

Prosopographical research by scholars such as Nicolet, Schatzman, D'Arms, Wiseman, Mouritsen, Coarelli and most recently Cébeillac-Gervasoni, have documented the participation of wealthy and socially prominent Romans, including members of the curial, equestrian, senatorial and consular élites in trade and a wide range of commercial activities. Nonetheless, the conviction that the social prejudice against commerce in favour of landed wealth familiar from the Medieval and Early Modern feudal nobilities was also characteristic of Roman society maintains a stubborn hold on the modern scholarly imagination. We can better understand the social attitudes and economic behaviour of the Roman upper class and dispel many misconceptions, through a fair and comprehensive comparison with the Early Modern aristocracies and bourgeoisies. When examined in the proper context, it is clear that the Roman upper class was largely free of the social and legal anti-commercial constraints that weighed on the feudal nobilities (and even on the commercial middle classes who consistently mirrored their prejudices). The Roman élite justified their social power with a decidedly meritocratic ideology, emphasizing a successful tradition of successful military and political leadership and private and public patronage designed to build electoral influence among the broader population. In their private affairs, they lauded frugality and the accumulation of wealth through productive investment and an aggressive pursuit of profit, whether in agriculture, which they considered a highly capitalized and demanding commercial business, trade, banking, or urban real estate development. In fact, as Werner Sombart noted long ago, ancient attitudes towards commerce were actually instrumental in providing a model for those petit bourgeois tradesmen and intellectuals who tried to challenge the dominant ideology of the *Ancien Régime* and defend the social respectability of commerce.

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