

The world of the early Roman Empire is far removed from our own, and it takes a great effort of the imagination to feel at home in it. The evidence is vast, but scattered and often fragmentary, so that few save the occasional Mommsen could in any sense be said to control it. Those who teach courses in Roman Civilization are often forced to rely heavily on secondary sources, and there is an understandable tendency to be conservative, to accept the common opinions, and to pass on to students views which had been taught by earlier teachers. While to a large extent this is inevitable, it may lead to the propagation of false pictures of the Roman world.

On one important matter I have been very slow to reject a picture of Roman society current a generation ago, and still widely accepted, but which is surely false. The influence of Gibbon is still strong, and I have myself quoted with approval his famous judgement in Chapter III: "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus." Of course "the human race" was not all inside the Empire, but even within its boundaries the judgement is very partial. What was the condition of the inhabitants of the Empire?

Our views are coloured by our sources. Historians like Tacitus and Dio were senators, Suetonius was a prominent equestrian. To them, members of the lower classes hardly existed, and life on the lower levels of the socio-economic pyramid was unthinkable. Juvenal writes of a poor man, pauper: this poor wretch has an investment income of 20,000 sesterces a year, which would put him far above subsistence level. We still tend to accept, with wholly inadequate reservations, the social attitudes of our literary sources.

One of the the best correctives to the dominant view of Roman society is provided by Ramsay MacMullen in his book entitled Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284. (Yale University Press, 1976). This volume should be required reading for anyone dealing with the Roman world. It demonstrates vividly the narrow focus of the dominant view. The population of the Roman world in the area MacMullen studies was about 50 million. Less than one tenth of one percent of these had the wealth of an equestrian; yet the author points out that scholars still write of this miniscule group as the middle class. Senators were of course an even tinier fraction of the population, amounting only to two-thousandths of one percent. To cite these figures is quite enough to show the folly of accepting evidence dealing with the upper classes as typical of Roman society as a whole. MacMullen hopes that his work will differ from what has gone before "by extending our knowledge a little farther beyond the upper classes to the lower, beyond Italy to the provinces, beyond the city to the countryside..." This he has done, and the picture is a grim one.

A few examples will suffice. "Away from centers of population, one risked being robbed or killed. The risk...finds mention in written sources of every time and province. Architectural and archeological evidence agrees...the less populated countryside throughout the empire approached a state of endemic warfare, from which only a stout cudgel, a fast horse, or a well-built little fortress gave protection." (p.4) So much for the immensa Romanae pacis maiestas we hear so much about! Our sympathy for Juvenal's "poor" Romans diminishes when MacMullen takes us to Egyptian census returns: "a sixty-fourth part of the standard unit of land measurement, the aroura, is evidently a possession very well worth recording; the sixth part of a single olive tree; the tenth part of an adobe home. And in that tenth part may be living twenty-six people...." (p. 13)

One aspect of Roman society on which MacMullen sheds light is the tension, often amounting to hatred, between classes. We have long known that agriculture was the primary basis of the economy, and that city-dwellers were essentially consumers rather than producers. Yet the two groups, despite close economic ties, were not friendly, and rich and poor were often in a state resembling open warfare. "More than buyer and seller on a free market were involved, rather a variety of cruel pressures exerted by the strong against the weak, the arrogant rich, 'the powerful', against the adjoining farm, villagers, or 'the poor', sometimes by crooked litigation, sometimes by armed force." (p. 6) A few pages later we read: "The two worlds regard each other as, on the one side, clumsy, brutish, ignorant, uncivilized; on the other side, as baffling, extortionate, arrogant." (p. 15) The poor farmer and his family had little chance to escape the rural life of grinding work and poverty. "What prevented mobility from offering much hope was the concentration of rural wealth in the hands of absentee landlords, who drew off from the land whatever surplus it afforded...A peasant boy had small chance at it, however he changed the work he did or the place where he lived." (p. 22)

MacMullen's book is short, only 127 pages plus appendices and notes. Yet it is rich in detail. The author ends with two quotations and a question. Ammianus Marcellinus wrote: "Not everything deserves narration that goes on among the lower orders." Marc Bloch says: "I can hardly be persuaded that it is perfectly legitimate to describe a state, without first having tried to analyze the society on which it rests." MacMullen concludes: "Two views, ancient and modern. Which shall we follow?" (p. 127) His answer is clear, and I find it convincing.