

History's Earliest Hustlers

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"THE HISTORY OF ROME," writes US archaeologist Kim Bowes, "is peopled by the rich." Cicero, Livy, and Tacitus chronicled the lives of consuls and emperors, but the classical world's most celebrated scholars weren't interested in ordinary working Romans. It's an omission Bowes seeks to remedy in her remarkable and meticulously researched new book, *Surviving Rome: The Economic Lives of the Ninety Percent*.

We meet a colorful cast of characters who survived—and sometimes even thrived—in what the author describes as the world's first "global" economy. The challenges faced by ancient Egypt's Soterichos family, who turned to cash crops to pay off debt, shed light on smallholder agriculture. We learn how Romans accessed credit in times of want from stories of the Pompeian pawnbroker and moneylender Faustilla. And the dealings of army supplier Philokles, who pimped out prostitutes to a garrison at Krokodilo in Egypt's Eastern Desert, form part of a discussion of income earned by working for the Roman state.

Bowes, a professor of classical studies at the University of Pennsylvania and former director of the American Academy in Rome, rejects the notion that all premodern societies were essentially the same—that it's possible to fill gaps in our knowledge of the ancient world by retrojecting based on peoples and places we know better. She draws instead on archaeological discoveries, bookkeeping records, and even human skeletons from far corners of the empire. The economy that emerges from these sources—many of which have surfaced or been subject to rigorous scientific analysis only in the past 20 years—is far more complex than hitherto supposed.

At the heart of this economy was a paradox: high consumption and rapidly expanding demand for cheap consumer goods—from greater varieties of food and drink to highly standardized pots, jugs, and jewelry—combined with low income and limited opportunities to earn a wage. Romans dealt with this income gap and supported themselves during months of scarcity through credit, pawning possessions, or borrowing against the next harvest or another source of future income.

Social mobility depended on accumulating small amounts of capital that could generate additional income—a plot of



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farmland, a yoke of oxen, a pottery kiln, or a loom for weaving. Yet most families struggled to amass savings to transform into capital.

Neat analytical categories such as farmer, artisan, or wage laborer fall apart on contact with the messy reality of ordinary Romans who depended on a multitude of income sources to make ends meet. Distinctions between adult and child, rural and urban, creditor and debtor—even between free and enslaved—become blurred when it comes to ordinary lives.

Bowes does not shy away from comparisons with the precarious economic existence of many people today. The relentless persistence of working Romans who "squeezed a living out of their circumstances" through graft, hustles, and money maneuvers is not so different from the efforts of a wide swath of 21st century American society, Bowes writes. Discussions of modern economic thinkers, from Adam Smith and Karl Marx to John Kenneth Galbraith and Thomas Piketty, add contemporary resonance.

Bowes's lively storytelling, accompanied by dozens of illustrations and photographs, will interest specialist and general readers alike. "It's amazing," Bowes writes, "how much we can know about the 90 percent just by listening to them." **F&D**

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