

BUSINESS LIFE IN ANCIENT ROME

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649019151

Business Life in Ancient Rome by Chas. G. Herbermann

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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CHAS. G. HERBERMANN

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ANCIENT ROME**

BUSINESS LIFE
IN 4504
ANCIENT ROME

BY
CHAS. G. HERBERMANN, PH.D.
PROFESSOR OF LATIN IN THE COLLEGE OF THE CITY OF
NEW YORK

NEW YORK
HARPER & BROTHERS, FRANKLIN SQUARE
1880

Revised and recast August 9 1922 H.K.

BUSINESS LIFE
IN
ANCIENT ROME.

EVERYBODY has heard the story of the tradesman who summoned his son to his bedside to receive his parting advice. "My son," said he, "make money; honestly if you can, but make money anyhow." Like the sea-serpent, this type of the unscrupulous business man turns up periodically in the "facetiæ" column of the newspapers. At one time he is said to be an Englishman, at another a German, and again a Yankee. But, for once, the omniscient journalist is at fault; the old sinner was known long before Plymouth Rock was discovered, long before John Bull settled in Britain—nay,

long before the Teuton gave up his shield and spear and turned trader. Nineteen hundred years ago he was known in Rome; the poet Horace saw him, or we misunderstand the following lines:

“Which is the better teacher, tell me, pray,
The law of Roscius, or the children’s lay?
The voice that says, *Make money, money,*
man;
Well, if so be; if not, what way you can;
Or that which makes you meet with dauntless
brow
The frown of fortune—ay, and shows you
how?”—HOR., *Ep.* I, i, 65 sq.

It seems strange that this story originated in Rome. To the imagination, the ancient Roman is a hero and a patriot, the lord of the earth; born to rule nations, to spare the vanquished, and to crush the proud. We fancy him at the head of armies, battling with the enemies of his country; or we see him in the senate-chamber, addressing words of burning eloquence to the assembled fathers; anywhere, in fact, except behind the counter. Still the noble

Roman did not disdain to buy and sell, to turn trader, and to hoard up millions. Listen again to Horace :

"Seek money first, good friends, and virtue next:
Each Janus lectures on the well-worn text;
Lads learn it for their lessons; gray-haired
men,
Like schoolboys, drawl the sing-song o'er
again."—HOR., *Ep. I, i, 53-6.*

In these lines the poet describes the Rome of his own day; in his letter to Augustus he has painted it for us as it was in the days of Scipio and the Gracchi:

"At Rome erewhile men rose by daybreak, saw
Their clients at their homes, laid down the law;
Put money at good interest out to loan,
Secured by names responsible and known;
Explained to younger folk, or learned from old,
How wealth might be increased, expense controlled."—HOR., *Ep. II, i, 108.*

When the empire supplanted the commonwealth, no doubt Rome and the Romans were wonderfully transformed, so much so that it is hard to recognize in the mob, shrieking for bread and the games,

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the descendants of Virginus and Icilius. But Roman thirst for gain was unaltered. We quote from Juvenal, who wrote early in the second century :

"It matters not what you may sell,
Of profit fragrant is the smell.
Keep on thy lips, morn, noon, and night,
This teaching of the bard, that might
Do honor to the gods above—
Nay, even, I should say, to Jove.
No one will ask whence comes your gold;
Have it you must, say young and old.
This principle the toothless nurse
Does to the crawling boy rehearse;
This girls upon their parent's knee
Must learn before their A B C."

Juv., Sat. XIV, 204-9.

In fact, the more deeply we penetrate into the life of the Romans, the more we shall be struck by the commercial side of their character. Patrician and plebeian, soldier and civilian, captain and senator—nay, sometimes the emperors themselves—were filled with the same craving for gain. Nor is this strange; to stifle it, they must have been more than men. The world was at

their feet, its luxuries at their command, its wealth at their mercy. What wonder if they stretched forth their hands and plucked the tempting fruit? if they lost the simple manners of their easily contented ancestors, and were filled with the cursed rage for gold? if they exchanged the plough and the sword for the counter and the balance?

But even had it not been born of the lust of wealth, Roman commerce must have been begotten of the needs of the metropolis. Towards the end of the republic, and during the first centuries of imperial rule, the population of Rome, it is estimated, amounted to a million and a half. Within its walls were gathered men of every clime and every nation; and, to provide for all the wants and luxuries of this motley multitude, immense supplies must be brought from every quarter of the globe. Modest, indeed, were the wants of by far the greater number. Of the 1,500,000 inhabitants, fully 900,000 were slaves, whose monthly allow-

ance was a bushel of corn, a pint of oil, and a little wine. Of the rest the majority were paupers, content, like Neapolitan lazzaroni, to live on the scantiest of fare. A few facts will enable us to form an idea of its meagreness. The historian Polybius, the friend of the younger Scipio, tells us that in his time, the middle of the second century before our era, one day's board and lodging at a northern Italian inn cost about half a cent. At Rome, of course, such rates were out of the question even in Polybius's time, and subsequently prices rose. Still, in Cicero's day a laborer lived on \$44 per year; and under Augustus the yearly maintenance of a slave was computed at \$37.50, or at a little more than 10 cents a day. But, in spite of what we should call starvation board and starvation wages, immense quantities of provisions were consumed by the population of the metropolis. The yearly consumption of corn alone amounted to 15,000,000 bushels. Of oil, the Roman substitute for butter, and of honey, which was