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Daily Life in Ancient Rome

Does higher education mean a higher salary? Modern-day statistics certainly suggest so, but for ancient Romans looking for a big pay day, it was better to shun the life of a well-read lecturer and instead pursue a career as a Roman Centurion soldier.

Throughout history's most famous and infamous empire, money was used to pay salaries, purchase slaves and glorify emperors. Visitors to the American Numismatic Association Money Museum can learn about life in ancient Rome through its coinage at the new exhibit, "The Die Is Cast: Money of the Ancient World," which opens Nov. 9.

Not surprisingly, the phrase "All Roads Lead to Rome" is derived from the city's place as the cultural, military and economic center of the ancient world. The economy was based on agriculture, mining, trade and slave labor. The health of the economy was chiefly the responsibility of the emperor, who issued coinage, set wages for soldiers and had the power to cancel debts.

Taxes were as sure a thing for Roman citizens as they are today. Imperial taxes were paid in Roman coins and grain, and were used to pay the army, maintain the Imperial household and bureaucracy, and subsidize the city of Rome, from grain for the poor and entertainment to imperial palaces and magnificent public buildings.

Like much of today's currency, ancient Romans could expect to find the likeness of political leaders on their money. Emperors used coins to let their subjects know of their ascendance to power, promote their policies, and showcase their accomplishments. The silver Denarius served as the standard monetary unit, while smaller coins used in daily life included the brass Sesterius (4/denarius) and the copper As (16/Denarius).

More than 2,000 years before the low-carb revolution, bread was the staple of the Roman diet, and you could expect to pay 2 asses for a one-pound loaf. A half-liter of top-shelf ancient wine cost up to 30 asses, while a new tunic cost about 15 sestertii. More expensive purchases for Romans included a cow (100-200 denarii), a male slave (500 denarii), a female slave (2,000-6,000 denarii) and an apartment (48-288 denarii/year). Unlike today's high-priced sporting events, a seat at the Coliseum or Circus Maximus was free, as it was a chance for the emperor to gain favor from his people.

Life for a Roman soldier might not have been long, but it did pay well. A Centurion on the front lines of battle was given 300 denarii/month for his services, while a Praetorian Guard stationed in Rome took home 60 denarii/month, also a comfortable salary. In contrast, jobs requiring a high education level supported a more modest lifestyle. A secretary or lecturer pulled down 12-15 denarii/month, only slightly more than a fortune teller, who was paid around 10 denarii/month.

Monetary System in Ancient Rome

<i>Denomination</i>	<i>Metal</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Size</i>	<i>Value</i>
Aureus	Gold	7.85g	20mm	25 Denarii
Quinarius	Gold	4g	15mm	12.5 Denarii
Denarius	Silver	3.8g	19mm	16 Asses
Quinarius	Silver	2g	15mm	8 Asses
Sesterseius	Brass	25-30g	25-35mm	4 Asses
Dupondius	Brass	12g	28mm	2 Asses
As	Copper	11g	24-28mm	Base Unit
Semis	Brass	3-4g	18mm	½ As
Quadrans	Copper	3g	15mm	¼ As

Cost of Goods in Ancient Rome

<i>Item</i>	<i>Price (1st Century A.D.)</i>
1 modius wheat	32 asses
1 one pound loaf of bread	1 dupondius = 2 asses
1 sextarius wine (~0.5 liter)	1 - 5 asses
1 sextarius fine wine	up to 30 asses
Entrance to the public baths	1/4 as
1 tunic (clothing)	15 sestertii
1 donkey	500 sestertii
1 cow	100-200 denarii
1 slave	2000 sestertii = 500 denarii
1 female slave	2000 - 6000 denarii
1 morgan land	1000 sestertii = 250 denarii
Apartment	48-288 denarii/ year
Small farm	100,000 sestertii

Salaries in Ancient Rome

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Denarii/ month</i>
Secretary	15
Lecturer	12
Messenger	9
Haruspex (fortune teller)	10
Legionary Soldier (Private)	20
Praetorian (guard in Rome)	60
Legionary Soldier (Centurion)	About 300