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Why fiscal estates matter: some concluding thoughts on the economic importance of public goods

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L'articolo offre alcuni spunti di riflessione sugli articoli contenuti nella raccolta sui beni fiscali in Italia (con un contributo sulla media Mosa). Enuclea cinque specifici aspetti che meritano di essere dibattuti: 1) una più o meno restrittiva definizione del concetto di fisco; 2) l'importanza strategica del controllo delle risorse (come fonti energetiche e minerali) all'interno di queste proprietà fiscali; 3) il problema dell'organizzazione del lavoro e la presenza di corvées sulle proprietà fiscali; 4) il modo in cui circolava la ricchezza, secondo modelli interpretativi alternativi al commercio prima della dissoluzione del potere ottoniano, in Italia, e il 'cambio di paradigma' causato dal boom commerciale – e i suoi legami con le città; 5) le conseguenze economiche complessive, sul medio e lungo termine, della redistribuzione dei beni fiscali nelle mani di altri possessori.

This article offers some food for thought based on the articles in the dossier on tax property in Italy (with a contribution on the Middle Meuse). It points out five specific aspects that deserve discussion: 1° the more or less restrictive definition of the concept of fiscus 2° that of the strategic importance of the control of resources (fuel, ore, energy) in these fiscal properties 3° the problem of the organisation of work and the presence of corvée on fiscal properties 4° the way in which wealth circulated, according to interpretative models alternative to trade before the dissolution of the Ottonian order, in Italy, and the paradigm shift caused by the commercial boom – with its links with cities 5° the overall economic consequences, in the medium and long term, of the redistribution of fiscal properties into the hands of other owners.

Medioevo, beni fiscali, risorse, *corvée*, commercio, proprietà fondiaria.

Middle Ages, Fiscal Estates, Resources, Corvée, Commerce, Property Patterns.

Many of the contributions in this monographic section of *Reti Medievali Rivista* deal with a (post)-Carolingian or even post-Ottonian 'matrix'.[1] The aim is to link the economic destiny of the *fisci* and their interaction with wider trends in the 11th and 12th centuries: population growth, commercialisation, the use of resources, the rise of local lordship[2] and the emergence of urban

[1] I I warmly thank Prof. Tiziana Lazzari and Dr Lorenzo Tabarrini for their careful review of this text, and their valuable comments.
[2] The question of the polysemy of the word 'seigneury', and the diversity of its local incarnations, is a huge historiographical problem, which is beyond the scope of this contribution. One

powers. Although it seems very ambitious, this programme focuses mainly on northern Italy, in particular Tuscany. However, two points of comparison are included in the dossier: Nicolas Schroeder studied the Middle Meuse Valley in present-day Belgium, at the heart of the Carolingian world; and Vito Loré examined the southern part of the Lombard Mezzogiorno, which is particularly well-documented for the area around Salerno. These concluding observations are made by an historian who is familiar with the northern part of the Frankish world, and who will use some specific works in order to discuss similar or divergent developments in the Italian space.

1. *The coherence of the* fiscus

Although there are obviously many issues that deserve comment, these concluding remarks will focus on five of them. The first regards the methodological issues related to the coherence of the fiscus: what is royal and what is not. At first sight, fiscus seems to be a well-defined concept.[3] Strictly speaking, when a patrimony is no longer of royal status, but depends only on a sub-royal or even a semi-private 'public power', i.e. non-royal churches, non-obedient bishops, independent counts enjoying their own *honores*, it cannot be defined any longer as 'fiscus'. The case studies collected here show different stages in the fragmentation of the former royal fiscus in various local contexts. At least in Italy, the end of the 11th and the 12th centuries can be regarded as a turning point, with well-known processes affecting the fate of the old fiscus. For example, the lasting effects of Gregorianism and the 'Investiture Controversy', the seizure of fiscal estates by local lords and the subsequent crystallisation of aristocratic lineages – all these played a crucial role in determining the decay of royal estates. Prior to this turning point, fiscal wealth flowed to certain families, but also returned to the royal owners, as Simone Maria Collavini has shown. This pendulum movement had a neutralizing effect, defusing both a constant impoverishment of the royal power and the emergence of arch-dominant families, despite episodes of revolt. In this movement, the appetite of peers – sometimes within the same family – should not be underestimated, as many individuals competed for access to the same resources, which were then regularly recirculated.

The intense mobility of certain goods and estates – which are therefore the most documented – can, however, mask the stability of other important complex of lands, which were continuously and jealously kept within the royal patrimony. Just because they were too important to be included in the flow of estates and wealth mentioned above, they are, paradoxically, less docu-

can refer to the article by Wickham, "*Defining,*" which notes the diversity of historiographical traditions on this issue. It is, however, the blind spot in the discussion of the gradual or sudden dissolution of fiscal lands. See also Devroey and Wilkin, "Retour sur la seigneurie".

3 On this topic, see Loré, "Introduction. Les biens publics".

mented, as they were not mentioned in any transactional document. Indeed, in these cases, documentation of the fiscus emerges as these cores of royal wealth begin to dissolve. While 'proof' *e silentio* is often a dangerous argument for historians, Maria Elena Cortese has strongly and convincingly suggested that the absence of mention of mining infrastructures may be evidence of continued royal control of some of them. In this respect, documents as the inventory describing the extent of the royal domain and the royal dues in the region of Chur in Rhetia, written under the reign of Louis the Pious, must be considered as exceptional.

Further difficulties arise when historians look at institutions that are normally under royal control, and therefore of 'fiscal' status. Even before the actual start of the seigneurialization process in the Italian world, which began, depending on circumstances, in the late-11th or 12th century, the situation could be fairly blurred.[4] Abbeys could have royal 'status' and thus be part of the 'fiscal' domains: in the North Frankish world, as well as in (post-)Carolingian Italy, they were very important royal monasteries;[5] for example, San Magno and probably Sant'Arcangelo, in the Lombard Mezzogiorno, belonged to this category. At least, they were so if their direct link to royal power was maintained. But there were also more independent religious communities. However, even the latter were obliged to provide resources and were linked to the higher strata of the kingdom. An ambiguous situation, to say the least. In another regional context, this ambiguity has led some historians dealing with Western Frankish monasteries to exaggerate and probably misinterpret internal management documents, such as the polyptychs, which have been understood as evidence of the 'fiscal continuity' linking them to the ancient Roman tradition of tax collection.[6] Also, even before the birth of the "Reichskirchensystem" in Germany or northern Italy, bishops were closely linked to kings and local elites. It is well known that Carolingian and Ottonian rulers used the church as an extension of their direct authority, a tendency that is shown, among other examples, by the famous case of Bruno, the brother of Otto III who was archbishop of Cologne. Non-royal ecclesiastical estates, whether monastic or episcopal, and the prerogatives associated with bishoprics, were not 'fiscal' but still crucial elements of royal power. The 'fiscus' in the strict sense is thus only one important component of a more complex mosaic of economic rights and influences that define the king's power. Finally, we must not overlook the existence of a separate patrimony, of private nature, which existed alongside the fiscal goods, as shown by some of the documents studied by Vito

4 In north-western Europe, the debate around the rise of local lordship and the 'feudal turn' has been fierce. Some scholars (e.g. West, *Reframing*) thought it became an 'impasse'. For a very clear overview of the positions, see Lauranson-Rosaz, "Le débat."

5 On the foundation of monasteries, removed from the royal fiscal system, see in particular Lazzari, "Patrimoni femminili."

6 See for example Magnou-Nortier, *Aux origines de la fiscalité publique*, or the numerous works by Durliat and Gerard Chouquer on measurement practices.

Loré for the Lombard Mezzogiorno at the end of the tenth and the beginning of the 11th centuries: this was a different kind of endowment, from which the princes drew in order to bestow their closest followers.

Conversely, the end of 11th and 12th centuries have been seen as a turning point in the overall process of redistribution or alteration of fiscal domains. In Tuscany, after the death of Frederick I, there are no more serious attempts to get hold of the public estates. This loss of control of some fiscal estates is something which started much earlier in the middle valley of the Meuse: there the fiscal estates certainly supported the Carolingian palace of Aachen logistically and economically. The 'feudal landscape' was already emerging in the 10th and 11th centuries, as Schroeder convincingly suggests – however, German kings still held some rights on the *Reichsgut* until much later.[7]

This chronology would certainly find an echo in French historiography, where Florian Mazel, Michel Lauwers and Dominique Iogna-Prat now distinguish between 'first' and 'second' Middle Ages, with the Gregorian phase as the dividing line.[8] An economic historian would only reluctantly use these religious and political categories as tools of periodisation, as they leave out many aspects But they have some credibility in this context, provided that they do not make Gregorianism the sole driver of change.

2. *The control of strategic resources*

The second important topic is the issue of control over strategically important resources. Maria Elene Cortese's article on the Alpine range and Tuscany (including the island of Elba) discussed metallurgy. Archaeological data constitute Cortese's main source of information, even though there are very few clues to identify the excavation or the metal processing sites. For the Alpine region, she noted that monastic institutions such as St. Martin de Tours could be used to secure not only the Alpine routes, but also the control of metal production. Finally, she argues that the royal control over the process of mining, processing and distribution was continuous. This control would have lasted until the central Middle Ages, when some type of 'seigneurial transformation' process emerged. This bring to mind Riccardo Francovich's and Chris Wickham's suggestions for Rocca San Silvestro, where the process of metal making would involve several stages, some of which were closely monitored in the lordly context.[9]

These suggestions call for further investigation to resolve some questions about the use of essential and perhaps sometimes? often? fiscal resources. The process of transforming the ore is very energy intensive. There is no need

7 Rotthof, *Studien*.

8 See for example Martine et Winandy, *La réforme grégorienne*. See also Mazel, "Pouvoir aristocratique."

9 Francovich et Wickham. "Une fouille archéologique."

to recall that resources and energy are a crucial asset in the economic development of a region, as Mathieu Arnoux recently pointed out.[10] To quote Carlo Cipolla: "La vie, les activités de l'homme dépendent des sources d'énergie dont il dispose. Faute d'énergie, pas de vie, pas d'activités créatrices [...]; les disponibilités d'énergie représentent la base nécessaire à l'organisation de la matière et à tout développement de l'histoire des hommes".[11] In order to discuss them properly, it is necessary to distinguish between the different types of metallurgical production and Maria Elena Cortese stresses, rightly, the existence of various types of practices. They range from the collection of renders in the manorial context, such as small quantities of finished objects or semi-finished materials, in a more "artisanal" context, to more pre-industrial specialised areas.

Depending on the scale and type of organisation, the extraction and processing of the ore may have been a ponderous task in human and environmental terms. In the region of Melle, near Poitiers in West Francia, where silver was collected for the Carolingian coinage, archaeological remains have shown the devastation caused by Frankish mining.[12] Wood was of crucial importance and was needed in huge quantities. This dependence on fuel explains why metal processing was sometimes found in areas where glass was being made or processed – glass production being another type of wood and energy consuming craft. Sometimes these largely overlapping productions were linked to monastic infrastructures, which hosted specialised craftsmen with *mansi* on their estates. Or specialised labour could also move from place to place.[13] High levels of pollution have been associated by archaeologists with the large-scale metal production of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, as evidenced by the concentration of pollution preserved in glaciers. Overall, environmental and logistical considerations would help to widen our knowledge of royal control over resources, including in wood, fuel, ore – but also poor labour. Attention to the sustainability of resource management would also link the research on fisci to wider environmental issues, through archaeology, palynology – which can document, for example, the extent of timber use – and archaeometry.

3. *Social structures and the control of workers*

The third point for discussion is the question of social structures and control of workers, and the use of boon labour. This issue has not been examined with the same intensity in all contributions. The small-scale family production or processing of metal mentioned above, which is the basis for the collection of renders in metal, differs substantially from the specialised heavy work

10 Arnoux, *Un monde sans ressources*.
11 Cipolla, "Energie," 521.
12 Bettenay, "Geological and Mining" which provides higher numbers than Tereygeol, "D'argent."
13 See Wilkin, "Le travail du verre."

in quasi-industrial quantities. In the framework of intensive production, the collective sanitary conditions were very poor, as has been proved again in the Melle region. What was the social framework of this exploitation in Italy, and how was organised the mining and smelting workforce on royal estates? Can we speak of specialised mining communities? Can we suspect the use of half or fully dependent workers or slaves, controlled by local officers? Here again, the evolution of some estates into 'lordships' specialising in metal production suggests that the difficulties implied by the production process implies some levels of constraint.

And what were the social conditions in other contexts, especially in fiscal areas? Paolo Tomei has not addressed this question here but has published an interesting article in which he discusses at length the different categories of fiscal management of estates in Tuscany.[14] Vito Loré has looked at the internal organisation of labour among southern royal estates. In the case of Salerno, corvée-duties appeared on several royal estates; it was fairly light and, apparently at least, it weighed exclusively on the *servitiales* of Capua and Benevento. The absence of boon work resembles, *mutatis mutandis*, the situation observed in the south of present-day France under the Carolingians where, apart from a few occasional carting services, *corvée*-work was largely absent.[15] The 'private pacts' which granted tenants the use of royal lands also show relatively low levels of levy. Boon work was then introduced in a more systematic way under the influence of the new Norman dynasty, much later, in the late 11th and 12th centuries. The question that arises is whether it was the Frankish model that was then adopted, or whether the spread of labour dues was a novelty introduced as a response to certain issues, notably the desire to maximise agricultural profits in a changing world.

This process has some resonance with the social changes in England in the 11th and 12th centuries after the Norman Conquest, according to Rosamond Faith.[16] Furthermore, this interesting case study makes room for further comparisons on the imposition of boon work at the edges of the Carolingian world – as Italian, Belgian or German scholars, among others, have done in the past.[17] In fact, boon work is only one possible mode of exploitation. Research on the northern Frankish world has been obsessed with the bipartite manorial system and has emphasized the driving force that royal estates and monastic estates linked to the royalty played in the introduction of the *corvada*.

[14] Tomei, "Una nuova categoria."
[15] Renard, "Grande propriété."
[16] To quote Rosamond Faith, "Social theory," 311: "It is unfashionable in England to see the Norman Conquest as having affected the status of the peasantry: a widely held view is that life went on as before and change went over their heads. I am very unfashionable. I think that a total replacement of the upper echelons of the landowning class must have had a profound effect. And I would put it as strongly as this: the aftermath of the Norman conquest of England in 1066 and the land settlement that followed was a critical period in the emergence of the bi-partite manor".
[17] Devroey et Wilkin, "Diversité."

However, this fascination is probably a side-effect of the wide availability of polyptychs.

4. *The circulation of wealth*

The commercial and non-commercial movement of goods is another fascinating topic, which is worth discussing. The discussions on mining and procurement have led, quite naturally, to another topical discussion – that regarding the availability of money and the use of currency before the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Alessia Rovelli's research has suggested that the silver used in coinage in Italy until the 11th century came from the Harz.[18] A limited use of money raises difficult questions about the social anchoring of exchanges in the aristocratic world, where the circulation of honours, gifts, counter-gifts, and political offices was crucial. In the last twenty years, this debate has attracted the attention of scholars such as Laurent Feller along with many Italian medievalists, who have examined the "social value of things".[19] David Herlihy's classical hypotheses have been revised by Paolo Tomei in a subtle way, which links the use of *meritum* and/or *launegild* to a specific historical phase during which the Ottonian court-centred society flourished, before the *meritum/placita/iusticia* system collapsed.[20] In Lucca, between 1080 and 1120, the political, social, and economic culture that had lasted until then faded away, and the authority of the marquis similarly vanished. Earlier on, the previous aristocratic system adopted specific and distinctive behaviours and value systems. Without being irenic – indeed, one should not be naive – this system differed from the violently agonistic culture of the new lordships that were slowly consolidating. The social reconstruction of the order which allowed the lineages to gain their momentum helped to deconstruct the old 'symbolic-economic' expression of value. This old political-economic system also greatly differed from the everyday socio-economic logics of exchange adopted by professional vendors. The more frequent use of money in documentary evidence, also attested to by the multiplication of levies in cash in the seigneurial documentation from the beginning of the 11th-12th centuries, also indicates the spread of another type of mentality. It was the dawn of the era of the urban merchant or professional trader, whose ethos and practices reshaped the way transactions were carried out, and the currency in which they were expressed, thus shifting from *meritum* to real coins.

18 Rovelli, "Coins."
19 See for example the articles collected recently in Feller, *Richesse*, with a new theoretical introduction.
20 Interestingly, West, *Reframing*, suggests a similar process for north-western *Francia*: he notes the gradual disappearance of a system of reciprocity and circulation of offices and gifts within the elites. Afterwards, too, a gradual 'transformation' (rather than a collapse) of the Carolingian order occurred. More debatably, however, he includes manorial structures, large estates and peasant renders within this Carolingian system of gift and reciprocity.

5. *The economic effects of redistribution*

Finally, our fifth issue, found in most of the contributions, is the *interaction between the rhythms of the economy and the fate of fisci*. As the title of the conference that gave birth to the articles collected here expresses, both are 'reflections'. But the use of the word *specchio* conceals the difficult question, posed by Simone Collavini, of the causal relations between the two. Obviously, it would be way too ambitious to give a proper answer here, but we can nevertheless elaborate on the short- and medium-term effects of fiscal ownership – especially on the effects of the seizure of former fiscal lands by newcomers.

It should be remembered that the growth of the early Middle Ages was probably prepared by what existed before. For example, Pierre Toubert and Jean-Pierre Devroey, among others, have shown that in the Carolingian period certain lasting processes were already at work and prepared the growth of the early Middle Ages, a tendency that can be identified in the Tuscan context as well,[21] as Simone Collavini recalls. As an hypothesis, it can be suggested that the public management of fiscal areas probably paved the way for future growth. Nicolas Schroeder convincingly suggests that there was certainly an economic 'boom' in the Middle Meuse region, linked to the profoundly interlocked nature of the estates centred on Aachen, at least until the end of the 9th century. Those estates were located in strategic places, which controlled essential traffic routes, as is shown by the grants of Alpine passes to royal monasteries of western Francia, which were also richly endowed with metal resources.

But it is likely that fiscal economic development was not at its maximum capacity, due to the economic model adopted in the fisci, which was still based on an essentially self-sufficient model in the areas that remained in the hands of the king. *Fisci* certainly had more sophisticated forms of management than the estates that were in the hands of people of lower social status. This seems to be particularly true of the artisanal and even proto-industrial production found across fiscal lands. They also experienced a dynamic of demographic growth, which can already be observed in the Tuscan sources of the 11th century. But this potential was probably not pushed to its maximum: often the royal estates formed networks and were more connected to each other than to their immediate environment.

Royal power was based on a set of rights, estates, resources – like mines or salt farms – scattered over vast areas; this does not mean that it was inherently looser, but it may have been so, as it was thought to be exercised on a large scale and – so to speak – in an extensive manner – that is, not necessarily intensive. During the Early Middle Ages, it was also likely to have been less tied to markets, as the sale of surplus was generally limited. Furthermore, the

[21] See the various contributions in *La croissance agricole*.

constant mobility of many goods from one temporary owner to another was not conducive to investment and sustainable economic efficiency, something the Ottonians in Italy possibly took care of, for example.[22] These considerations fit well with the model proposed by Chris Wickham, centred on aristocratic demand, which could certainly also use commercial exchange to satisfy its needs, but could also do without it.[23]

However, the high potential of the fiscal estates was eventually bound to attract the covetousness of local players, who took advantage of the conflicts between the increasingly weakened royal power and the papacy, from the 1070s-80s in Tuscany, and especially in the following century. The pattern of redistribution and the fiscal integrity of royal estates was compromised. This acquisition of estates by aristocratic elites – sometimes of modest origin – allowed a change of scale in the level of surplus extraction, which accelerated the economic trends already observed in the fiscal estates.

In north-western Europe, there are some parallels to this: Flanders appear to be a good example, as Adriaan Verhulst and Erik Thoen have noted. From the 12th century onwards, the estates of the counts, as well as the local castellanies – both strategic and economic assets – paved the way for the urban development of the region.[24] The scale of the count's demand and production was such that it led to the accumulation of surplus and encouraged monetisation of the economy, which was in turn crucial for the growth of Bruges and Ghent.

In Italy, this closer connection of local lords with their newly acquired estates of fiscal origin certainly led to a local framing of production, to a more direct connection with the multiplied markets and centres and to some sort of intensification of the lordly demand. One can use the concept of 'pervasiveness' employed recently by Sandro Carocci, to describe the seigneurial intervention at all levels.[25] An intervention which was maybe also a reaction to some challenges, such as the difficulty to get access to the agricultural surplus. In north-western Europe, Léopold Génicot had shown the link between the intensification of levy through the imposition of *malae consuetudines*, due to the fall of the real value of customary rents in kind; small lords thus invented new types of demands which made peasant life more burdensome.[26] This type of competition for resources has some parallels in Tuscany over the 11th century, as it has been already pointed out.[27] It must be recognized, however, that this intensification of seigneurial demand went hand in hand with

[22] Lorenzo Tabarrini suggested to me the importance of the Ottonians' investment; I thank him for this.
[23] Wickham, "Rethinking."
[24] Thoen, "Le démarrage économique."
[25] Carocci, "Pervasiveness."
[26] Genicot, *L'économie rurale*.
[27] Collavini and Bianchi, "Risorse."

an even more significant phenomenon: the growth of urban demand, which was bound to have a radical influence on the countryside.

Despite the changes in management, Lorenzo Tabarrini emphasised the symbolic aspects of holding an ancient fiscal estate – as well as its possible economic and military potential, which apparently disappeared earlier on in the northern Frankish regions. The memory of ownership encapsulates a high degree of social significance, and symbolic value could be linked to the possession of formerly fiscal estates. The fate of the *curtes* of Guastalla and Luzzara and the struggles between San Sisto of Piacenza and the urban community of Cremona are evidence of that. However, we must not forget, as Lorenzo Tabarrini has also pointed out, that these *curtes* were undoubtedly of great economic value and therefore of great use, especially in the context of the emerging indebtedness of the urban communities starting from the second half of the 12th century.

6. *Concluding observations*

A final observation on the long-term effects of landownership patterns on the economic prosperity of a region. To expand on Simone Collavini's and Lorenzo Tabarrini's remarks on the attractiveness of fiscal estates, one can discuss the aggregate impact of the redistribution of fiscal lands on the economy of a society. Bas Van Bavel's book, *Manors and Markets*,[28] raises an important question, already tackled by David Herlihy who studied the extent of ecclesiastical property in the *ancien régime* out of all the available land – which he estimates at about one third of the total, at least in Italy.[29] Indeed, not all regions or areas were equal in terms of land appropriation in the early Middle Ages. The patterns of landownership may have had lasting effects: the share of large-scale estates, or its absence in some regions – especially in 'marginal areas' – explains some long-term developments. In the Low Countries, during the high and late Middle Ages, the organisation of land tenure, the contracts and the rents demanded from tenants, the extent of free peasant holdings or the links to specific markets can all be regarded as the consequences of the identity of the lords who held or had held the estates. Indeed, the previous type of management left a deep mark on the way the land was used when it was later put back into circulation – by rental, perpetual or temporary lease, or tenure by its owners. If we look even further, the share of ecclesiastical property had very long-lasting effects – which are acknowledged by economists, too.[30] During the entire Ancien Régime, there were very different levels of ownership and wealth for churches and monasteries, with a concentration

[28] Van Bavel, *Manors and Markets*.
[29] Herlihy, "Church property."
[30] Arnaud Deseau made me read part of his unpublished dissertation: Deseau, "Land Reform."

of economic power in certain regions, mainly in the northern half of France. After the French Revolution, ecclesiastical property was confiscated and sold. The re-circulation of these goods had a measurable economic impact on modern society. Returning to the Italian *fisci*, one might ask what research carried out on those same lines could bring to light, e.g. by taking into account the geographical distribution of the fiscal estates in Italy, and how their sudden redistribution affected the socio-economic map.

What types of income remained in the hands of the sovereigns, after the partial seizure of the fiscal land wealth on the part of lords and urban communities? In his overview of royal estates, François Bougard has suggested that, at least under Frederick Barbarossa, most of the king's income depended on indirect revenues: taxes, such as *telonea*…[31] This trend paved the way for an important development of late medieval society, which is also very visible in the Low Countries and France: the permanent indebtedness of the king and the appeal to the urban communes or states to provide money (the *États*, *Fueros*, whatever they are called in different political traditions). The partial disappearance of the economic base of royal power opened up the way to political negotiation. The lasting success of this idea: "No taxation without representation" is, after all, well-known. Thus, the pace of the disappearance of royal resources –and the way in which they were passed on or not to the relatively-lower strata of the political landscape – stands at the corner of political and economic history.

[31] Bougard, "Les biens et revenus publics."

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