

Chapter 10: Rome: From City-State to Empire: 10-6 Society and Economy

Book Title: World Civilizations

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## 10-6 Society and Economy

In general, the Romans were successful in creating a single, unified vision of what life was about—and how it should best be lived—that was accepted from Britain to Egypt and from Spain to Romania. We have a great deal of information about the economic and cultural life in the first and second centuries C.E., when the empire was prospering.

During Rome's imperial age, the methods by which ordinary men made a living had changed little from earlier days. Farming or herding animals remained the paramount occupation. At the same time, the urban population grew considerably, especially in the West. In the towns, the number of people—both men and women—engaged in skilled or semiskilled labor steadily increased. But the real growth of the urban population came from the influx of country people who had lost their land and their livelihood. They came to town hoping for a better life, but many ended up as beggars.

Most Roman subjects, as always, worked the land. But much of this land was now owned either by the imperial government or by wealthy absentee landlords. Small farmers were a declining species by the second century. They were replaced not so much by slaves as by sharecropper-tenants, who were still free in most of the empire but would not remain so long.

In the Italian and western European countryside, the land controlled by *villas*, or country estates of the wealthy, was steadily increasing at the expense of the impoverished small farmers. More and more people were tempted or coerced into giving up their independence to obtain regular income and protection against rapacious tax collectors. Another ominous trend in the empire was the increasing social stratification, particularly in the towns of Italy. The rich were more numerous than ever before, and the poor were both more numerous and more miserable. Wealth seems to have become the main qualification for public office.

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