

Temporary Workforce in the Roman Villa

Werner Tietz

This paper is dedicated to evaluating the exchange of workforce between villas and surrounding 'subsistence' farms in Roman Italy and beyond. The latter economic model often suffered from a lack of arable land, but had a surplus of workers. The former had need for considerable additional workers during the harvest and other peak seasons.¹ Ideally, these two types of farms would complement each other. Villas could avoid keeping a permanent workforce without enough work to do, while smallholders could earn cash money or could be granted access to facilities which demanded investment in capital they lacked, such as wine presses or storage units close to markets.

The crucial question is how well this model of workforce exchange worked in reality to build a circle of exchange in the Roman countryside. Possible obstacles lay on both sides of the bargain. The smallholders could lack the necessary infrastructure to get to the next villa within a reasonable time, could be occupied harvesting the same kind of crops on their own land, or simply could not care enough, (either due to lack of information or indifference towards the possibilities offered by earning cash money). The villas, on the other hand, could profit from more suitable sources of workforce, especially slaves of the same owners but from different estates, unoccupied at the time. Additionally, they may be unwilling to employ workers from surrounding areas for political reasons, or focused on conspicuous consumption in the form of slaves.

Looking at the ancient economy, scholars over the last 150 years have often found that it lacks a certain kind of entrepreneurial spirit. Over 1000 years the means of agricultural production and processing seemed to have hardly changed. Still potent are the suggestions advanced by Moses Finley and others that the ancient landowners, in particular the Roman elite, lacked a real sense for rational thinking when it came to terms of investment and return. It has often been claimed that the Roman elite could rely on a permanent stream of slaves from successful wars to provide cheap labour for their huge estates. Furthermore, it was proposed that Roman large landlords had no incentive to heighten returns from their land by technology, a rational division of labour, or even sophisticated bookkeeping.² The classical works cited to support this approach ranged from the writings of Cicero to Tacitus; these authors are almost exclusively members of the elite and, one could argue, not really connected to the actual day-to-day-business on their estates. Most importantly, however, is the often-neglected point that they wrote with an agenda of their own. This agenda often encompassed criticism of elite behaviour and was not meant to be a description of the real world.

The idea of the prevalence of slaves over free landowners in ancient Rome goes back to well-known texts such as this famous passage from Plutarch:

“But his brother Gaius, in a certain pamphlet, has written that as Tiberius was passing through Tuscany on his way to Numantia, and observed the dearth of inhabitants in the country, and that those who tilled its soil or tended its flocks there were imported barbarian slaves, he then first conceived the public policy which was the cause of countless ills to the two brothers. However, the energy and ambition of Tiberius were most of all kindled by the people themselves, who posted writings on porticoes, house-walls, and monuments, calling upon him to recover for the poor the public land.”³

In this text, greedy landowners seem to stand against the poor *plebs rustica*, depriving them of their land and replacing them with slaves (i.e. not even keeping them on as tenants). The moralising quality of texts such as this has often been overlooked. Finley notes: “Clearly the exploitation of agricultural labour was intense, of tied peasants and dependent labour in the eastern and some other conquered territories, primarily of slaves and of the marginal free men who took small tenancies in the classical heartland.”⁴ This fits well with other ancient texts, from Cicero to Vergil to Plutarch. Mostly, the contrast is made between slaves working for absentee landlords, and free farmers who are either landowners or tenants barely getting by.⁵

While the concerns of the landowning elite make up most of this evidence, a great part of the actual work was probably done by neither of those groups but by free labourers who were temporarily employed, mostly on mid- or small-sized villas. These also made up a great portion of the labour on bigger estates.

A quick calculation suffices to show that slaves were a profitable means of production only when there was work all year round, a piece of knowledge clearly shown by Columella.⁶ According to him, an able adult slave cost about 6,000 to 8,000 sesterces, and at the same time a landowner paid his free day labourers about four sesterces a day.⁷ Even if one takes the low price of 6,000 sesterces and optimistically assumes that this slave would work full-time for 30 years, one could employ a free labourer for the price the slave had cost for 42 days each year – more than enough to cover all the labour-intensive periods on a farm, like ploughing or harvest seasons. However, slaves also needed food, drink, and housing, and by no means would remain healthy at all times. All things considered, the costs for a slave might have amounted to close to 20,000 sesterces over 30 years, adding up to 5,000 days of work (i.e. almost half a year every year).⁸ This, of course, would have been a convincing argument for any Roman farmer to use just a minimal staff of slaves together with a supplementary force of seasonally employed free labour, provided that there was a sufficient quantity available.⁹

The most successful villas thus probably operated in areas of mixed economic character, where villas and smallholders existed side by side.¹⁰ Slaves were usually valued by their agricultural owners. As everywhere in the Roman economy, there were different degrees of skill and levels of responsibility in Roman agriculture, with the two going hand-in-hand.¹¹ Whenever ancient writers discuss investing in slaves, they do not forget to mention a good education and a system of rewards, including the possibility, if not to be freed, to live almost like free-born people.

We find slaves in all kinds of services and trades, where they usually make up the well-educated and higher-ranking part of the personnel. In potters' workshops and brickyards, for example, they are attested as supervisors of free workers. Knowledge counted more than legal status, especially from the perspective of the slave owner. The same seems to be true for the rural economy. Personal legal status often seemed too abstract a concept to govern the daily operations on a Roman villa. Varro explicitly suggests having literate slaves as foremen, who should even be entitled to rebuke and strike the free staff whenever they deemed it necessary. Furthermore, they should be rewarded and assigned little plots of land or a small flock for their own use in order to have them develop strong ties with the estate.¹² This model, born out of necessity and generations of practice, became a space with its own legal setting. For example, the shepherds in the 2nd century A.D. novel *Daphnis and Chloe* are slaves, but the readers are told about that only just before the end, when they need the permission of their owner to get married.¹³ Until that point, they and many other characters acted as if they were completely free. A novel may seem a little far from reality, but according to each and every one of our agricultural writers, one had to take good care of the slaves. Often this might be the result of a humanitarian rather than a utilitarian motivation, but this is exactly the point. *Servi quasi coloni* (i.e. slaves acting as quasi-independent tenants) were a ubiquitous phenomenon.¹⁴

A great part of recent scholarship, though, trusts rather in conspicuous consumption than in rationality as a prime motif for Roman elite behaviour. Losses might have been taken in order to attain higher goals in aristocratic competition. Slaves might have been an excellent means for that, and they are presented as such in some passages of Roman literature.¹⁵ These passages, though, should not be seen as accurate representations of reality, but rather as a conscious exaggeration for the sake of social and moral criticism.

Farms of 10 *iugera* of land or less were not capable of comfortably sustaining a family, but this size is what was given to retiring Roman soldiers and is often mentioned in our texts.¹⁶ So, where would the rest of the necessary funds for those families have come from? The 'primitivist' view in ancient economic history supposes the ruthless exploitation of the arable land, destroying the last resources of those families. It needs to be taken into account, though, that the Roman economy lasted for over 500 years basically within the same set of principles, so a constant loss of land does not seem to be the right solution for the problem of surplus workforce.

It remains to consider huge wanderings of labour from small farms to bigger villas as well as into nearby towns. Hired temporary workers were a ubiquitous phenomenon in the Roman world.¹⁷ In towns we find temporary labour, too, but we can rarely distinguish whether the free workers came in from the countryside or were actually part of the *plebs urbana*.¹⁸ It has been shown that there was no clear social or economic division between Roman towns and the surrounding countryside.¹⁹ This clearly also applies to the frequent exchange of temporary workers, whether a city-based entrepreneur was

looking for someone to fill in with the packing of pottery, or a rural landlord came to town in search of harvest labour, as described in the Gospel of Matthew.²⁰

Our sources abound with documentation of temporary work in the Roman countryside, and those were not only the infamous *obaerati*, people working off their debts, who are mentioned by Varro in Asia Minor, Egypt, and Illyricum.²¹ The dozens of papyri from Egypt that stipulate seasonal work might be considered an exception. Yet, Cato and others give their readers a whole set of examples and models for such contracts for basically every kind of harvest where time was a critical issue; large forces of labour were a necessity over short periods of time.²² Pliny the Younger, certainly one of the wealthiest senators of his time, takes his urban slaves with him when harvest is due and puts this in the centre of one of his letters.²³ This must have been considered extraordinary, and Pliny might well be fishing for compliments here, showing himself off as a frugal owner who avoids hiring extra labour, the usual way of supplying the extra workforce needed for harvest and other peak seasons. This behaviour points to a temporarily huge demand for labour meeting the unwillingness of the Roman elite to supply it from their own staff. Untrained free workers filled in. In another letter, Pliny deplores the lack of good tenants for his land and reacts by sending guards for the fields and slaves as supervisors.²⁴ This happened in Roman Italy, where purportedly masses of slaves laboured in the fields, as Gaius Gracchus had already written 200 years earlier!

In regions where huge estates were the dominant feature, the supply of free labour from nearby farms certainly had its limits. To supply it anyway, there were companies with huge working gangs. These companies had long-term contracts with the landowners, and the gangs worked their way through Italy, North Africa (where slaves were always rare),²⁵ Egypt, Mesopotamia, and certainly several other regions for which we lack testimony.²⁶ The famous harvester's epitaph from Mactar shows the protagonist as part of such a gang,²⁷ but there were also small enterprises that specialized in certain activities during harvest season, such as the correct preparation and working of the oil presses.²⁸

These specialists probably were the exception. Our evidence rather points towards a *plebs rustica* that hired out their readiness to work, and not with special skills. A graffito from Pompeii ridicules a man for having worked as waiter, potter, saltfish-maker, baker, farmer and many other jobs.²⁹ Those certainly were odd jobs for an unskilled worker.

Of course, due to the nature of our archaeological and textual sources, quantification is a problem also when it comes to estimating the contribution of free labour to the economy of the Roman villa. But it seems that especially on mid-sized farms they were the unrivalled model for every farmer who had his wits together. It is probable that slaves usually figured as rather independent agents of their owners, often blurring the lines of civil and legal status. The flourishing cities of Roman imperial times attest to a flourishing rural economy. This is best imaginable by suggesting an efficient exchange of temporary labour.

These conclusions might affect our view towards the remains of Roman farms and rural estates. In the surviving archaeological evidence, there are very few examples of Roman villas where we can be sure that they had slave quarters. It is often assumed that compact structures around an inner courtyard, like the ones at Lucus Feroniae, Boscotrecase, Settefinestre, and some others, were used to house slaves.³⁰ Very rarely do we actually find them equipped with shackles, guard rooms, or other clear indications for the legal status of the occupants.³¹ Mere trust issues, on the other hand, might have come up when the landowner's own slaves were concerned, and perhaps especially when landowners had to hire an additional temporary workforce they did not necessarily know from previous enterprises. Rooms used as living quarters other than those for the landowner or his steward (especially on farms smaller than the large senatorial or imperial estates, but also other kinds of farms), should be considered as a multiple-use structure, occasionally providing housing for free labour.

Notes

¹ Varro rust. 1, 17; Shaw 2013, 13–23.

² For this whole discussion, see the summary in Pleket 1990, 32–53; Greene 2000.

³ Plut. TG 8, 7; cf. Plut. TG 9. For Gaius Gracchus as a writer of pamphlets and thus fabricating his own legend see also Cic. div. 2, 62.

⁴ Finley 1985, 103; cf. Pleket 1990, 99–102.

⁵ See the summary in Bringmann 1985, 8–16.

⁶ Columella's postulate of eight slaves working fifty hectares of arable land (2, 12) has been shown to cover just a little less than the amount of work required year-round, but nothing more: Bringmann 1985, 16; Spurr 1986, 136–140.

⁷ Colum. 3, 3, 8; cf. Hor. epist. 2, 2, 1–5 and Plin. nat. 10, 84; NT Matth. 20, 1–5.

⁸ For a detailed calculation, see Tietz 2015, 290–291.

⁹ Rathbone 1981.

¹⁰ Cato agr. 13; Varro rust. 1, 17, 2.

¹¹ See, e.g., the list in White 1970, 332–376.

¹² Varro rust. 1, 17, 4–5.

¹³ Longus 3, 31; 'marriage' among slaves and other 'liberties' conceded to them prove this point, that reality often superseded legal status: White 1970, 351–359; 411. Similarly, a freedman in Petronius claims to have been a slave for 40 years, with no-one knowing his real status: Petron. 57, 9.

¹⁴ Pleket 1990, 100–102 with note 130; Tietz 2015, 292–294.

¹⁵ Petron. 47, 12–13. 53, 2–10. 57, 7; Brunt 1975; Pleket 1990, 100.

¹⁶ See the compilation in White 1970, 345–347.

¹⁷ Cic. off. 1, 150; White 1970, 347–350.

¹⁸ CIL IV 10150.

¹⁹ Goodman 2007.

²⁰ NT Matth. 20, 1–5.

²¹ Varro rust. 1, 17.

²² Cato agr. 64–67. 114–115. 153–154; Longus 2, 2; Shaw 2013, 31–33.

²³ Plin. epist. 9, 20, 2: *Ipse cum maxime vindemias graciles quidem, uberiores tamen quam expectaveram colligo, si colligere est non numquam decerpere uvam, torculum invisere, gustare de lacu mustum, obrepere urbanis, qui nunc rusticis praesunt meque notariis et lectoribus reliquerunt.*

²⁴ Plin. epist. 9, 37, 2–4.

²⁵ Lepelley 2006, 102.

²⁶ Suet. Vesp. 1, 4; Rufinus Hist. Mon. 18; Shaw 2013, 72–79.

²⁷ CIL VIII 11824.

²⁸ P. Oxy. 1631.

²⁹ CIL IV 10150.

³⁰ See the compilation in Andrews – Privitera 2016, 136–237.

³¹ For a critique of the interpretation of the slave-quarters at Settefinestre and Lucus Feroniae, see Marzano 2007, 125–153.

References

Andrews – Privitera 2016

M. Andrews – S. Privitera, The Interpretation of the Building, in: E. Fentress et al. (eds.), *Villa Magna. An Imperial Estate and its Legacies. Excavations 2006–2010* (London 2016) 136–138.

Bringmann 1985

K. Bringmann, *Die Agrarreform des Tiberius Gracchus. Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Stuttgart 1985).

Brunt 1975

P. A. Brunt, Two Great Roman Landowners, *Latomus* 34, 1975, 619–635.

Goodman 2007

P. Goodman, *The Roman City and its Periphery. From Rome to Gaul* (New York 2007).

Greene 2000

K. Greene, ‘Technological Innovation and Economic Progress in the Ancient World: M. I. Finley Re-Considered’, *The Economic History Review* 53, 2000, 29–59.

Lepelley 2006

C. Lepelley, *Rom und das Reich. Die Regionen des Reiches* (Hamburg 2006).

Marzano 2007

A. Marzano, *Roman Villas in Central Italy: A Social and Economic History* (Leiden 2007).

Pleket 1990

H. W. Pleket, *Wirtschaft*, in: F. Vittinghoff (Hg.), *Handbuch der Europäischen Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte I* (Stuttgart 1990) 25–160.

Rathbone 1981

D. W. Rathbone, The Development of Agriculture in the ‘Ager Cosanus’ during the Roman Republic: Problems of Evidence and Interpretation, *JRS* 71, 1981, 10–23.

Scheidel 2005

W. Scheidel, Human Mobility in Roman Italy II: The Slave Population, *JRS* 95, 2005, 64–79.

Shaw 2013

B. Shaw, *Bringing in the Sheaves. Economy and Metaphor in the Roman World* (Toronto 2013).

Spurr 1986

M. S. Spurr, *Arable Cultivation in Roman Italy c. 200 B.C. – c. A.D. 100* (Ann Arbor 1986).

Tietz 2015

W. Tietz, *Hirten, Bauern, Götter. Eine Geschichte der römischen Landwirtschaft* (München 2015).

White 1970

K. D. White, *Roman Farming* (London 1970).