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THE ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF ANATOLIA IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE: TRADE, AGRICULTURE, AND URBAN CENTERS

Abstract: This paper investigates the profound economic significance of Anatolia within the Roman Empire, focusing on the interconnected dynamics of trade, agriculture, and urban centers. Covering the period from the Roman integration process, beginning in the 2nd century BCE, through Late Antiquity, this study argues that Anatolia was not merely a passive periphery but a vital economic engine, contributing significantly to the Empire's stability and prosperity. Employing an interdisciplinary methodology that synthesizes archaeological evidence (including survey data, excavation reports, archaeometry), epigraphic records, numismatic findings, and ancient textual sources, the paper analyzes Anatolia's strategic geographical position as a commercial nexus, its diverse and abundant agricultural production, catering to both regional and imperial needs (including the *annona* and military supply), and its highly urbanized landscape, facilitating complex patterns of manufacturing production, finance, and consumption. The analysis highlights regional variations, drawing on analytical frameworks for Roman Eastern economic structures, the crucial role of infrastructure (roads, ports), the integration mechanisms (taxation, coinage, Roman law) within the broader context of Roman provincial economic systems (Ionescu 2013), and the interplay between imperial policies and local initiatives (e.g., *euergetism*, *collegia*). Specific studies on the Roman economy in Anatolia are integrated to provide detailed insights. Comparative perspectives, drawing methodological insights from studies on other provinces like Dacia, particularly concerning monetary circulation (e.g., Găzdac 2010), are also considered. The paper concludes that Anatolia's rich natural resources, sophisticated urban networks, and extensive trade connections rendered it an indispensable economic powerhouse within the Roman world, demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptability even through periods of crisis.

Keywords: *Roman Economic Structures, Roman Anatolia, Monetary Circulation, Roman Urbanism, Comparative Provincial Studies.*

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INTRODUCTION

During the Roman Empire, the economy of Anatolia constituted more than just a regional economic system; it formed an organic part of a vast imperial market. In the process that began with the bequest of the Kingdom of Pergamon to Rome in 133 BCE and entered a new phase with the division of the Empire in 395 CE, the Anatolian economy experienced significant transformations while managing to retain many structural continuities. The analysis of this complex economic mosaic is of critical importance not only for understanding the functioning of the eastern provinces of the Roman

Empire but also for shedding light on theoretical discussions concerning ancient economies.

Academic debates on ancient economies have deepened and diversified over the last century, running parallel to the paradigmatic shifts in social sciences and historical thought. The primitivist perspective, initiated with Karl Polanyi's concept of the "embedded economy" and shaped by Moses I. Finley's "ancient economy" approach, dominated academic discourse for many years. This approach argues that ancient economies, unlike the logic of the modern market, were "embedded" in social, cultural, and political structures, and economic decisions were based on status, prestige, and traditional values rather than on rational-maximization principles in the modern sense. In contrast, the "modernist" perspective of M. Rostovtzeff and his followers sees the existence of a developed market economy in the Roman Empire, certain forms of commercial capitalism, and signs of economic rationality.

Archaeological research in the last three decades, particularly advances in underwater archaeology, ceramic analysis, archaeobotany, zooarchaeology, and numismatics, is feeding this theoretical discussion with new data. Peter Bang's "imperial market" approach and the commercial diaspora model, developed from a comparative historical perspective, offer a more nuanced understanding of the Roman economy by comparing it with other pre-modern empires such as the Ottoman and Mughal Empires. At the same time, the structural-demographic approach presented by the Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World project provides new tools for analyzing the Roman Empire's economy at a macro level.

The aim of this study is to examine the economic structure of Anatolia under Roman rule with a multi-dimensional approach, in light of current archaeological findings and theoretical discussions. Anatolia was one of the wealthiest and most urbanized provinces of the Roman Empire. Across a wide spectrum ranging from agricultural production to urbanization, from maritime trade to the organization of land routes, from craftsmanship to the monetary economy, Anatolia was an integral part of the Roman economic system. The examination of this economic structure will not only reveal a regional economic history but will also contribute to developing a more holistic understanding of the general functioning of the Roman Empire's economy.

The methodological framework we will use in our study is based on an interdisciplinary approach. Archaeological findings (excavation reports, architectural structures, production facilities, amphora analyses), epigraphic documents (inscriptions, monuments, building inscriptions), ancient texts (Strabo, Pliny, Cassius Dio), numismatic evidence (coin emissions, hoards, circulation patterns), and papyrological records will be evaluated simultaneously. Innovative methods such as modern archaeometry techniques, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analyses, and digital modeling will also be utilized.

During our examinations, a geographical, chronological, and sectoral distinction will be observed. The coastal strip of Western Anatolia, the agricultural basins of Central Anatolia, the trade ports of the Southern coast, and the resource areas of the Black Sea region will be discussed

separately. Chronologically, the initial periods of Roman rule (133 BCE – 14 CE), the Early Imperial period (14–193 CE), and the Late Imperial period (193–395 CE) will be examined in subsections. Our sectoral analyses will cover agriculture, trade, craft production, mining, fishing, and service sectors.

The findings and analyses we will present will not remain merely a historical evaluation but will also offer a theoretical framework for understanding the relationships between economic systems and cultural, social, and political structures. This study aims to comprehensively present Anatolia's economic role within the Roman Empire and the impacts of this role at both the imperial and local levels.

1. INTEGRATION INTO THE ROMAN ECONOMIC SYSTEM AND THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF ANATOLIA

The economic success of the Roman Empire was based on efficient integration mechanisms between the core and its peripheral provinces. Within this system, taxation, monetary unity, the legal framework, and advanced logistic networks played a key role. Anatolia integrated into this system through both its strategic geographical position and its rich resources, thereby becoming a vital region for the imperial economy.

1.1. Geographical Position and Strategic Value

The fact that Anatolia served as a natural bridge between Asia and Europe and was bordered by three seas (the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea) bestowed upon it particular strategic and economic importance. This geographical position facilitated commercial connections with both the eastern provinces (Syria, Mesopotamia) and the western (Greece, Italy) and northern (Black Sea basin) regions. East-West terrestrial and maritime trade routes (for example, the western extensions of the Silk Road) traversed Anatolia, and regional ports (Ephesus, Smyrna, Miletus, Side, Sinope, Trapezus) constituted key nodes of Mediterranean and Pontic commerce². This strategic position made Anatolia not only a center for the flow of goods but also a space for cultural and technological interactions. Its proximity to the eastern frontier of the empire (with the Parthian/Sasanian Empire) conferred upon it military importance, but also placed it in a key intermediary position in the trade of luxury goods (silk, spices) from the East³.

1.2. The Process of Integration and Administrative Organization

Anatolia's entry under Roman rule began with the inheritance of the Kingdom of Pergamon in 133 BCE, a process followed by the Mithridatic Wars and the Roman civil wars, which destabilized the region. However, with the establishment of the Principate under Augustus (27 BCE – 14 CE), Anatolia was administratively reorganized and firmly integrated into the imperial system⁴. Augustus and his succes-

¹ SCHEIDEL/MORRIS/SALLER 2007.

² MITCHELL 1993; FRENCH 1980, 698–729.

³ SARTRE 1991, 275–310.

⁴ MITCHELL 1993; MAREK 2010.

sors divided the region into provinces such as Asia, Bithynia et Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Lycia et Pamphylia, and Cilicia. The existing Hellenistic urban structure was largely preserved, but the Roman fiscal system (*tributum soli*, *tributum capitis*, *portoria*), the legal system, and Roman administrative practices were integrated into the region⁵. The activities of tax farmers (*publicani*), although initially having a negative impact, were gradually replaced by the direct collection of taxes by imperial officials or local urban administrations, creating a more stable economic environment.

Table 1. Main Types of Roman Taxes Applied in Anatolia⁶.

Tax Type	Latin Name	Rate/ Amount	Collection Frequency	Application in Anatolia
Land Tax	<i>Tributum solisoli</i>	1 – 10% of value/product	Annually	Controlled by provincial governor
Head Tax	<i>Capitatio cap.</i>	Fixed amount	Annually	Variable depending on the city
Customs Duty	<i>Portorium</i>	2 – 5% of value	Per transaction	In port cities and provincial borders
Sales Tax	<i>Centesima</i>	1% of value	Per transaction	In local markets
Inheritance Tax	<i>Vicesima</i>	5% of inheritance	After inheritance	Only for Roman citizens

1.3. Natural Resources and Imperial Needs

Anatolia was a rich reservoir of natural resources for the Roman Empire:

Mineral Resources: Mines of silver (Balya-Karesi), copper (Ergani), iron (Hisarcık), and marble (Dokimeion, Afyon) in Anatolia held strategic importance for the Roman economy. Marble from Dokimeion, for example, was used in luxury constructions in Rome, indicating the imperial scale importance of these resources.

Agricultural Wealth: Fertile areas such as the central Anatolian plateau, the Meander Valley, and the plain of Cilicia excelled in the production of cereals, olive oil, and wine. Archaeobotanical studies indicate an increase in the diversity of agricultural production in Anatolia during the Roman period.

Forest Products: The rich forests, especially in the Taurus Mountains and on the Black Sea coast, were a critical source of timber for the Roman fleet and the construction sector. Timber exports from the ports of Sinope and Heraclea Pontica are documented epigraphically.

This geographical and climatic diversity allowed Anatolia to contribute multidimensionally to the Roman economic system, distinguishing itself not only as a supplier of raw materials but also as a center of production and trade.

⁵ KAYA 2005.

⁶ MITCHELL 1993.

2. AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION: THE ECONOMIC BASE OF ANATOLIA

Agricultural production constituted the backbone of Anatolia's economic power. The region's varied geographical and climatic conditions allowed for the cultivation of a wide range of products. This production not only met local needs but also provided important export items to other regions of the Roman Empire, contributing significantly to the provisioning of Rome and the army (*annona*).⁷

2.1. Regional Diversity and Production Models

The different geographical regions of Anatolia were distinguished by distinct agricultural specializations:

Western Anatolia (Aegean Region): The basins of the Meander and Gediz rivers specialized in olive and grape production. Olive oil presses and wine facilities discovered near Ephesus demonstrate the advanced technologies used in processing these products. Olive oil and wine amphorae found in the ports of Ephesus and Miletus attest to the region's export capacity.

The Central Anatolian Plateau: The regions of Galatia and Lycaonia, in particular, were known for extensive grain production (wheat, barley). According to Strabo's accounts, the grain produced in this region was the main source of food for the Roman garrisons on the eastern front. Large agricultural complexes (*villae rusticae*) near Ancyra (Ankara) provide an idea of the scale of this production.

The Plain of Cilicia: This fertile region, besides grain production, specialized in special crops such as cotton, flax, and citrus fruits. Textile workshops discovered in the region provide archaeological evidence regarding the techniques used in processing flax and cotton.

The Black Sea Region: The humid climate allowed for the cultivation of forest products such as hazelnuts, chestnuts, and timber. Remains of hazelnut shells and timber products exported from the ports of Sinope and Amisus document the region's economic specialization.

2.2. Production Organization and Technology

Agricultural production in Anatolia was organized in different types of farms:

Large Estates (Latifundia and Villae Rusticae): Particularly in Central Anatolia and in fertile valleys, there were large agricultural properties belonging to Roman elites or local aristocrats. These often utilized the labor of slaves or tenant farmers (*coloni*) to produce for the market. Archaeological excavations (for example, around Sagalassos) reveal the complex structure of these villas and their production facilities (presses, storage areas).

Small Farmers and the Rural Economy: Throughout Anatolia, free farmers who worked their own land or rented small plots also held an important place. Rural settlements (*komai*) were units integrated into the urban economies, producing for local markets.

Agricultural Technologies: The Roman period witnessed significant advances in agricultural technology. The use of advanced plows, water mills (especially in Late Antiquity),

⁷ MITCHELL 1993, 243–255.

terracing techniques, and most importantly, irrigation systems (canals, aqueducts) increased agricultural productivity⁸. Aqueducts in Aspendos and Patara suggest that water was also used for agricultural purposes.

3. TRADE NETWORKS AND URBANIZATION DYNAMICS: ENGINES OF INTEGRATION

The economic importance of Anatolia within the Roman economy was not solely due to its productive potential, but also to the advanced trade networks that transported this production to the imperial market and the vibrant urban centers situated at the heart of these networks. Cities were dynamic centers where production, trade, and consumption were organized.

3.1. Transport Infrastructure: Arteries of Trade

The Roman administration built an efficient transport infrastructure in Anatolia for both military and economic purposes.

Roads: The Empire improved existing roads and constructed new strategic routes. Military and commercial roads, such as the Via Sebaste (connecting Antioch in Pisidia to the southern ports), built during the time of Augustus, connected inland regions to the coast⁹. Milestones (miliaria), placed at regular intervals, indicated distances, while rest and supply stations (mansiones) ensured the safe travel of people and goods.

Maritime Routes and Ports: Maritime trade was the most efficient method of transport, especially for bulky goods (cereals, olive oil, wine, marble). Major port cities such as Ephesus, Smyrna, Miletus, Side, Attaleia, Sinope, and Trapezus were equipped with breakwaters, lighthouses, warehouses (horrea), and customs buildings¹⁰. Underwater excavations of shipwrecks (for example, the Uluburun Late Bronze Age wreck, though not from the Roman period, demonstrates the maritime potential of the region; Roman-era wrecks also exist) provide valuable information about the goods transported (wine, oil, etc., in amphorae) and the trade routes¹¹.

3.2. Commercial Goods and Exchange Networks

Anatolia was both an exporter of its own products and a transit center for goods coming from the East.

Exports: The main export items were agricultural products (cereals, wine, olive oil), textile products (wool from Laodicea, fabrics from Miletus), pottery (Sagalassos Red Slip Ware, Eastern Sigillata), glass products, marble (architectural elements, sculptures), metals, and timber¹².

Imports: Fine pottery from Italy (Arretine), glass products, metal goods were imported; papyrus, cereals, exotic goods from Egypt; silk, spices, precious stones from Syria and the Orient.

Organization of Trade: Trade was organized by both

individual merchants and professional associations called collegia (shipowners, merchants). These associations protected the rights of their members, regulated trade, and sometimes collaborated with the state (for example, in transport for the annona)¹³. Customs duties (portorium), an important source of income for the empire, were levied in ports or at provincial borders (usually 2.5%, quadragesima Asiae).

Table 2. Common Amphora Types and Their Association with Anatolian Products¹⁴.

Amphora Type	Production Region	Content	Dating Range	Distribution Area
Dressel 24	Cilicia	Olive Oil	1st / 3rd Cent. CE	East Mediterranean
Kapitän II	Aegean	Wine	2nd / 4th Cent. CE	Entire Mediterranean
Rhodian	Rhodes/Cnidus	Wine	1st Cent. BCE / 2nd Cent. CE	Widespread
Ephesus 56	Ionia	Wine/Fish	1st / 2nd Cent. CE	Western Anatolia
Sinope	Black Sea	Garum/Wine	1st - 3rd Cent. CE	Black Sea/Aegean

3.3. Urbanization and the Urban Economy

Anatolia was one of the most urbanized regions of the Roman Empire, being the center of economic activity. The physical layout of Anatolian cities during the Roman period was organized to support economic activities:

Agora/Forum Complexes were the main venues for commodity exchange. The trade agoras in Ephesus and Miletus stand out due to their specialized functions. These areas featured porticos (columned galleries) that allowed merchants to display their goods.

Macellum, or food markets, were enclosed spaces where daily consumption items were sold. The macellum structures in Sagalassos and Perge illustrate the functional organization of such markets.

Horrea (warehouses) were large structures specifically built for the storage of commercial goods, particularly in port cities. The warehouse units discovered in the Slope Houses excavations in Ephesus shed light on the logistical infrastructure of urban trade.

Basilicas were the locations for legal proceedings and the resolution of commercial disputes. Some merchants also conducted business in these spaces.

Archaeological data indicates that the shops (tabernae) in city centers were generally built to standard sizes, and specialized production areas began to emerge. For example, glass workshops in Ephesus and textile workshops in Hierapolis were concentrated in specific neighborhoods.

Cities served as markets (agora, macellum) for products from the rural hinterland (territorium), centers of craft production (workshops, ergasteria), places where

⁸ WILSON 2002, 92, 1–32.

⁹ MITCHELL 1993.

¹⁰ SCHERRER *et alii* 2000; BLACKMAN 1982.

¹¹ GIANFROTTA/POMEY 1981.

¹² MATTINGLY/SALMON 2001.

¹³ MEIGGS 1973.

¹⁴ BEZECZKY 2013.

financial transactions took place (banking activities, currency exchange), and nodes of regional and international trade.

During the Roman period, cities had administrative and economic control over the surrounding rural areas (*territorium/khóra*):

Villae Rusticae (country villas), mostly owned by the urban elite, were units where agricultural production was organized. Surface surveys conducted in the regions of Lycia and Pamphylia have documented the spread of these structures.

Kome, the term used for villages, were economically dependent on the urban centers. Inscriptions from the Phrygia region mention the representatives (*komearkhai*) sent by the villages to the city councils.

Border disputes could lead to economic tensions between cities. Boundary inscriptions between Aphrodisias and its neighboring cities illustrate the struggles over control of agricultural land.

The urban economy was based on the processing and commercialization of agricultural products obtained from the surrounding rural areas. This relationship is clearly reflected in the concepts of “metropolis” (the main city) and “khóra” (the hinterland) mentioned in inscriptions.

Urban Infrastructure and Euergetism. The economic vitality of cities was supported by investments in infrastructure: aqueducts, sewage systems, roads, public buildings. A significant part of these investments was financed through euergetism, the system by which local elites made donations to gain prestige¹⁵. This not only enriched the physical appearance of the cities but also stimulated the local economy (for example, the construction sector). The Library of Celsus in Ephesus, the monumental fountain in Side, the Aspendos ancient theatre located in Serik (in the region of ancient Pamphylia or the Sebasteion in Aphrodisias) are magnificent examples of these investments.

Urban Specialization and Economic Networks. Some cities specialized in certain economic fields: Aphrodisias in marble sculpture, Laodicea in textiles, Sagalassos in pottery¹⁶. This specialization stimulated complex economic networks between cities and regions. Inscriptions found in these cities, belonging to guilds (*collegia*), document the institutional structures of this specialization.

3.4. Monetary Economy and Finance

The standardized monetary system of the Roman Empire facilitated economic integration in Anatolia: One of the most important instruments of economic integration in the Roman Empire was the standardized monetary system implemented across the imperial territory. Anatolia held a central position within this system, particularly in the eastern provinces.

Coinage Centers and Local Mints: In Roman Anatolia, coin production was carried out both by imperial mints under central authority and by municipal mints operating in individual cities¹⁷.

Imperial Mints: Cities such as Nicomedia (modern İzmit), Cyzicus (modern Erdek), and later Constantinople served as imperial minting centers, producing standardized coins including the aureus (gold), denarius (silver), and follis (bronze).

Municipal Mints: Prominent cities such as Ephesus, Pergamon, Smyrna, Laodicea, and Antioch had the privilege of minting their own coins. These local mints typically issued bronze coinage to meet regional economic needs.

Coin Circulation and Economic Integration: Coin circulation provides crucial insights into the economic interactions among various regions of Anatolia.

Regional Circulation Zones: Coin finds indicate that specific coins circulated along particular trade routes and networks. For instance, coins minted in Cilicia were primarily used in trade with the eastern provinces and Syria.

Imperial vs. Local Coinage: Imperial coinage—particularly the denarius and aureus—was predominantly used in long-distance trade, major transactions, and tax payments. In contrast, local civic coins were more common in everyday commerce and within regional economies.

Coin Hoards and Economic Crises: Coin hoards discovered in Anatolia were typically buried during periods of economic or political instability. The composition of these hoards such as the emperors represented among the coins can shed light on the specific periods during which economic conditions deteriorated.

Banking Activities. Private bankers (*argentarii*, *numularii*) and temples (especially the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus) offered financial services such as currency exchange, accepting deposits, and granting credits¹⁸. These institutions played an important role in financing trade and capital accumulation.

4. CONTINUITY, CHANGE, AND CRISES

Roman rule transformed the Anatolian economy but also preserved many structures inherited from the Hellenistic period. Economic crises and political changes occurring over time tested the adaptability of the regional economy.

4.1. The Hellenistic Legacy and Roman Transformation

Rome largely adopted the existing Hellenistic urban structure, administrative systems, and economic institutions in Anatolia. However, the environment of peace imposed by Rome (*Pax Romana*), the advanced road network, the standardized monetary system, legal security, and full integration into the imperial market significantly increased the scale and intensity of economic activities. The presence of military garrisons and the *annona* system also shaped the economic structure.

4.2. Transformations in Late Antiquity

The crisis of the 3rd century CE (political instability, inflation, epidemics, frontier threats) also shook the Anatolian economy. However, the reforms of Diocletian and

¹⁵ VEYNE 1990.

¹⁶ RATTÉ/SMITH 2008; WAELEKENS 2006.

¹⁷ HOWGEGO 1995; METCALF 2012.

¹⁸ ANDREAU 2010.

Constantine (monetary reform, fiscal reform, administrative reorganization) brought about a partial recovery. The establishment of Constantinople as the new capital (330 CE) shifted the economic center of gravity towards the Marmara region and created new demand for the western and northern regions of Anatolia. With the rise of Christianity, churches and monasteries emerged as new economic actors, the pilgrimage economy developed, and the tradition of euergetism was transformed into Christian charity. During this period, the tendency towards regionalization observed throughout the empire also manifested in Anatolia, with local markets and production networks gaining increased importance.

CONCLUSION

During the Roman Empire, Anatolia was an indispensable component and one of the engines of the imperial economy. Its strategic geographical position transformed it into a natural commercial bridge between East and West, while its rich natural resources and diversified agricultural production played a vital role in meeting the civil and military needs of the empire. From olive oil and wine to cereals and timber, from marble to metals, a wide range of products made Anatolia a major center of production and export.

The region's high rate of urbanization, combined with Roman investments in infrastructure (roads, ports, water systems) and the contributions of local elites through euergetism, allowed for the development of vibrant trade networks and sophisticated urban economies. From metropolitan ports like Ephesus to specialized production centers like Aphrodisias, Anatolian cities provided dynamic platforms for craft production, financial services, and regional/international trade. Professional organizations like collegia and a developed monetary economy formed the institutional framework that supported this economic vitality.

Integrating the Hellenistic legacy with pragmatic Roman policies, Anatolia successfully integrated into the imperial system while preserving its distinct regional economic identities. Even in difficult periods, such as the crisis of the 3rd century, it demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation and resilience, adjusting to the transformations of Late Antiquity. In conclusion, the economic importance of Anatolia resided not only in its resources but also in the complex social, institutional, and infrastructural networks that processed, transported, and commercialized these resources. Through these characteristics, Anatolia made a fundamental contribution to the economic power and longevity of the Roman Empire.

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