligt (2012) 190 table 4.3 for a tentative percentage of 40% slaves in the cities of Roman Italy, cf Hopkins (1978) 68.

The last section of this chapter deals with labour supply and labour demand. The combination of a dense population and high urbanisation rate in Roman Italy made for a thick urban labour market: in other words, there were more workers than work. This is likely to have been particularly relevant for unskilled wage labourers. A copious labour supply in this sector is underlined by the scarce evidence for remuneration, that suggests that wages were low; for the majority of people, living standards were therefore probably low. Labour demand in Rome was variable due to fluctuations and seasonality of consumer demand and the building/shipping trades, which were conducive to cyclical unemployment or underemployment. It was difficult to scrape a living in the city. But the city was the place to do it.

THE ROMAN ECONOMY

The publication of Moses Finley's *The ancient economy* in 1973 sparked off the debate on the Roman economy, and arguably remains the starting point for any discussion on the ancient economy. Many Roman economists adhered to Finley's 'primitivist' idea that the Romans had an 'underdeveloped' economy.⁵ In this scenario, the ideal was autarky, cities were very much self-sufficient, and although it was acknowledged that there was a certain amount of trade, there could be no market integration. It was to be expected that this view has evoked a counter-reaction from a substantial group of other Roman economic historians. The 'modernists' advocated trade and market integration as important characteristics of the Roman economy. It has convincingly been argued that the primitivist and modernist interpretations are not as mutually exclusive as their followers have led us to believe. The debate has been solved diplomatically by pronouncing it obsolete.⁶

There probably are not many ancient historians who would deny that there were market forces at work in Roman society. The regular attestation of prices, contracts, rents and wages, points to the existence of market forces in the Roman economy. The plentiful use of coinage in the Roman empire is well known and does not require further elaboration here.⁷ The one document that provides most of the Roman price data we know, Diocletian's *Prices Edict* of 301 AD, is price regulation on a massive scale that was

5 Garnsey and Saller (1987) entitled their chapter three, p. 43-63, 'An underdeveloped economy'; Finley's continued influence shows from the fact that *The ancient economy* was reprinted most recently in 1999, the third edition; see also Andreau (2002), entitled 'Twenty years after Moses I. Finley's *The Ancient Economy*'.

6 Saller (2002), reprinted as Saller (2005); cf De Ligt (1993). Compare the introduction for the influence of this debate on the use of economic theory in ancient history.

7 E.g. Howgego (1992); cf Harris (2006) on other means of payment.

likely a response to market-driven inflation; moreover, market forces were so strong that they may well have caused the *Edict's* failure.⁸ It is absolutely correct to state "[t]hat the Roman economy was not simple — that it set market prices, sustained development, and had room for growth — is old news".⁹ But what form this took, and to what extent economic theories can be applied, is still the subject of much debate.

The Roman market economy

There is a lot of information, but hardly any of what economists call data.¹⁰

Roman historians have not shied away from using various economic principles in their analysis of the Roman economy.¹¹ Many of such economic principles rest upon the null hypothesis of a functioning market economy in the society under scrutiny.¹² The logical corollary that the Roman economy therefore may have functioned like a market economy, however, has only recently found a true protagonist in Peter Temin. It is worth pointing out that the initiative to promulgate the more general view of a Roman market economy came from an economist rather than an ancient historian.¹³ Temin advocated his views in a series of articles, culminating in a monograph with the title *The Roman market economy*.¹⁴ Economists seem to accept the view that Rome had a market economy.¹⁵ Responses from scholars of the ancient world are more reserved than economist reviewers. One ancient historian reviewed the book for the *Times Literary Supplement*, concluding that "Temin has, I fear, done a good job of persuading me that there was really nothing resembling an integrated Roman market economy".¹⁶ In this reviewer's

8 Temin (2001) 173; Groen-Vallinga and Tacoma (2017).

9 Von Reden (2014) 536.

10 Temin (2006) 134.

11 Contrary to what Temin writes, (2006) 133: "Ancient economic history is in its infancy, both because few economists have learned much about the ancient world and because ancient historians have typically not incorporated economics into their analysis".

12 Temin (2001) 170, repeated verbatim in Temin (2013a) 6: "This is a problem for the study of the Roman economy, because it is precisely this typical null hypothesis that needs to be tested".

13 Cf Temin (2013a) 1: "The application of economic reasoning to ancient history is growing, but more ancient historians than economists are interested in ancient economies".

14 Temin (2001).

15 E.g. Berg (2014) 37; Also Grantham, unpublished paper for the conference 'Work, labor and professions', Ghent 31 May 2013.

16 Thonemann (2013) *Times Literary Supplement*. The review by Ivanov (2013), trained as an economist, interestingly does not fit into the category of economists nor that of ancient historians and is quite insightful.

opinion, the Roman economy does not lend itself to 'new economic history', because it leaves the social aspect of economic transactions out of the equation.

In my view the problem with Temin's work can, perhaps, be summarized as follows: the market economy is too theoretical, too abstract and all-encompassing a concept and it cannot just be imposed on the Roman empire. It needs to be tailored to fit the specifics of that empire. The question is not whether or not the Roman economy was a market economy – there is no yes or no answer – but to what extent the market economy model, and the closely related presumption of a functioning labour market, have explanatory power for the Roman Empire. It does not matter whether or not Finley was wrong. We need to move further, from the theoretical model of a market economy to the specifics of market forces in the empire; from the existential question whether Rome had market economy, to a utilitarian perspective that can usefully apply the economics of the market to Roman Italy.

The value of *The Roman market economy* to my mind lies in the far-reaching hypothesis of an integrated market in the Roman empire. It is a bold hypothesis that seems to work at face value, even if it lacks a firm evidential basis. Precisely the extreme attempt to emphasize a supposed complete interconnectedness within the early Roman empire, however, brings out how the market was broken up into segments and regions.

With market integration comes price correlation. Temin suggested that the wages for work in the mines of the Roman empire supports the existence of a functioning, empire-wide labour market, since the wages of the miners at Mons Claudianus in Egypt resemble those for gold-miners in Dacia (Alburnus Maior). The mining trade, however, is likely to have been largely under imperial control. The imperial administration would have set standard wages which may even have limited labour migration.¹⁷

To illustrate that the Roman empire constituted an integrated market, Temin places much emphasis on his analysis of the grain trade. On the basis of just six references to grain prices, he establishes a supposed correlation between price, and distance to Rome, which would illustrate an integrated market for wheat.¹⁸ This argument does not hold and has been the focus of justified criticism. Quite apart from problems deriving from the law of small numbers, he ignores the importance of non-market channels for the supply of grain, and the fact that much grain was cultivated with the primary goal of personal consumption.¹⁹ Temin lumps data together from varying time periods and provinces.

17 Nuanced critique Holleran (2016) 96-7 with references. For the approximation of wages Egypt/Dacia: Cuvigny (1996) 142-145; as evidence for integrated labour market Temin (2013a) 118, who does note the possibility of intervention of the Roman state.

18 Temin (2013a) chapters 2 and 5.

19 See Bransbourg (2012) s.v. 'the law of small numbers'; with response by Temin (2013b); Erdkamp (2014) with reference to Erdkamp (2005) for a very different analysis of the grain market.

“No amount of regression analysis is going to convince many ancient historians that six pieces of data, taken from a period of more than two centuries, are sufficient to demonstrate the integration of the entire Roman wheat market”.²⁰ In a thorough analysis of the (qualitative as well as quantitative) evidence for the grain trade, Erdkamp demonstrated earlier on that there was a certain amount of market integration, but that it was regional rather than empire-wide.²¹ The grain trade may serve as an illustration of a more general pattern. In Antiquity, the infrastructure for goods and, more importantly, information, was slow and therefore largely unsuitable for full empire-wide integration.²² Market integration therefore was also slow, and may rather have been compartmentalised into smaller market regions within the empire.

Market forces are also identified by Temin in the instrumental behaviour that shows from Roman literature. Instrumental, that is economically rational, behaviour is indicative of the free competition in a market economy.²³ There certainly were Roman gold-diggers and profit seekers. Temin’s favourite Roman example of economic rationality is Cato the Elder, as portrayed by Plutarch. This famous anecdote speaks both of Cato’s clever way of investing in shipping enterprises, minimising risk by taking on only 1/50th share, and of the way he bought slaves to sell them for double after a year of solid education.²⁴ However, there is no way of knowing if Cato’s behaviour was truly economically rational, or to what extent his decisions were also determined by considerations of reputation or social capital, and convention. Seeking profit is no evidence for market integration.

The historical circumstances of the early Roman empire facilitated market exchange. The trading opportunities that came with the foundation of the empire were unprecedented. Formal institutions created the necessary infrastructure to maximize profit: the *Pax Romana*, a relatively stable government, and an empire-wide legal system greatly contributed to the increase and the success of business enterprises and commercial partnerships.²⁵ Not every historian is convinced of the effectiveness of these institutions, however. The role of formal institutions was regularly complemented or replaced by informal networks of family, friendship (*amicitia*), patronage and (professional and

20 Morley (2013) with reference to Temin’s “tendency to adopt unrealistically sharp distinctions and polarities” (unpaginated). The economist reviewers, too, invariably mention these six data.

21 Erdkamp (2005), (2008).

22 As Temin himself notes, e.g. (2001) 179. See also Bang (2008); Terpstra (2008), especially 352-4.

23 Temin (1980) on instrumental behaviour, which is to be expected in market exchanges, as opposed to customary and command behaviour – see also the brief summary in Temin (2001) 171-2.

24 The reference is to Plut. *Cat. Mai.* 21. Temin (2001) 175; Temin (2006) 134; Temin (2013a) 103, 129, 188. Columella’s careful description of the vineyard business and the cost involved is another choice illustration; Colum. *RR* 3.3, 7-11, cited in Temin (2006) 143; cf Temin (2013a) 136.

25 But see Woolf (1992) for the view that it was the expansion of empire in the last centuries BC rather than the stable empire that created the largest integrated markets.

other) associations.²⁶ The social structure of society was crucial in the development and maintenance of networks, and these are likely to have been of a local, or at most regional nature. This pattern is demonstrable in trade, but also in human mobility, that is, migration patterns. Temin's chapter on financial intermediation and Roman banks and loans incidentally provides an excellent illustration of this phenomenon.²⁷

The evidence for market activity typically originated from an urban context, and the literary and juristic references sprung from the top layers of society. The peasant farmers of the Roman empire are hardly represented at all, and it remains to be seen how market-oriented they were.²⁸ Temin points out, "[a]lthough market activity was only a minority of all productive activity, it was the dominant mode of activity of 'literate Rome'".²⁹ In other words: the presumption of market activity goes a long way to explain the evidence that has come down to us, much of which is in written form. And so accepting the possibility of market exchange in Rome becomes essential to our interpretation.

Integration and market forces in the Roman empire were probably strongest among the cities of the Italian heartland, with the city of Rome in particular taking centre stage. The concept of a market economy has explanatory power for the Roman empire, if only because much of the ancient evidence comes from market transactions. That is all the more valid for Roman Italy, where there may have been more of a market economy than anywhere else in the empire because of its high degree of urbanisation and strongly integrated city-networks. Rome itself functioned as the single biggest market for food, goods, and people in the empire.³⁰ Even within the boundaries of Roman Italy, however, regional differences occurred and we have to allow for variation in the degree of market integration within and between cities, and between city and countryside.

THE ROMAN LABOUR MARKET

The labour market deals in a particularly elusive good. Labour is immaterial, unlike physical capital that can change hands. That distinctive feature is complicated by the existence of slavery in Rome: slaves and slave-labour are material and *can* change hands. The Roman labour market therefore is not only an interesting subject that deserves

26 Temin (2013a) 100; Cf Hawkins (2016); Broekaert (2012), (2011); Verboven (2012a), (2002); Terpstra (2008).

27 Temin (2013a) 157-189.

28 De Ligt (1993) argues that they were not market dependent.

29 Temin (2001) 180.

30 One economist writes: "To my mind the existence of the city of Rome with a population of close to a million pointed to the existence of a sophisticated division of labour that was inconceivable without a flourishing market economy", Koyama (2013) 270.

closer scrutiny in itself, but as a preindustrial labour market with slave labour it is also a particularly instructive case study to test labour market theories.

It is necessary to identify first and foremost what is meant by the designation 'labour market'. Temin characterizes a labour market in economic terms.

A functioning labor market couples a labor demand with a labor supply. Two conditions must be filled, at least partially: workers must be free to change their economic activity and/or their location, and they must be paid something commensurate with their labor productivity to indicate to them which kind of work to choose.³¹

This definition readily presents two guidelines for testing whether there was a labour market or not: the extent of labour mobility, and market integration for wages and labourers. An analysis of Roman labour mobility and market integration in accordance with price theory cannot present the full picture, so I suggest to opt for a socio-economic interpretation of the concept of 'labour market'. The *Dictionary of Sociology* offers some insightful additions to this principal definition and is worth quoting at length:

In a labour-market, human effort (or labour power) is made into a commodity, which is bought and sold under terms which in law are deemed to constitute a contract. The purchase and sale of formally free labour developed extensively with capitalism, but alternative paths to industrialization (...) have entailed wage employment, though not strictly a free market for labour. Economists argue that, as with other factors of production, the market for labour can be understood as a special case of the general theory of prices, with the price (wages or salaries) being determined by supply and demand. However, research on actual labour-markets has shown that, in practice, many of the basic conditions assumed by price theory are usually absent. Mobility of workers between jobs is often sluggish or non-existent; the anarchic structure of earnings differentials bears only the loosest relation to labour supply and demand; discrimination, labelling, racism, and sexism are rife. Economic explanations of labour-market processes have to be supplemented, and sometimes replaced, by sociological analysis, creating a promising field for interdisciplinary research.³²

Market imperfections will be a recurrent theme in the following investigation into the Roman labour market. Thus, distinct patterns of mobility will become apparent that may

31 Temin (2013a) 115.

32 Scott and Marshall (2009) s.v. 'labour-market'.

have facilitated or restricted labour movement. Labour market segmentation will have limited market integration. Seen in this way, the Roman case may not present us with the numbers or statistics for a strictly economic analysis, but there is plenty of qualitative evidence that can increase our understanding of the Roman urban labour market, and that adds to its value in a historical comparison.

Labour mobility

Economic theory, then, holds that a functioning labour market requires freedom of movement for labourers.³³ Freedom of movement includes geographical movement, as well as movement between employers, or between occupations. The socio-economic concept of a labour market furthermore predicts that there will be certain restrictions and governing principles to labour mobility.

Geographical mobility: labour migration

The pull of the city was strong. Despite unsanitary conditions, overall living standards were probably better in the urban centres than in the countryside of Roman Italy – even if inequality was high and a large part of the urban population lived in poverty. The hope of a better life must have been irresistible to many. Many of the rural-urban migrants in Roman Italy will have been attracted by the (expectation of) labour opportunities in towns.³⁴ That is particularly true for Rome, but the expectation of better wages is likely to have drawn labour migrants to smaller urban settlements, too.³⁵

There appears to have been no fundamental predisposition favouring local labour over migrant labour in Roman Italy.³⁶ That does not necessarily mean that migrants' chances in the labour market were equal to those of city-born Romans. Labour-induced migration is governed by different factors than trade or market integration. Human mobility of the free population is guided by social networks, institutions and services, both in the place of origin and in the place of destination.³⁷ In Roman cities, this networking is substantiated by the (professional) associations, and a close-knit system of patronage,

33 Temin (2013a) 115, “[L]abor needs to be mobile enough to bring wages for work of equal skill near equality”, or rather “approximately equal”, page 120.

34 Tacoma (2016) 172: “Much – though certainly not all – migration is related to work”; For an indication that wages were higher in the city of Rome than in the Egyptian countryside, see Temin (2013a) 254; On inequality in towns generally see Gilbert (2013) 685; cf Holleran (2011) on the city of Rome; Holleran (2016) offers an insightful account of labour migration to mining centres.

35 The analysis of Herculaneum in Garnsey and De Ligt (2016) indicates that there may have been few options left open to free labour migrants in smaller centres like Herculaneum (p. 84). Cf Holleran (2016) 98 with n. 16.

36 Tacoma (2016) chapter 6. Most of his analysis for Rome holds true for Roman Italy.

37 Lucassen (2013); Holleran (2017) 96-7.

both of which may not have been easy to access, which potentially made it difficult for migrants to resettle permanently. The necessary reputation to gain credit to set up a business, or credibility as a business-partner or employee was generally built on these very same networks. Migrant networks and family were therefore the supporting instruments of chain migration, though there is little evidence for them.³⁸

There were perhaps more opportunities for migrants seeking temporary hired labour, especially for the unskilled.³⁹ The temporary and seasonal nature of much of the available work in this category made slave labour unprofitable.⁴⁰ Instead, many of these temporary labourers will have been freeborn farmhands from the surrounding countryside. The life cycle of rural families and the seasonal cycle of agricultural work left many able workers underemployed for extensive periods of time.⁴¹ As a result, many farmhands would attempt to find some additional form of income in the city. These cyclical migrants were not just the poor; it has been reasonably argued that particularly farmers who were better off could profit most from these opportunities.⁴² Patterns of (seasonal) occupational pluralism are also attested in other historical societies.⁴³ Many of the available urban labour opportunities, however, were found in sectors that did not always match the seasonal cycle of the work of the farm: the building trade and the shipping trade are likely to have been their main employers and were also subject to a seasonal cycle of their own. The building trade could nevertheless support a number of workers for around nine months a year. It is likely that there were some vacancies left for wage workers who wanted to settle, or who already lived, in the city.⁴⁴

Humans typically move over shorter distances than goods, which implies that free labour markets were probably local, or regional at most.⁴⁵ Unfree labour, conversely, may have moved over somewhat greater distances, similar to perceived market patterns for goods. This concerns soldiers, convict labour and, above all, slaves.⁴⁶ Slaves were a much-needed addition to the urban population. In all likelihood they were purchased and moved to the city in order to fulfil labour demands for domestic service in an elite *domus*, or to work in smaller workshops: slave migrants were thus a direct result of urban

38 Tacoma (2016) 201-202, 232-240; Zuiderhoek (2013) on these allocative institutions; Holleran (2016) 96-100 on the importance of migrant networks for finding work in Rome.

39 Cf Zuiderhoek (2013) 47. Holleran (2011) is pessimistic about migrants' chances in the capital.

40 Erdkamp (2016) 37-8.

41 Erdkamp (2016), (2008), (1999).

42 Erdkamp (2016) 37-8.

43 McCann (1999) on 19th-century Nova Scotia.

44 Garnsey and De Ligt (2016) 84, 90-1.

45 For local labour markets, cf Holleran (2013) 238.

46 Woolf (2017); Convict labour: Groen-Vallinga and Tacoma (2015).

job opportunities and this will have meant significant competition for free labourers looking to find work.⁴⁷

The nature of the urban labour market also determined the character of labour-induced migration.⁴⁸ Urban labour demand in Roman Italy is likely to have been volatile. This was due to the seasonal trades, but also because of fluctuating demand for (luxury) goods.⁴⁹ High mortality in an urban environment theoretically leads to job openings.⁵⁰ But there was no lack of job applicants either. Not for every fortune-seeker a year round stable occupation could be found. Because of unstable labour demand, there must have been a large group of unskilled labourers who migrated to the city only temporarily. Such unskilled wage workers historically were mostly young males.⁵¹ The Roman city had very little to offer in terms of social security or security of employment, and the *annona* in Rome was an exceptional arrangement for which most labour migrants would not have been eligible.⁵² To cushion these insecurities, they generally maintained close bonds with their family in the countryside, and many must have returned there. To skilled workers, however, the cities of Roman Italy may have provided a more stable environment to settle permanently. Skills strengthened their position in the labour market, and they may also have benefited more from the institutional framework of voluntary associations, such as the manifold professional *collegia*.⁵³

47 Garnsey and De Ligt (2016) 82-4; De Ligt (2013) 155: "the vast majority of the cities of the Roman empire seem to have grown as a result of local or regional processes of migration and as a result of elite expenditure on urban slaves"; for elite *domus*, see chapter 4. The pattern is most clear for the capital, but there are indications that it is also realistic for other cities, see De Ligt and Garnsey (2012); This supposition holds even if some slaves were acquired mainly to add to the prestige of their owner, cf Bodel (2011) 312: "Everything a slave did, except what was done at the master's sufferance, was done for the master and thus constituted work".

48 Lucassen (2013).

49 Fluctuating demand: Hawkins (2016), (2006).

50 Garnsey and De Ligt (2016) 91.

51 Tacoma (2016) 113-23 argues that migrants to the city of Rome were mostly young males. On (the limits of) female mobility in Roman society, compare Woolf (2013), and the current research project of Lien Foubert, e.g. (2013).

52 Erdkamp (2016) 47; Brunt (1980) 94-5; Holleran (2017) 87. But compare Jongman (2007) 605 who believes that "public subsistence support was indeed one of the salient features of Roman life".

53 Compare Tacoma (2016) 202: "In practice this meant that those who had already had success at home would be the best placed to make the move, but at the same time they were exactly the persons who might have had the least incentive to do so: they would have already have settled and might have started a family"; Holleran (2016) 114; See also chapter 5.

Job-hopping

Changing employers or changing jobs in the Roman city was not particularly difficult, at least in theory. Much of the available labour was hired labour performed under limited-term contracts, varying from day labour and bespoke assignments to longer-term agreements.⁵⁴ Various passages in the *Digest* for example discuss the theoretical situation of a slave apparently rented out for the period of a year.⁵⁵ The problem, then, was not the theoretical possibility of changing jobs, but the practical implications of finding work.⁵⁶

Slavery, it seems, did not preclude freedom of movement in the labour market. There is some evidence suggesting that slaves were allowed to exploit their own labour for a wage during the times their owner had no work for them. In such instances, the slave apparently paid his owner a set remittance each day; if he earned more than he owed, the slave could thereby enhance his own assets (the *peculium*).⁵⁷ This was a mutually beneficial arrangement: the slave could earn money, and saved his owner the trouble of finding employment for him. Hiring out slaves, by their masters or by slaves themselves, was a common way of cutting costs in other slave societies: in British and antebellum America, as well as in ancient Athens.⁵⁸ The *Digest* presents a number of clear references to such practices in the Roman empire.⁵⁹ Labeo, for example, discusses liability in the case of an incompetent muleteer:

54 Groen-Vallinga and Tacoma (2017) on the predominance of hired labour and the various forms of remuneration in Diocletian's *Prices Edict*; Holleran (2016) 95–6; Treggiari (1980) 51.

55 *Dig.* 24.3.7.10 (Ulpian book 31 ad Sabinum); *Dig.* 33.7.19 (Paul)

56 Holleran (2017) for the mechanisms of finding work in the city of Rome.

57 Cf Hawkins (2006) 207–9 with reference to Colum. *RR* 1 pr. 12. Columella seems to refer to a self-hiring slave when he mentions a wage-worker's daily tribute (*quotidianum tributum* = remittance?). Hawkins also lists the valuable evidence from an account book from Roman Egypt listing such slave remittances among the household income (*P. Mich. Inv.* 1933); Incidentally, a slave could also hire out his/her under-slaves (*vicarii*) and make a profit from that (*Dig.* 14.3.11.8).

58 Hawkins (2006) 205 with references.

59 For other indications of slave self-hire in the *Digest*, see the references in Brunt (1980) 88 n. 42; Hawkins (2006) 204 ff; and for both hire and self-hire of slaves, see especially Jonkers (1933) 112 n.1; Bürge (1990) has argued at length that the term *mercennarius* refers exclusively to another man's slave, renting himself out. Möller (1993) however argues convincingly that the converse is true and that *mercennarius* refers to freeborn wage-labourers, unless the addendum *servus* (vel sim.) appears. See also the comments of Scheidel (1994) throughout pages 153–202.

Dig. 19.2.60.7

Servum meum mulionem conduxisti: neglegentia eius mulus tuus perit. si ipse se locasset, ex peculio dumtaxat et in rem versum damnum tibi praestaturum dico: si autem ipse eum locassem, non ultra me tibi praestaturum, quam dolum malum et culpam meam abesse: quod si sine definitione personae mulionem a me conduxisti et ego eum tibi dedissem, cuius neglegentia iumentum perierit, illam quoque culpam me tibi praestaturum aio, quod eum elegerem, qui eiusmodi damno te adficeret.

You hired my slave as a muleteer; your mule died because of his carelessness. If he leased himself out, I say that I will be responsible to you only up to the value of his *peculium* or the amount of my enrichment. If, however, I leased him out, I will not be responsible to you for more than the absence of my bad faith and fault. If you hired a muleteer from me without specification of the individual, and I gave you the man from whose carelessness the mule died, I think that I will be responsible to you also for that fault, because I chose the one who caused you the loss in question.⁶⁰

The text specifically discusses the possibility that the slave hired out his own labour, contrasting it with the option in which the slave was hired out by his owner.

Changing occupations was perhaps more difficult for a freeborn specialist, an artisan or craftsman. Tied to one skill-set and possibly also to work-related property, changing jobs was reserved for the next generation. In the early empire, occupation was not always inherited. On the one hand, there is ample evidence for family businesses and for sons following in their father's footsteps; such intergenerational continuity would be the obvious strategy when the family owned a workshop. On the other hand, many children had a different occupation from their father or mother. If a workshop was rented, this would have facilitated career changes.⁶¹ The family business could not always be handed down to biological children, which could be remedied by apprenticeship, adoption or even manumission. Families with more than one child (that is, more than one heir) might seek to differentiate in order to spread the risk of unemployment or underemployment.⁶²

There were no guild restrictions in Roman Italy that would have impeded a change of occupation, or location. The comparison between professional associations and

60 Dig. 19.2.60.7. Translation: Martin (2001) 112-3 n. 17.

61 Tacoma (2016) 196.

62 The hereditary nature of jobs and intergenerational dependency will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

medieval guilds has proven useful in some respects, but the Roman associations did not entertain a monopoly like the medieval guild may have done.⁶³ Affiliation with an association was not an inherited right, but was based on individual merit. Significant numbers of artisans and craftsmen did not even join the associations and operated independently or through separate networks. That situation only changed in the late third and early fourth centuries.

Despite the fact that there were no structural inhibitions to labour mobility, actual evidence of Romans switching jobs is scarce. The fact that there are few people whose careers we can trace is in line with the nature of the evidence: someone like Lucian, for example, would not be commemorated for his brief endeavour as an apprentice sculptor in his epitaph.⁶⁴ The closest thing to a 'career' perhaps is a provocative graffito from Pompeii scolding someone who held various jobs in the past, and supposedly would do anything for money now: *nunc facis si cummu(m) linx<s>e<e>ris, consummaris omnia*. "The joke would surely only work if changing occupations were possible."⁶⁵ The most obvious advancement, however, is a career within the elite household, from slavery to freedom. There is some evidence for slaves moving between jobs (or tasks?) in the *Digest* and in epigraphy; similarly, Petronius outlines the fictional career of Trimalchio in some detail – page boy, apprentice accountant, paymaster, as well as his engagements in business as a freedman.⁶⁶

Market integration and labour market segmentation

Previous studies on Roman labour have tended to pay much attention to status distinctions of labourers. This has prompted many to centre either on free independent artisans and craftsmen, or on slavery. It is my contention that the entire working population can and should be studied together. The distinction between slave and free workers was important in the notoriously hierarchical society that was Rome, and will receive due attention in the analysis. But in addition two other dichotomies seem to govern the discussion about the Roman labour market: the dichotomy between skilled and unskilled, and male and female workers.⁶⁷ Economic theory of a functioning labour market predicts full market integration. Labour segmentation theory however predicts that the

63 But see chapter 5 below for the fact that medieval guilds may not have had such a monopoly either.

64 Luc. *Somn.* 1, discussed in chapter 3 below.

65 *CIL* 4. 10150, Holleran (2017) 88 n.12. It is the only example of changing occupations she adduces.

66 For multi-tasking slaves, see chapter 4 below; Trimalchio's career is outlined in Petr. *Sat.* 29, cf the summary in Petersen (2006) 3–4.

67 See also Tacoma (2016) 170–203 for the same three basis distinctions plus a paragraph (195–9) on permanent, temporary and seasonal work; Tacoma (forthcoming) distinguishes also between dependent and independent labour; Hawkins (2013) singles out gender and legal status.

labour market was not fully integrated, but divided into corresponding 'segments' or smaller 'labour markets', that were not automatically interlinked. In other words, these dichotomies are likely to reflect real restrictions to what jobs were open to an individual.

Slave and free labour

The Roman elite likened wage employment to slavery. Cicero wrote of wage labourers that "their very wages are the warrant of their slavery".⁶⁸ The close connection between working for wages and slavery is reinforced also when Chrysippus tries to soften the position of a slave by calling him a "perpetual wage-labourer".⁶⁹ They may be among the first uses of the concept of 'wage slavery' that would become prominent in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The elite openly expressed their loathing of manual labour in general: agriculture was the only decent way to earn a livelihood.⁷⁰ Joshel sums up nicely the picture painted in the ancient sources:

Doctors kill their patients, and teachers corrupt their students (...). Businessmen always cheat, and rich auctioneers are usually crass. Men who make their living in commerce are materialistic, and they will try to use their wealth to claim precedence.⁷¹

On closer inspection, however, some occupations apparently were not deemed quite as disreputable as others. Jobs can be perfectly respectable for those "whose status they befit" (*quorum ordini conveniunt*), such as architects.⁷² Elite disdain of work focuses "on the relationship of dependency that work signified rather than on the status of who performed it".⁷³ The equation of workers and slaves perceived in ancient literature is therefore largely superficial.

68 Cic. *De Off.* 1.150: *est enim in illis ipsa merces auctoramentum servitutis*; transl. M.I. Finley (1973²) 57. Cf Treggiari (1980) 52: "most of the passages cited to prove [that the Romans equated wage-earning with slavery] seem insubstantial or ambiguous, except for Cicero's famous and rhetorical phrase". For Cic. *De Off.* 1. 150 and elite views on labour, see also the introduction.

69 *Mercennarius perpetuus*; Chrysippus in Sen. *De ben.* 3.22.1.

70 E.g. Van den Hoven (1996) 49.

71 Joshel (1992) 63–4. Similarly, Van den Hoven (1996) 49: "This train of thought in both pagan and Christian authors often resulted in not so much a dislike of trade as a dislike of traders. This is, of course, very similar to the traditional opinion of the Greeks and Romans concerning crafts: the product of the craftsman was not frowned upon, nor his skills, but the craftsman himself was".

72 Cic. *De Off.* 1. 151. Compare Or. 9

73 Bodel (2011) 317.

A more literal reading of the Roman elite view of manual labour however, has coloured historians' perception of labour in the Roman world in the past.⁷⁴

Economists sometimes express surprise that free labour should have played so small a part in the Roman world, whilst besides the slaves a *plebs* of several hundred thousand men inhabited the capital and other *plebes* not subject to the authority of any owner lived in all the large towns under both the Republic and the Empire. But all surprise is removed when one considers the institutions [i.e. the *annona*] which permitted this proletariat to live in idleness. (...) Free labour, which however never completely yielded to servile labour, lost its power of resistance in proportion to the ability of the *civis romanus* to live at the expense of the State.⁷⁵

The opinion voiced here by Louis downplays the contribution of free labour to the economy. The freeborn in the countryside – the majority of the population – were thought to have been farmers;⁷⁶ the idle poor in the city did not work, they were mollycoddled by means of bread and circuses instead – at best, they could be employed in the imperial building projects.⁷⁷ Note that in this, once again, the situation of the city of Rome is extrapolated to assumptions about the Roman empire.

The assumption that all manual labour was performed by slaves was supported by the fact that ancient evidence on slave labour and working freedmen is more abundant than that on free labour: slaves and ex-slaves predominate in the occupational inscriptions by a wide margin. It is now known, however, that this is partly the result of biases in the material. Slaves nevertheless made up a significant percentage of the urban population, perhaps over 40 per cent. The percentage may well have been lower for the city of Rome, but it would still amount to between 25 and 30 per cent.⁷⁸ Percentages of this order of magnitude clearly indicate the importance of slave labour within the urban economy. They also illustrate that the majority of the working population must have consisted of free labour.⁷⁹

74 See also Holleran (2017) 87 with references; Tacoma (2016) 176 with n.34.

75 Louis (1965) 2. Cf Sall. *Cat.* 37.7.

76 Also, e.g., Treggiari (1969a) 90: "...leaving [the free Romans] two occupations only, farming and war", although she hastens to add that "displaced and unemployed citizens were often glad to undertake ['servile' work]".

77 On the importance of the building trade, e.g. Brunt (1980). But see Holleran (2011) 171–2.

78 Cf De Ligt (2012) 190 table 4.3; De Ligt and Garnsey (2012) for Herculaneum; Joshel (1992) 46–9.

79 Holleran (2017) 87–90; Tacoma (2016) 176–8; cf Temin (2004a) 526: "...slaves were not the dominant labor force either in the city or the countryside of the early Roman empire."

In Roman society, overall welfare levels were low (see below). It was only in the city of Rome itself that the dole satisfied (or partly satisfied) a basic need for grain for a select group of the urban nonelite; even the dole, however, will have left people in need of additional income.⁸⁰ Common sense dictates that the group of free labourers in the cities must have been substantial, if only because a life of leisure in accordance with elite ideals was probably out of reach for most. The urban labour market therefore was not solely populated by slaves, although it is clear that slaves held an important share in it. The existence of a large urban slave population, combined with the hypothesis that the free urban population had to work for a living, leads to the expectation that slave and free often must have worked side by side. Slaves thus constituted not an economic, but primarily a legal category.⁸¹ If slavery is regarded as just one type of labour relation among a spectrum of possible labour relationships, the question remains: why was this quite extreme type so popular?

Slave and free were part of the same labour market, and if that labour market functioned according to economic price theory, it means they would have had to compete in price. But the relative price of slave labour is hard, if not impossible, to calculate. There is little evidence for wages from Roman antiquity to work with. Even if there were more attestations for wages, slaves do not always receive it. An attempt to account for the price of freedom (which is invaluable) from a modern perspective, as undertaken by White, may be morally sound but it is also anachronistic and cannot lead to an understanding of the economic contribution of slavery within Roman society.⁸² It is equally difficult to put a price-tag on the prestige and social capital of slave-holding in the eyes of the Romans, or their perception of the economic security of dependent labour.⁸³ Some interest in the economic value of slave labour is nevertheless reflected in slave prices: male slaves commanded higher prices than female slaves under the Roman empire. If slavery were based on traditions of honour involved in owning slaves, rather than on their economic value, we should expect prices to be similar for all slaves.⁸⁴ A definite awareness of the profitability of slave labour is also present in, for example, Columella's careful calculations of how many slaves and supervisors are needed to work a vineyard, or in Varro's advice to hire doctors, fullers or builders rather than provide expensive job-

80 Erdkamp (2016) 46–7; cf Brunt (1980) ; LeGall (1971). On the dole, see e.g. Aldrete and Mattingly (1999).

81 Bradley (1994); Temin (2004a).

82 White (2008).

83 Scheidel (2005b) and (2008); cf Hawkins (2017) 48ff.

84 Harper (2010) 234; historically, female slaves were often more expensive than males, more prestigious and more numerous.

training for slaves.⁸⁵ The antique authors never explicitly compare the cost and benefits of slave versus free labour, however.

It should be emphasized at this point that slave and free were not static categories. An individual could move from one to the other category: slaves could be granted their freedom through manumission, and free men could be enslaved through debt-bondage, penal slavery, and self-sale. Freed status was not permanent either, because the next generation would be freeborn.

One could say that slavery offered additional labour opportunities. Self-enslavement is in its very essence simply a particularly striking form of freedom of labour movement and economic strategy. Historically it is a desperate measure for individuals to turn to when there is no other option for sustenance left – “rather as when in seventeenth-century India, as Braudel records, a Persian ambassador acquired ‘innumerable slaves ... for almost nothing because of the famine’.”⁸⁶ However, it has also been argued that in Roman Italy the prospect of enslavement sometimes was in itself desirable when compared to the life of the free urban poor.⁸⁷

A remarkably open slave system and frequent manumission are commonly listed as the core characteristics of Roman slavery.⁸⁸ In some noticeably optimistic approaches to Roman slavery – undoubtedly inspired by a willingness to see the Roman Empire as the sophisticated forerunner of modern civilization – it has been argued that virtually all slaves were freed eventually, and that when they were freed they could expect full social integration in an open slave system.⁸⁹ Urban slaves in particular do seem to have stood a good chance to be manumitted once they had reached the legal age of manumission, though manumission was certainly not universal.⁹⁰ The frequency of manumission and the openness of the Roman slave system are still the subject of debate.

It is undoubtedly true that the Roman ex-slave was accepted into society to a remarkable degree.⁹¹ I would argue that this acceptance is the result of the overall integration of slaves within Roman society, and of an ex-slave’s continued bonds with his or her former

85 Colum. *RR* 1.9.4-5; Varro *RR* 1.16.4.

86 Braudel (1981) quoted by Harris (1999) 73.

87 The economic opportunities of contractual slavery are explored at length by Silver (2011); see also Ramin and Veyne (1981); Temin (2013a) 132-133; Temin (2004a) 526.

88 E.g. Kleijwegt (2006) 22. See chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of manumission practices.

89 Watson (1980) on open and closed slave systems. Quasi-universal manumission: Alföldy (1986), Weaver (1972), Harper (1972).

90 Perhaps more than 50%, see Garnsey and De Ligt (2012) and (2016); see chapter 4 below for a more elaborate discussion of manumission rates.

91 Kleijwegt (2006) 56: “In no other slave society do we observe so many freedmen reaching important political positions and accumulating capital and property in commerce and entrepreneurship as we see in ancient Rome.”

owner. Both these facts secured freedmen a place within Rome's hierarchy. Acceptance was emphatically not the result of assimilation of the freed among the freeborn. Freedmen were never wholly free from stigma. A freedman became a Roman citizen, but he did not have full citizen rights. He was barred from the senatorial, equestrian and decurial classes, and thereby excluded from a number of political offices; intermarriage with the senatorial order was restricted.⁹² More importantly, freedmen remained dependent on their patron, although the practical implications of that bond could differ.

To a certain extent, then, slave, freed, and freeborn were interchangeable. Keith Harper noted that "[i]t is an open question, and one which has not been posed often or explicitly enough, to what extent slave and free labor acted as substitutes in the Roman economy".⁹³ Although most jobs appear to have been open to all, regardless of legal status, some sectors were predominantly staffed by either slave or free and they should therefore be seen as "*imperfect economic substitutes*".⁹⁴

Skilled and unskilled labour

Occupational inscriptions testify to high job differentiation in Roman Italy; some of the recorded jobs were clearly highly skilled.⁹⁵ There were surgeons and ophthalmologists, architects and gem engravers.⁹⁶ The fine quality of many material remains from Roman antiquity also attests to the fact that there were highly skilled artisans and craftsmen in Roman Italy. No one could deny the skills of the architect of the harbour facilities at Portus or the Baths of Caracalla, or the talent of the sculptor who copied the Greek original of the Apollo of Belvedere, and the vase-maker who decorated the Warren cup. It is therefore unlikely that high job differentiation was merely the result of low levels of skill in Roman society, in a scenario where all workers merely made a tiny contribution to the manufacture of a more complex final product.⁹⁷

92 Kleijwegt (2006) 3: "In ancient Rome, enslavement automatically wiped out free birth (...). In contrast, manumission documents from Brazil contain the standard clause that the act of manumission turned the slave into a free man, 'as if free from birth.'" See also his p. 38 ff, specifically 41 on the "incomplete transition from slave to free" throughout history, and in Rome.

93 Harper (2010) 213.

94 Tacoma (2016) 183, his emphasis; idem (forthcoming); Bradley (1994) 65; Temin (2004a) 518.

95 Tacoma (2016) 184 on a spectrum of skills; idem (forthcoming).

96 *Medicus chirurgus*: CIL 6. 3986, CIL 11. 5400; *medicus ocularius*: CIL 5. 3156 and CIL 6. 33880; *architectus*: CIL 5. 3464, CIL 6. 8724 – examples for these three occupations could be multiplied. There is only one *gemmarius sculptor*: CIL 6. 9436.

97 As argued by Morel (1992). On labour differentiation, see introduction, and ch. 4.

The dichotomy between skilled and unskilled crosses the boundaries of legal status.⁹⁸ This is a point that deserves emphasis, because – like manual labour – skills are sometimes thought to have been exclusive to slaves.⁹⁹ The perseverance of that idea may once again be attributed to the overwhelming predominance of slaves and freedmen in the occupational inscriptions. Occupational inscriptions, but also other evidence like the chapter on wage in Diocletian's *Prices Edict*, chiefly attest to skilled labour.¹⁰⁰ The reasons why skilled occupations are overrepresented in the occupational inscriptions are not difficult to come up with. It may be assumed that people took pride in a job they had trained for. Moreover, it was a job that earned more money than unskilled wage-labour, so that it allowed them to set up an epitaph in stone more often than their unskilled counterparts. Even if they were commemorated in an inscription, many unskilled labourers were probably more like jacks-of-all-trades and not easily collected under the heading of a single job-title.

Most people commemorated with a job-title on their epitaph were both skilled, and of servile background – but that does not mean that all skilled labourers were of a servile background. No doubt it is true that some of the men and women who were enslaved during the expansion of the empire were clever Greeks.¹⁰¹ Moreover, investment in the education of home-born and bought slaves could certainly be a profitable undertaking and it must be assumed that many slaves were trained in the household. Conversely, the prospect of manumission might also have encouraged some slaves to pursue an education.¹⁰² It will be argued in the remainder of this thesis that skills were also accessible to the free population. Job-training was available to slave and free alike, and to both men and (if not as regularly) women. Investment in human capital was not exclusive to slaves

98 Temin (2004a) 538: “The fundamental economic division in the early Roman empire (...) was between educated and uneducated – skilled and unskilled – not between slave and free”.

99 E.g. Casson (1978) 45; and see chapter 4.

100 Cf Groen-Vallinga and Tacoma (2017).

101 Cf Garnsey (1980) 44 and chapter 4 below. Tacoma (2016) 201 on (exceptional) trades that were “associated with foreignness”: (Eastern) astrologers and (Greek) doctors. Of course, origin can be faked to create the same effect. I wonder if the owl-statue at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden belongs in that category, with a Greek inscription signposting the seer Achatas Petrios's business in Rome.

102 Or to pursue it with more enthusiasm, insofar as they had choice in the matter; Temin (2013a) 131. “The observation that educated people became slaves reverses the causation noted earlier in this chapter that open systems of slavery with manumission promoted education. The earlier statement was that manumission led to education; the previous paragraph asserts that educated slaves led to manumission. Which is correct?” Temin argues that both were caused by the conquest of the Mediterranean.

and slave-owners. Slaves and ex-slaves just had better reasons to record their skills in stone – or less to substitute it with on their epitaphs, in terms of family ties.¹⁰³

Skilled labour paid at least twice as much as unskilled work, which could theoretically indicate that it was in relatively short supply.¹⁰⁴ Investment in education was relatively costly, and despite the skill premium it was not an investment that everyone could afford to make. A low life expectancy (and thus a shorter time-span to cash in on the investment), and competition for employment between slave and free workers made job-training less alluring for the freeborn. The evidence for investment in human capital by the freeborn, however, is better than that for slave education. Moreover, intergenerational dependence predicts that skilled labourers will often have been able to provide similar training for their children. It also indicates that unskilled workers very likely could not do the same for their offspring. In sum, job-training presumably was not as common or self-evident as it is in the Western world today – but that does not mean that skilled labour was necessarily scarce.¹⁰⁵ Scarcity depends on labour demand as well.

Roman society must have had a significantly higher demand for the muscle power of unskilled labourers than for the work of specialists. Combined with the limited scope for job-training just outlined, a large group of unskilled labourers must therefore be postulated. Despite the difficulties of quantification, scholars agree that especially in the capital employers had at their disposal a virtually limitless pool of unskilled workers.¹⁰⁶ The market for unskilled labour in the city may have been more casual, temporary and seasonal in nature than that for skilled labour, since labour demands were relatively unstable. The building trade and the transport sector should be highlighted in this context. This demand for unskilled labour power was probably met not only by urban residents, but must have been supplemented by temporary, cyclical labour migrants (see above).

Male and female labour

Gender distinctions are present within the other categories, slave and free, skilled and unskilled. In virtually every type of jobs men are more prominent and more often attested than women. For many families, however, the additional income of women must have been an economic necessity.

Scholarly discourse on Roman labour implicitly or explicitly focuses on male labour, for which the sources are much better. The current work is no exception. Thus, whereas 'gender' indicates the balance between male and female, the fact that everything else

103 Joshel (1992).

104 Hawkins (2017) 44-8.

105 See chapter 3 for investment in human capital of the freeborn, chapter 4 for investment in human capital of slaves.

106 Holleran (2017) 102-3.

is mostly based on sources about men's work turns this section about male and female labour into one that is really mostly about women's work. Roman women are often researched with a focus on their familial role, defining the women by the men in their lives – just as the Romans seem to have done.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, when looking at female labour in the context of the Roman family, it is often assumed that when women were economically active, they did not have a money-earning occupation, but helped out their husbands in the family business.¹⁰⁸ This is noteworthy, because working women in Rome are actually not that uncommon in the sources and they have certainly not lacked scholarly attention. Much of the evidence is therefore well-known, but there is a tendency to explain away evidence for independent and skilled women in favour of these generalizations.¹⁰⁹

Women's contribution to the family income, like that of children, is difficult to measure. In many historical as well as contemporary societies, women's primary involvement with family economics has been with domestic housekeeping and childcare, which is generally unremunerated. Because of that, "[t]he woman at home was said to be economically nonfunctional".¹¹⁰ Though historical analyses of past economies and labour have long since started to take the economic value of domestic work into consideration, women's engagement with the labour market, particularly in a pre-industrial context, is still often underexposed. This section reveals that the focus on men is only partly justified and that when speaking of Roman labourers, this really does include many women.

Roman society was governed by men, and male dominance pervaded the organization of labour and the economy as well. Referring to such social systems as 'patriarchy' often carries a pejorative connotation, but it also facilitates comparison, which has proven to be useful.¹¹¹ Patriarchy is not unique to Rome. In other historical societies, patriarchy did not so much ban women from the labour market, but it has kept women confined to inferior, often unskilled jobs, with lower wages and fewer opportunities in what is called a secondary, or dual labour market – calling to mind the glass ceiling that is still regularly

107 E.g. Dixon (1988) *The Roman mother*; Hallett (1984) *Fathers and daughters in Roman society* – both titles are telling.

108 E.g. Saller (2007) 105-7; Saller (2003) 194; Kampen (1981) 112-13, 125; Treggiari (1979a) 73, 76 and (1976).

109 Groen-Vallinga (2013) with references; Holleran (2013). Malaspina (2003); Dixon (2001a) and the important methodological chapter on working women in (2001c) 113-134; Eichenauer (1988); Günther (1987) for freedwomen; Kampen (1981); LeGall (1970); worth mentioning here is especially the work of Treggiari (1976)(1979a)(1979b) which already poses many fundamental questions.

110 Tilly and Scott (1978) 5.

111 Groen-Vallinga (2013) 297-8; Honeyman and Goodman (1991) on patriarchy in general.

discussed as a serious issue today.¹¹² Such an engendered dual labour market limited women's opportunities of employment, and it was firmly in place in Roman society.¹¹³ In the words of Richard Saller:

A gendered division of labor makes Rome no different from nearly every other human society, but it is worth reflecting on the consequences of the particular configuration of gendered labor in Rome's slave society.¹¹⁴

A gendered labour market is a result, as well as a reflection, of gender ideals: the Roman elite endorsed the ideal that a woman should not need to work. This ideal image became widespread among the rest of the population and, as a result, women's work is not usually recorded in the ancient evidence.¹¹⁵ Because of a widespread gender bias and the resulting low wages, as well as the expectation of a relatively early marriage which shortened their time in the labour market and limited returns on investment in their human capital, it is likely that girls had fewer opportunities for job-training than boys.¹¹⁶ Their economic prospects therefore were limited, discouraging investment in female human capital even more. One of the implications is likely to have been that women actually participated in the labour market to a lesser extent than men. Women had a biological comparative advantage in the home, men had a comparative advantage in the labour market because they generally commanded higher wages.¹¹⁷ Regardless of their weak position in the labour market, it should be emphasized that many women will still have had to contribute to the family income to make ends meet. But when a woman was trained in an occupation, her profession was not the first thing she was remembered for in an epitaph.¹¹⁸

Women were therefore not only less actively involved in the labour market than men, but working women are also likely to be underrepresented, which goes a long way to explain the scarcity of the evidence from ancient Rome. The material we do have,

112 See e.g. Ridgeway (2011) 92-126, "Gendering at work". The glass ceiling is a phenomenon of an engendered, but not of a dual labour market.

113 Groen-Vallinga (2013); see also Gardner (1995) and Dixon (1984) for women's position in Roman law.

114 Saller (2003) 201.

115 Groen-Vallinga (2013) 295-9.

116 Women's wages are seldom attested, and when they are gender differentiations are not clear; on wages for women in Diocletian's *Prices Edict*, Groen-Vallinga and Tacoma (2017) 113; on investment in human capital of women, see chapter 3 below.

117 Cf Cigno (1991) 28.

118 Larsson Lovén (2016); Groen-Vallinga (2013) 295-9; Hemelrijk (2004) on the *laudatio Turiae*; Larsson Lovén (1998).

however, shows that women were operating in a remarkably broad range of jobs. There is no reason why they should not be: there was no law against women in commerce, production and business, and their income presumably presented a welcome addition to the family budget.¹¹⁹

LABOUR SUPPLY AND DEMAND

According to economic price theory, “[a] functioning labor market couples a labor demand with a labor supply”.¹²⁰ This section therefore takes a closer look at labour demand and labour supply in Roman Italy. The expectation here, too, is that there will have been socio-cultural constraints to reaching an equilibrium between supply and demand.

Urbanisation rates in Roman Italy were high. That fact prompts a number of suppositions about supply and demand within the urban labour market: it suggests that there were plenty of workers available in what would be considered a thick urban labour market. If so, the ample availability of labour would then reduce the value of labour, implying low wages. Low wages lead to an increase in labour supply, because people will have sought to increase their income by looking for more work. However, a large urban population also means that there was a larger pool of consumers: people have to eat and so a large population raises product demand. But was the increase in product demand enough to increase labour demand, and to increase it sufficiently to satisfy everyone’s need to find an income? Was it idle hope to find a new life, a better income in the city?

Living standards and the working population

Aggregate labour supply in economic theory is determined by the numbers of the working population, multiplied by the hours worked and the intensity of effort in those hours, taking into consideration such factors as demographics and human capital. Obviously, no such sophisticated cliometric analysis is possible for ancient Rome. But there is a lot to be said about the numbers and the structure of the total urban population of Roman Italy, which is the maximum potential work force. It will be argued that most of the population lived at or under subsistence level, and that therefore the potential working population at least roughly approximates the actual work force: everyone who could do so, had to work for a living.

119 Larsson Lovén (2016); Groen-Vallinga (2013), and on the family as a whole see chapter 3 below.

120 Temin (2013a) 115.

Temin contends that “ordinary Romans lived well”.¹²¹ The amount of scholarship trying to make sense of the scarce data on Roman living standards already indicates that the argument is not easy to substantiate, however. In recent years, students of the Roman economy presented various efforts to calculate Roman gross domestic product (GDP) for the early Empire, mostly in the context of analysis of Roman economic growth but also in connection with investigations into Roman living standards.¹²² There is no way to identify *per capita* GDP accurately for the Roman empire. Some findings are suggestive for our current investigation, however. Comparative evidence suggests that regional differences in the distribution of GDP occur; in the case of the Roman empire it is likely that wealth was concentrated in Roman Italy, raising GDP there. As a rule, GDP and urbanization rates are linked, and indeed the high urbanization rate of Roman Italy matches the suggested higher GDP in the Italian heartland.¹²³

The proposition that Roman Italy had a higher GDP than the rest of the empire does not necessarily mean that the inhabitants of Roman Italy were well-off, nor that they were any better off than those in the provinces. Temin’s assumption that Roman Italy can best be compared to the blossoming economy of the Netherlands in 1600, rather than the less wealthy ‘early modern European economy’ proposed as comparandum by others, does not prove the hypothesis that “ordinary Romans lived well”. Calculations of *per capita* or aggregate GDP effectively mask income inequality; and the distribution of income may have been more unequal in Roman Italy than elsewhere, because wealth tended to concentrate in the hands of a small group of people.¹²⁴

Real wages are perhaps a better indication of living standards than *per capita* GDP. The most comprehensive dataset of prices and wages to calculate real wages is the list contained in Diocletian’s *Prices Edict*. The conclusions drawn on the basis of the wage of an unskilled worker in the *Edict* are consistent: real wages were low in comparison with other historical societies.¹²⁵ The more abundant wage data from Roman Egypt lead to the same inference.¹²⁶ It was postulated here that a large part of the urban

121 Temin (2013a) 2 and chapter 11; cf Temin (2006) 133, “Many inhabitants of ancient Rome lived well”; cf Jongman (2007).

122 Temin (2013a); Lo Cascio and Malanima (2009); Scheidel and Friesen (2009); Bang (2008); Maddison (2007); Temin (2006); Goldsmith (1984); Hopkins (1980).

123 Temin (2013a) 253, 256; whereas the correlation is clear, Temin notes that the causality is unclear – is it wealth that leads to urbanization, or does that work the other way around?

124 Temin (2013a) 256–7. Cf De Ligt (2012) 19, with reference to Van Bavel (2008) and Maat (2005) for income inequality in the Dutch Republic of the Golden Age; Groen-Vallinga and Tacoma (2017) 118–22 note that Diocletian’s *Prices Edict* points to high income variation.

125 Allen (2009) and Duncan-Jones (1978); Scheidel (2014) for a less clear-cut negative answer; See also Groen-Vallinga and Tacoma (2017) 118 with further references.

126 Scheidel (2010a) 433; cf Drexhage (1991) chapter 9.

population consisted of these unskilled labourers who had to get by on a very low wage. Most ancient historians therefore infer that “the majority of the Romans were not very well off”.¹²⁷ The effects of low real wages may theoretically be cushioned by the regular participation of all family members, not just the male head of household.¹²⁸ This phenomenon also suggests that the labour supply was high. But in fact labour supply may have been so high that it could not always be satisfied, in which case large groups of people were underemployed, or unemployed at any one time.¹²⁹ This presumption supports the argument that the large majority of the Italian population may still have been living at or under subsistence levels.¹³⁰ Somewhat paradoxically, a city like Rome was the best place to live in structural poverty, because it offered the largest variety of casual and informal ways to survive.¹³¹

Price theory suggests that low real wages indicate an abundant supply of labour. This is supported by the evidence: the urban population in the Italian peninsula was substantial in any calculation. There were quite simply very many people in Roman Italy, no matter whether we choose to adhere to the so-called ‘low count’ – six or seven million people – or the ‘high count’ – fifteen or sixteen million – of the Italian population. Recent estimates suggest that perhaps twenty-five per cent of the numerous Italians lived in cities.¹³² Warfare and other unnatural population checks did not interfere greatly with the population of Italy in the period under scrutiny. It is clear that there was no shortage of labour in the urban labour market, at least in terms of population numbers.¹³³

The value of these people’s human capital – the intensity of work – was also dependent on health: in line with what was said before about the material well-being of the urban population, Jongman wrote that “[m]any inhabitants of the Roman empire only eked

127 Groen-Vallinga and Tacoma (2017) 118. But see Jongman (2007) for a rather more optimistic view on the standard of living under the early empire, and Rathbone (2006) who holds that Roman Egypt in the early empire was relatively prosperous overall.

128 Groen-Vallinga and Tacoma (2017) 119–20; Groen-Vallinga (2013) on female labour participation; Scheidel (2010a) 433–5, 454.

129 Holleran (2011) 165: “Cities in developing countries typically demonstrate high levels of unemployment, underemployment and poverty”.

130 Gilbert (2013) on rising inequality in cities throughout history; Temin (2013a) 250 on the subjectivity of the term ‘subsistence’; Holleran (2011) for the concept of chronic poverty in Rome; Scheidel and Friesen (2009) for income distributions and the percentage at or under subsistence levels; on poverty in the Roman world see also Harris (2011) 27–54, ‘Poverty and destitution in the Roman empire’; Scheidel (2006); Garnsey (1988).

131 Holleran (2011) 177–8.

132 De Ligt (2012) 231–3, 238–46.

133 Cf Holleran (2017) 103 notes that there is no mention of labour shortages in Rome; See also Suet. *Vesp.* 18, where Vespasian refuses a labour-saving device with the argument that he needs to feed his people – suggesting that there were many in need of work.

out a meager living, their skeletons grim testimonies to malnutrition and disease.”¹³⁴ By contrast, slaves may have been fed relatively well, since caring for slaves was equivalent to preserving property. Bioarchaeology as well as less direct approaches to analyse the physical well-being of the ancient Romans form an expanding and promising new area of research.¹³⁵ This developing research into skeletal evidence and the physique of the ancient Romans does not yet allow for firm conclusions on topics like malnutrition or stature.

Some more general patterns may still be sketched out, however. In the unhealthy environment of a preindustrial city endemic diseases were omnipresent and will have decreased the efficiency and ability of people to work.¹³⁶ The urban population was also more likely to be susceptible to epidemic disease.¹³⁷ If an epidemic led to a sudden drop in population numbers, the labour supply dwindled and that would have led to higher labour participation of women and children; it will also have raised wages, at least in a functioning labour market. Too little is known about epidemics in the ancient world to determine their effects with any certainty. It is only the great Antonine Plague of the later second century AD for which scholars have attempted to find some tentative answers about its economic effects: population losses of perhaps as much as 20-30 per cent seem to have doubled the price of labour in Roman Egypt.¹³⁸

Economic insecurity and fluctuating demands

Labour demand is a derived demand, based on demand for services and products. It was noted several times in passing in this chapter that urban labour demand is likely to

134 Jongman (2007) 594; that said, note that Jongman argues that the majority of Romans in the early empire were actually relatively well-off, and that increasing inequality and poverty was a thing of late Antiquity.

135 The contributions of both Jongman ('Consumption') and Sallares ('Ecology') to the *Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman world* (2007) illustrate its incorporation in studies of the ancient economy; see also the edited volume by King (2005); Bisel and Bisel (2002); Tacoma (2017) for its use in migration studies.

136 Oerlemans and Tacoma (2014) for imperial Rome; Gowland and Garnsey (2010) on the correlation between urbanization and disease; Eventually the problem 'solved' itself: Parkin (2003) 235, "When a person's failing state of physical and mental health led to total inability to be self-supporting, then, in the absence of effective medication (...), dependence on others may have been short-lived anyway".

137 Duncan-Jones (1996) 109–11; Sallares (2002) on endemic malaria; Scheidel (2003) for Rome; Laurence (2005) for Herculaneum and Pompeii.

138 Temin (2013a) 118, 84-85; Rathbone (2009) 305; Scheidel (2012e) and (2002) to be read with the critical comments of Bagnall (2002); cf Duncan-Jones (1996).

have been particularly unstable in the cities of Roman Italy.¹³⁹ In part this was due to the seasonality of the building and transport sectors, where many unskilled city-dwellers and temporary migrants should be located. The influx of cyclical labour migrants in turn added to the general consumer demand in the cities. Conversely, there is a possibility that some of the unskilled urban population moved away from the city in summer to assist on farms during the harvesting season.¹⁴⁰ Though seasonality and instability certainly apply, the trough in demand during the off-season was perhaps not as severe as we might expect. The building sector could continue for most of nine months a year; the shipping trade, with due acknowledgement of the dangers involved, may have been not as strictly limited to the sailing season (traditionally April to October) as has generally been thought.¹⁴¹ The sailing season of course also influenced mobility in general, and tourism and migration may have spiked in the safer period. The seasons or, more accurately, the weather obviously affected many trades more generally.

Equally cyclical were religious festivals and other festivities on the calendar, that presented a major incentive in demand, be it for the required ritual clothing or through the habit of exchanging gifts; merely the crowd of people will have increased consumption and attracted merchants.¹⁴² Especially in the city of Rome, celebrations such as triumphal processions, and the mere presence of the emperor will have attracted many people. The elections of the magistrates in January apparently drew many to the city; Augustus implemented a summer low-period for the Senate and a recess for the courts which had the opposite effect:¹⁴³ outside of the political high season, many nobles moved to the countryside to survive the (literally) murderous summer heat.

These seasonal and cyclical peaks and troughs in demand required a certain flexibility of the workers, but at least they were to a certain extent predictable. Throughout the year, workshops produced on commission, however, which was largely unpredictable. Many of the luxury trades catered specifically to the needs of the elite – much of the

139 Much of what follows rests on this basic idea from Hawkins (2016) chapter 1, who derives this model from a comparison with medieval and early modern cities. Briefer, Hawkins (2013) 339-46.

140 So Hawkins (2013) 341; but see Erdkamp (2016): it is probable that the rural population had enough manpower for the harvest without the help of urban residents. A short holiday on a farm in the north of the Netherlands taught me that even today farmers work together and simply rotated the machinery and manpower for grass silage within the one week that this had to be brought in.

141 The building trade: Erdkamp (2016) 39 with reference to the work of DeLaine (1997), ca 220 days a year. On the sailing season, Hawkins (2013) writes it was May-September, but see now Gambash (2017) and especially Beresford (2012).

142 De Ligt (1993) 60 for markets during the *ludi* in Rome.

143 Plin. *Ep.* 2.11.10 (the crowd in January); Suet. *Aug.* 32 (recess of the courts in Nov-Dec), 35 (only the presence of a minimum of senators, which ones was determined by lot, was required in Sept-Oct).

money that went round in the city simply was spent by the elite.¹⁴⁴ Larger (building) projects could present entrepreneurs with a sudden peak in labour demand.¹⁴⁵ For day labourers, insecurity was a daily fact of life: even if they had regular employment with one employer, his sudden leave of absence could mean a day without work – and without pay: Apuleius' has a poor carpenter return home unsuccessfully from work, stating that "although our shopkeeper, wrapped up in a public matter, has made this a holiday for us, still I have raked in our daily bread" – in this case, by selling an unused *dolium*.¹⁴⁶ The implications are twofold: firstly, he expected to leave for work like every other day but was unexpectedly sent away, and secondly, he did not get paid.

The city was the place where supply and demand for labour could meet.¹⁴⁷ The congregation of people looking for workers, or work, in itself was also a powerful generator of consumer demand, increasing the pull of the city even more. Fluctuating demand increased the insecurities of the urban economy, prompting various economic strategies that would increase flexibility for labourers and employers alike.

CONCLUSION

Labour in the Roman empire clearly was subject to market forces and it is therefore possible to speak of a Roman urban labour market. This chapter illustrated that market integration was far from perfect, however. The Roman market economy is likely to have been local or regional in many instances. Moreover, the importance of social structures that determined and restricted the integration of a market for labour should be emphasised. In the chapters that follow it will be argued that family ties and non-familial networks were the chief determinant of an individual's labour opportunities in the market. Again, these socio-economic networks will generally have been of a local, or at most regional nature. The section on labour migration showed a similar dependence on institutions: there was movement, but there were certainly restrictions as to who moved, and what options were open in the receiving labour market.

Labour mobility is likely to have accounted for a large part of migration streams in Roman Italy. Migrants moved to the city in the hope of finding additional income or better wages. Rural-urban migration flows kept the urban population intact, even if many

144 On the correlation between urbanization and elite expenditure, see chapter 4.

145 Erdkamp (2016) 48, "the labour demand of the urban economy fluctuated, in part following a pattern of predictable and regular, seasonal cycles, in part as a result of less predictable and less short-term trends that were primarily caused by imperial spending".

146 Apul. Met. 9.5-6: *licet forensi negotio officinator noster attentus ferias nobis fecerit, tamen hodiernae cenulae nostrae propexi*.

147 Holleran (2017) on the ways in which employer and employee may have found each other.

labour migrants were only temporary guests. The urban infrastructure was probably more conducive to permanent settlement of skilled labourers than to that of unskilled wage workers, but the city had an appeal to both groups. The possibility of movement between jobs was enough to allow for some flexibility in the light of labour demands, which holds true for slave workers as well. Changing or finding jobs was easier in theory than in practice, however.

Opportunities on the labour market were governed by legal status, skills, and gender. Perhaps contrary to expectations, it was not the split between slave and free that stands out as the most important limiting factor. Most occupations appear to have been open to slaves, freedmen and the freeborn alike. It is only in domestic service that a strong preference for slave labour comes to the fore, closely connected to the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption. Because women historically often find work in this sector and the Roman society was familiar with a similar gender ideal, this is likely to have impacted most on free women's chances to find work.

Skills were highly valued in Roman society, and here, too, there is little to indicate that chances were better for slave or free – both seem to have had access to job-training. The one group that is less well represented again, is that of freeborn women. There were certainly women who were trained as artisans, or who gained other skills, and they should not be explained away – still it is safe to say that gender was the most distinctive criterion that determined one's potential in the labour market.

Labour was undoubtedly the most widely available production factor in Antiquity. Labour supply often was greater than labour demand in Roman Italy, leaving large parts of the free urban population under- or unemployed for regular periods of time. The urban population was large. The cities of Roman Italy were the home of the freeborn, freed and slaves, and of men, women and children. The individuals that made up the urban population were not equal, in the sense of perfectly interchangeable. For example, it is likely that elite *domus* simply employed slaves to fulfil vacancies in their household, effectively closing off part of the service sector for the freeborn. In very many instances, however, the labour demand was met by both slave and free labourers. That should not be surprising, considering the fact that the majority of the working population effectively consisted of free labourers. Some of the labourers possessed a particular skill set, others were unskilled wage labourers. It was postulated that skilled labour may have been relatively scarce, and very valuable because of it. The labour supply for unskilled wage work, in particular, is likely to have been abundant.

Since the supply of labour was at times more profuse than labour demand, wages tended to be low. Roman Italy may have demonstrated a relatively high *per capita* GDP, but income inequality was also high, particularly in the Italian heartland; comparative evidence suggests that inequality was most pronounced in an urban context. The evidence indicates that the majority of the urban population in Roman society did indeed

work for low wages and that their living standards were low. Quite possibly many of them were living in chronic poverty. The emperor and the urban elite needed to provide more than bread and circuses to keep the people happy: work, in the form of large building projects for example, was vital.

Strong labour segmentation within an urban labour market that was characterized by fluctuating demand and high labour participation, a large proletariat of unskilled labourers that is poorly reflected in the epigraphic evidence and a small group of highly skilled workers that is well represented, are the backbone for the rest of this thesis.

