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Introduction

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

THE YEAR was 78 CE. The emperor Vespasian had been on the imperial throne for nine years, ruling over an empire that stretched from Syria to Wales. In Italy, Mount Vesuvius was beginning to rumble over Pompeii. And at dawn on October 11, an Egyptian farmer named Epimachus went to work.¹ With him trudged another farmer and three slaves. For two weeks during that October, the five of them worked side by side, running the backbreaking hoist pumps that lifted the Nile floodwaters onto their parched lands. Epimachus and his landlord split the costs of the work: Epimachus worked himself and paid one of the slaves, while the landlord supplied the other slaves and some day-wages. Those wages, the workers' names, and each day's work were all carefully entered into the landlord's account books, until October 25, when the accounts break off and Epimachus, the farmer and the slaves all vanish from history.

The history of Rome is peopled with the rich. It was a history written by and for men who made their living from the labor of others. How people like Epimachus and his comrades made their way in this world has yet to be told. How did ordinary people survive? How did they work and earn, sell and save, borrow and lend? This book tells their story. This is a history of the 90 percent of Romans who worked with their hands, a history of shopkeepers and farmers, spinners and potters, and the even more numerous who had no single profession, but many. It's a book about both enslaved and free workers, women, men and child workers. It's a group of people who have stood on the sidelines of history, even as they are sidelined today. This is the story of how they got by.

As the following pages will describe, they got by in a world in which the expansion of coined money, consumer goods, markets—in short, the world's first “global economy”—created bitter challenges and opportunistic hustles.

Theirs was a world awash with things: even miners and farmers might eat off well-made plates and drink imported wine. But their many things concealed and produced a constant precarity. Theirs was a world in which most farmers produced and sold small surpluses—to cities, to the state, and to each other. Yet their astonishing productivity was driven as much by the whip of high rents as it was by the lure of high profits. It was a world where working for wages was probably more common than at any time before early modernity. But working for wages meant working multiple jobs, hustling a living from many kinds of income. Theirs was a world where most everyone used credit—to invest, to supplement periods of low income—but saving was wrenchingly difficult.

The categories to which history has assigned these people—slave and free; urban and rural; butcher, baker and trinket-maker—have obscured all these strategies for survival. Preoccupied with their identities, we’ve missed what they did. While they may have differed in their jobs, their income bracket or their status before the law, the 90 percent shared a set of economic practices and strategies, managing risk, living with precarity, while doubling down on opportunity.

Their story often bears an uncanny resemblance to that of modern working people. Like the modern poor, Romans were cagey managers of small resources. Like modern Americans and Kenyans and Indians, they held multiple jobs to make ends meet. As one of the world’s first “global” economies, they, like us, lived in the near and interacted with the far, using money and markets and credit to do so. And like us, they suffered from these things as well. But as we shall also see, the past is a foreign country: the Roman world was not ours. Most Romans were farmers. Most Romans didn’t live by wages alone. While they used credit, they rarely used banks. With few machines to do their work, physical labor took an unprecedentedly high toll on their bodies. And a great many Romans, even working Romans, routinely enslaved other human beings to do some of their work. The world of the Roman 90 percent is both eerily familiar and ineluctably distant from our own.

This is a history set in the crucible of the Roman empire, from its advent in the late first century BCE through the first half of the third century CE. Our subjects were already subjects of a massive empire, one that, by sword and by tax, had unified unprecedentedly diverse peoples and ecosystems under a single political umbrella. They lived in one of the world’s first “global” economies—where “global” embraced the lands between Britain and Syria—connected by fast ships but divided by slow roads. Theirs was a dense and populous world of some 50–60 million inhabitants, probably even more. Most

of them lived in the countryside, small farmers like Epimachus owning or leasing small or smallish plots. But many more than we used to think lived in cities. Cities were bigger and thicker on the ground in most parts of the empire than at any point before the nineteenth century. This meant more craftsmen, traders, seasonal laborers and commuting farmers than ever before. They lived in a world where cities and countryside were linked by trade and religion and labor, and where people were constantly on the move in short and long trips. This world included the megacity of Rome with its million inhabitants, its thousands of specialized craftsmen, its huge number of slaves. It included the cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii, buried in 79 CE by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and thus preserving two of the best-documented cases of working people's lives—their houses, shops, and savings. It included the lands of Egypt, where farmers like Epimachus had managed the Nile flood for millennia, and from whom Egyptian, Greek and now Roman overlords extracted rents and taxes. It included the northern provinces of Britain and Gaul, where farming meant cows and beer, while backbreaking work was to be had in new cities. And, although less prominent in this story, on the other side of the Mediterranean it included the ancient cities and villages of Greece and Asia Minor.

This is a history that can only begin to be told now. Even thirty years ago, had anyone wanted to write an economic history of working Romans (which, with some exceptions, they mostly didn't) they would have run aground from lack of data. New archaeology, new texts, and old texts newly reconsidered have radically altered the picture. The archaeological data alone is staggering: hundreds of farms and shops and workshops, and reams of new scientific data—studies of ancient plants and animals, ancient coins, and ancient skeletons. Those same excavations—as well as excavations in libraries and archives—have uncovered the writings of working people: graffiti and papyri record their contracts, loans, wage payments, even their bar bills and receipts for trips to the baths. All this new evidence reveals working people to a degree unimaginable three decades ago. Much of this new material has been published in big datasets, releasing a refreshing shower of quantified data onto the parched landscape of ancient history. This data makes it possible to do the work of this book, to give voice to the lives of the 90 percent in their complexity and diversity.

Only now, too, do we have tools and perspectives to do justice to that data. For some time now, we've realized that the lives of working people—in the present and in the past—aren't always well represented by macro-models and aggregate measurements. High gross domestic product and high average

wages often conceal grinding poverty and hunger, while real financial hardship lurks in erratic incomes, high interest payments or low credit scores. Top-down theories are particularly bad at making sense of the life-critical messiness of lives lived on the edge. Economists have come to realize that the 90 percent themselves are often the best source of information on their economics: how they use money, how they juggle multiple jobs, how they save—or don’t—for the future. This is as true of the past as it is of the present. Understanding how the ancient Roman 90 percent or the contemporary American 90 percent survive means taking their own lives and choices seriously. New data, combined with new ways of thinking, make that newly possible.

Who Cares About Working People?

An account of why no one cared about working people in ancient history barely needs to be written. The field has been famously focused on rich men ever since the rich men who are its subjects—Cicero, Livy, Tacitus—wrote it themselves. Classics, as the study of those rich men’s literary production, only slowly shed this bias, and ancient history, its bedfellow, more slowly still.² But there are still some understandable reasons why this should have been so. For one, our ancient sources were biased themselves. Cicero, to whom we listen more often than we ought, famously said that “the wages of the laborer are the badge of slavery,” “no workshop can have anything noble about it,” and other disparaging *bon mots*.³ Work, it would seem, was bad, and workers to be despised. Cicero wasn’t alone—he was parroting a long Greek tradition that included Plato and Aristotle—but we can find the same general ideas repeated by many Roman writers. Following their lead, historians long assumed that ancient people (elites at any rate) looked down on work as well as working people, and that this was true in some kind of operative way.⁴

That we long believed that these ancient prejudices reflected something real about ancient economic behavior is down, in part, to Sir Moses Finley. Finley—a child prodigy of immigrants, pushed out of America for his communist sympathies and welcomed at Cambridge University—was one of the subtlest, if stubbornest, thinkers about the ancient world the twentieth century ever produced.⁵ His 1973 publication of *The Ancient Economy* deployed an enormous range of elite sources and, in readable, citation-light prose, internalized their prejudices.⁶ As Finley saw it, Cicero & Co. didn’t hold labor as a value, or profit as a motivation. As a result, he believed, ancient people had no properly economic thinking. Elites didn’t think about profit maximization—they thought

about status. Happy to get rich off their estates, they showed scant interest in innovation, trade, banking or anything resembling “modern” economic activity.⁷ Nonelite people, according to Finley, were mostly subsistence farmers, producing just enough for survival, tools and taxes. Their “just-enough-ism” also lay outside anything we might describe as distinctly “economic.”⁸ In short, by failing to value either labor or profit, and being disinterested in “getting ahead,” neither Roman elites nor Roman working people had anything we would recognize as an economic mentality.

Much of this, we now know, is wrong. For someone as well-versed in economic theory as Finley was, his definitions of “profit-seeking” or “maximizing” seem lumpen. But his certainty that there was some essential truth in Cicero was real. In part, the problem Finley faced was his almost total reliance on elite sources. If you follow Cicero & Co. around, you’re going to be left with the impression that work was undervalued and working people’s activities lay outside of anything discernibly economic. While Finley knew that no politician or philosopher is ever to be trusted when talking about working people, neither did he appreciate the subtleties contained in those politicians’ arguments. Cicero & Co. were much less interested in the value of labor or the laborer than they were in the nature of civic responsibility. And beneath civic responsibility lay even deeper waters—the philosophical relationship between objects and their makers, metaphysical cul-de-sacs where a shoe could be good, but a shoemaker was without honor.⁹ In short, behind these seemingly damning statements against workers and work was a kind of cultural double-think, rolled out in political-philosophical texts, but set aside when living one’s life.

Ancient and modern thinkers made one exception to all the anti-worker speak: the farmer or peasant.¹⁰ For ancient writers, small farmers were the protagonists of a national, tragic myth. Farmers like Cincinnatus farmed a Republican golden age, when smallholders worked the land and served the state, setting Rome on its course to political and military greatness. Then followed these farmers’ ruin: pushed off their land through years of military service, ensuing debt, and slave-run agriculture, the death knell of the small farmer was the death knell of the Roman Republic. For Finley and his predecessors, it wasn’t so much the equation of farmers with a doomed Republic but their presumed subsistence economic behavior that made them so interesting. For Finley particularly, the ancient economy was dominated by just-getting-by farmers, intent on self-sufficiency with only negligible surpluses and only a glancing interest in markets or specialization.¹¹ That is, unlike his ancient sources who imagined an occupation—farming—Finley

imagined a category of person complete with their own particular kind of economy: the peasant. Together with status-oriented elites, self-sufficient peasants anchored Finley's noneconomic ancient economy. In different ways, then, for both ancient and modern historians, farmers were a kind of mascot, good to do history with, no further thought on their hows and whys required.

Many of Finley's ideas about ancient economics have long been swept away, undone by new evidence and new models. The sophistication and extent of non-agricultural activities—trade, craft production and infrastructure as revealed by archaeology—all describe something much bigger and more complex than Finley's underdeveloped world.¹² Some of this world was funded by what appear to be entrepreneurs, investing in risky businesses with the expectation of robust returns. So, too, new work on Roman money has discovered a world awash in coins and credit, where Cicero & Co., rather than disdaining finance, actually used reasonably sophisticated accounting and financial instruments.¹³ A mountain of new data has revealed a world Finley never imagined or took seriously.

And yet, this new data has been grafted onto what is now a rather old model of economic behavior. This model casts institutions, particularly the state, as the star in history's drama.¹⁴ According to this more recent view, the Roman state guaranteed the value of money through its mints, enforced contracts with its laws, and through a set of carrots (infrastructure) and sticks (taxation), it encouraged trade and exchange and investment at a historically unprecedented volume. The Roman state, some argue, produced a Roman economic revolution. Rejected, too, is Finley's contention that modern economic models and metrics were useless in a world without proper economic thinking. Historians have now enthusiastically charted the details of Roman economic performance, estimating a Roman price index, taking up the question of economic growth, even providing a number for Roman gross domestic product (GDP).

Yet even in our own world, economists and workers alike no longer trust that either institutions or macro-performance measurements represent the economy as experienced by ordinary people. Working people's challenges are routinely masked by national production calculations or estimates of average income. In the same way, the recent emphasis on ancient economic performance and the state has pushed poor and working Romans to the sidelines of history. The rejection of Finley's peasants has meant tossing out the small-farmer majority—small-scale agriculture not being an obvious agent of economic performance. Questions about money have become questions about gross state outputs, leaving aside the supply of small change and its use by ordinary people.

Even labor, posed as a problem of market efficiencies, wage formation or market integration, takes large-scale employers' and owners' perspectives rather than that of workers. Cicero & Co. get as much attention as they ever did, while the 90 percent are submerged within institutions, like the slave villa, or swapped for abstract categories, like wage-labor. In short, these models of Roman economic performance swerve away from both the working majority and the complex realities of their lived experience.

But if the recent macroeconomic studies have sidelined the 90 percent, other disciplines and other kinds of data have revealed their lives in astonishing detail. Driven by the desire to plumb all corners of Roman life—not just the elite—this new data has exploded in quantity and quality in the past twenty years. Three profound revolutions in our knowledge of the Roman world have transformed what we know about working people, revolutions that, although they speak at tangents to economic performance, are eloquent on matters of economic life.

The first knowledge revolution pertains to making. Each step in large-scale bread baking, how shopkeepers set up their shops, the complicated processes of potting, cloth-making and glassmaking—have all been revealed in granular detail, thanks to two decades of new archaeology.¹⁵ Unearthing craft has also revealed the extraordinarily specialized knowledge produced by Roman working people. These examinations have tended to linger on products and processes—retail and baking and weaving—and somewhat less on the economics of shopkeepers and bakers and weavers.¹⁶ This is understandable: it's not easy to get from the product to the people, and archaeologists are justly cautious in assuming a loaf of bread tells us anything about a baker. Furthermore, much of this new data is qualitative, not quantitative: we are still woefully uninformed about the scale of artisanal outputs, wages or profits—the basic building blocks from which to reconstruct artisanal economic life.¹⁷ Nonetheless, this book amasses what we do know about makers and their economic strategies to ask how they made a living—their various sources of income, how they managed credit and debt and labor.

In no sphere of ancient activity has there been a greater knowledge revolution than farming. We can never pay enough attention to farming and farmers. Sadly, that's not how decades of archaeology saw it. Cities were held up as the yardstick of a civilization, and Roman archaeologists long lingered on urban monuments and urban design. When they spared time for the countryside, they tended to focus on the villas of elites.¹⁸ These villas were big and attractive, produced mosaics and sculpture, and recalled the world of the city. As a

consequence, their agricultural apparatus was mostly ignored. Less sensational, but ultimately more important, were the meticulous surveys of the countryside itself, mapping where people lived and the changes in those places over time.¹⁹ But it is only with excavations, particularly big excavations done in advance of big construction projects, that we can now see Roman farming in its true light. Over the last thirty years, the construction of modern train lines, highways and airports, carried out in what had once been the Roman countryside, has done more for Roman farmers than a century of academic projects.²⁰ The result has been a shower of information about Roman farms and fields, crops and herds, and the geology and soil science to make sense of it all.

Finally, the last twenty years has also seen a revolution in ancient texts. Roman texts used to mean Cicero and Livy. Now they also mean dirty jokes penned by bored Pompeiians, land leases signed by illiterate farmers, and beer deliveries tracked by London publicans. Graffiti scratched on walls, wooden tablets, the thousands of papyri and ostraca (writing on broken pottery) from Egyptian towns and villages—all these constitute what has been termed “everyday writing.”²¹ Only recently have scholars realized its importance for revealing the extent of ancient literacy. Yet much of this writing also constitutes the economic archives of working people—their expense lists and receipts, contracts and loans. Everyday writing contains the residues of everyday economics, overwhelmingly produced by and for working people.

These three knowledge revolutions—on making, on agriculture and on writing—have made the lives of working Romans visible as never before. This new data sets the stage for a new kind of history, centered on what working people actually did to survive, not simply the distilled metrics of their economy. They make possible a bottom-up economics, one rooted not in economic performance, but in economic practice.²²

Who Are the 90 Percent?

When the British historian E. P. Thompson set out to write *The Making of the English Working Class*—one of the all-time great books on working people’s lives—he could rely on some basic things.²³ He had as his subject late-nineteenth-century people who earned their living mostly from wages. They worked principally at a single trade, and increasingly in factories. These people came to regard themselves as a group—as a working class—and demanded improved labor conditions in part on the basis of this identity.

We cannot rely on any of these things in defining our group of working Romans. The group we're interested in didn't, despite some claims to the contrary, work principally for wages. Some worked at a specific trade, but many didn't. They occasionally grouped themselves by profession, but on the whole, they tended to describe themselves in other terms. And there is no Latin or Greek equivalent for "working class" or "blue-collar." So who are the people that are the subject of this book, and, in the absence of an ancient term for them, what's the logic to considering them together? Put another way, who are the proper subjects of a history of economic practice?

In a modern context, we would probably speak of a "class" of working people. But ancient history has often had an allergy to the concept of "class," one that is both wholly appropriate and not always helpful.²⁴ It's amusing, in a way, that the class allergy began with Finley—the alleged communist. Finley strenuously objected to the use of the term "class" to define ancient working people. "Class" defined around a Marxist means of production placed slave and free, not to mention nonworking members of different political orders, on the same analytical footing.²⁵ Class seemed to open the door to the notion of a "middle class," a capitalist bourgeoisie invented, he felt, by modern scholars. "Working class" was to be avoided for the same reason. "Status" was Finley's favored heuristic for dividing up ancient society, defined around Max Weber's "admirably vague" blend of legal status, political order, economic resources, family background and a self-defined sense of belonging.²⁶ Notwithstanding some recent attempts to reinsert a "working class" back into the conversation, Finley's aversion to class and preference for status continues to frame most work on the group under discussion here.²⁷

Finley was, again, following his elite sources, for the Roman elite and juridical sources don't use anything like a class vocabulary. They employ legal terms for people according to their political status (*plebs*, *humiliores*), or their property status, like tenants (*coloni*) or landowners (*possessores*, *domini*). They have terms that are place-specific: country people are *rustici* or *pagani*, for instance. They have terms for specific kinds of activities or professions—shippers (*naviculari*), deposit bankers (*argentarii*), sex workers (*meretrices*)—some of which they use pejoratively and some they don't.²⁸ What Roman elites didn't have is a term for people who work with their hands generally. Even the people who did work with their hands didn't have a blanket term for it.

In fact, it's not so easy to find working people talking about themselves with anything like a consistent vocabulary. In the late Republic, the *plebs* of the city of Rome identified themselves through their neighborhoods, but above all

through their shared access to the grain dole—a legal status that led to a form of messy group identity.²⁹ During the imperial period, much of our evidence for workers’ perspectives comes from tombstones. Most Romans did not put their economic occupation on their tombstone, which shouldn’t surprise us because neither do we: they, like us, emphasized their family relationships. This isn’t to say there aren’t exceptions. Much of the evidence for that work-identity on tombstones comes from the city of Rome and much of it from enslaved and freed people.³⁰ Enslaved and freed people were more likely to describe themselves by their work identity, having no legal families to relate themselves to. And a great many of those enslaved and freed worked in great elite households where work identities were particular and hyper-specialized, not unlike an English manor: hairstylists, pearl-setters, seamstresses. In other places, like Gaul, work identity in funerary contexts isn’t so tied to enslaved/freed status, but it’s still not the norm. Work identity clearly mattered, but, at least on tombstones, we can only see it mattering in quite particular circumstances.

What about a collective identity, like “working class”? Roman working people sometimes did join collective organizations, called *collegia*. These clubs were often (but not always) formed of people from the same profession, who organized themselves for a variety of reasons—to make business connections, to lobby the state on particular issues, to show their fealty to that same state, to have parties, or to provide for members’ burials.³¹ Professions-based *collegia* proudly declared that profession in public inscriptions: the cloth traders from a town in southern Spain made dedications in honor of the emperor; the builders of Ostia built a temple ditto.³² Surely here is “class consciousness” on display? Not quite. It’s not at all clear that the builders of Ostia or those cloth traders from Spain were bound by any abstract idea of their profession: local ties and interests were what drew them together. Although they may have banded together for mutual benefit, *collegia* didn’t have the abstract labor identity and explicit aims we associate with the nineteenth-century development of a “working class.”

There’s another category that both ancients and moderns have used around our subject, and it’s one that also forms part of this book—the poor. When Roman social historians have addressed this subject—which, again, has only happened recently—they sometimes conclude that “the poor” were actually most people, or they tend to treat the very bottom end of the spectrum—the homeless and destitute.³³ More nuanced studies use “poverty” as an opportunity to ask what Romans meant by the term, for ancient writers made

abundant use of the idea of the “the poor,” particularly as part of a dichotomy of rich and poor.³⁴ Cicero (again) uses the rich/poor contrast to probe the boundaries of civic virtue—is the rich-but-immoral citizen to be preferred over the poor-but-virtuous citizen? For lawyers-in-training, the rich-man/poor-man duo were stock characters in textbooks, stereotypes to be deployed in speeches. Even social satire relied on it: in the satirist Juvenal’s Rome, the rich ride in their sedan chairs like ocean liners, parting waves of the begging poor. This ancient literary dichotomy of rich and poor, along with the contemporary interest in poverty, has again left us with a category of people, rather than questions about what those people actually did—their practices.

In fact, many of our challenges in defining working people come down to what we might term categories of analysis, versus categories of practice.³⁵ Categories of analysis are types, like “the poor,” categories we use to divvy up people into abstract entities. These are categories helpful for making sense of the world at a distance. Categories of practice, on the other hand, are based in experience—the categories ordinary people use in their day-to-day lives. These categories overlap. For example, in contemporary society, race is used to make particular political, social and historical arguments: this is race as a category of analysis. But race shapes daily life in inescapable ways for many people—racial slurs, racial profiling. Here is race as a category of practice. In the ancient world, *colonus*, or tenant, was a category of analysis: a person defined by their legal obligations to another. That analytical category really mattered when you paid your rent. But the practices and daily experiences of being a tenant overlapped with the analytical category only in part.³⁶ Think of the tenant Epimachus’ weeks of raising and pouring the hoist pump alongside four slaves and a wage-laborer: “tenant” doesn’t make sense of that. The point is that we shouldn’t mistake analytical and practice categories as being the same thing. When we do, we mistakenly assume that one kind of identity—typically the categories we make as scholars, or categories made by the law—tells us something about people’s lived experience, their practices. It’s our job as historians or social scientists to unpack the overlap, as well as the differences.

One of the reasons we’ve struggled with a working people’s economics is that we’ve often confused analysis for practice. The absence of an ancient concept of a “working class,” and the more general noncorrespondence between ancient and modern socioeconomic categories, have closed off the space to think about practice. We have thus, quite understandably, prioritized discussions of legal status, or professions, or the poor. These categories seem safer or more relevant, for they echo what Romans said about their own world, they

hint at a modern notion of “professional identity,” or they speak to modern preoccupations with poverty. All of this sidesteps the lived experiences and economic practices of actual working people, as experienced by them.

These problems of category make us particularly blind to the messiness of work as a practice, as opposed to work identity as an analytical category. There were over 200 specific job titles used in the Roman world, and we’ve already noted the specialized training and knowledge required in many of them.³⁷ But one’s profession was not necessarily identical with the work one did to get by, nor did it define a discrete set of economic practices or thinking. Most households did many things, relying on a variety of activities to get by: hauling and potting, farming and building and carting—to name just a few. That kind of multitasking elides analytical professional categories, categories we like because they remind us of our own modern professional identities. Analytical categories like profession also privilege the individual (usually male) head of household: they ignore the often-critical labor inputs from women and children.³⁸ Those inputs may be supportive of the male “profession”—the woman from Rome who managed the books for her family butcher shop—or they may be different—Egyptian children who earned cash wages sweeping leaves while their parents farmed a small plot.³⁹

The analysis/practice problem is particularly important when it comes to integrating enslaved and freed people into a history of labor. Slave (*servus*) and freed (*libertus*) were fundamental legal categories. Following this preoccupation with legal categories and using the slave systems of the Americas as a comparative guide, ancient historians have often placed the enslaved apart, in separate books, in separate interpretive frameworks—the slave villa, slave labor, the slave experience.⁴⁰ And yet, the recent shift to the term “enslaved” rather than “slave” labor opens to the door to the practical fact that this legal category, imposed by others, did not constitute an entire identity.⁴¹ The labor of enslaved people was also a category of experience, of daily practices and work, some of which they shared with others who were not enslaved. We have already witnessed this with Epimachus, where a tenant and three enslaved men—all categories of analysis—all did the same work side by side for weeks. Similarly, even though slaves, as legal nonentities, were prohibited from owning anything, this didn’t prevent them from owning money, real estate, even other slaves, via a legal fiction that prioritized practice—particularly the economic needs of their owners—over the analytical category of enslavement.⁴²

Any history of Roman working people would be incomplete if it did not include the enslaved people who did so much of the labor. And much of that

labor was of the same kind as, and often done side by side with, free people. But this does not mean that their labor was the same, and this is where the legal-analytical category of slavery diverges from the shared practice of work. The slaves Epimachus worked beside were not paid, and even the wages for one slave, Ambyron, were paid directly to his owner. Enslaved labor was patently not the same labor because it was owned by someone else, and enslaved bodies were legally an instrument—a tool. The role of the enslaved in an economic history of working people will necessarily be messy, far messier than an easy comparison with the slave-driven American South sometimes intimates. Roman slaves formed a major part of the workforce in some areas and were largely absent in others. They sometimes earned, saved and spent money like free people; they were sometimes the property of other working people and thus part of their capital.⁴³ Some freedmen used their earnings and their master's capital to become so wealthy they left working people's history and became part of the nonworking elite—like the fictional character Trimalchio.⁴⁴ Including the enslaved in working people's economics means being attentive to legal distinction—as we shall see on the issue of savings and capital—while at times trampling all over it—when, for example, discussing the working body.

Where does this leave us as far as defining working people? This book uses “the 90 percent”—a demographic guesstimate and majoritarian slogan—or “working Romans”—an activity descriptor. These terms gesture to the majority of Romans—maybe something like 90 percent of the population—who depended on their own labor, overwhelmingly manual labor, for their survival. They are distinguished from the minority of Romans—maybe something like 10 percent or even less—who didn't need to labor, earning their income from investments, from rents, from the labor of others.⁴⁵ The 90 percent might also be termed the nonrentier class, although they might have had some income from rents. They are often called nonelites, although this term simply begs the definition of an elite. The “90 percent” or “working Romans,” are terms that, if nothing else, gesture through positives, not negatives, to the laboring majority.

The gesturing, not strict defining, is deliberate. Like E. P. Thompson, instead of defining a group in advance and then studying it, here we want instead to observe and dissect a series of activities. Words will not be helpful. We will have no choice but to use identity categories and terms like craftsmen, builders, farmers, traders, spinners. Enslaved and free, men, women and children. But what this book is really about is what they did as economic actors—growing, making, earning, saving, spending, borrowing, lending. People we might term “knowledge workers” today—teaching, scribing, managing—also

sometimes form part of this story. Others, like a harvester from North Africa who worked for many years, eventually accumulating enough capital to enjoy leisure later on, drop in and out.⁴⁶

Indeed, it is the very messiness of this big-tent category, its noncorrespondence with narrower ancient categories, that allow it to be so useful—and so revealing. It includes people who may have worn different identity-hats but shared complex strategies for getting by.⁴⁷ It includes an urban fisherman whose status as a manual laborer didn't stop him from applying for membership in an elite club. It includes a family of shepherds, unable, seemingly, to own their own animals but nonetheless capable of leasing big flocks, handling big cash flows, and taking out big loans. It includes a priest who, despite his impressive office, routinely rented out his children to pay off his debts. It even includes (possibly enslaved) salt workers whose bodies show the signs of the most punishing physical labor, but who lived unusually long lives and made dedications, ironically, to the god of the sea. These are just some of the Roman 90 percent whose very different job titles, gender or legal statuses conceal shared practices of survival in a harsh world. It's those practices we'll be interested in here.

As a consequence, and in sharp contrast to the categories extracted from performance metrics, our 90 percent will also include people of very different economic status. As a demographic guesstimate, the 90 percent refers not to a singular income bracket but to a diverse group who were reliant on their own labor. The impoverished hauler of salt, the struggling shopkeeper, and the owner of a medium-sized farm had very different incomes but shared strategies for consuming, accounting, borrowing and lending—strategies shaped by the particular challenges of living in the Roman world. As we will also see, whatever their economic status, the 90 percent shared the specter of precarity, a precarity hinted at by income but really lurking in spending, borrowing and hustling—that is, in practices. Income, this book argues, is just the beginning of the story. At the same time, the sources of that precarity will vary enormously—from tenant farmers versus owner-operators, from those who lived on wages to those who lived with them. The purpose of the category of “the 90 percent” is thus to cast a big net; the work of the rest of this book is to demolish it.

The Right End of the Telescope

In the 1950s, when economists began to wake up to the problems of global poverty, they initially used the tools developed for national economies.⁴⁸ Aggregate indicators of economic performance—like GDP or capital accumulation—were

imagined to follow evolutionary developments, with “developed” nations simply further along the same curve as “underdeveloped” nations. Institutions like the United Nations or the World Bank tried to foster economic growth as measured by these gross indicators through a whole range of means, from sponsoring industrialization to incentivizing free markets.

Big problems attended both the theory and the practice of this approach. Aggregate indicators are useful for some things: they provide a general basis for comparison among different kinds of economies. But as measurements of the things that matter to working people or that impact their lives, they turn out to be pretty bad. GDP in particular suffered from the “power of a single number” phenomenon.⁴⁹ As an information-dense aggregate of millions of transactions, GDP was both incredibly seductive and potentially incredibly misleading. In 2009, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development commissioned a study on economic metrics like GDP. It concluded that “there appears to be an increasing gap between the information contained in aggregate GDP data and what counts for common people’s well-being.”⁵⁰ Production, big business, financial markets—all turn out to be overrepresented in GDP metrics, while the economic well-being of the “common people” was experienced more in consumption, in household-level transactions, and in many nonmarket interactions. Put another way, average people’s economic lives are composed of somewhat different variables—different in nature and in scale—than those that go into gross performance measurements.

A new approach to working lives—not just of the poor in developing countries but of working people everywhere—was needed. The winners of the 2015 and 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics represented that new approach, which can be summarized as: don’t start with models, start with people.⁵¹ By gathering detailed information from working households on how they earned, spent, saved and borrowed, a new generation of economists were able to get at those activities concealed by GDP measurements. They also learned surprising things: that most of the world’s most impoverished people rarely ended the month in the red; that most used sophisticated, if tiny-scale, financial instruments to boost their earned income; that illiterate street traders in India kept precise mental financial diaries while working Americans had only a general sense of their household finances. Above all, they learned that the aggregate measurements miss the all-important flows of money within households, complex balance sheets of incomings and outgoings, of wealth alternatively frozen and thawed by loans and borrowing.

Many of the problems addressed by this newer “poor economics” don’t apply to the ancient world: Romans, after all, lacked microfinance, NGOs and health insurance. But its realignment in scale—from the macro to the micro—was important. The relationship between macro and micro—in economics and in history—has been a matter of debate for some time. In economics, there’s a long-running argument that macroeconomic aggregates behave in ways different from individual actors.⁵² Historians have been puzzling over the problem for a while too: Is the macro-micro distinction just scalar—big histories address institutions and the state, while microhistories tell stories of individuals and households? Or is the distinction temporal—long- versus short-term histories?⁵³ This debate produced nagging doubts that aggregates of any kind—be they GDP or “big” histories or institutions—are simply the sum total of lots of small kinds of actions or people.⁵⁴ They are different, and the shift in scale constitutes a shift in kind. In choosing the scale of measurement, we don’t just choose which end of the telescope to peer through, but in doing so, we shift the nature, the subject, and the results of our observation.

Here we opt to look through the right end of the telescope, examining little people who lived at a great distance from our own time in such a way that they leap up large in our field of view, full of their original complexity and contradiction. This book is built from “micro” data—the actual remains and records from households and individuals. It takes most seriously what they took seriously—how much they spent and consumed. Consumption and expenditure help shed light on labor and income, and, to a lesser extent, on production. The flows of money within households were the daily micros of economic experience and the real basis of precarity or prosperity. It’s those flows, concealed by the aggregates, that interest us here.

As a consequence, we view income and savings as working people experienced them, at the level of the household. The household here is not the “primitive” economic unit of Finley and his predecessors, nor the institution-in-miniature of some economists, but a messy, often conflicted group of people.⁵⁵ Roman families lay somewhere on a spectrum between the nuclear model that populates modern economics to various kinds of extended kin: Roman families in Italy probably lay more toward the nuclear end, those in Egypt often included sibling couples and grandparents, while British farming families may have preserved traditions of older extended-family tribes.⁵⁶ Better-off families included their slaves and freedmen. These complex groups, as we’ll see, acted as units when they made decisions about expenditure and

labor allocation but had more tangled relationships when it came to debt and savings. Individualist or collective behavior depended on what they were doing. However, by looking at things like wage earning and labor strategies from household rather than institutional perspectives, “wage labor” and “professions” look very different, sometimes fading altogether.

It’s probably worth noting, too, that we’re also doing something quite different than Karl Marx.⁵⁷ Marx reoriented the subject of history to include working people, and all historians who think the 90 percent matter owe him a debt.⁵⁸ But Marx was a quintessential categories-of-analysis man. Proletariat, modes of production, slave society: Marx wrung these categories from the detritus of history, not chats with his working neighbors. Marx’s aim may have been the improvement of the lives of workers, but their actual, messy lives were often sacrificed on the altar of historical materialism. This is particularly true of the lives of the ancient people who populated his historical arc. Our aims here are not Marx’s aims, and indeed, by letting the practices come before the theory, we’ll find many of Marx’s categories to be less than helpful.

Little People, Big People

There’s another contemporary question that seems to sit somewhere between the macro-measures and economic life, and that’s inequality—the disparity in wealth or income among groups. Inequality, as a category of analysis, will be treated only glancingly by this book, a move that will strike many as bizarre. After all, one might argue, surely the new (or rather, more avowedly passionate) interest in wealth inequality—beginning with the financial crisis of 2008 and picked up by historians—heralds a genuine swerve toward the working majority? The answer to this would be to ask any working person today to read Thomas Piketty’s *Capital*—a book on long-term wealth inequality that, if it didn’t start historians thinking about inequality, certainly opened the floodgates.⁵⁹ It’s a marvelous book, rich in data and metaphor alike, trying to put some real depth and calculus on Marx’s claim that capital just yields more capital. I have not asked my Philadelphia neighbors—who work three jobs during the day and look after other people’s children at night—to read *Capital*, but if I did, I suspect their response would be, “Right, another book by so-called liberals about rich people.” Which would be correct, and not just about Piketty and his project.

Piketty’s book on inequality describes how rich people hang on to their money and grow it. The money of working people—even what we could

legitimately call the working class of the eighteenth through twenty-first centuries—doesn't even factor in his book, so statistically irrelevant is their wealth. In short, the inequality question, as it has driven Piketty and the Occupy Wall Street Movement and most of the new work on inequality in the ancient world, is yet another conversation—an angry one, to be sure—about the rich. This is an important conversation in the present, as it touches on the rich's hoarding of limited resources, their control over political decision-making and the resultant sully of our democracies. This is not a rationale any ancient person would have recognized: insofar as Romans cared about inequality, theirs was an elite concern about moral corruption. Eating fish purchased at 1,000 sesterii a pound hollowed out your soul, but that didn't lead to any efforts to eradicate poverty.⁶⁰ As for the Roman scholarly conversation about inequality, following Piketty, it tends to be rich people's economics by other means: political instability, monetary inflation, or Roman senatorial wealth portfolios, all a putative product of inequality as experienced by the rich. How the unequal distribution of wealth in the Roman world mattered for the 90 percent is not so much on the menu.⁶¹ We shall have many things to say about inequality in this book, but inequality of a different kind. The inequalities separating farmers who owned land from those who rented; between weavers who earned wages versus those who were paid by the piece; between the enslaved with access to their master's capital and those without—these are the inequalities of everyday practice that will occupy us here.

The inequality question also highlights one of the hazards of a project like this: how to do justice to regimes of power without simply writing about regimes of power. To date, Roman economic history has mostly been a history of the state and how, in part by accident and in part by design, it produced an extraordinarily productive moment. Increasingly, too, we're aware that the Roman state wasn't some socialist democracy, building roads, enforcing contracts and reducing transaction costs. It also behaved in brutal ways, killing and enslaving millions of people, forcibly resettling other millions, and subjecting newly conquered peoples to tribute and tax.⁶² The 90 percent, by definition, lived at the thin edge of that wedge of power, exposed to landlords, employers, tax collectors, soldiers and slave owners, all as part of their daily bread.

We do yet a further injustice to our working subjects if we render them as simple victims in yet another history of the powerful. As we shall see throughout this book, the Roman 90 percent were canny and shrewd. They were adept exploiters—of the systems that exploited them, as well as of each other. The following pages will find them robbing each other of pennies, reserving the

right to pursue their mothers for debt, and selling their children into something close to slavery in order to live another day. They were litigious when they could be and rarely trusting. Many of them were doubtless ruined by the big powers that surrounded them, but few of them went quietly. “Agency” is often used to describe people’s ability to act within the structures that confine them.⁶³ It seems too sanitized, too optimistic for this hard world. “Grit” may be more accurate.

The Past Is Many Foreign Countries

One could argue that economics—or, at any rate, the theory of supply, demand and price that has dominated economic thinking since the early twentieth century—has no real need of history. If, as neoclassical economic theory argues, human actors are rational and human behavior therefore universal, then change over time is uninteresting.⁶⁴ We could also say that these same certainties make all history the same: if rational actors making informed decisions around price and profit are ever-present, then all economies share some fundamental metrics, like price-earnings ratios or wealth distribution. Wearing the sheriff’s badge afforded by this theory, a historian could confidently move between, say, the Roman empire and eighteenth-century France, armed with some economic performance statistics, and say something meaningful about the comparison. By this same logic, things we do know about, say, the cost of living in eighteenth-century France, could be used to fill in what we don’t know about the Roman economy.

There are many things that we don’t know about the Roman economy: the overall population, per capita consumption, wheat yields, the tax rate, land rents outside of Egypt—the list is depressingly long and contains some pretty important variables. So it’s doubly tempting to rob statistics from better documented societies. The neoclassical sheriff’s badge would appear to give us the right to do so. But even if we think that badge is bunk, some genuine similarities appear to make comparison not unreasonable. As a highly monetized, nonindustrialized, agricultural world that had simple but sophisticated accounting and did lots of trading, the Roman world had some things in common with, say, the Abbasid empire or Tudor England. However, these economies’ shared “premodern” label has done some thinking for us, thinking that needs to be rethought.

The growing fascination with so-called deep or big history has not only made use of the increasing amounts of “big data,” but when such data isn’t

forthcoming, it has proven very tempting to simply retroject what we do know onto the deeper, uncertain past.⁶⁵ With economics, this has been an exercise in making less do more—that is, using a few data points to recreate a whole economy. A few mega-data projects have applied this method to create performance metrics for economies from 1 CE to the present.⁶⁶ These re-created performance metrics have been used by lots of people, from those interested in wage series or long-term inequality to those estimating GDP.⁶⁷ They all postulate a static “premodernity”—little growth, little significant change in output measurements. Population ups and downs, not economic behavior, produce the only real blips in the growth curve. The action only really starts in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, when mercantile capital, trade and eventually industrialization start the pot really boiling.

This blasé premodernity is, in large part, a product of self-determining math. The performance measurements from the early economies—the Roman empire, the Byzantine empire or twelfth-century France—look the same because they have been constructed with the same bad data—subsistence calories times the cost of wheat, tweaked by population guesstimates.⁶⁸ Pre-modern economies tend to look alike in part because the numbers used to calculate activity are mostly the same.

Static premodernity is also a product of the scale—the graph—thinking for us. It’s true that compared to the massive economic growth of the past 150 years, the premodern space does look pretty static and dull.⁶⁹ If we’re interested in the present, that’s an important observation. If we want to understand the Roman (or Byzantine or medieval) world on its own terms, it’s less so. But it’s also a case of a model driving interpretation to a place that is inductively absurd: the idea that the Byzantine empire, with its tiny population, small production of surpluses and consumer goods, smaller levels of trade, and limited use of money for everyday exchange is somehow economically “the same” as the Roman empire, seems strange.

But even this example highlights that what we choose to measure and compare has a big impact on what the comparison looks like. Comparing the cost of minimum requisite calories in different societies (which are erroneously assumed not to change) produces lots of sameness. Comparing the breadth (not the rates) of monetization and the use of credit and patterns and quantities of consumption will emphasize difference. Comparing *how* things happened—how small farmers grew crops, to whom they sold their surplus, the uses to which they put credit—this all introduces the fine-grained stories of practice, which are more different still.

Baked into this notion of an unchanging premodern world is another equally unhelpful idea: “subsistence.” Subsistence, despite some important cautionaries to the contrary, usually means producing enough to survive, plus reserve for bad times.⁷⁰ Even for those who accept that such a concept is absurd—for virtually nobody deliberately produces just enough to survive—subsistence continues to define an attitude, a just-enough approach to getting by tinged with pessimism and risk-aversion. More than that, subsistence is mostly presumed to be unchanging. Subsistence-oriented people are not, by definition, hugely variegated because the subsistence ideal is all-encompassing and consistent. “Subsistence” is dredged up to characterize everyone from hunter-gatherers to medieval serfs. In this way, subsistence worms its way in to become a historical constant, only finally undone for the masses by industrialization. Wearing the neoclassical sheriff’s badge again, this means that subsistence can also be used to fill in missing data in economic performance models, while it also has a contagion effect on lots of other economic variables—like diet, well-being, trade and consumption. In any premodern society, the former two must be depressingly low, and as for the latter two, working people need not apply—they are all just living at subsistence, and their consumption or trade is negligible. Subsistence is another one of those ideas that seems to address the 90 percent but, by flattening them into an ahistorical, timeless abstract, ultimately erases them.

How do we get around these temptations to fill in what we don’t know with people and places we know better? How do we preserve the emphatic then-ness of then—the particular, often weird and distressing Romanness of Roman working people? In this book, we do so by sticking to ancient data from the hands and households of the 90 percent themselves. This book is constructed on such data. It steers clear of ethnographic interviews, data from modern agriculturalists or artisans, early modern household budgets, and all the other siren songs from better-known worlds. Perhaps as controversially, it draws only sparingly on the writings of Cicero & Co.: filling in the lives of the 90 percent with the opinions and prejudices of the 10 percent has been done for long enough. The payoff, though, is worth it. It is amazing how much we can know about the ancient 90 percent just by listening to them. The triple revolution in making, farming and everyday writing has produced mountains of information that allows them to write their own history.

While it may be more their own history, this doesn’t mean it’s necessarily a smooth or complete one. Archaeological data is often not quantified, and when it is, it can’t be easily compared with texts. The texts—receipts, expense

accounts, contracts—come overwhelmingly from a couple parts of the empire and are missing critical variables. We'll overemphasize some places—Pompeii, Britain, Egypt—and have less to say about others—the city of Rome, Asia Minor and North Africa—places that were more central economically but for which we have less robust data of the kind used here. Much of our data probably privileges the working middle and bottom-middle. The very bottom—the indigent, the homeless—are hard to see by any means. Comparative macro-economic aggregates paper over these cracks; we shall have no choice but to confront them.

This book's comparative debt is not data but scale. It aspires to the granular, household budget-driven stories that the new poverty economics now tells—dense stories about how working households manage their resources.⁷¹ Aspiration is the key term here: we don't yet have the data to write these kinds of dense household histories, so this book offers more fragmented versions. Throughout, too, we'll be reminded that the Roman world was not, in fact, sixteenth-century England or twentieth-century India. We owe working Romans, so long relegated to the sidelines, a history that is properly theirs, rather than rendering them in the clothing of an English manor farm servant or a Mumbai textile worker.

The Math of Small Things

It's one thing to know something about economic practices in the past. It's another to quantify them. The passion for numbers in economics is a product of the discipline's quantitative turn, and economic history's turn with it.⁷² Beginning in the 1970s, economic historians began the search for big data in the past—what they called cliometrics. Wages paid to English builders, the height of American slaves, ages reported in the census or on tombstones—all these numbers could be gathered and analyzed to understand something about economies over the long term. What historians assumed those numbers meant sometimes turned out to be wrong: wages were often not equivalent to take-home income; slave heights didn't reflect only diet; age-accuracy doesn't always reflect numeracy. Those mistakes have sometimes led to better numbers, sometimes to new questions that can't be answered with numbers.

Finley was suspicious of numbers. He didn't think there was enough coherent evidence from the ancient world to scrape together even a single coherent data set, and since ancient people didn't think quantitatively about their economic lives, what would be the point? For a long time, historians and

archaeologists mostly followed his lead. Now, with skepticism thrown to the wind and huge amounts of data piling up, we have quantitative analyses of everything: Roman loans, city sizes, coin-outputs and a myriad of other subjects.

Numbers save us from raiding the already bare cupboard of ancient evidence for a handful of compelling examples. Used correctly, numbers reveal differences even as they reveal patterns. For instance, only now that we have thousands of excavated farms can we see that most of them were pretty big, and the few very small ones had to cope with particular challenges. The thousands of moderate-sized loans throw the tiny ones into sharper, more desperate relief. The poetics of muchness, as one economist termed it, doesn't need to be obfuscating: it can reveal the majority's struggles in emphatic, even sympathetic ways that stories alone cannot.⁷³

This book is based on lots of numbers as well as lots of stories. It draws on a wide range of datasets, many of which are wholly new. While the curious reader can find the raw analysis in the appendixes, the text and many figures provide an easy guide for even the number-allergic. For while quantitative data underlies this book, it has not been wrung particularly hard to yield up its stories. While statistical work has produced some important breakthroughs in working people's economics and the numbers that underlie this story are more robust than they once were, they are still fragile enough to collapse under too much pressing.⁷⁴ The kind of questions we're interested in here also don't necessarily require complex math. Ours is the math of household expense lists and interest rates and fractions of fractions—the math of small things.

The Road Ahead

The Roman 90 percent, as they emerge from these numbers and stories, were both/and-ers. They were avid trackers of their economic lives, but they only rarely used their accounting skills for future-oriented planning. They produced more than we thought, and they consumed more than we imagined. Neither of these was necessarily a sign of affluence. Their acquisitive society, awash with new goods and foods, produced its own consuming imperative. To belong, particularly but not only in cities, meant high costs of social inclusion. Their sophisticated, specialized agriculture was, in many places, the product of both opportunity and compulsion—new markets, shrinking amounts of land. Robust incomings were often quickly eroded by high outgoings, while erratic incomes required a robust portfolio of loans to bridge the gaps.

“Poverty” and “affluence” as simple descriptions of income poorly capture their constantly changing circumstances. Precarity—the high-wire act of balancing income with outflows—was the 90 percent’s constant companion.

As the 90 percent carved a living from an unforgiving world, the sources of that precarity were somewhat different than we had imagined. Getting enough to eat was less of a problem for many than controlling expenses in a world of things. Producing higher wheat yields may have been easier than we thought, while finding enough land to feed one’s cows was harder. Taxes appear to be less extortionate than bogglingly high rents. An obsessive tracking of expenses made sense in a world in which constant outflows—and thus the real challenges to savings—constituted the biggest threat to survival for many.

Our subjects will defy our efforts to categorize them. We will linger over small farmers, because farmers constituted the majority of the 90 percent, and because they have been ignored for too long. But these farmers were never just agriculturalists: they worked for wages, acted as small-scale traders of their own and others’ produce, and were key players in the great craft industries. We will spend equal time in cities and very large villages, where professional titles—butcher, baker, jug-maker—will matter less than a shared gusto for things, and the frantic efforts to manage money flows in a world saturated with both cash and credit. Indeed, the divide between urban and rural people was constantly eroded in this world, as farmers moved to cities for trade and work, while city shopkeepers and artisans often kept small plots. Animals—key agents of both transportation and disease—followed them all from place to place.

The people we will meet in this book, like a great many modern people, lived in moments of plenty and dearth. One of the arguments of this book is that, like modern Americans, working Romans found it very hard to save. Much of an Egyptian farmer’s plentiful harvest vanished into the pockets of his landlord; urban craftsmen’s astonishing outputs were eroded by the social obligation to decorate their houses and keep a good-looking table. Socking away small sums without spending them the next month was particularly challenging. As a consequence, the Roman 90 percent lived in a world of risk, with limited buffers to cushion the bad times.

Working Romans’ response to their risky, precarious world was an intense and relentless doing. The villager who used his wage account to buy wine on credit to sell for a profit: living in a monetized world meant squeezing the spaces between different kinds of money for maximum advantage. The Gallic small farmers who sold mustard and pigs to the city, or the Tuscan farmers

who sold their excess wine to their neighbors: producing meant a high-wire act between selling your crops and eating them. The mine workers running futures markets on their meager rations; the sutlers who sold fish and prostituted their sisters to the army; Epimachus and his renting, wage-hustling and water-sharing: the Roman 90 percent confronted their complex, exploitative world by wringing its neck. Hustlers and operators, the subjects of the following pages bear witness to an economy of tenacity, maneuvering, and white-knuckled grit.

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