

Ancient Agriculture -
Part VI: Roman Policy

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While the second century BC Roman writer Cato tells us, in his *De Agricultura*, that the best way to make money is to own and manage a farm or ranch, this was not always as easy as it seemed. Cato outlined the management of estates, slaves, crops and the commercial aspects of farming in a practical, almost textbook manner, but many things occurred during Cato's own lifetime which tended to beat down the life, resources and even the land of the poor farmer struggling to maintain a toehold on his fields in the Roman Republican period.

One such major occurrence was the agricultural and economic devastation caused by a formidable invasion of foreigners in 217 BC led by Hannibal, son of the Carthaginian Hamilcar Barca. Hannibal's forces swept down through Etruria to southern Italy leading to a mass destruction of not only Roman morale but also Roman agricultural resources. While accounts of the devastation of the second Punic War are in themselves tragic stories of the senselessness of war, it was the small-scale farmer who felt the effects of the political power struggles the most.

It was from these peasant farmers "that the sturdiest men and keenest soldiers" came, as Cato informs us. These were the men who made up the backbone of the Roman army in the third and second centuries BC, and it was these same farmers who suffered most for their patriotism. Called away from plot and plough to make up the citizen army of the Roman Republic, if the farmer-turned-soldier was

lucky enough to survive the myriad battles taking place all over the Roman world at this time, he came home to villages and homes which were destroyed and to once productive farmland now desolate and devastated. If he could afford to start over again, the rebuilding took time and money—the former he had (his land was unproductive anyway) but the latter he sometimes came up short on. For some farmers this meant only one thing: sell out to the wealthy nobles who could afford to buy the small farmer's holdings.

Not long after the Punic Wars had ended, the Roman government proceeded to confiscate and subsequently lease or sell off large tracts of very rich farmland to the nobility and senatorial classes, who in short order accumulated vast landholdings in the form of large farm estates or *latifundia* whose only purpose was income and prestige. These large landowners of the second century BC, responding to market demands from towns and cities which continued to grow in population, soon reduced much of the small-scale subsistence farming, typical of Italy up to this date, into large-scale commercial enterprises pursuing large-scale profits for their absentee landowners.

It was at this time, between the second century BC and the early Empire, that the new elite of wealthy Roman landowners invested heavily in both new agricultural holdings and slave labour gangs to work their large estates and plantations. It is ironic to think that the cheap slave labour that flooded into Italy at this time was, to a large extent, a consequence of the military victories brought about by the small farmers who made up the Roman army, and who were only to be displaced by those same slaves once they returned home from the wars. It was the apparent success of this economic and political investment in land owning, whether for cash crops or for sheep-raising, that created an even greater demand for land and added to the plight of the displaced independent farmer. These displaced and poverty-stricken farmers had nowhere else to go but the large cities, especially Rome, where they soon became a further burden on an already depressed economic situation.

As if this were not enough, the small farmers who did manage to hold onto their land were faced with yet another dilemma: food, especially grain, was being imported into Italy and sold on the

domestic market for less than the independent farmer could produce and sell it. This was yet another nail in the proverbial coffin of the small farmer. Now only large-scale latifundists with their cheap slave labour could economically afford to work the grazing lands, vineyards and olive groves of Italy and still turn a profit. As a result, by the first century BC, Rome had become dependent on imported grain from its provinces, which greatly diminished its self-sufficiency and independence.

The Roman senators and nobility alone cannot really be blamed for the demise of the independent farmer—it was merely the result of a wicked twist of economic politics. In Republican times, it was not considered appropriate for these wealthy upper-class citizens to participate in commerce or business—at least not openly. This social and political pressure led to enormous investment in ownership of the Italian countryside. As ancient sources tell us, land ownership was the only respectable form of economic investment for a proper Roman.

Since the Italian *latifundia* were, in the second century BC, largely producing only grapes and olives or raising cattle, sheep and goats, and since most of the grain needed for the urban populace was being imported into Italy from the provinces, the slave-run estates produced only enough grain for the *familia*, including of course the slaves. This was a major turn in the economic politics of the entire Roman Republic. With the decline of grain production on the Italian peninsula, Italian cities and especially Rome became virtually dependent on imported wheat for their very survival.

The second and first centuries BC saw a tumultuous succession of political reformers trying to bring stability to a depressed economy and an even more depressed population. Two reformers in particular, however, could have set Rome straight in favour of the poor farmers. The rich aristocratic Senators, themselves large landowners, got to these two Gracchi Brothers first and assisted them out of their challenging agrarian problems by arranging for their untimely deaths. Political reform of the Roman agricultural economy by the few for the sake of many would not come easily.

Unfortunately, most of the physical evidence for the economic and political evolution of Roman agricultural policy, reform, management and mismanagement are all but lost from the archaeological record. As a result, we must turn to primary literary and historical sources such as Cato, Varro, Columella, and Elder Pliny to give meaning to all of the prosperity and strife, profit and loss in Roman agricultural activity. What physical evidence we do have comes down to us largely in the form of inscriptions of inventories or lists and property markers on stone. In some cases, mosaics and paintings also show us agricultural techniques, cycles, activities and practices, knowledge of which would otherwise be lost through a lack of archaeological evidence.

While the primary literature mentioned may give us an insight into the economic aspects of Roman agriculture, it also helps us to understand the techniques employed in such practices as ploughing, cultivating, harvesting and storing of agricultural products. We can also turn to architectural, stratigraphic, osteological, geological and botanical analysis to give us an overall picture of early Roman agricultural practice and an understanding of the natural climatic changes as well as of human impact on the landscape through extensive farming, ploughing, deforestation and soil erosion. It is this practical aspect of Roman agriculture which will occupy us in the next article of this series.