

grandparents alive; fewer than 1% of 20-year-olds had a surviving paternal grandfather.

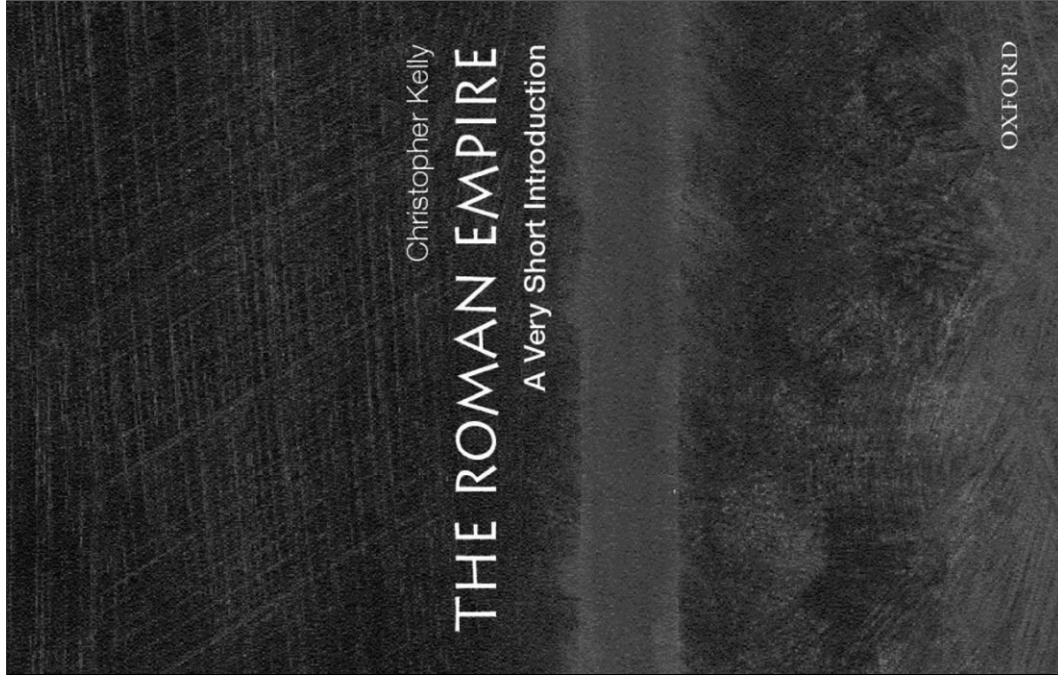
Taken together, these patterns of mortality, marriage, child-bearing, and extended families mark out an experience utterly alien to industrialized societies with much higher life expectancy, much lower birth rates, and the pressing social and financial obligations of supporting an ageing population. The contrasts are significant: surveying the Roman empire, modern eyes might be most immediately struck by the relative absence of old people; the pervasive presence of teenagers; the incidence of orphaned children; and, above all, the distressingly high number of dead babies. This was a society in which it was reasonable to think that (if they survived childhood) most people's lives would have run their course by their mid-40s. Such an expectation also carries with it a radically different sense of the passage of time, of the trajectory of an individual's career (after all, elite high-flyers entered the Senate at 25), and of what might reasonably be achieved or experienced in a generation. In the 170s AD, the emperor Marcus Aurelius, writing in his journal (known to posterity as his *Meditations*), reflected on the dull repetitiveness of human existence. In Marcus' melancholic reckoning, a lifetime of 40 years was sufficient to comprehend the tedium of eternity.

Living and dying

Look back at the past and at all the changes in the present; it is also possible to foresee the future, for it will be precisely the same and cannot escape from the rhythm of the present. Hence to study a man's life for forty years is the same as studying it for ten thousand years. For what more will you see?

Far from the madding crowd

Most modern imaginings of the Roman empire understandably concentrate on the elite. It is pleasant to picture ourselves walking with princes, offering counsel to the powerful, luxuriating in the grand residences of the rich, appreciating the works of Virgil,



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THE ROMAN EMPIRE

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

Tacitus, or Plutarch alongside those *cognoscenti* for whom they were first written. In this there is nothing to be ashamed. Indeed, these are experiences which most Romans would have envied. In a Mediterranean-wide population of some 60 million, the wealthy perhaps numbered no more than 200,000.

There are, of course, other enthusiasms. The extensive archaeological remains of the Roman military – its weapons, its armour, and, above all, the forts still standing along Hadrian's Wall in northern Britain and the Rhine frontier in Germany – have inspired some to recreate the daily routine of serving legionaries. These too are minority pursuits. The army under Marcus Aurelius in the late 2nd century AD perhaps totalled 500,000 men, less than 1% of the empire's population. A wider perspective is offered by the magnificent ruins of Roman towns. Certainly, as at Pompeii, it is possible to establish some reliable sense of what life might have been like – at least for around 15% of the empire's population.

The majority of the inhabitants of the Roman empire lived and worked on the land. Land was not only the main source of subsistence in the ancient world, it was also the principal index of wealth. Land was concentrated in the hands of the well-off. A register from the very beginning of the 2nd century AD, surviving from the unremarkable town of Ligures Baebiani in southern Italy, records contributors to a scheme promoted by the emperor Trajan to support a select group of citizen children. The register indicates that 3.5% of the richest landowners held 21.3% of the land (one individual held 11.2%). At the other end of the scale, 14% of the poorest landowners owned only 3.6% of the holdings listed. The size of these estates is difficult to determine. The register from Ligures Baebiani gives only capital values; nor is it known what area it covers. In addition, only properties worth enough to allow their owners to participate in Trajan's scheme were included. The smallest farms, omitted from the register altogether, may have been less than 2.5 hectares. This was the maximum size of plots allotted

The Roman Empire

to Roman citizens who settled conquered territory in northern Italy in the early 2nd century BC. From the 1st century AD veterans (discharged after 25 years' service in the legions) were established in purpose-built towns across the empire and assigned holdings of up to 5 hectares. These colonial ventures left their mark on the provincial landscape: the regular, chessboard pattern of ancient farms is still visible in large tracts of the Tunisian countryside.

Agriculture depended on the peasantry. Only on large estates in Italy, Sicily, southern Gaul, and parts of North Africa did slave labour make any significant contribution. For the most part, the fields were worked by owner-occupiers and their families, by tenant farmers, and by wage labourers. These are overlapping categories. A small proprietor might supplement his income by working on a nearby estate during the harvest. Indeed, the size of the plots allotted to veterans, too small for self-sufficiency, particularly in areas of poor-quality arable land, assume their owners will be able to find other employment. Inevitably, the methods and style of cultivation adopted by peasant farmers, whether as owner-occupiers or tenants, were subject to the physical constraints of climate and terrain: from the cycle of inundation and irrigation in the Nile valley (the most productive area in the empire) to the rain-fed fields of northern Italy or southern France (fertile enough to permit crop rotation rather than require biennial fallow); from the 'run-off' agriculture of the high steppe and pre-desert zones in North Africa (where an elaborate network of canals and terraces distributed water stored after spring rains) to the heavy, wet soils of Britain and the Rhine-Danube provinces.

In the Mediterranean basin, the basic crops were cereals (chiefly barley and wheat), dry legumes (broad beans, peas, chickpeas, lentils), vines, and olives. Dry legumes provided vitamin B2 and calcium, absent from cereals; the olive was a major source of fat, oil, lighting, and soap. A smallholder might also keep pigs (for meat), goats (for cheese), and a few sheep (particularly for manure). Cattle were rare. In the semi-arid Mediterranean lowlands where good

arable land was in relatively short supply, large-scale animal husbandry was simply uneconomical. It placed too great a strain on food and water resources. It is perhaps then unsurprising that for many classical writers the raising of livestock was principally associated with far-flung frontier provinces such as Britain and the nomadic peoples living beyond the Rhine-Danube. A diet rich in beef and dairy products was a sure indication of barbarism.

Typically, peasant farming aims to trade maximum production against minimum risk. In much of the Mediterranean, a wide variety of crops was grown in several fields scattered across a broken, hilly landscape. The diversification of plant types and the fragmentation of land acted as a buffer against the chances of crop failure. Careful storage helped ensure adequate supplies throughout the year.

Individual farmers down on their luck might also be able to rely on neighbours whom they had perhaps once bailed out in similar circumstances. But for all their thrift, ingenuity, and mutual support, hunger was never far away. In the mid 2nd-century, Galen, one of the most famous ancient doctors whose writings survive, vividly recalled the effects of food shortage on the rural areas around his home town of Pergamum (in western Turkey). Those in the countryside first slaughtered their livestock (which they could no longer feed), then they consumed the acorns which had been stored in pits as winter food for their pigs. Galen noted that, even in famine conditions, few died of starvation, but rather of secondary infections following the consumption of unwholesome substitute foods such as the shoots of trees and bushes, bulbs, and boiled fresh grass.

Numerous fevers occurred ... defecation was foul smelling and painful, and there followed constipation or dysentery; the urine was acrid or indeed foul-smelling, as some had ulcerous bladders. . . . Those to whom none of these things happened all died either from what was evidently inflammation of one of the internal organs or because of the severity and malignity of the fevers.

Despite often harsh environmental conditions and near endemic

malnutrition, those on the land were surprisingly resilient in the face of hardship; but theirs was a fragile economy which might suddenly be broken by unpredictable crop failure, drought, or flood, or by the unreasonable demands of landlords, creditors, or tax collectors. Some peasants weathered these crises; some succumbed to death, disease, or debt; others slipped from owning their own farms to become tenants, or from tenants to landless labourers. Their sons perhaps looked to join the army with the expectation that, if they survived 25 years' service in the legions, they would receive their own plot. Many veterans were settled near the garrison town in which they had served, often far away from where they had grown up. And in their new home – like most other people – they continued to work the land.

Living and dying

Smallholders in the Roman empire were a silent majority. They erected few inscriptions; they were commemorated by few epitaphs; their humble, wooden farmsteads have mostly perished without trace; they rarely feature in surviving literary texts, except perhaps as rustic yokels whose puzzlement in the face of cultivated urbanity was sure to raise a laugh. Yet the wealth of the Roman empire depended on those who laboured in the countryside. Their meagre surpluses, extracted as rents or taxes, funded a peacetime army stationed on the frontiers and underwrote the network of cities which gave the empire its administrative and cultural coherence. Roman history (for both educated contemporaries and ourselves) understandably concentrates on emperors, wars, conquest, the rich and powerful, and the remarkably impressive achievements of an urban civilization. These deserve our attention, and may merit our admiration. That said, it can sometimes too easily be forgotten that the stability and prosperity of this vast Mediterranean superstate rested squarely on the reluctant backs of sweating peasants. History is not just about what has chanced to survive, or what catches the attention of historians. In the face of so much glittering, imperial magnificence, it is always salutary to reflect that most inhabitants of the Roman empire lacked sufficient resources to leave behind any lasting memorial.