

INTRODUCTION

The study of the economy of Roman Epirus offers a vital perspective on the mechanisms of regional economic adaptation within the Roman Empire. Traditionally perceived as a peripheral and rural area, Epirus has often been portrayed in literary sources as economically marginal, particularly following the devastation inflicted by the Romans in 167 BC. However, recent archaeological investigations have significantly challenged this narrative, revealing a region that not only recovered but also underwent profound economic transformation. The natural environment of Epirus, with its mountainous terrain, fertile valleys, and access to maritime routes, provided the foundation for a mixed economy based on pastoralism, agriculture, and, later, integration into broader Roman markets. Roman administrative reforms, systematic land division, and the establishment of *villae rusticae* reshaped the landscape, facilitating the rise of large-scale agricultural estates and a more intensive exploitation of natural resources. Systematic and rescue excavations at both urban and rural sites, together with extensive regional surveys, have supplied crucial evidence that complements the often fragmentary ancient literary testimonies and allows for a much richer and more coherent synthesis of archaeological and textual sources. Material culture, architectural remains, and land-use patterns now enable a deeper understanding of Epirus' integration into the economic structures of the Roman world.

In light of these new perspectives, Charikleia Papageorgiadou, Sophia Zoumbaki, Lina Mendoni, and Vyron Antoniadis conceived the idea of organising the international workshop *Discussing Economy in Roman Epirus*, held at the Section of Greek and Roman Antiquity, Institute of Historical Research of the National Hellenic Research Foundation. This initiative subsequently developed into a three-part series devoted to the history, archaeology, and economy of the region. These workshops reaffirmed the need for a collective publication that would bring together the latest archaeological discoveries and historical analyses. The present volume, which emerged from these workshops and subsequent meetings, aims to deepen our understanding of the transformations wrought by Roman presence in the Epirote lands.

Epirus was renowned for its tribal organisation, a feature that has long contributed to the perception of the region as peripheral, if not “barbarous”, relative to the Greek world. This tribal social structure shaped the habitation patterns of Epirus. According to ancient authors, the Epirotes dwelt in unfortified villages *kata komas* (THUC. 3.94.4; SCYL. 28–32; STRAB. 7.7.5), although urban centres also existed. From the reign of Pyrrhus onwards, fortified settlements increasingly acted as nuclei around which smaller rural agglomerations and isolated farmsteads clustered. The phenomenon of living *kata komas* is not unique to Epirus; it appears in several regions of Greece and is generally associated with societies whose economy remained strongly tied to pastoralism. This dispersed settlement pattern, linked to seasonal livestock movements, reflects an adaptive strategy shaped by the region’s mountainous environment.

In this framework, the first group of contributions by Panagiotis N. Doukellis, Frank Daubner, Adolfo J. Domínguez, Sophia Zoumbaki, and Charikleia Papageorgiadou examines the economic and social antecedents of Roman Epirus and the region’s gradual entanglement with Italian political and commercial interests. Focusing on the period from the late 3rd to the early 1st c. BC, Doukellis stresses the chronic presence of warfare and insecurity as a structuring factor and explores the coexistence of *komai*, fortified sites, and urban centres within a heterogeneous Epirote landscape. By rereading literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence, he highlights the mixed agro-pastoral economies of these communities, the role of royal power and *ethne* in managing land, surplus, and mobility, and the ways in which the Romans responded to this complex pre-Roman configuration by initiating and imposing new rules for the organisation of rural structures and the management of agricultural production.

The tribal and rural character of Epirus is further explored in this volume by Daubner, who traces the emergence of Bouthrotos (modern Butrint) as the political and economic centre of the *koinon* of the Prasaibians, a new independent state under Roman protectorate in the period between the Third Macedonian War and the foundation of the Roman colony. Daubner offers an important inversion of traditional urban models, arguing that “the Prasaibian territory is not the *chora* of Butrint, but Butrint is the *polis* of the Prasaibian territory”. His analysis emphasizes a deep-rooted territorial organisation based on pre-existing tribal units and sanctuaries rather than newly founded urban centres. Sanctuaries such as that on Dobër Hill in the Pavlla Valley played a critical role in structuring regional economies and identities. Positioned along vital communication routes linking

major centres, these sanctuaries not only served religious purposes but also acted as hubs for seasonal markets and exchanges among rural populations. In fact, we think that the Epirote model finds strong parallels in central and southern Italy, where various “Italic tribes” organised themselves into non-urban societies centred around sanctuaries and seasonal pastoral movements. In both cases, mountainous terrain dictated patterns of habitation and land use, fostering economies based on mixed agriculture and livestock breeding, a pattern already noted by Aristotle in his references to the famous cattle herds of Epirus (*Hist. an.* 3.21).

The Roman conquest of Epirus, culminating in the aftermath of the Battle of Pydna in 168 BC, inflicted enormous demographic and economic disruption on the region. Livy (45.34) reports that the Romans expelled urban populations from their cities, but it is equally likely that rural populations suffered severe consequences, particularly through mass enslavement. Epirote slaves, valued for their expertise in herding and livestock management, became a sought-after commodity across the Mediterranean. Whether these individuals were transported to Italy or retained in Epirus to manage Roman estates, their integration into Roman economic systems is clear. Despite this disruption, the so-called deserted lands of Epirus were ideally positioned for exploitation, given their proximity to Italy. By the 2nd c. BC, conditions were ripe for the expansion of large-scale pastoralism, including abundant underexploited land, rising demand for pastoral products, and a politically unified territory. Organised farmsteads and large agricultural estates fostered the development of cultivated fields and the integration of animal husbandry into broader regional economies. Archaeological evidence, notably from sites like Agios Donatos, attests to the introduction of Roman land management principles during this period. Such transformations were not isolated to Epirus but mirrored developments elsewhere in the Roman world, particularly in Italy.

From the 2nd c. BC onwards, Roman authorities declared large areas of conquered territory *agri publici*, subjected them to *centuriatio* (land survey and division), and often leased them to Roman citizens or allied elites. Agricultural treatises by Cato the Elder and later Varro articulate a Roman ideal of a self-sufficient, market-oriented, large-scale rural economy, shaped by earlier Greek traditions but adapted to Roman political and social realities. In Italy, this regime led, by the 3rd c. BC, to a concentration of landownership among a wealthy elite and the marginalisation of small farmers. Epirus’ economic evolution in the Late Hellenistic period closely paralleled trends in central and southern Italy,

where aristocratic estates dominated rural production. Yet large-scale agricultural exploitation was not foreign to local traditions. As Domínguez shows in his contribution, from the late 4th and especially the 3rd c. BC a cluster of fortified farmsteads and related agricultural installations developed in southern Chaonia, with further parallels in Molossia and Thesprotia. Despite periodic disruption by warfare, many of these sites remained in use or were transformed into villa-type complexes in the Roman period. Domínguez's reassessment of the Mesopotamos building (the so-called Nekyomanteion of Acheron) in particular suggests that it was a monumental fortified farmstead controlling an extensive estate and probably linked to royal or aristocratic landholding, underlining the central role of large properties in the Epirote rural economy.

Despite the political and demographic upheavals of conquest, commercial activities in Epirus did not cease. On the contrary, the early phases of Roman expansion fostered new patterns of trade and economic integration across the region. Older centres such as Ambracia continued to play vital roles within the emerging Adriatic–Ionian economic corridor. Zoumbaki's contribution examines Rome's early economic policy in western Greece during the 3rd and 2nd c. BC, with particular focus on the case of Ambracia. Zoumbaki's analysis highlights that Roman influence in Epirus was not simply the result of military victory but the culmination of a gradual commercial entanglement that predated the post-war settlement of 167 BC. Through boundary arbitrations, selective economic exemptions, and the protection of Italian merchant interests, Rome embedded western Greece into its expanding imperial network. The Roman conquest of Epirus should thus be seen not as a sudden rupture but as the acceleration of existing processes of commercial integration. Complementing this picture, Papageorgiadou reassesses coin use and monetary circulation in western Greece from the 3rd to the 1st c. BC. Focusing on the Ionian Islands, Acarnania, and Epirus, she shows that the shores of western Greece were already well frequented by Italian and Roman merchants from the 3rd c. BC onwards, a situation reinforced by Roman political and fiscal measures. Numismatic evidence, including isolated finds and hoards, documents regular but numerically limited inflows of Western coinage and the early appearance of Republican denarii, while highlighting the continued predominance of local and federal Greek issues and a pragmatic coexistence of Greek and Roman currencies rather than a straightforward monetary "Romanisation".

By the 1st c. BC, the most fertile lands of Epirus had passed into the hands of wealthy local and Italian landowners. Varro's references to the *Synepirotae*, the

Epirotici pecuariae athletae, or “the cattle-raising champions of Epirus”, testify to the continued importance of large-scale pastoralism and the specialised skills that Epirote herders contributed to Mediterranean markets. In addition to cattle, the regions of Epirus, Aetolia, and Acarnania became renowned for horse breeding, a highly profitable enterprise tied to elite demand across the Roman world. Titus Pomponius Atticus, a close associate of Cicero and a prominent landowner in Epirus, exemplifies the emergence of a wealthy absentee class whose fortunes were rooted in agricultural and pastoral exploitation. His estate, famously known as the “*Amaltheium*”, symbolises the integration of Epirote landscapes into Roman elite economic strategies focused on market production and long-distance trade.

The major institutional reorganisation of Epirus came with the Roman colonisation projects initiated under Julius Caesar and completed by Augustus. The foundation of Roman colonies at Butrint and Photike marked important steps in this transformation, culminating in the establishment of Nicopolis following Augustus’ victory at Actium in 31 BC. The creation of Nicopolis introduced a distinctive model of Roman urbanisation in western Greece. Unlike many Roman colonies where surrounding lands were directly distributed among settlers, Nicopolis centralised political and economic resources, creating a dominant urban hub without fragmenting the landscape into smallholdings. This specific arrangement profoundly altered the structure of rural life, concentrating economic and administrative activities around the new city.

Unlike other regions of the Roman Empire where early imperial expansion often stimulated the growth of rural settlements and agricultural intensification, Epirus followed a different trajectory. The foundation of Nicopolis led to the concentration of production and resources, resulting in fewer but larger rural estates strategically organised to meet the demands of the urban centre and the wider Adriatic market.

Older coastal settlements, previously autonomous trading cities, were revitalised under the evolving Roman system, becoming integrated nodes within a broader network of supply and distribution. The reorganisation of the countryside facilitated the spread of *villae rusticae* and large agricultural domains, reinforcing the connection between rural production and urban consumption. In this wider interregional context, a second group of studies by Athanasios D. Rizakis, Vassiliki Lamprou, Kassiani Lazari, Antonia Tzortzatou, Ioulia K. Katsadima, Ypatia Faklari, Guillermo Pascual Berlanga, Georgia Pliakou, Vassiliki Giannaki, Anastasia Giovanopoulou, Leonidas Leontaris, and Ioulia Stamou explores the

reorganisation of the countryside under Roman rule. Focusing on the uneven and regionally differentiated spread of *villae rusticae*, Rizakis shows how patterns of land accumulation under Roman rule reshaped rural landscapes, deepened social polarisation between urban elites and rural populations, and introduced a new organisation of the production and distribution of rural goods. Drawing comparisons with Italy and the western provinces, he emphasises that the villa economy in Greece remained strongly conditioned by earlier settlement and landholding structures, so that traditional small farms and *komai* continued to coexist alongside elite estates, producing a complex and regionally varied rural environment.

In the area of Thesprotia, the study by Lamprou, Lazari, and Tzortzatou on farmsteads and *villae rusticae* offers a detailed picture of rural investment and land exploitation in Roman Epirus. By tracing the distribution of these establishments along the coastal plain of Igoumenitsa, the valleys of the Kalamas and its tributaries, and the plain of Paramythia, they show that many farmsteads and villas founded in the Late Hellenistic period, spanning the years before and after the Roman conquest, continued in use, with modifications, into the 3rd and 4th c. AD. These rural complexes combined facilities for the exploitation and processing of agricultural and pastoral produce with elements of urban luxury, as evidenced by decorative mosaics, wall-paintings, bath installations, mausolea, and carefully planned monumental layouts.

This gradual economic integration is illustrated in the case study analysed by Katsadima, Faklari, and Pascual Berlanga on the long-lived agricultural residence at Sellades, near the Ambracian Gulf. Occupied from the second half of the 4th c. BC to the 4th c. AD, the site demonstrates a significant shift from ceramic production and mixed functions to agricultural exploitation, notably viticulture, during Roman rule. Its strategic location near Ambracia and later Nicopolis and along the main route on the eastern shore of the gulf enabled integration into broader trade and production networks. The material remains underscore the progressive embedding of regional economies into the Nicopolis-centred network of imperial structures, highlighting adaptation rather than rupture.

While coastal regions flourished, the Molossian hinterland also remained economically active. Pliakou's research on sites such as the Late Hellenistic farmstead at Episkopi and the fortified settlement of Megalo Gardiki reveals how inland settlements combined agricultural production, storage, and trading functions linked to the ports of Ambracia and Actium. Around Ioannina, the appearance and reorganisation of larger residential complexes from the Augustan period onwards,

including villa-type establishments at the margins of the plain, signals continued investment in rural economies. Contrary to earlier assumptions of widespread abandonment, Pliakou shows that many farmsteads and settlements survived, were reorganised, and remained integrated into wider regional exchange networks. Further evidence from Kranoula, also in Molossia, refines this picture of inland rural investment. Giannaki, Giovanopoulou, Leontaris, and Stamou have studied a Roman *villa rustica* of the porticus type, founded in the late 2nd c. AD, which commanded the fertile plain of Lapsista from a strategic hillside position on Mount Mitsikeli. Designed around a central portico and equipped with an elaborate private bath complex, it demonstrates how Roman architectural models were adapted to local conditions. Although only the residential core survives, the complex is interpreted as the nucleus of a larger agricultural estate and as part of the wider network of Roman rural establishments that structured the Molossian countryside and controlled movement along the communication routes of the Ioannina basin.

In the longer term, the foundation of Nicopolis not only transformed the coastal and urban economy of Epirus but also stimulated profound changes in the inland regions. A third set of contributions by Vyron Antoniadis, Thalia Kyrkou, George A. Zachos, Milena Melfi, and Dimitris N. Sakkas examines how these new urban centres and their institutional frameworks reshaped the surrounding countryside and articulated local communities within wider imperial structures. In this context, Antoniadis reconstructs the positioning of the Nicopolitan rural estates within a structured agrarian landscape and a system of routes and access. Combining archaeological evidence for villa-type installations with GIS-based analysis of terrain, hydrology, and Least Cost Path analysis, his study shows that estates around Nicopolis were not scattered opportunistically but sited on stable benches and open slopes, at measured distances from reliable water and along efficient corridors of access to the city. The analysis distinguishes a centuriated garden-focused near field from larger surplus-oriented estates beyond the grid, especially those specialising in olives and vines, and argues that Nicopolis functioned as the nodal hub of a deliberately organised countryside in which terrain, water, and movement were systematically exploited for production and exchange.

Extending this perspective on the articulation of city and countryside, Kyrkou's contribution turns to mosaics as a privileged medium for reading both urban and rural elite life. By analysing pavements in the *domus* of Nicopolis and in *villae rusticae* and agrarian residences in its hinterland and in Thesprotia,

she explores how mosaics served as indicators of wealth, social status, agrarian investment, and the Romanisation of elite rural life. Kyrkou argues that the distribution and chronology of mosaics are closely linked to the development of a network of villa estates that controlled agricultural production and channelled surplus towards nearby urban centres. Mosaics thus provide not only artistic insights but also valuable evidence for the material conditions, cultural choices, and evolving economic realities of Epirote landowners.

The foundation of Nicopolis profoundly altered the urban dynamics of neighbouring regions, above all Aetolia and also Akarnania. As Zachos notes, the decline of Aetolia was a long-term process that began in the early 2nd c. BC and continued until the Augustan era. Many Late Hellenistic urban centres lost population and status, some being abandoned while others were effectively downgraded to small settlements or *komai* in the literary tradition, even as new rural sites and roadside farmsteads appeared in their territories. Paradoxically, this urban contraction allowed rural economies to reconfigure and, in some areas, to strengthen in the Roman period. Smaller settlements located on plains, lake-shores, and in valleys survived or were newly founded, capitalising on natural resources and proximity to the new communication networks radiating from Nicopolis and Patras. This pattern of rural resilience and reorganisation underscores the complex effects of Roman colonisation and Augustan settlement policy: large-scale political transformations did not obliterate earlier systems of habitation and exploitation but stimulated their evolution within a new imperial framework.

More broadly, from the late 1st and throughout the 2nd c. AD, an increasingly elaborate and diversified rural landscape emerged, reflecting wider social and economic shifts across the empire. Administrative reforms under Trajan and later emperors, together with major infrastructural projects such as the *Via Publica*, further contributed to regional development. Although difficult to quantify precisely, these investments likely stimulated agricultural intensification and the diversification of rural activities. During the Hadrianic period, renewed investments in landownership by Roman and local elites reinforced these trends, bringing Roman architectural models and elite lifestyles deeply into the rural landscapes of Epirus.

The foundation and development of Hadrianopolis in the Drino Valley represents a particularly significant case study: as Melfi explores in her contribution, Hadrianopolis embodies Hadrian's wider policy of founding or refounding cities at key strategic and economic nodes in the Greek East, especially in regions

traditionally regarded as peripheral, in order to reorganise territories and their revenues within a new provincial framework. Strategically located on the main route through the Drino valley linking the harbours of the Adriatic coast with central Greece, the site developed from a Caesarian and Augustan *vicus* attached to the colonial territory of Butrint into a carefully planned urban centre provided with an orthogonal grid, theatre, baths, and related infrastructure under Hadrian.

The urban development of Roman Epirus is further illuminated by the contribution of Sakkas, who reassesses one of its key public inscriptions, *SEG* 24, 423 and its associated fragments. By combining the surviving stone with archival records from early twentieth-century excavations, he reconstructs two partly preserved documents concerning public works and clarifies the role of the city council in organising and supervising construction. The restoration and new dating correct an earlier attribution to the late 3rd c. and instead place the texts in the middle imperial period, with important implications for the chronology of Nicopolis' building programme and for the mechanisms of civic administration and expenditure.

Despite the widespread destruction caused by Visigothic incursions in the late 4th and early 5th c. AD, the basic structures of Epirote rural life, grounded in mixed agro-pastoral production and in the coexistence of large estates and smaller farms, proved remarkably durable. While many urban centres experienced a sharp decline, rural communities adapted to new conditions without abandoning their traditional agro-pastoral strategies. As Stephanus of Byzantium notes, by the 6th c. AD Epirus retained a predominantly rural character, albeit one shaped by centuries of integration into Roman economic and administrative frameworks. From the 4th c. onwards, broader transformations across the Balkans and the Mediterranean world, including the consolidation of large estates (*latifundia*), the emergence of new local markets, and technological innovations in agriculture, continued to influence the Epirote countryside. Yet essential patterns of mixed farming, seasonal transhumance, and localised production networks persisted, suggesting a notable degree of adaptability within rural society.

This volume aspires to illuminate the processes of economic, social, and spatial transformation across Roman Epirus. Through the combined testimony of historical sources and archaeological evidence, the contributions assembled here challenge traditional narratives of decline and marginality. Instead, they highlight the diversity and innovative capacities that characterised Epirus across centuries of Roman rule. They offer a richer understanding of how imperial strategies were

received, adapted, and transformed within a complex regional context, providing new perspectives on the broader mechanisms of economic integration in the Roman world. Future research promises to shed further light on the lives of the rural majority in Epirus. Intensive surveys and micro-analyses of small rural sites could provide critical new data on landholding structures, agricultural practices, and rural consumption habits, offering a more grounded view of the countryside beyond the narratives of elite estates.

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