During the last two decades a steadily growing number of studies have contributed to increase our present knowledge of “pastoral economies in classical antiquity”, to cite the title of one important publication. In particular a much better understanding of the interaction between agriculture and animal breeding has been established with the re-evaluation of the different types of husbandry and with a growing appreciation of the high degree of continuity in the way of life in pastoral communities.

An archaeological approach to the study of pastoralism has hitherto been rare. Questions such as whether extensive transhumance took place in Italy before or began after Rome’s political and economic hegemony of the peninsula and as an impact of the Hannibalic War are still subjects of controversy. Emphasizing the neglect of transhumance in Cato’s De agrí cultura, a number of scholars from Greniers onwards have argued that large-scale transhumance only developed after 150 B.C. But as pointed out among others by Skydsgaard in an article published in this journal almost twenty years ago, the theme of Cato’s treatise is agriculture and not cattle-breeding, and the terms for the lease of winter pasturage cited in chapter 149 indicate in fact that extensive pastoralism must have existed. Furthermore, it is obvious that systematic transhumance between the mountains and the coasts must have been accompanied by specific political conditions, but that this does not necessarily imply a single state is also clear from modern examples of this type of pastoralism in Italy and other mediterranean societies.

The scholarly debate will certainly be reinforced by the publication of the results from important surveys directed by Graeme Barker in the Biferno valley and the Cicolano mountains in Central Italy. The combination of field-walkings and ethno-archaeological findings has shown that “ whilst small-scale mobility and short-distance transhumance were probably the norm, there is no evidence for specialised transhumance in the pre-Roman Samnite economy.” Barker’s wide-ranging conclusion concerns not only prehistoric pastoralism; he also draws attention to the spectrum of pastoral economies. The neglected small-scale transhumance and mixed farming represent only two of many different subsistence systems varying from region to region.

Large-scale, long-distance transhumance in Roman Italy did not completely replace the traditional animal husbandry. But though it required a well-trained and specialised manpower, the responsible herdsmen have been accorded no outstanding place in the controversy on the continuity of Italian transhumance, nor in general accounts on Roman farming. Usually only some few lines or perhaps one or two pages citing Varro are devoted to the herdsmen, and a full summary of the information available on ancient Roman pastores is still a desideratum. This paper, however, intends to examine only a small part of the extensive material on pastoralism in Italy and the western provinces: namely that part concerning the chief herdsman, the magister pecoris. But it will also discuss the relationships and hierarchy between the slave-herdsmen and the group of slave overseers involved in managing the so-called villæ rusticae. It is normally assumed that the magister pecoris was inferior to the bailiff, vilicus, but, as this article will show, a rather complicated range of relations varying from household to household existed between them.