

## ROMAN EXTRAVAGANCE

### Show Me the Money

There is a saying in the Talmud that ten measures of wealth came down into the world and that Rome received nine and all the rest of the world only one. One famous scholar said that in modern times we are babes in the matter of enjoyment compared with the ancient world; and another remarked that our most extravagant luxury is poverty compared with the prodigal magnificence of ancient Rome.

In that ancient world, there was a kind of desperate competition in ostentation. It was said of Caligula that "he strove most of all to realize what men deemed impossible," and it was said that "the desire of the incredible" was the great characteristic of Nero. The senator who paid too low a rent, or traveled with too scanty an entourage, became a marked man and immediately lost respect and influence.



One of Nero's freed slaves could regard a man with a fortune of \$652,000 as a pauper.



Marcus Gavius Apicius is believed to have been a Roman gourmet and lover of luxury. Apicius squandered a fortune of \$7,670,000 in refined debauchery, and committed suicide when he had only \$767,000 left because he could not live on such a pittance.

In one day Caligula squandered the revenues of three provinces amounting to \$767,000 and in a single year scattered broadcast in prodigal profusion \$153,000,000.

Nero declared that the only use of money was to squander it, and in a very few years he squandered \$138,000,000. At one banquet of his the Egyptian roses alone cost \$270,000.

"In reckless extravagance Caligula outdid the prodigals of all times in ingenuity, inventing a new sort of baths and unnatural varieties of food and feasts; for he would bathe in hot or cold perfumed oils, drink pearls of great price dissolved in vinegar, and set before his guests loaves and meats of gold." He even built galleys whose sterns were studded with pearls.

Nero compelled people to set before him banquets costing \$150,000. "He never wore the same garment twice. He played at dice for \$15,340 a point. He fished with a golden net drawn by cords woven of purple and scarlet threads. It is said that he never made a journey with less than a thousand carriages, with his mules shod with silver."

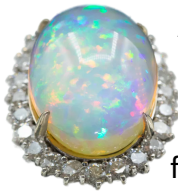
### Gluttony



Dishes featuring peacock brains and nightingale tongues were served to guests at banquets. Vitellius, who was emperor for less than a year, managed to spend \$53,000,000 primarily on food. Suetonius recounts his favorite dish: "In this, he mixed the livers of pike, the brains of pheasants and peacocks, the tongues of flamingos, and the milk of lampreys, transported by his captains and triremes from throughout the empire, from Parthia to the Spanish Strait."



Another dish included a large boar, adorned with baskets of sweetmeats hanging from its tusks. A massive bearded hunter drove a hunting knife into its side, and instantly, from the wound, a flight of thrushes emerged, which were skillfully captured in nets as they flitted about the room.



A certain Struma Nonius possessed a ring featuring an opal as big as a hazelnut, valued at \$160,000, but that pales in comparison to the pearl that Julius Caesar presented to Servilia, costing \$500,000. Pliny recounts seeing Lollia Paulina, one of Caligula's wives, at a betrothal feast, adorned with a jewel made of emeralds and pearls that covered her head, hair, ears, neck, and fingers, worth \$3,200,000.

Dissolving pearls in vinegar was a common display of ostentation. Cleopatra is said to have dissolved and consumed a pearl worth \$615,000. Valerius Maximus, at a feast, placed a pearl to drink before every guest, and he himself, as Horace notes, swallowed the pearl from Metalla's earring dissolved in wine, claiming he had swallowed \$10,000,000 in a single gulp.



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## Fabrics and Dyes

Ancient purple was much redder than modern purple. It was the royal colour and the garment of wealth. The purple dye came from a shellfish called murex. Only one drop came from each animal; and the shell had to be opened as soon as the shellfish died, for the purple came from a little vein which dried up almost immediately after death. A pound of double-dyed purple wool cost almost \$400, and a short purple coat more than \$800. Pliny tells us that at this time there was in Rome "a frantic passion for purple."



Silk may now be a commonplace, but in the Rome of the Revelation it was almost beyond price, for it had to be imported from far-off China. So costly was it that a pound of silk was sold for a pound weight of gold.

Scarlet, like purple, was a much sought after dye. When we are thinking of these fabrics we may note that another of Rome's ostentatious furnishings was Babylonian coverlets for banqueting couches. Such coverlets often cost as much as \$50,000, and Nero possessed coverlets for his couches which had cost more than \$300,000 each.



## Materials

The most intriguing of the woods mentioned in this passage is thyine, which was especially valued for tabletops. Trees large enough to produce tabletops were extremely rare. Tables made from thyine wood could cost anywhere from \$30,000 to \$110,000. Seneca, Nero's prime minister, is said to have owned three hundred such thyine tables with marble legs.



Ivory was widely used for decorative purposes, particularly by those looking to make an ostentatious display. It was employed in sculpture, for statues, sword hilts, inlaying furniture, ceremonial chairs, doors, and even household furnishings. Juvenal describes the wealthy man: "Nowadays, a rich man finds no joy in his dinner—his turbot and venison lack flavor, his unguents and roses appear to smell rotten—unless the broad slabs of his dinner table rest upon a gaping leopard carved from solid ivory."



Statuettes crafted from Corinthian brass or bronze were world-renowned and ridiculously expensive. Iron was sourced from the Black Sea and Spain. For a long time, marble had been utilized in Babylon for construction, but not in Rome. Augustus, however, could pride himself on having found Rome made of brick and left it adorned with marble. Ultimately, there was even an office tasked with searching the world for fine marbles to embellish the buildings of Rome.



## Merch

Merchandise is brought from every land and sea, everything that every season begets, and every country produces, the products of rivers and lakes, the arts of the Greeks and the barbarians, so that, if anyone were to wish to see all these things, he would either have to visit the whole inhabited world to see them—or to visit Rome; so many great ships arrive from all over the world at every hour, at every season, that Rome is like some common factory of the world, for you may see such great cargoes from the Indies, or, if you wish, from the blessed Arabias, that you might well conjecture that the trees there have been stripped naked; clothing from Babylon, ornaments from the barbarian lands, everything flows to Rome; merchandise, cargoes, the products of the land, the emptying of the mines, the product of every art that is and has been, everything that is begotten and everything that grows. If there is anything you cannot see at Rome, then it is a thing which does not exist and which never existed.

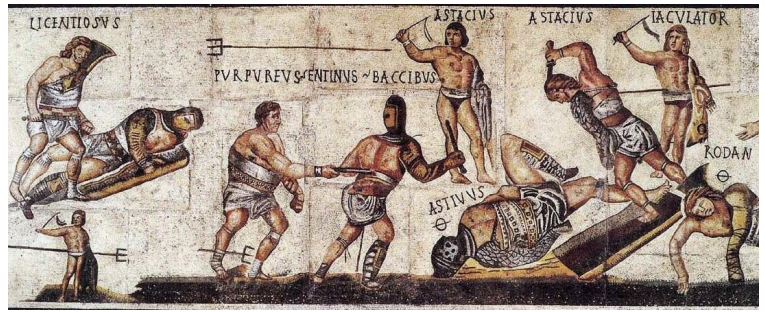


## Slave Trade

The word used for slave is soma, which literally means a body. The slave market was called the somatemporos, literally "the place where bodies are sold." The idea is that the slave was sold body and soul into the possession of his master.

It is almost impossible for us to understand how much Roman civilization was based on slavery. There were some 60,000,000 slaves in the empire. It was no unusual thing for a man to have four hundred slaves. "Use your slaves like the limbs of your body."

There were, of course, slaves to do the menial work; and each particular service had its slave. We read of torch-bearers, lantern-bearers, sedan-chair carriers, street attendants, keepers of the outdoor garments. There were slaves who were secretaries, slaves to read aloud, and even slaves to do the necessary research for a man writing a book or a treatise. The slaves even did a man's thinking for him. There were slaves called nomenclatores whose duty it was to remind a man of the names of his clients and dependants! "We remember by means of others," says a Roman writer. There were even slaves to remind a man to eat and to go to bed! "Men were too weary even to know that they were hungry."



There were slaves to go in front of their master and to return the greetings of friends, which the master was too tired or too disdainful to return himself. A certain ignorant man, unable to learn or remember anything, got himself a set of slaves. One memorized Homer, one Hesiod, others the lyric poets. Their duty was to stand behind him as he dined and to prompt him with suitable quotations. He paid \$8,000 for each of them,

Some slaves were beautiful youths, "the flower of Asia," who simply stood around the room at banquets to delight the eye. Such beautiful

boy slaves cost at least \$8,000 or \$15,000. Some were cup-bearers. Some were trained in pert and often obscene repartee. The guests often chose to wipe their soiled hands on the hair of the slaves. Some slaves were freaks-dwarfs, giants, cretins, hermaphrodites. There was actually a market in freaks "men without shanks, with short arms, with three eyes, with pointed heads." Sometimes dwarfs were artificially produced for sale. It is a grim picture of men being used body and soul for the service and entertainment of others.



## Silver

At the time John was writing, there was a strong passion for silver dishes in Rome. The silver mainly came from Cartagena in Spain, where 40,000 men labored in the silver mines. Solid silver was used to create dishes, bowls, jugs, fruit baskets, statuettes, and entire dinner services. Lucius

Crassus had crafted silver dishes that cost \$400 per pound of silver. Even a military general like Pompeius Paullinus took to his campaigns silver dishes weighing 12,000 pounds. Women would only bathe in silver baths, soldiers sported swords with silver hilts and scabbards adorned with silver chains, and even poor women wore silver anklets while slaves had silver mirrors. Their personal chariots were four-wheeled private vehicles, often silver-plated by the wealthiest aristocrats of Rome. During the Saturnalia festival, which coincided with the Christian Christmas and involved gift-giving, the gifts often included small silver spoons and similar items; the wealthier the giver, the more lavish the gift. Rome was truly a city of silver.

