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The interdependence of demographic and economic development in the Greco-Roman world

As a result of the conceptual isolation of ancient economic history from modern economic theory (and arguably also because of Moses Finley's lack of interest in population history), studies of ancient economies do not normally take proper account of demographic factors. By contrast, economic historians specializing in more recent periods have long acknowledged the pivotal importance of population for economic development. In this paper, I shall introduce a formal parametric model of the causal relationship between economic and demographic variables in pre-modern systems. This model provides a template for the assessment of otherwise decontextualized data samples from the ancient world, and allows us to reconstruct and explain the occurrence or absence of significant historical change. In particular, I will seek to demonstrate that a combination of theoretical approaches (from the theory of homeostatic population regulation to the theory of the low-equilibrium trap) is essential for our understanding of the potential for economic growth in ancient societies. This approach provides an alternative to the culturalist perspective advocated by Finley and perpetuated by his followers as well as his critics, and helps to re-integrate the study of ancient economies into the mainstream of economic history.