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***Agri Deserti* and Field Management Techniques in the late Roman Empire**

It has long been recognized that legislation concerning *agri deserti* in the late Roman Empire is not an indication of a massive decline in agricultural productivity and the abandonment of land by a rural population in inexorable decline. Rather, the texts preserved in the Theodosian and Justinianic Codes were primarily aimed at ensuring that the taxes assessed on such land continued to be paid—that is, *agri deserti* were a fiscal, rather than an agricultural problem. Current scholarship is of the opinion that this problem had its origins in annual variation in the productivity of marginal land, and the inflexibility of Diocletian's new tax system.

In this paper, I explore further this disjunction between the fiscal legislation and agricultural practices in the late Roman period. Drawing upon the *Opus Agriculturae* of the fifth-century agronomist Palladius, I stress the wide variety of field rotation and fallowing patterns customarily practiced throughout the Roman Empire, and argue that the sudden prominence of *agri deserti* in the legislation reveals a fundamental inability on the part of the late Roman state to come to terms with these long-established techniques. I conclude by suggesting that a more fruitful approach to the legal evidence may be to explore its potential for elucidating field rotation practices in different regions of the Mediterranean world.

The agricultural treatise of Palladius reveals that there was enormous room for choice in crop rotation strategies, in response to specific environments (*Op. Ag.* 3.1; 10.1). His advice on the opening up of new or formerly cultivated fields suggests that in some regions lands could lie uncultivated for long periods (*Op. Ag.* 10.10). This allowed for their periodic regeneration as part of flexible field-management systems.

Superimposed upon this multiplicity of field management techniques was the new, standardized tax system of *capitatio-iugatio*. The heavy emphasis upon ascribing responsibility for a defined portion of land to a named individual or individuals allowed for little flexibility in agricultural practices, and took no account of regular patterns of field rotation. This disjunction should not be interpreted as providing the sole explanation for legislation concerning *agri deserti*. Nevertheless, that evidence, together with Palladius's testimony, can provide important information as to the extent and sophistication of field management techniques in the Mediterranean world.