

INVISIBLE ROMANS

Prostitutes, outlaws, slaves, gladiators, ordinary men and
women ... the Romans that history forgot

ROBERT KNAPP

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

SEEING THE INVISIBLE

I SEEK TO UNCOVER and understand what life was like for the great mass of people who lived in Rome and its empire from the time of Augustus at the start of the first millennium to the accession of Constantine three centuries later. 'For the history of Greece and Rome,' the British classical historian Michael Crawford writes in his guide to ancient sources, 'there is a great deal which is simply unknowable.' Evidence is uneven and often difficult to interpret. Scholars energetically debate how far the Roman world can be known. The world of the twenty-first century differs in numberless ways from the world of ancient Rome, not least in our attitudes and assumptions. Given what little evidence of everyday Roman life survives, the ordinary Romans begin to seem irretrievably invisible.

But we need not despair. We can, for example, supplement the evidence from our chosen time period with some careful use of sources before and beyond it. Ancient cultures were more stable than our own. The continuity of agrarian culture and economy in the ancient world makes it likely that people generally behaved in much the same way, not through contact and sharing, but because they had the same struggles for survival. The focus of this book is not merely on the city of Rome but on the whole of the Roman world. One might think the Latin-speaking parts more Roman than those where other languages predominated, but neither sources nor logic suggest this was so. We can find much

useful evidence from the mostly Greek-speaking part of the empire, especially from Egypt. As well as containing revealing observations of life in the country, much of it is concerned (as we will be) with urban life; the experience of living in cities and towns, often founded or ruled in Roman patterns, encouraged many common attitudes. This is not to deny the huge variety of cultures in the empire, nor to claim that every person would think and behave in just such a way. But likenesses in attitudes and behavior make it reasonable to use evidence from scattered sources so long as our questions are formulated with care and our answers subject to critical scrutiny.

If we can begin to overcome the difficulties of time and space, we have still to confront the most challenging aspect of the evidence. This is simple and simply put. What survives was generally created by or for the rich and the powerful, and hides the actions and perspectives of any but their own class. As the elite historian Ammianus Marcellinus aptly puts it:

There are many things which are irrelevant to the underlying themes of history, itself accustomed to deal with the highpoints of affairs. Its role is not to investigate the minor details of unimportant circumstances. If someone wished to do that, he might as well try to count the tiny bodies coursing through space, the atoms, as we call them. (*Roman History* 26.1.1)

The historian can thus write with least difficulty about what the elite Romans cared about, such as politics and war, and the issues they talked about, such as the making and enforcement of law, philosophy, aesthetics, and the inevitability of a social structure that held them at its pinnacle. Many books on these topics appear every year, but the sources, so dear to the heart of Roman historians, do more to obscure than reveal what we're after. Ancient evidence comes in two types: the one intentionally provided and the other incidentally. The first is generally irrelevant to our purpose, but the second can be crucial. An elite author setting out, for example, to write on the Roman wars of expansion, will sometimes include contextual details and bits of information which, when combined with other evidence, begin to create a picture of ordinary people. The experience of ordinary people has no direct voice

in the histories the Romans have left us. Yet sometimes it is possible to garner insights into the lives of the invisible people even where none was intended and to amplify these by deploying perspectives and evidence from a variety of other sources.

I have searched for a term to capture the invisible demographic group that is the subject of this book and have chosen to call them 'ordinary people.' This distinguishes them from the elite and leaves their definition open to the wide range of their existence, from fairly wealthy to modestly well-off and downright poor, male and female, slave and free, law-abiding and outlaw. These ordinary people lived in a world dominated by a tiny, self-perpetuating elite that was limited and defined by wealth, tradition, blood, and power. They belonged to one of the three orders or *ordines* into which they divided themselves. The senatorial order was the most exalted in social and political terms but not always the wealthiest. The equestrian order focused on the acquisition of wealth rather than the power and rank of the senatorial order. The decurial order ran towns and cities across the empire and mirrored the senatorial-equestrian divisions of Rome; these men were generally less wealthy than members of senatorial-equestrian orders, although sometimes local decurials were also equestrians. The three orders amounted to no more than 100,000–200,000 people, less than half a percent of the empire's population of 50–60 million. Among them only the adult males counted; these numbered about 40,000 and so, as the empire at this time was roughly 2.5 million square miles, there was on average one adult member of the male elite for every sixty or so square miles. As the elites were concentrated in Rome, the proportion elsewhere was even lower. Yet these numerically minuscule and widely scattered leaders controlled almost everything. Though they are not the direct concern of the present project, we shall need to bear in mind their impact on the other 99.5 percent.

The chapters that follow divide the invisible people into various groups, some less mutually exclusive than others; there are separate chapters, for example, on ordinary men and soldiers and on ordinary women and prostitutes, though most of the latter were female. The aim will be to get, so far as we can, inside the minds of these different people: what attitudes and outlooks they had, what fears haunted and what hopes inspired them. David Potter, an American classical historian

writes, 'There can be no universal definition of history or the historical process that does not allow for the ultimately subjective selection of both evidence and presentation.' In this book, I make choices and value judgments as I weave disparate threads into tapestries of what life for ordinary Romans was all about. Creating a readable and revealing account of the neglected majority in a great empire was an exciting challenge to undertake. I hope the reader will enjoy the fascinating panorama of invisible people made visible at last.

IN THE MIDDLE: ORDINARY MEN

THE ELITE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE – emperors, senators, equestrians, and the local elite of magistrates, town councilors, and priests – produced almost all the literature and extraordinary material culture which is commonly spoken of as ‘Roman.’ As a result, treatment of ‘Roman’ normally means applying the mind world and culture of the elite to a description of the entire Roman population, as when people write and speak of ‘Roman civilization’ or ‘Roman attitudes toward women.’ Here I move away from that habit and focus rather on the ordinary men, people below and generally invisible to those high in the social pyramid. By ‘ordinary men’ I mean every free person below the elite and above the poor day-laborer or peasant. Their outlook, seen through their own eyes, reveals a rich mosaic of attitudes and actions as they live their lives outside the blinkered view of the empire’s aristocracies. Although their mind world is the same as the elite’s in some basic ways – they were both part of the same overarching culture, after all – outlooks and attitudes in general differ significantly.

The imperial elite stood at the top of the Roman socioeconomic pyramid. To qualify, a person had to be worth over 400,000 sesterces (equestrian) or over 1 million sesterces (senatorial). Among the approximately 50–60 million people in the Roman Empire, there were perhaps 5000 adult men possessing such extreme wealth. Beneath (but mostly far beneath) these were the elite of the local towns of the empire. An

average of 100 or 125 adult males in each of the 250 or 300 towns of the empire that rose above the level of village would produce another 30,000 to 35,000 very wealthy persons. Because of the steep socioeconomic gradation of the Roman world, these elite together probably held 80 percent or more of the total wealth. The Romans themselves recognized this break in socioeconomic situation between elite and nonelite by calling the super-wealthy *honestiores* ('more honorable ones') and all the rest of the free persons *humiliores* ('lesser beings'). This 'all the rest' was 99.5 percent of the population.

Below these super-wealthy were a fair number of persons who had many fewer resources in comparison to the very rich, but resources sufficient, at the lower end, to be fairly certain of their daily bread and, on the upper end, to enjoy a lifestyle that allowed enough leisure to pursue some social, political, and cultural interests. These were the more modest landowners, the merchants and artisans, successful soldiers, and those financed by these groups and by the elites (professional teachers, doctors, architects, and so on). These men and their families numbered perhaps 25 percent of the total population. Besides a certain stability in resources, another commonality unites these ordinary people. They all value labor whether they are merchants or artisans or wealthy peasants; they share that important socioeconomic fact, which binds together their outlooks even though the actual wealth-level and occupation of individuals varies greatly. It is these people I am concerned with here. The challenge is to capture their mind world.

Social attitudes

Marks of hierarchy and place were everywhere. For example, the 10,000-denarii donation of Manius Megonius Leo, a citizen of the Italian town of Petelia (modern Strongoli), for a foundation was to be invested and the income distributed hierarchically: 450+ denarii income per year was spent on the anniversary of his birth. Three hundred denarii funded a banquet, but only for the local elite, the decurions; after costs of the banquet, anything left of the 300 was distributed in cash to the decurions present. In addition, 150 denarii were designated for a banquet for the Augustales, the elite priestly group of wealthy freedmen, with the remainder after costs divided among the Augustales present. Finally,

each male citizen and his wife were given a single denarius, equivalent to a working man's good daily wage; no banquet was provided (*ILS* 6468). This sort of graded gifting made the social hierarchy very visible, much as the graded seating in the amphitheaters did. Living in an unremittingly stratified world, the middling sort absorbed one of the basic attitudes of such a life: deal with equals as equals, take advantage of those below you when possible, defer to those above you always. An individual's mental state focused his abilities on avoiding infliction of injury on himself, either physical or mental, and on inflicting injury on others – in Roman terms, defending his honor and standing by lessening the honor and standing of others, while at the same time protecting his own from diminution at the hands of those thought inferior. Subordination to a lesser being, or assimilation to a group below his station (e.g. slaves), in the mind or action of a superior, was a horrible thing. The mind world was simpler with regard to those obviously superior (elite) and obviously inferior (slaves) than with the common man's peers. In the latter group there were huge differences of status and power, but no clear markers of 'legitimate' subordination or superiority. It was in this world that slights to honor, hostilities, and rivalries worked themselves out in the liveliest manner.

Hierarchical thinking places specific expectations and stereotypes in the minds of each group. The ordinary men were no exception. Scholars identify five of the most common prejudices: against freedmen, against the poor, against slaves, against merchants, and against work. It is worth examining each through the eyes of ordinary people.

Free birth was the default preferred condition; it had no legal liabilities and had none of the constraints imposed by slavery and manumitted status. The vast majority of the free population at any given time would be freeborn, as the legal status of the manumitted disappeared with the manumitted generation. It is clear that the elite held strong prejudices against freedmen who pretended to usurp their social or economic capital. While it is generally assumed that the elite prejudice against freedmen would have been held in all segments of freeborn society, there is little evidence for this; a full discussion appears in the chapter on freedmen. Certainly, however, the prejudice against the poor was real. The graffito on a wall in Pompeii says it all:

I hate poor people. If anyone wants something for nothing he is a fool. He should pay for it. (CIL 4.9839b)

Likewise, the Epistle of James in the New Testament indicates clearly this prejudice, although the author's purpose is to argue against it within the context of the Christian community:

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:1-4)

A great prejudice also existed between the ordinary man and the enslaved population. Here we can turn to Paul. In his addresses to groups of Christians, he constantly emphasizes by negation the fundamental distinction between free and slave in society; his repetitiousness is evidence that old prejudices died hard – his addressees clearly struggled with his advice to treat their slaves with less prejudice, and often failed. Another illustration of the chasm between free and slave comes from *The Golden Ass*: Lucius' transformation into an ass and back again can easily be read as an allegorical journey from freedom to slavery to freedom; all of his adventures show that the condition of being a slave is bad, that slaves are subhuman.

Another prejudice must be disposed of: ill feeling against merchants. The general view of the elite was that merchants were lying thieves. Did ordinary people share this view? Paul's letter to the Philippians uses language that is extensively mercantile – verbs of accounting and exchange are common, and they are used to convey Paul's ideas about the Christian community. Not only does this indicate Paul's own background as a man of commerce, but also that the audience was operating in this exchange and business environment, and felt positive about it. Lydia the purple merchant was active in the same milieu; again, there is no negative connotation. Businessmen themselves took great pride in their accomplishments, as did this long-distance merchant:

If it is no trouble, passerby, hold up and read this [epitaph]. I often coursed over the great sea with swift-sailed craft and reached many lands. This is the end which once upon a time the Fates spun for me at my birth. Here I have laid down all my cares and labors. Here I do not fear the stars, nor the clouds, nor the savage sea, nor do I fear that expenses will outrun my profits. (*CIL* 9.60, Brindisi, Italy)

And beside the long-distance traders there were local, short-range businessmen who dealt either in locally produced goods on a small scale, or bought wholesale and resold at the local level. Epigraphy attests to these merchants seeing themselves as the mirror image of the cheating, dishonest dealers of elite lore. Lucius Nerusius Mithres, a merchant from a small town, noted:

I sold goods which the people could use, my honesty was always praised everywhere, life was good ... I always paid my taxes, I was straightforward in everything, as fair as I was able to everyone I dealt with. I helped as much as I could those seeking my aid. Among my friends I was highly thought of ... (*CIL* 9.4796, Vescovio, Italy)

Praecilius, an *argentarius* in Cirta, and so a member of the highly suspect banker class of merchant, notes that he always had the trust of his customers and was always truthful and good:

Here I am silent, describing my life in verse. I enjoyed a bright reputation, and the height of prosperity. Praecilius by name, a native of Cirta, I was a skillful banker. My honesty was wonderful, and I always adhered to truth; I was courteous to all men, and whose distress did I not succor? I was always gay, and hospitable to my dear friends; a great change came over my life after the death of the virtuous Valeria. As long as I could, I enjoyed the sweets of holy matrimony; I celebrated a hundred happy birthdays in virtue and happiness; but the last day has arrived, as the spirit leaves my exhausted limbs. Alive I earned the titles which you read, as Fortune willed it. She never deserted me. Follow me in like manner; here I await you! Come. (*CIL* 8.7156, Constantine, Algeria/Malahide)

Naturally, merchants saw no problem in seeking gain, and thanked the gods for it:

Dedicated three days before the first of June in the consulship of Dexter (for the second time) and Fuscus. Sacred to Mercury, Mighty Profit Giver and Profit Preserver. Gaius Gemellius Valerianus, son of Gaius, of the Oufentina district, Member of the Four Man Board with Police Authority, Judicial Prefect, with Cilonia Secunda his wife and Valeria and Valeriana Secunda, his children. He set this up in fulfillment of a vow and dedicated it in a spot authorized by the municipal authorities. (*CIL* 5.6596 = *ILS* 3199, Fontanetto da Po, Italy)

Thus, merchants had a good opinion of themselves. Of course it is easy to suppose that relations in specific instances could become strained, but the evidence from Artemidorus and elsewhere is consonant with the positive impression Paul's experiences give of ordinary men associating normally with such fellows. Likewise, businessmen in Apuleius' *Golden Ass* and in Petronius' *Satyricon* are treated as normal people; they are not stigmatized.

In a similar vein, there is no indication among ordinary folk of the disdain for craftsmen felt by elites such as Cicero, who states that 'All craftsmen are engaged in base trades' (*On Duties* 1.42.15). Rather, the father of the literary Lucian is exemplary of how middling men looked at trades. Lucian's father wanted his son educated to a certain degree, but his long-range goal was to apprentice him to one of his wife's brothers so he could learn a trade. Lucian rebelled against this, but that fact does not take away from the reality that his father believed a career as an artisan would be good for everyone. There was no shame felt by Lucian's family about the artisan life and in fact even Lucian was tempted until, in a further dream, Education convinced him that the elite view of the trades – that they are vulgar – was correct, and persuaded him to pursue a career through learning and rhetoric.

A further note of pride tempered with sadness comes from the epitaph of Vireius Vitalis Maximus. He had adopted Vireius Vitalis, 'a lad of incomparable promise in the craftsman's calling,' had raised him up in the profession, and hoped that the boy would carry on his trade, supporting him in his old age. In both Artemidorus' *Interpretation*