

From reading Latin literature we are liable to come away with the distorted impression that "typical" Romans were either men of leisure, like Cicero, or an idle mob of unemployed riffraff subsisting on free "bread and circuses". In truth very few Romans were independently wealthy, and the official handouts, while popular, did not provide such essentials as clothing and housing; so for most Romans, as for most of us, it was necessary to earn a living. In modern times, trade unions have done much to improve the lot of the worker; in Roman times, however, there was little job security, many people worked without a contract, and collective bargaining was unknown. The collegia ("trade guilds") were professional associations rather than unions: their energies were devoted chiefly to religious and social ends (including banquets and funerals) rather than to improving working conditions (though we do hear of a strike by the bakers' guild at Ephesus in Asia Minor).

The majority of the labour force was employed in the countryside. In early times the free peasant was the model Roman, and legend praised rural patriarchs like Cincinnatus, who humbly returned to his fields after saving the state. By the time of the Gracchi, peasant holdings had largely been supplanted by latifundia, plantations owned by the rich and manned by slaves. Outside southern Italy and Sicily, however, agricultural labour in the Roman world was predominantly free. This does not, of course, mean that everyone was a landowner. Many peasants were tenants who rented land; this system, known as the colonate, became increasingly prevalent in the Late Empire and eventually led (with some modifications) to the feudal system of mediaeval times. But there

were also many casual farm workers who could be hired for a limited period of time. The elder Cato in his farming manual provides for the hiring of skilled labour like blacksmiths and lime burners, but there were many unskilled labourers available for planting, harvest or odd jobs. The Biblical parable of the vineyard workers (Matthew 20:1-16) probably reflects a practice common not only in first-century Judaea but throughout the Roman world: would-be workers congregating in the marketplace, hoping to be hired by a farm manager for the standard day-wage of one denarius. Another passage (Luke 10:1-7), in which Christ, likening his disciples to farm workers, encourages them to accept food and drink in the homes where they teach, suggests that labourers were not paid exclusively in cash; this is confirmed by Diocletian's price edict (late third century) which sets the maximum wage for rural workers at 25 denarii a day plus food.

Women as well as men worked in the fields. Strabo records that the women of Liguria and Cantabria were so hardy that they were hired not only for tilling the soil but for digging irrigation ditches, and that they would sometimes take a short break to give birth to a baby and immediately resume working so as not to lose their day's wage.

Another rural industry was mining. We tend to think of this as a servile occupation, and certainly slaves handled the most dangerous jobs in the mine shafts, but free labour is also represented, in smelting operations for instance. We also read of independent prospectors digging shallow mines or panning for gold in the rivers.