Sowing Decay: *To what extent were the latifundia in the late Roman Republic necessary or detrimental?*

Total word count: 3,871

Introduction

No study of the *latifundia*—the large agricultural estates that became a structural feature of the late Roman Republic's political economy—can escape the gravity of Pliny the Elder's claim that, 'telling the truth, the large farms have ruined Italy, and now even the provinces.'[1]

While the *latifundia* are an institution whose impact transcends *simple* characterisation, we will find that Pliny is largely correct. This essay asserts that the *latifundia* were an unnecessarily detrimental force and not merely, as the functionalist view holds, a neutral instrument in Rome's transformation. For this claim, I provide three arguments drawing largely upon primary sources. First, *latifundia* were often established through unlawful and gratuitously harmful means. Second, the *latifundia's* output fuelled the military expansion from which its owners disproportionately benefitted even as their consolidation of the agricultural industry rendered Rome's food supply more precarious. And third, by displacing Rome's yeoman farmers, the *latifundia* eroded the strong sociocultural foundations upon which Rome's long-term success depended. In developing these arguments, we will examine the *latifundia's* origins, agricultural contributions, and impact on Rome's social and cultural development.

First, however, we must define this term: *latifundia*. To be sure, it has acquired a rigorous definition among modern scholars who use it to refer not only to the vast private landholdings of Rome's latter centuries but also to medieval feudal manors[2] and the haciendas of colonial Latin America.[3] This is not coincidental; the one led to the other,[4] but the trouble, as one author notes,

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[1] Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis*, transcribed by Bill Thayer from the Teubner edition, Book 18, section 35, University of Chicago, accessed July 22, 2025, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/thayer/e/roman/texts/pliny_the_elder/home.html.
[2] E. V. K. FitzGerald, "Latifundia," in *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), accessed July 22, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95189-5_1244.
[3] Solon L. Barraclough, "The Legacy of Latin American Land Reform," *North American Congress on Latin America*, Routledge/Taylor & Francis, September 25, 2007, accessed July 22, 2025, https://nacla.org/article/legacy-latin-american-land-reform.
[4] FitzGerald, "Latifundia."

is that 'divergent modern definitions abound and confuse.'[5] For our purposes, we shall discuss the Roman *latifundia* in a broad sense.[6] This entails relinquishing the word's more superfluous implications, such as the use of particular kinds of labour or the tenancy of their owners; though often present, these will not be considered essential qualities of a *latifundium*—only its private ownership or occupation[7] and its impressive size will be. Our basis for this definition will be the *lex Licinia,*[8] a 4th-century BC law prohibiting any person from occupying over 500 jugers.[9]

This law's particular significance is demonstrated by its attempted revival in 133 BC when Tiberius Gracchus, tribune of the Plebeian Assembly, sought to distribute excess lands to the poor. His efforts, however, served only to incentivise his assassination by wealthy senators,[10] a moment recognised by Flower as 'a turning point in Roman history and the beginning of the crisis of the Roman Republic.'[11] Evidently, 500 jugers was the dividing line in a land reform argument of great importance. Therefore, a privately owned or operated lot of 500 jugers or more aptly circumscribes what we will consider a *latifundium*. Note that in using a rather bare definition which does not necessitate slave, foreign or tenant labour, all our criticisms of the *latifundia* will be both widely applicable and, owing to this favourable interpretation, especially forceful.

Let us now commence our investigation into the origins, agricultural contributions, and sociocultural ramifications of the *latifundia*.

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[5] M. Stephen Spurr, "Latifundia," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, March 7, 2016, accessed July 22, 2025, https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-3596.

[6] Note that even the most technical definitions among classical texts make no reference to the extraneous features which follow; Anton J. L. van Hoof, "Some More Latifundia," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 31, no. 1 (1982): 126–28, accessed July 22, 2025, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4435795.

[7] The nuance of Roman land ownership and occupation will be dealt with in Section 1.

[8] George Long, "Lex Licinia," in *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. William Smith (London: John Murray, 1875), 693–94, University of Chicago, accessed July 23, 2025, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Lex_Licinia.html.

[9] One *iugerum* is approximately equal to two-thirds of an acre.

[10] Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (London: Profile Books, 2016), 223.

[11] Harriet I. Flower, *Roman Republics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 92, accessed February 27, 2025, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7t3pn.

Section I — Origins

In tracing the *latifundia's* dubious origins, it is useful to consider the ancient political events which brought them into question. Foremost among these was the introduction of Julius Caesar's two agrarian laws. The first, *lex Agraria,* was passed in 59 BC and distributed public land to veterans and the urban poor while also funding the purchase of supplementary private land for them.[12] The second, *lex Campana,* dispensed public Campanian land to some 20,000 families.[13] Campania had been especially dominated by large estates since before 377 BC,[14] and these new laws were highly controversial among conservative senators. Among them, Cicero stands out as a powerful opponent, framing Caesar's policies as a populist and unjust redistributive measure.[15] How, though, if Caesar's laws involved *public* land, did they affect the *latifundia—private* landholdings of wealthy citizens—and thus attract dissent from patricians like Cicero? The answer lies in understanding the two broad types of Roman land: *ager publicus* (public) and *ager privatus* (private).

That *ager publicus* ultimately belonged to the state did not prevent private, often wealthy, citizens from occupying vast swathes of it.[16] In theory, this practice was entirely legal. A technical term, *possessio,* even described the legal occupation and use of *ager publicus*—though, in theory, this land could be reclaimed by the state.[17] Hence, even public land reforms were an economic threat to many senators who owned productive *latifundia* on *ager publicus*.[18] What, then, was these senators' response?

In *De Officiis (On Duties)*, a 43 BC treatise expounding many of his political convictions, Cicero rebukes the *lex Agraria*.

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[12] Lily Ross Taylor, "On the Chronology of Caesar's First Consulship," *The American Journal of Philology* 72, no. 3 (1951): 255, accessed July 21, 2025, https://doi.org/10.2307/292075.
[13] George Long, "Agrariae Leges," in *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. William Smith (London: John Murray, 1875), 37–44, accessed July 21, 2025, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Agrariae_Leges.html.
[14] Robert Burn, *Rome and the Campagna* (London: Deighton, Bell, and Co., 1871), 404, Internet Archive, accessed July 21, 2025, https://ia600903.us.archive.org/8/items/romecampagnahist00burn/romecampagnahist00burn.pdf.
[15] Catherine Tracy, "The People's Consul: The Significance of Cicero's Use of the Term 'Popularis,'" *Illinois Classical Studies* 33–34 (2009): 186–87, accessed July 21, 2025, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/illiclasstud.33-34.0181.
[16] Long, "Agrariae Leges," 38.
[17] Ibid
[18] Andrew White, "The Role of Marius's Military Reforms in the Decline of the Roman Republic" (Senior Seminar paper, Western Oregon University, 2011), 4, accessed July 22, 2025, https://wou.edu/history/files/2015/08/andrewwhite.pdf.

> Sunt autem multi, et quidem cupidi splendoris et gloriae, qui eripiunt aliis, quod aliis largiantur, iique arbitrantur se beneficos in suos amicos visum iri, si locupletent eos quacumque ratione… Quare L. Sullae, C. Caesaris pecuniarum translatio a iustis dominis ad alienos non debet liberalis videri;[19]
>
> *There are, however, many—and indeed those eager for fame and glory—who take from some in order to give generously to others, and they believe that they will seem benevolent to their friends if they enrich them by any means…Thus, the transfer of wealth by Lucius Sulla and Gaius Caesar from its rightful owners to strangers should not be seen as generosity;*

Cicero[20] emphasises his disdain for the bill through his scathing rhetoric, characterising the redistribution as theft through the word *'eripiunt'* (rob). He also raises alarm through the contrasting adjectives *'iustis'* (rightful) and *'alienos'* (strangers), describing the original and new landowners, respectively. He even rebuts a similar agrarian bill, championed by Sulla, as being a definite '*deminutio'* (invasion) of one's *'bonis privatorum'* (private property). Evidently, Cicero views the large estates, though not on *ager privatus*, as within their possessors' rightful claim to property. In fairness, some possessors had lived on the land for generations, and in cases where they had actively improved the land, its confiscation without payment may justifiably seem tantamount to theft.[21] As we will see, however, a similar argument was used to the opposite effect by those who sought land reform even before Caesar.

If one grants that possessors may exclude others on *ager publicus*, then this right ought to apply equally to all possessors, regardless of their socioeconomic status. The way in which *ager publicus* was transferred from its original, less wealthy possessors to its later wealthy ones is therefore of foremost relevance, and unfortunately for Cicero, this process was laced with violence and dubious arrangements. Sallust, writing in the first century BC, records how land was appropriated by the rich while the poor were at war.

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[19] See bibliography for which classical sources I have translated and which I have used translations of. Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (London: Harvard University Press, 1913), book 1, section 43, Perseus Digital Library, accessed July 21, 2025, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2007.01.0047%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D43.

[20] Interestingly, Cicero's concerns surrounding Caesar's reforms appear to be especially deep-rooted. Evidence suggests he was suspicious of Caesarian officers' activities near his Tusculan villa and even feared for his Roman home (P. Walcot, "Cicero on Private Property: Theory and Practice," *Greece & Rome* 22, no. 2 (1975): 122, accessed July 22, 2025, http://www.jstor.org/stable/642).

[21] Robert Burn, *Rome and the Campagna*, 404.

> interea parentes aut parui liberi militum, uti quisque potentiori confinis erat, sedibus pellebantur. Ita cum potentia avaritia sine modo modestiaque invadere, polluere et vastare omnia, nihil pensi neque sancti habere, quoad semet ipsa praecipitauit.[22]
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> *Meanwhile, the parents or children of the soldiers, if they bordered a more powerful neighbour, were driven from their homes. In this way greed, [combined] with power, invaded, violated and ravaged everything without limits or moderation, having neither reason nor virtue, until it hurled itself to its own demise.*

Sallust paints a damning image with his acutely negative word choice, accusing the rich of *'polluere et vastare omnia'* (violating and ravaging everything), and with the word *'pellebatur'* (driven from), he implies the use of violence in the establishment of large estates. As a supporter of Caesar and detractor of Cicero, Sallust may not be the most impartial voice, but he is not alone in his narrative. Over a century later, Apuleius,[23] a literary source, and the Greek historians Appian[24] and Plutarch[25] all repeat the claim that land was often taken by force and wile. In the Greeks' histories, however, more nuance can be found, for both Appian and Plutarch note that some land transactions were voluntary, with conscription possibly providing the impetus for a farming family of humble means to sell.[26]

Appreciating this nuance, we may be tempted to attribute the *latifundia's* emergence to simple economic necessity. Accepting this view, one might call *latifundia* proprietors opportunistic at worst. To do so, however, relies on the wilful neglect of evidence suggesting that mutually beneficial exchange was frequently *not* the norm. But most egregiously, it would completely overlook the bloody, anti-democratic resistance to efforts seeking to rectify the *latifundia's* historical injustices. While running for re-election in 133 BC, Tiberius Gracchus was bludgeoned to death in broad daylight by senators opposed to his revival of the *lex Licinia.*[27] Thus, our conclusion is clear. The establishment of the *latifundia* was largely reliant upon illegitimate acts, and their survival past 133 BC was ensured by morally and politically reprehensible deeds.

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[22] Sallust, *Bellum Iugurthinum*, Perseus Digital Library, chapter 41, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0125%3Achapter%3D41.
[23] Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. E. J. Kenney (London: Penguin, 2004), Book 9, chapter 35..
[24] Appian, *The Civil Wars*, trans. Horace White (London: MacMillan & Co., 1899), book 1, chapter 1, Perseus Digital Library, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0232%3Abook%3D1%3Achapter%3D1.
[25] Plutarch, "Tiberius Gracchus," in *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (London: Harvard University Press, 1921), Perseus Digital Library, chapter 8, section 1, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0065%3Achapter%3D8%3Asection%3D1.
[26] Appian, *Civil Wars*, 1.1.
[27] Beard, *SPQR*, 223.

Section II — Agricultural Contributions

Military expansion led to emigration from the countryside into urban areas. By 225 BC, the city of Rome harboured 150,000–200,000 residents, and without a robust agricultural sector, many would have surely starved.[28] To laud the *latifundia* for their support of a burgeoning Rome, however, ignores two crucial realities. First, that the *latifundia* supported growth by concentrating agricultural production in distant provinces, thereby worsening Rome's food fragility. Second, that *latifundia*-fuelled expansion was conspicuously advantageous for *latifundia* owners.

Our first task is still, of course, to gauge the productivity of the *latifundia*. Interestingly, Varro, Martial, Pliny and Columella, notable Roman agronomists, all advise against a high degree of crop specialisation, a feature typical of cash crop-dominated *latifundia*.[29] Nevertheless, their arguments that plant diversity increases biological cross-benefits, keeps farm workers productive year-round, and lowers a farm's production costs[30] were evidently surmounted under the light of historical fact. It *is* true that the *latifundia* fed the growing empire, as can be seen in the cases of Sicily, Iberia and North Africa.

After Sicily's annexation in 241 BC, rich Romans bought large tracts of land and worked them with slave labour.[31] If the arguments of the aforementioned agronomists are to hold weight, then these new farms' devotion to cereal crops[32] should have hindered the island's food supply. By the first century BC, though, Sicily was furnishing the empire with grain. In 70 BC, in his orations against a former Sicilian governor, Cicero recognised the province as a key source of corn.

> *When did she not voluntarily promise [the corn] which she thought was necessary? When did she refuse what was demanded? For this, the wise Marcus Cato called Sicily the treasury of our republic, the nurse of the Roman people…For without any of our own expense, by supplying hides, tunics, and corn, she clothed, fed, and equipped our greatest armies.*[33]

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[28] Saskia T. Roselaar, *Public Land in the Roman Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed December 1, 2024, https://archive.org/details/publiclandinroma0000rose.
[29] Richard Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 37, Internet Archive, accessed July 21, 2025, https://archive.org/details/economyofromanem0000dunc/page/38/mode/2up?q=estate.
[30] Ibid
[31] John Paul Russo, "The Sicilian Latifundia," *Italian Americana* 17, no. 1 (1999): 41, accessed July 20, 2025, http://www.jstor.org/stable/29776533.
[32] Russo, *Sicilian Latifundia*, 41-42.
[33] M. Tullius Cicero, *In Verrem*, ed. Albert Clark and William Peterson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917), actio 2, book 2, section 5, Perseus Digital Library, accessed July 22, 2025,

Latifundia in Iberia's southernmost province, Baetica, again contributed to the empire's food supply. So great was their exportation of olive oil, peaking around the 1st century AD, that there is an entire mountain called 'Monte Testaccio' on the banks of the Tiber composed of over 53 million empty olive-oil amphorae, up to 95% of which originated in Baetica![34] It is a credit to the *latifundia's* efficiency that as Baetican land was consolidated during the first century AD, the olive oil trade reached its peak,[35] and the production of these amphorae was increased and standardised.[36] Furthermore, olive oil was no trivial food source. Biological evidence indicates that the average Roman consumed 475 to 750 calories of olive oil each day and around 40 litres of it each year, counting the olive oil in various inedible products.[37] In this way, Baetican *latifundia* supplied Rome with an essential commodity.

Finally, North Africa was another major provider of sustenance. Sallust, writing in 41 BC, well after the region had been conquered by Rome, describes Africa as a 'fertile field of crops'.[38] The province had maintained its reputation into the late first century AD, as evidenced by Tacitus, who later recounted the panic in 69 AD when African grain shipments failed to reach Rome.

> *Lucius Piso, the proconsul of [Africa], was not at all a turbulent character; but because the ships were detained by the harshness of the winter, the commoners, [who were] accustomed to buying food daily [and] to whom the grain supply was the single public concern, believed and feared that the ports were closed and the provision [of grain] restrained.*[39]

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https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0012%3Atext%3DVer.%3Aactio%3D2%3Abook%3D2%3Asection%3D5.

[34] Mary Martin, *Liquid Gold: The Olive Oil Trade between Baetica and Rome* (honors thesis, University of Mississippi, Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, May 2016), 49–52, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.ancientportsantiques.com/wp-content/uploads/Documents/AUTHORS/Martin2016-OliveOil.pdf.

[35] Martin, *Liquid Gold*, 3.

[36] Horacio González Cesteros et al., "Before the Dressel 20: Pottery Workshops and Olive Oil Amphorae of the Guadalquivir Valley Between the Late Republic and Augustan-Tiberian Times," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 37 (2024): 139, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-roman-archaeology/article/before-the-dressel-20-pottery-workshops-and-olive-oil-amphorae-of-the-guadalquivir-valley-between-the-late-republic-and-augustantiberian-times/EF523D160396F97D6AE1FF988FD3B87B.

[37] Martin, *Liquid Gold*, 54-55.

[38] Sallust, *Bellum Iugurthinum*, 17.

[39] Cornelius Tacitus, *Historiae*, ed. Charles D. Fisher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), book 4, chapter 38, Perseus Digital Library, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0079%3Abook%3D4%3Achapter%3D38.

Rome's panic at a mere pause in the daily African grain shipments exposes its deep economic dependence on North African imports. Crucial to our examination, these imports were *not* the output of small farms. Immediately following Pliny's infamous remark that large estates were destroying Rome, he notes, likely hyperbolically, that 'six proprietors owned half of Africa when Emperor Nero executed them.'[40]

Pliny doubtless intended to incriminate the *latifundia* with that detail, but taken together with Tacitus' account revealing Rome's reliance on African grain at the same time that land was consolidated into a few hands, Pliny inadvertently vindicates the *latifundia's* industrial capacity. For our purposes, it is actually Tacitus, not Pliny, who provides the most forceful criticism of the *latifundia* on productive grounds.

Insofar as the *latifundia* were instrumental in feeding Rome, as Tacitus' account proves, they also rendered her vulnerable in the event of a brief pause. The Romans were aware of this dependency, and in 123 BC the *lex Sempronia* was passed to ensure that grain was always affordable to the poor.[41] The connection between this law and the rise of the *latifundia* is apparent in both the timing and author of the *lex Sempronia*. Passed by Gaius Gracchus, it came just ten years after his brother Tiberius was publicly murdered for his attempt to reinstate the *lex Licinia*.[42] Clearly, land and grain reform were inextricably linked. As the *latifundia* predominated in new provinces, Romans crowded into cities, thereby losing the ability to grow their own food and creating a new class of urban poor who fed themselves at the mercy of the price of *latifundian* grain.[43]

The implication of Tacitus' recollection of the grain panic and the existence of the *lex Sempronia* upon our argument is twofold. Consider the *prima facie* reasonable apologetics that the *latifundia* provided the best means of feeding the growing empire. First, this does not imply that the *latifundia* were a good or near-perfect solution; by outsourcing crop production to the provinces, they left the heart of the empire vulnerable to supply or transportation shocks. Second and more important, we must reject the implicit assumption that the empire's growth was some universally desirable end. The *latifundia* served the interests of expansion, and expansion served the interests of the *latifundia*. Not only did they gain land, but they displaced rural populations, at once quashing competition and intensifying inelastic demand for their

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[40] Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, 18.35.
[41] J. G. Schovánek, "The Provisions of the 'Lex Octavia Frumentaria,'" *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 26, no. 3 (1977): 378, accessed July 22, 2025, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4435569.
[42] Beard, *SPQR*, 222-224.
[43] Samuel Aly, "The Gracchi and the Era of Grain Reform in Ancient Rome," *Tenor of Our Times* 6 (2017): 15, Harding University, accessed July 22, 2025, https://scholarworks.harding.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1034&context=tenor.

product. We therefore conclude that the *latifundia* were more economic extortionists than saviours, and their ultimate outcome was a food supply which was more precarious and less equitable.

In stripping the displaced of their livelihoods, the *latifundia* stripped *all* of Rome of something graver in consequence than mere food for the body. They deprived her of the social and cultural virtues without which her preeminence began to wither.

Section III – Sociocultural Ramifications

Having dispelled the imperialist fiction that expansion benefitted all, and having recognised that *but for* the *latifundia*, that appetite for growth needn't have been so ravenous, we can now appreciate that another path—indeed the older one characterised by small, independent farmers—was open to Rome. In coming to understand what the abandonment of this path meant for the republic beyond its aforementioned legal and economic implications, we will find that the most powerful criticism of the *latifundia* stems from their corrosive influence on the Roman body politic.

We turn first to poetry for its visceral introduction to the problem. While many poets extolled the virtues of the humble farmer, Horace is here considered as he analyses the consequences of their disappearance. In 23 BC, in Book III of his *Odes,* he laments the decline of Rome's successive generations.

> damnosa quid non inminuit dies?
> aetas parentum, peior avis, tulit
> nos nequiores, mox daturos
> progeniem vitiosiorem.[44]
>
> *What has damned daylight not diminished?*
> *The age of our parents', worse than their forebearers, bore*
> *us still worse, [and] soon we will be giving [birth to]*
> *more vicious progeny.*

Polemic adjectives such as *'damnosa'* (damned) and the comparative *'vitiosiorem'* (more vicious) render Horace's distress vividly. Two stanzas prior to this extract, however, his tone is much more positive. He praises the *'rusticorum mascula militum / proles'* (male offspring of rustic soldiers)[45], but alas, these rustic soldiers, resembling the small landowners displaced by rich neighbours, were a fading race. As Simkhovitch observes, the demise of traditional *Romanitas* and the rise of the *latifundia* were intertwined, being 'aspects of the same social phenomenon.'[46] In the process, 'the place of innumerable small farms was taken by extraordinarily large estates—the *latifundia*.'[47]

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[44] Horace, *Odae*, 3.6, The Latin Library, accessed July 21, 2025, https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/horace/carm3.shtml.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Vladimir G. Simkhovitch, "Rome's Fall Reconsidered," *Political Science Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (1916): 203, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2141560.
[47] Ibid.

Horace, though, may not be the most objective source from which to form a conclusion. He himself lived in the country, often at his Sabine and Tiburtine estates.[48] He also enjoyed close relations with Augustus, who sought to restore traditional Roman *pietas*, so his eulogising of the small farmer may have been both self-serving and politically motivated.

He is, however, corroborated by other sources. Sallust, writing at the time of the Civil War (49-45 BC), gives a more mechanised account of how land consolidation led to moral decay.

> *When, however, idleness and poverty gradually drove the commons from the fields and forced them to live without a fixed abode, they began to covet the riches of other men and to regard their liberty and their country as objects of traffic. Thus little by little the people, which had been sovereign and had exercised authority over all nations, became degenerate, and each man bartered his share of the common sovereignty for slavery to one man. Hence this population of ours, at first acquiring evil habits and then divided by different employments and modes of life, since it has no bond of union, seems to me quite unfitted to govern the state.*[49]

Sallust here highlights the specific deficiencies of 'sloth' and a covetousness of others' property, and it is easy to see how large, invasive estates produced this effect. He also emphasises the loss of freedom, an important Roman ideal, as this dispossessed class was forced to sell its labour. Though Sallust was a known supporter of Caesar and critic of the aristocracy, his explanation of how the *latifundia* corrupted Roman social dynamics is detailed and plausible. That he was corroborated by both poets and other historians[50] further leads me to believe that the large estates did in fact have a detrimental cultural impact. Cicero himself even exalts the farming life and its relation to freedom.

> *However, of all the affairs by which gain is acquired, there is nothing better than agriculture, nothing more enriching, nothing more pleasant, nothing more worthy of a freeman.*[51]

That even Cicero, the *latifundia's* great defender, here employs his rhetorical talents to praise agriculture, not merely for its profitability but for its '[worthiness] of a freeman', makes incontestable the link between rural life and admirable character. Hence, to the extent that the

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[48] Suetonius, *Vita Horati*, University of Chicago Penelope Project, accessed July 22, 2025, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/de_Poetis/Horace*.html.
[49] Pseudo-Sallust, *Epistula ad Caesarem senem de re publica*, University of Chicago Penelope Project, section 5, accessed July 22, 2025, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Sallust/pseudo/Epistula_ad_Caesarem*.html.
[50] Such as Pliny.
[51] Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.151.

latifundia deprived so many of this lifestyle, one must recognise their ruinous effect on traditional Roman virtues.

Cultural decay manifested itself visibly in both military and political matters. Beginning with the former, a decline in the size and morale of Rome's citizen-soldier force accompanied that of Rome's independent farmers. The situation became so dire that in 107 BC, the consul Marius removed the landowning requirement associated with military service. The long-term result was to make soldiering more a career than a calling, increasing soldiers' economic dependence on, and thus loyalty to, their generals. Some even point to Marius' professionalisation of the army as the key antecedent to civil war.[52] Furthermore, it stands to reason that as soldiers' property stake in the republic dwindled, so too would their morale.

On the political front, one need only recall Cicero's dismay at Caesar's land reforms to see how outrageous inequality led to animosity between rich and poor. But even decades earlier, land redistribution debates prompted the assassination of Tiberius Gracchus—Rome's first constitutional crisis.[53] The animosity with which many of the urban poor regarded the landed rich was a reasonable response to the unfair deprivation of their lands. However, even if such animosity is to be derided as envious and redressive policies as populist, these are *moral* criticisms, vices to which the rustic farmers of sterner moral fibre would not have succumbed even if they had reason to. Indeed, recall how Sallust claims that the poor *became* covetous, *beginning to* 'seek out others' resources' *after* they were dispossessed.[54] In other words, whether or not one thinks the domination of the *latifundia* gave the poor good reason to resent the rich, the emergence of envy, justified or not, is itself a serious social harm. In this way, cultural decay presented itself in violent polarisation and negative relations between economic classes that spelt the end for the Roman Republic.

It is hard to see how the *latifundia* could have more fundamentally undermined Rome's long-term success than by sabotaging its military and political functioning. History and logic demonstrate that even economic success cannot long last under military and political turmoil. Crucially, though, they achieved this indirectly through the destruction of the yeoman farmer and his attendant sociocultural virtues.

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[52] Jack Morato, "*Praecipitia in Ruinam*: The Decline of the Small Roman Farmer and the Fall of the Roman Republic," *International Social Science Review* 92, no. 1 (September 1, 2016): 15–16, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.jstor.org/stable/intesociscierevi.92.1.01?seq=1.
[53] Beard, *SPQR*, 223.
[54] Sallust, *Epistulae ad Caesarem*, 1.5.

Conclusion

In an era of great technological and societal development, it is tempting to attribute the ills of the existing order to necessity—to remark that the world could simply not be any different from what it is and to appreciate that it is at least not any worse. True or not in our present age, if I have persuaded you thus far, the following should be clear about a dominant force in Roman society over two millennia ago: first, that the *latifundia* of the late Roman Republic were highly detrimental to their society, and second, that these detriments are *inexcusable* as mere necessary costs of Rome's development.

With regard to the first claim, the *latifundia* imperilled Rome's population of humble farmers, trapping her food supply in hazardous equilibrium and despoiling her of her proud farming virtues. The second claim, however, is perhaps more contentious.

At best, one might regard the *latifundia* as a necessary evil, an admittedly damaging institution, the blame for which lies in the circumstances responsible for its creation. I hope to have illuminated the flaws of this argument, for it would firstly suggest that every possible effort was made to mitigate the *latifundia's* negative impacts. Their violent and insidiously coercive establishment repudiates such an apology. Second, this argument also implies that the *latifundia* served a larger purpose: Roman expansion. This rationale being the greatest impetus for their continued existence, however, only incriminates the *latifundia* as self-serving, extractive institutions—for it was through the conquest, absorption and displacement of people that *latifundia* owners best ensured their increasing wealth. That the *latifundia* outlived the husk of Rome by more than a thousand years belies their service to her and condemns their emergence in the late Republic as the seeds of decay.

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