

that this style of racing was experimental and ephemeral. Surely if foot races/chariot races were common, there would be additional references to the practice in other literary or epigraphical sources. Undoubtedly, that additional information would have clarified the meaning of *pedibus ad quadrigam*.

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CW 79.1 (1985)

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BOOK PRICES AND ROMAN LITERACY

Some years ago Best published a series of articles which demonstrate that Roman literacy was not confined to the upper classes.¹ This is an important conclusion and it suggests a further question: Could lower class Romans afford to purchase books?

Literacy and cultivated literary taste are different things, of course, and there is no doubt that most of the classical texts we read today were written for very sophisticated audiences. But sophistication was not confined to the upper classes any more than literacy was; for every senator who never read a book there was a poor teacher or educated freedman whom economic or social circumstances deprived of money and status, but not taste.² Some books, moreover, demanded less of the reader (Martial's *Epigrams*, for example), and others might be valued for their practical advice rather than their literary qualities.³

What evidence we possess that the common man bought and read books would have little credibility unless there were books priced low enough that someone with a modest income could afford them. If all ancient books were expensive, then it is likely that only the wealthy purchased them. According to Birt, whose century-old treatise, *Das Antike Buchwesen*, is still the standard work in the field, booksellers set prices rather high.⁴ Although, as noted below, there is evidence to support this conclusion, it is not a particularly helpful one. It is more important to know what the range of book prices was.

Most of the evidence for book prices at Rome belongs to the end of the first century A.D., when the book trade was well established. For this period Martial is the principal source of what we know. In one passage the poet is chastising a plagiarist (1.66. 1-4):

Erras, meorum fur avare librorum,
fieri poetam posse qui putas tanti,

¹ See Edward E. Best, Jr., "Attitudes toward Literacy Reflected in Petronius," *CJ* 61 (1965) 72-76; "The Literate Roman Soldier," *CJ* 62 (1966) 122-27; "Martial's Readers in the Roman World," *CJ* 64 (1968) 208-12; "Cicero, Livy, and Educated Roman Women," *CJ* 65 (1969) 199-204; "Literacy and Roman Voting," *Historia* 23 (1974) 428-38.

² A literary example is Juvenal's Codrus (*Sat.* 3.203ff.).

³ The evidence for Martial's readers is discussed by Best (see note 1, above). As for technical books, in Varro's *De Re Rustica* the *magister pecoris* is said to carry with him a veterinary handbook (2.2.20); compare the passage from Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* discussed below.

⁴ Theodor Birt, *Das Antike Buchwesen* (Berlin 1882) 355f. The same author's *Kritik und Hermeneutik nebst Abriss des antiken Buchwesens* (Munich 1913) is no improvement on the earlier work, and there is no thorough modern treatment; but see Tönnies Kleberg, *Buchhandel und Verlagswesen in der Antike* (Darmstadt 1967), a readable and fairly reliable semi-popular account.

scriptura quanti constet et tomus vilis:
non sex paratur aut decem sophos nummis.

There is some disagreement as to what the price of 6 or 10 sesterces refers to, but the most straightforward reading is to take it as the cost of a transcription plus the price of a cheap roll of papyrus (*tomus vilis*).⁵ A finished book, if quite small, could cost less; elsewhere Martial says that his *Xenia* (the very short thirteenth book of his *Epigrams*) could be bought for a mere 4 sesterces (13.3.1-2). A fancy edition would be considerably more expensive: in 1.117 Lupercus is told to buy a deluxe copy of Martial's poems from Atrectus at the price of 5 denarii. An elegant roll of blank papyrus could be expensive, too, as Statius tells us in a humorous poem addressed to his friend Plotius Grypus (*Sil.* 4.9.7-9):

noster purpureus novusque charta
et binis decoratus umbilicis
praeter me mihi constitit decussis.

The words *praeter me* mean that Statius purchased a blank roll and then copied in his poems.

Besides size and cost of materials, age and contents determined a book's price. In the poem just quoted, Statius complains that Grypus has sent him an old, dilapidated book worth *plus minus asse Gaiano* (4.9.22), perhaps not far from the truth. Similarly Aulus Gellius claims to have purchased at Brindisi a very large number of old and dirty books *aere pauco* (9.4.1-5). On the other hand, an old book valued for what it contained could bring a very high price. With the advent of the archaizing movement came an upsurge in the demand for antiquarian books, dramatically increasing their prices.⁶ Gellius (2.3.5) says that a grammarian once paid 20 *aurei* for a particularly old roll containing the second book of the *Aeneid*.⁷

Compared to such a book, or indeed to an ordinary deluxe roll, one costing a few sesterces was quite cheap. The only remaining question, then, is who could afford to buy the inexpensive books, and this is easily answered. In Martial's time, the daily wage of a laborer was approximately 3 sesterces,⁸ probably close to the lower limit on the price of a new book.⁹ Thus the men at the bottom of the Roman pay scale hardly had the money to buy books. But it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that a skilled artisan or a man with a little property and income did buy books; he had the money for the inexpensive ones. It was men like these whom Pliny the Elder had in mind, when he wrote in the preface to his *Naturalis Historia*: *humili vulgo scripta sunt, agricolarum, opificum turbae, denique studiorum otiosis* (*Praef.* 6).

The evidence is limited, but clearly books could be inexpensive and within the

⁵ For the different views, see Mario Citroni, ed., *M. Valerii Martialis Epigrammaton Liber I* (Florence 1975) 215f.

⁶ See Tönnes Kleberg, "Antiquarischer Buchhandel im alten Rom," *Vetenskaps-samhällets i Uppsala* 7 (1964) 21-32.

⁷ Dio Chrysostom (21.12) shows how unscrupulous *bibliopolae* exploited the market for old texts. The book Gellius refers to was thought to have belonged to Vergil himself, but very likely was a forgery: see J.E.G. Zetzel, "Emendavi ad Tironem: Some Notes on Scholarship in the Second Century A.D.," *HSCP* 77(1973) 225-43, especially 240ff.

⁸ See Richard Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge 1974) 54.

⁹ Any estimate must be rough. At 13.3 Martial says that the profit on a book selling for 4 sesterces was more than 2. Since he is referring to his own *Xenia*, a very small book, it appears that a more substantial roll could hardly sell for less than 3 or 4 sesterces, unless the bookseller sold it at or below cost.

reach of a Roman of modest means. Martial's proud claim—*Roma legit*¹⁰—is naturally an exaggeration and no more proves that the average Roman read books than does Horace's remark in the *Satires* (1.4.71-72):

Nulla taberna meos habeat neque pila libellos,
quis manus insudet volgi Hermogenisque Tigelli.

Horace does not say that these people were purchasing anything, but the point of this article is that many of them could. Book prices did not confine sales to the well-to-do. Once a man rose above the level of a common laborer, personal taste and individual needs, not money, determined whether he read books.

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CW 79.1 (1985)

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¹⁰ See, e.g., 6.60.1f.; 9.97.2.

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