

Ancient Agriculture
Part V: Early Rome & Italy

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"O happy beyond measure the tillers of the soil..." - or so says Virgil in his *Georgics* of about 30 BC. But just how "happy" were the farmers of early Rome really? They led a hard life, plagued by starvation, unemployment, war, invasion, confiscation and the "good intentions" of political reformers. For the most part, the small farmers in early Rome probably wanted to lead a quiet life of subsistence farming, raising just enough to satisfy their own family needs and maybe a little extra to trade for a few "luxury" goods—such was not to be the case though. The politics of land investment took over, doing more than anything else to "ruin Italy", as Pliny the Elder tells us.

The story of farming in ancient Rome, however, begins well before any accounts of confiscation, mismanagement and social decline. The story begins with the land and the early Indo-European settlers who probably came into Italy from Asia via central Europe shortly before 1000 BC. These people found fertile, volcanic soils in what would be called Etruria, Latium and Campania. Here began agriculture in settlements which would later rule the world as Rome.

The geography of the Italian peninsula was much more conducive to an agrarian lifestyle than most other parts of the Mediterranean region, such as the Greek mainland we looked at earlier in this series on ancient agriculture. While Greece had a landscape which promoted coastal harbours and therefore extensive trade, it lacked the larger fertile plains for agricultural cultivation which Italy was blessed with. These fertile plains for agriculture as well as the highland pastures for livestock combined to make Italy a sunny, temperate cradle for a unique agrarian growth which would become the basis of Roman livelihood for centuries to come.

Italy was lucky to have had a good deal of early volcanic activity in its Apennine Mountain range. This made a soil on the Italian plains which was rich in nutrients, phosphates and potash - all essential for prosperous agriculture. The cultivation of grains, vegetables, fruits, vines and olives as well as timber made possible by this fertile farmland provided Italy with rich agricultural resources not readily found in many other parts of the Mediterranean region.

While Italy has only slightly more extensive river systems than Greece, the silt deposited by these rivers of northern Italy combined with the volcanic soils in central and southern Italy provided wheat and barley in prehistoric times and vines and olives from Greece in pre-Roman times. Lettuce, cauliflower, onions, radishes and garlic were grown in great abundance, as were cultivated flowers such as roses, lilies and violets. Wheat was always, and still is, one of the most important grains grown in Italy, although, as we shall see, its import was at times more important than its domestic cultivation.

Figs, grapes, apples and olives also grew well in the fertile soil and livestock which grazed the rich pasture lands of Italy included pigs for meat, cows for ploughing and sheep for wool and milk. No other Mediterranean country had the combination of available arable land, temperate, humid climate, rich volcanic soil and adequate river systems to foster the establishment of an agricultural economy which would give rise to one of the greatest civilizations the world has ever known.

The areas of the Italian peninsula which were not naturally endowed with fertile soil, but rather had to contend with a clay stratum, were ones which the early inhabitants of Italy, the Etruscans, excelled in developing by means of innovative technology. By carefully draining and irrigating otherwise agriculturally useless land, the Etruscans of northern Italy were able to cultivate and harvest adequate crops and pasture cattle for their subsistence agrarian lifestyle.

Around 800 BC, the Etruscans were already building fairly elaborate irrigation systems of canals and dams to clear, drain and revitalize otherwise swampy areas for intensive crop production. Etruscan centres, such as Veii just north of Rome, advanced agriculture in Italy to such an extent that they actually produced surplus agricultural products which enabled them to export their produce throughout both neighbouring and distant territories. There is also evidence in the form of Greek vases found in Etruria that the Etruscans imported both Greek goods and Greek artisans up to about 500 BC.

By the period of the early Roman Republic of the fifth century BC, public land, or *ager publicus*, had become available for the small farmers to rent for grazing and planting—if they could afford it. Even if they could, the land was by no means secure for it was always subject to invasions from neighbouring peoples. These raids, combined with numerous natural crop-devastating disasters, caused conditions of famine which the early Roman farmers had a great deal of experience with and which they were not always able to extricate themselves from. When small farmers had to borrow more grain from wealthy landlords for planting and for food than they could produce, they often found themselves in a difficult situation—one whose worst case scenario was to default on the repayment of debts for which they might be sold into slavery. When all went well, however, the small farmers of the early Roman Republic were able to produce just enough to provide a subsistence lifestyle for their immediate family and perhaps—when things went really well—a little extra to barter with their neighbours, who likewise had to scratch out a meagre living from the soil.

By the fourth century BC, with a lot of luck and plain hard work, the small farmers were able to enjoy not just a subsistence living but even take some produce to the larger cities on "market day" each week. There they might sell any wheat, barley, garden vegetables or fruit they had in excess, or buy any beans, onions, turnips, cabbage, figs, olives, apples, plums or pears they lacked. All these grains, vegetables and fruits were the mainstay of the early Republican farming economy.

While all this may sound like an enjoyable lifestyle of subsistence farming, very little was to be enjoyed by the farmers of Italy in the later Roman Republic as war, land confiscation, grain import, political interference, mismanagement and general decline ravaged the Roman countryside and devastated the agricultural stability of the Roman world itself.