

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	vii
Chapter 1 How to Become Rich, Envied, and Respected: Farming	I
Chapter 2 How to Become Rich, Probably Envied, and Perhaps Respected: Commerce and Banking	35
Chapter 3 How to Become Rich, Maybe Envied, but Certainly Not Respected: Taxation and Public Contracts	71
Chapter 4 How to Invest, Lose Money, and Gain Popularity: Giving Back to the People	111
Chapter 5 How to Invest and Lose Money, Popularity, and Everything Else: Disastrous Investments	141

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CONTENTS

Chapter 6 The Dark Side of Money Making: Human Trafficking	165
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	217
GLOSSARY	219
NOTES	227

Chapter 1

HOW TO BECOME RICH, ENVIED, AND RESPECTED

Farming

Introduction

In the third century BCE, two main powers coexisted in the western Mediterranean: Rome and Carthage. Eventually they clashed. Thanks to the military genius of Hannibal, Carthage came very close to winning the war; in the end, however, Rome triumphed. Ancient and modern historians agree that the contenders had comparable resources and power, and yet they were radically different. Carthage had developed a maritime and commercial empire; it mostly cared about keeping control over some ports strategic for safeguarding its trade network in the Mediterranean. As a result, when it came to war, Carthage heavily relied on its fleet and employed mercenaries. The Roman economy, on the other hand, was neither commercial nor industrial, but agricultural. Accordingly, Rome relied mainly on its infantry, and the core of its army was made up of farmers who fought to defend their land.

FARMING

In many ways, the outcome of the Second Punic War transformed the Roman economy, but it did not alter its nature. Rome remained grounded in agriculture. Indeed, upon defeating Carthage, Romans, not content with their new acquisition of strategic ports, actually created two new provinces: Sardinia and Sicily. In other words, farmers wanted more land.

Indeed, in return for their service, soldiers could expect a stipend and special rewards, which mostly depended on their rank in the army and on the success and generosity of a general. The highest reward was a plot of land. This plot typically was part of some freshly conquered territory, though some plots were located in reclaimed land or in newly established colonies. Florence, Bologna, Cologne (meaning “the colony”), York, and Lyon owe their origin or their growth to settlements of land-hungry veterans.

It would be hard to overstate the central position that agriculture occupied in the Roman psyche. As mentioned in the introduction, *pecunia* is Latin for “cattle” and hence for “money”; similarly, *laetus* means “well-manured” or “fertile” and hence “joyful,” while *felix*, which means “fruitful,” came to mean “lucky.” If money is cattle, then being happy and blessed means having a well-manured field that bears fruit. Being a good farmer, then, was about more than achieving financial success. One can begin to see why the Romans reinvested in land the profit they had acquired through war and commerce.

FARMING

Clearly, the centrality of agriculture in the Roman imagination, economy, and language can reveal a lot about the ways they earned a living, with implications that reach beyond agriculture. For one thing, it means that, however idealized, the story of Cincinnatus, who went from being a farmer to being a dictator and then back to a farmer, captures an unquestionably historical truth. Not only did Rome and the majesty of its empire grow directly out of an initially marginal and irrelevant peasant society, but even after Rome had become the leading economy in the Mediterranean, farming and agriculture remained the ideal and the measure of individual success. The first two selections of this chapter portray the endurance of the agricultural ideal and its adaptation to an economy that grew over the centuries. The next two selections reveal some secrets for succeeding in agriculture, or in other words, they show how to become rich, joyful, and blessed. For all this bounty, however, we cannot forget that, as Rome expanded its borders, slaves labored long hours in the fields, while the elite reaped the benefit of their work. The last passage, a short fragment from an epitaph, gives a voice to those enslaved and often invisible laborers.

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

Texts 1 and 2. Introduction: How to Choose a Farm

When the envoys from the Roman senate reached Cincinnatus, they found him working his land, and Livy specifies that he owned four acres. This may well be another piece of historical information. At the time of Cincinnatus (fifth century BCE), the Roman territory was as big as Delaware and looked like a quilt of small family farms. Typically, farmers passed on to their descendants their land and their dream: to work a few acres, produce enough to support a family, and then pass it down to the next generation. Truly, the fifth century proved particularly challenging for the Romans, but it taught them to defend ferociously their plot of land. After rejecting the Etruscan kings (traditionally in 509 BCE), the budding Roman Republic was besieged by enemies on all sides. Its economy was in desperate shape, with disruptions in trade and several crop failures. Besides, a series of epidemics hit, while civil unrest further challenged the survival of Rome.

Fighting against the odds for a couple of centuries, Rome established itself as the main power in central Italy. Then, after defeating Carthage, Romans safely controlled the western Mediterranean. In 218, when the Second Punic War broke out, Cato was about sixteen years old, and by the time he died in 149 BCE, he had witnessed a radical growth in the Roman

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

economy. In many ways, his life must have been easier than Cincinnatus's. Cato, however, faced a problem that Cincinnatus never had. Cato needed to assess the quality of *more* land for sale. Perhaps, other Romans of his time nourished similar aspirations, because Cato begins his treatise *On Agriculture* with advice on choosing good land.

What's the point of teaching agriculture to an audience of farmers? The type of farm Cato had in mind was quite different from what Cincinnatus and generations of Romans used to own. Starting from the Second Punic War, overseas conquests brought in more land and slaves. Cato envisioned a unit of about twenty-five acres, and much of his treatise dealt with something unfamiliar to farmers of earlier generations, such as the management of laborers and slaves and the supervision of their work.

Cato dedicated *On Agriculture* to his son, but he had a larger audience in mind—an audience that now includes us. This treatise is the earliest piece of Latin prose we have. The grammar is archaic, the syntax and style repetitive and bare, the tone straightforward, top-down, and preachy. All in all, although some recommendations may seem banal, Cato's precepts offer precious insights into a world that, though changing, remained centered on agriculture.

Two and half centuries later, another senator, Younger Pliny (61–113 CE), was equally interested in agriculture, and indeed he wrestled with the same problem

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

that Cato had. In a letter to a friend, he openly disclosed his aspirations and reservations about buying more land. Just like Cato, Pliny did not write for his addressee only; he published his letters to reach a broader audience and posed as a member of the Roman elite dealing with an elite problem—the purchase of new farmland.

In facing a possible acquisition, Cato and Pliny seem to go through a strikingly similar checklist, but their style and tone could not be more different. Pliny's polished Latin, smooth grammar, and amicable manner reflect not only his different personality but also the fashions of his time. By the end of the first century CE, Rome was the capital of a well-established and flourishing empire and had developed a robust body of first-class literature. Pliny's letters reflect these literary developments.

Similarly, the content of Pliny's letter documents the massive economic growth that had intervened since the time of Cato. The estate Pliny had in mind was as different from Cato's twenty-five-acre farm as Cato's was from Cincinnatus's. The larger size of the estate and the fact that this larger estate was only one of the many that Pliny owned demanded a more complex staff. Unsurprisingly, then, Pliny contemplated the necessity of employing more specialized workers, such as gardeners, stewards, and tenants. Stewards, *atrienses*, took their name from the *atrium*, the center of a countryside villa. They lived in the villa and supervised

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

the administration of an estate when the owner was gone, which was most of the time. Tenants, *coloni*, were mostly free people who rented some land and worked it for a fee to the owner. Typically, tenants pledged some security for renting farmland, and since they tended to have little extra cash, often the best thing they could pledge were their very farming tools. If there was a bad year and they fell in arrears, landowners could then take their tools. Doing so, however, could backfire for a landowner, as a paucity of workers might force him to look for new tenants or to buy more slaves, lest his land lie fallow.

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

Quo modo agrum emi pararique oporteat.

Praedium quom parare cogitabis, sic in animo habeto: uti ne cupide emas neve opera tua parcas visere et ne satis habeas semel circumire; quotiens ibis, totiens magis placebit quod bonum erit. Vicini quo pacto niteant, id animum advertito: in bona regione bene niteri oportebit. Et uti eo introeas et circumspicias, uti inde exire possis. Uti bonum caelum habeat; ne calamitosum siet; solo bono, sua virtute valeat. Si poteris, sub radice montis siet, in meridiem spectet, loco salubri; operariorum copia siet, bonumque aquarium, oppidum validum prope siet; aut mare aut amnis, qua naves ambulant, aut via bona celerisque. Siet in his agris qui non saepe dominum mutant: qui in his agris praedia vendiderint, eos pigeat vendidisse.

Uti bene aedificatum siet. Caveto alienam disciplinam temere contemnas. De domino bono bonoque aedificatore melius emetur. Ad villam cum venies, videto vasa torcula et dolia multane sient: ubi non erunt, scito pro ratione fructum esse. Instrumenti ne

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

1. *HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM, ELDER CATO, ON AGRICULTURE (DE AGRICULTURA) 1*

How to Buy and Prepare Land

Here's what you need to keep in mind when you're thinking of purchasing a lot of land. Don't be emotional; don't refrain from careful examination; don't be satisfied with one tour of the property. If the lot is a good one, the more you visit it, the more you'll like it. Pay attention to the neighbors: are they thriving? Thriving neighbors prove that the land is good. Consider the entrance to the land but also the exit. Make sure that it has a good rather than bad climate, and that it is fertile and naturally rich. Ideally, find land at the foot of a mountain, facing south, and in the right position. Make sure that there are many day laborers and a natural reserve of water close by, and that it borders a prosperous town, or the sea or a river, so that access by water or land is quick and easy. A high turnover of ownership is a bad sign; and if someone sells property, let him regret it.

Check how solid the buildings are, and don't hastily judge what the neighbors built. It's better to buy from an owner who's also a good builder. When you enter the country house, check the number of presses and storing jars: finding few suggests that the harvest is scarce. There should not be too many farming tools. Also make sure that the land is in a good location. Make sure that there are no more tools than necessary

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

magni siet, [loco bono siet]. Videto quam minimi instrumenti sumptuosusque ager ne siet. Scito idem agrum quod hominem, quamvis quaestuosus siet, si sumptuosus erit, relinqui non multum. Praedium quod primum siet, si me rogabis, sic dicam: de omnibus agris optimoque loco iugera agri centum, vinea est prima, vel si vino multo est; secundo loco hortus irriguus; tertio salictum; quarto oletum; quinto pratum; sexto campus frumentarius; septimo silva caedua; octavo arbustum; nono glandaria silva.

C. PLINIUS CALVISIO RUFO SUO S.

Assumo te in consilium rei familiaris, ut soleo. Praedia agris meis vicina atque etiam inserta venalia sunt. In his me multa sollicitant, aliqua nec minora deterrent. Sollicitat primum ipsa pulchritudo iungendi; deinde, quod non minus utile quam voluptuosum, posse utraque eadem opera eodem viatico invisere, sub eodem procuratore ac paene isdem actoribus habere, unam villam colere et ornare, alteram tantum tueri. Inest huic computationi sumptus supellectilis, sumptus atriensium topiariorum fabrorum atque etiam venatorii instrumenti; quae plurimum refert unum in locum conferas an in diversa dispergas. Contra vereor

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

and that the land won't incur extra costs. Remember that fields are just like people: if they produce but cost too much, there's not much profit. If you ask me what the best farm is, this is what I would say: of all fields located in an ideal location, go for a plot of twenty-five acres. Vines should occupy the best location, especially if they produce much wine, and a well-watered garden takes the second best; plots of willows and of olive trees take the third and fourth; the fifth goes to a meadow, the sixth to a grain field; the seventh, eighth, and ninth go to trees that produce wood, fruit, and acorns.

2. TO BUY OR NOT TO BUY, YOUNGER PLINY, LETTERS (EPISTULARUM LIBER) III 19

Pliny Sends Greetings to His Dear Calvisius Rufus

As per usual, I need you to advise me about some family business matters. An estate next to my fields—in fact it cuts into mine—is up for sale. I'm very intrigued, but there are also some significant deterrents. First off, I'm tempted by the very nice prospect of joining the two properties, then by how convenient and pleasant it would be to visit both lands with one journey and to place both under the same manager. It would be practical for me to have the same staff and to inhabit and furnish one country house, while just keeping the other one in good shape. Part of my calculations are also the costs of furnishing;

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

ne sit incautum, rem tam magnam isdem tempestatibus isdem casibus subdere; tutius videtur incerta fortunae possessionum varietatibus experiri. Habet etiam multum iucunditatis soli caelique mutatio, ipsaque illa peregrinatio inter sua. Iam, quod deliberationis nostrae caput est, agri sunt fertiles pingues aquosi; constant campis vineis silvis, quae materiam et ex ea redditum sicut modicum ita statum praestant. Sed haec felicitas terrae imbecillis cultoribus fatigatur. Nam possessor prior saepius vendidit pignora, et dum reliqua colonorum minuit ad tempus, vires in posterum exhaustit, quarum defectione rursus reliqua creverunt. Sunt ergo instruendi eo pluris quod frugi mancipiis; nam nec ipse usquam vinctos habeo nec ibi quisquam.

Superest ut scias quanti videantur posse emi. Sesteratio triciens, non quia non aliquando quinquagens fuerint, verum et hac penuria colonorum et communi temporis iniquitate ut redditus agrorum sic etiam pretium retro abiit. Quaeris an hoc ipsum triciens facile

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

the expense for stewards, gardeners, and handy-men; not to mention hunting gear and whether it is collected in one place or scattered in many, which makes a big difference. But on the other hand, I worry that subjecting such a huge property to the risks of the same weather may not be sensible. It seems safer to undergo fortune's uncertainties with separate properties. Moreover, it's always pleasant to change location and air and to travel from one's own estate to the next. So the key point in my reasoning is that the land is fertile, rich, and well watered; the property consists of fields, vineyards, and trees that produce wood—a modest but secure source of income. But this fertility is compromised by the scarcity of workers, because the previous owner too often sold the tools that the tenants had pledged. In this way he reduced their debt for a while, but in the long term he drained their resources, and for this reason the arrears have picked up again. As a result, it needs to be replenished with slaves and at greater expense because they have to be reliable, given that neither I nor anyone else there keeps them in chains.

There's one last thing you need to know—the sale price. They want 3 million sestertii; they used to ask for 5, but because of the scarcity of farmers and the current crisis, the revenue and the price of land have gone down all at once. You may wonder if I can easily come up with that 3 million; I have invested almost entirely in estates, but I have some money on hand

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

colligere possimus. Sum quidem prope totus in praediis, aliquid tamen fenero, nec molestum erit mutuari; accipiam a socru, cuius arca non secus ac mea utor. Proinde hoc te non moveat, si cetera non refragantur, quae velim quam diligentissime examines. Nam cum in omnibus rebus tum in disponendis facultatibus plurimum tibi et usus et providentiae superest. Vale.

HOW TO CHOOSE A FARM

from interest, and I can take out a loan without a problem. I plan to borrow from my mother-in-law, whose account I can access as easily as my own. So do not worry about me securing the money, if you have no objections to the other considerations, which I'd ask you, please, to ponder as carefully as possible. For I know that you have experience and wisdom in every matter and especially in managing properties. Be well.

HOW TO OPTIMIZE LAND PRODUCTION

Texts 3 and 4. Introduction: How to Optimize Land Production

Once farmers or landlords secured a plot of land, they had to make it productive. In the early centuries of the Roman Republic, when the economy relied on small subsistence farmers à la Cincinnatus, deciding what to grow and knowing how to do it was a matter of life or death. Choosing wisely meant the difference between managing and failing to support a family. For example, growing vines or olive trees was no doubt more lucrative than growing vegetables, but not everyone could afford the investment. It takes some years for a vineyard or for olive trees to bear fruit, and some farmers were in no position to wait. Those who made the investment, however, in order to make the most of their small plot, had to know how densely they could plant and how quickly they could grow vines, especially because hastening growth could backfire in the long run. The same principle applies to producing and aging wine. Similarly, allotting some land to trees that generate only wood is less profitable than growing vegetables, but it is also safer, in case hail or some other natural calamity should strike, and a year of bad crops should ensue. For this reason, at the end of the first selection, Cato advised his son to diversify and grow nine different types of produce. Of course, such diversification is more easily achieved on a twenty-five-acre than on a four-acre farmstead.

HOW TO OPTIMIZE LAND PRODUCTION

The next set of selections deals with recommendations about growing vines and selling wine. They are taken from the Elder Pliny's *Natural History*. Elder Pliny (23–79 CE) was the adoptive uncle of Younger Pliny (whom we met in selection 2). He is most known for his works and manner of death. An incredibly prolific and versatile author, he wrote about history, biology, grammar, astronomy, geography, medicine, mineralogy, and the arts, among other subjects. His *Natural History*, in thirty-seven books, documents the range of his interests and reveals much about Roman scientific knowledge: diamonds are so hard that if put on an anvil and struck with the hammer, they shatter the hammer, unless they are drenched in fresh and warm goat blood; lightning strikes are fires falling on earth from the planets; and the shape and color of many plants resemble the part of the body they have the power to cure.

Today, Elder Pliny's encyclopedic knowledge may look like encyclopedic ignorance. But tellingly, when dealing with agriculture, Pliny came much closer to the mark, as he relied on hard-won knowledge from centuries of subsistence farming. Much of what he taught about growing vines closely resembles practices still recommended on the websites of various American universities. Cut pieces of roots, also known as "rooted cuttings," or sprouts can be used to form new shoots; and buds (or "eyes," as Pliny names them) must be pruned at specific times. One may add that

HOW TO OPTIMIZE LAND PRODUCTION

Pliny's theories, even when inaccurate or abstruse, proved influential. For example, he is rightly regarded as one of the founding fathers of the so-called doctrine of signatures, the theory that connects a plant's look to its medical power. A present-day nephrologist would not prescribe a plant for kidney stones, but the plant that Pliny recommended for this malady is to this day called "stone-crop" or "gromwell." Powdered stone-crop/gromwell root is still thought to have curative powers, and a \$25 package gets glowing reviews on Amazon.

The range of Elder Pliny's interests bears witness to a genuine curiosity, which his nephew, Younger Pliny, immortalized in a letter. When Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE, both Elder and Younger Pliny happened to be at the Bay of Naples, and "as a real scholar, my uncle realized that the eruption demanded closer scrutiny and called for a boat."⁷ His sense of duty prevailed, so he set out to rescue other people, until he died by suffocating on ashes and gas.

Pliny sprinkled his *Natural History* with many short and entertaining stories and anecdotes, such as that of Caius Furius Cresimus (selection 4). Acquiring some land, deciding what to grow, and knowing how to do it was still not enough. A successful farmer had to take good care of his tools as well. For the Romans, farmers possessed three types of tools: tools that do not move and do not speak, like ploughs and shovels; tools that move but do not speak, like donkeys and

HOW TO OPTIMIZE LAND PRODUCTION

oxen; and “tools” that move and speak, like slaves. Selection 4 tells the story of a former slave who became a farmer and was summoned to court. He had to appear in front of the Roman tribal assembly, which typically judged trials concerning noncapital cases. By the time Cresimus appeared in court, he was already wealthy and envied, but only his treatment of his “tools” made him respected as well. Many and noble individuals strove to fulfill the ideal of the Roman farmer: Cincinnatus became dictator; Elder Cato became censor; Elder Pliny was an all-rounder, and his nephew a senator and first-rank writer. Each taught us much about agriculture. But no one incarnates this ideal better than Caius Furius Cresimus, a former slave.

NOTES

1. Throughout this book, I provide my own translations of Greek and Latin passages. Unless otherwise indicated, the Greek and Latin texts can be found, with English translations, in the Loeb editions (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). Here, Cicero, *On Duties*, translated by Walter Miller (1913), 266–67.
2. Cicero, *On Duties*, 152–53.
3. *Corpus of Latin Inscriptions* (*Corpus inscriptionum latinarum*), bk. 4, inscriptions 6426, 6428a, 206, and 677.
4. Martial, *Epigrams*, translated by David Shackleton Bailey (1993), vol. 1 (bks. 1–5), 230–31.
5. The epitaph of Claudia, *Corpus of Latin Inscriptions* (*Corpus inscriptionum latinarum*), bk. 1, vol. 2, inscription 1211, is often cited as an example of this formula.
6. Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, translated by Niall Rudd (2004), 272–73 and 276–77.
7. Pliny, *Letters*, translated by Betty Radice (1969), vol. 1 (bks. 1–7), 426–29.
8. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845; San Diego: Icon Classics, 2005), 84 and 63.
9. Strabo, *Geography*, bks. 3–5, translated by Horace Leonard Jones (1923), 258–59.
10. Plutarch, *Lives*, vol. 2, translated by Bernadotte Perrin (1914), 366–67.