

Roman Economy

Most people in the Roman world were farmers. Some of the people who worked on farms were slaves, but most of them were free. They grew wheat and barley and olives and grapes and apples, onions and celery. Mostly they sold what they grew in markets in the towns, and bought food in the market to eat, as most farmers do today. And they paid taxes, as farmers do today. Roman farmers paid their taxes partly in money and partly in food. With the money they got from selling their crops, these Roman farmers also bought clothes and furniture and tools. They bought flip-flops, glass drinking cups, and animals to sacrifice to the gods.

A lot of these farmers lived in small villages, but a lot of them also lived in bigger towns and then walked out to their fields every day. In villages, people mostly lived in mud-brick apartment buildings with courtyards, and they did their cooking on braziers in the courtyards. People who lived in town often lived in small apartments, with no courtyards, and didn't have kitchens, so they bought most of their food from street vendors or in fast food restaurants.

Rich people and their slaves also lived in the towns. Some of these rich people owned a lot of land, and rented it out to poorer farmers, or made their slaves farm it. Some of the rich people ran businesses, making clothes or tools in factories. Some poorer men in the towns taught school, or were doctors, or carried water, or ran bakeries, or begged. Women in the towns sold things in stores, or did spinning or embroidery, or worked as wet-nurses, or begged. Women didn't generally teach school in ancient Rome. Many of these people working in towns were also slaves.

Roman people didn't have to just buy things that were made locally. Traders sailed across the Mediterranean Sea bringing papyrus from Egypt, glass from Phoenicia, pork sausage and salt from Austria, tin from England, fish sauce and cooking pots and dishes from North Africa, and olive oil from Spain. Even ordinary farmers could afford a lot of these things.

Some traders went even further, into the Indian Ocean or across West Asia, and traded with people in India or in West Asia to get Indian cotton, pepper, cinnamon and other spices, and even silk that came all the way from China. But these things were very expensive, and only very rich people could afford them.

Questions

1. What was one way people earned money during the Roman time period?
2. How did people get around not having a kitchen to cook in?
3. How did life compare if you were wealthy or poor in the towns?
4. What were some products Rome imported?
5. How did imports show social status?