

Roman townsman in the countryside

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Abstract

In most studies of the socio-economic history of ancient Rome, attention is paid either separately to urban life or rural life, but the phenomenon of a person entering an alien environment stands aside. In this regard, the question arises: to what extent in ancient times there was a discrepancy between the inhabitants of the city and the countryside. This small study on how a Roman citizen behaves in a village raises a number of problems of this nature. What was the countryside like for the inhabitants of a Roman city? How did he behave there? And whether a Roman citizen wanted to live in a village? The article attempts to find answers to these questions.

Keywords: ancient Rome; ancient city; townspeople; villagers

One often comes across the judgments of ancient authors about their stay in the Roman village and their attitude towards the villagers. Therefore, I would like to give a peculiar essay on how Roman authors at different times described the collision of the Roman city dweller with the rural way of life. Despite the fact that the life of a Roman citizen from ancient times was associated with agriculture and the rural way of life, and the farmer (*agricola*) was the ideal Roman (*Cat. De agri cultura.*, Pref. 1), quite early appeared a layer of citizens whose life and activities were directly connected with the city. Over time, the circle of such people is expanding more and more. The number of townspeople can include not only urban artisans, merchants, and urban lumpen-proletariat, but also aristocrats, who, although they have large landholdings, their political interests are concentrated in Rome. In addition to Roman citizens and free, stateless people, an important place among the urban population is undoubtedly occupied by various kinds of slaves permanently living in the city.

For the first time in Roman literature, the opposition of the urban dweller to the rustic (*rustici*) is most clearly recorded by Plautus. His life and activities fall in the second half of the III century BC - the beginning of the II century BC. Although the action of the comedies takes place in Greece, Plautus freely replaces the features of Greek life with Roman ones. In the comedy "The Rude Man" (*Truculentus*), the slave, bearing the nickname given in the title of the play, is named by one of the heroines a redneck (*Plaut. Truc.*, 253). In the same comedy, it is shown how a short city life turned a gloomy peasant into a frivolous reveler. The "Vudularia" comedy contrasts life in the city and the countryside. The old man Diniya, hiring a day laborer, for a long time does not want to hire the impoverished city dweller Nicodemus, whose hands, according to Diniya, "are used to throwing bones only", and his body is "white from the shadow, the bliss of the city" (*Plaut. Vud.*, 20 – 45). In the same comedy, Diniya also describes the difficult village life. The slave Halin from the "Casina" comedy (*Cas.*, 90 – 100) speaks contemptuously about the village and its inhabitants. For the Roman city dweller, the villager is a rude, intemperate dork; even the city slave treats the village slave with contempt (*Plaut. Most.*, 1-10). Even country smells are repugnant to the city dweller (*Plaut. Most.*, 37 – 41). On the other hand, a daily visit to the villa (the estate - *Plaut. Truc.*, 646) is quite a common action,

however, young people in Plautus' comedies appear there without much pleasure, and the main life is concentrated in the city. Naturally, rural life does not please the slaves of young rakes either. They agree to everything just not to go to rural work, and leaving for the village is a tragedy (Plaut. Menaech., 970-980; Cas., 420). Slave Gurmion in the "Ghost" comedy speaks of the bitter fate of the city slave in the countryside as follows (Plaut. Most., 15-20):

You think me a country bumpkin, I dare say – witty city chap that you are – pretty witty city chit. I expect you know you're going to be sent out to the mill yourself before long. Yes, any day now you'll be joining the outdoor sta-the ironclads. Better make the most of your time now, my lad. Drink and be merry, waste your master's goods and make a ruin of your master's ne young son (Plautus 1964).

The village economy in the comedies of Plautus has to be run by a woman, while the husband stays in the city (Plaut. Merc., 924).

At the same time as the plays of Plautus, a work no less interesting for our topic was created – the treatise of Mark Porcius Cato the Elder "Agriculture". The treatise was a kind of generalizing manual on the conduct of an intensive slave-owning economy. It was written both for those who already had experience in housekeeping and for young people who are just getting such experience. Cato describes in some detail how, in his opinion, the owner, who arrived from the city to the estate, should behave (Cat. De agri cultura, 2). The owner, having offered honors to the home Lar, must go around the estate on the day of arrival or the next (2.1) after in the description of Cato follows a conversation with a slave-manager - vilicus, who is described with naturalism and sarcasm. The owner asks the manager what work has been done, how well they are done, and how much product has been received. Vilicus makes excuses if not everything is in order: he says that "the slaves fled, that they performed their duties". After the vilicus gives a lot of excuses, the owner returns him to the calculation of work and daily lessons» (2, 1 – 2). The owner points out that all the work could be done, but the manager was lazy. (2, 3 – 4). According to the advice of Cato, the landowner must carry out the survey of the manager with complete calmness (2.5). For Cato and his contemporaries, the villa is, first of all, a place of housekeeping, and not a place of rest. The estates are rather modest in appearance and are intended not so much for the pleasures of the owner, but for the residence of workers and the manager.

Seneca (Epist., 86) tells that the villa of Scipio the Elder amazed everyone with its simplicity and homeliness. However, the fact that Cato insists on frequent visits to the estate also indicates that even for his contemporaries, the delights of urban life were preferable to rural labor. This fully corresponds to the grotesque image that appears before us in the comedies of Plautus. This attitude to life in the countryside and the rural way of life among the Roman city dweller persisted for a long time, until the middle of the 1st century BC.

The attitude of townspeople to life in the countryside is changing along with global social and political changes in the Roman state at the turn of the era. In the first half of the 1st century BC the attitude toward the rustic (rustici) among the townspeople is quite mocking.

Cicero, in a speech in defense of Sextus Roscius, speaks directly about attitudes towards rural life:

I ... know many who ... consider that very village life, which, in your opinion, should serve to reproach and accusation, considers both the most honest and the sweetest”
(Sed permultos ego novi... qui... vitamque hauc rusticam, quam tu probo et crimini putas esse oportere, et honestissimam et suavissimam esse arbitrantur. – XVII, 48).

Cicero adds, comparing his client with “rusticus” from Caecilius' comedy “One should forgive the man who himself admits that he is a redneck” (Ignosci oportere ei homini, qui fatetur esse rusticus – Op. cit., XVIII, 51). Later, Horace (Epist., I, 7,84) shows the same negatively mocking attitude towards the “village” – Volteus, who bought the estate “before [he was] clean, [and now] he became a peasant” (ex nitido fit rusticus). Columella notes that «it has become common and firm to believe that agriculture is a dirty business» (Colum., I, pref., 20). S. A. Osharov believes that this was the opinion of the majority (Osharov 1988).

In the Roman literature of the Principate, the village appears as a refuge from troubles and a place of active recreation (otii), and this was successfully expressed by Horace (Sat. 2, 6):

Oh, when will I see the fields! And when will I be able to
Then over the writings of the ancients, then in sweet slumber and laziness
Enjoy the blissful oblivion of an anxious life again!

Such attitude becomes the commonplace of Roman literature of the Common Era. The village otium is filled either with modest feasts and festivities, or with love (in Tibullus), and most often with academic studies or poetry (Seneca, Pliny the Younger). With regard to the charms of village life and the glorification of agricultural labor, we can even speak about a certain state order from the time of Augustus. The life of a farmer and rural labor in such works (first of all, the "Georgics" and "Bucolics" of Virgil) are idealized. The idealization and glorification of rural labor were very well correlated with Augustus' policy of “returning to the customs of his ancestors” and his agrarian policy. Nevertheless, perceiving the village as a place of recreation and creativity, Roman citizens and, above all, landowners, perceived a long stay in the estate away from the city as a burden.

Roman writers of the time of the Empire, although they rejoice at the opportunity to be away from the noise of the city (Sen. Epist., 123, 1 – 3; Plin. Epist., I, 3; 6; 9; 22, 1), at the same time, they constantly complain that the estate is more economic (Plin. Epist., I, 3,2; III, 19) distract them from creativity and soon they are drawn back into the thick of urban life, judicial and political affairs (Plin. Epist., II, 14; IV, 13, 1). (see Tronsky 1957; Von Albrecht 2003).

The messages of Seneca and Pliny the Younger are especially interesting in the key of our research. Both were large landowners and their estates were scattered all over Italy. In their letters, both left detailed descriptions of their stay in the countryside. Pliny the Younger, talking about his uncle Pliny the Elder, gives us an interesting comparison of life in the city and in the country (Plin. Epist, III, 5, 8 – 16). In the city, a famous encyclopedist gets up before dawn for creative pursuits and political affairs. The rest of the time at home he also gives to his studies. In the village, Pliny the Elder is already completely immersed in his scientific studies, having freed himself, as his nephew says, from “city labors and city bustle”.

For residents of cities of that time, as well as for modern citizens, the village seemed on the one hand to be a place of rest, but rather boring, where a measured life has no the fullness of that in the city. The villagers are rude and uncouth, their life is difficult and dirty. For a significant part of landowners living in the city and only occasionally visiting their estates (and

with time less and less), staying in the village and village worries are burdensome, and they tend either not to stay in the estate, or to equip it with urban luxury.

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