De luxuria propagata romana aetate

Roman luxury in its many forms

Edited by

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Giovanna Di Giacomo specialised in Classical Archaeology, with a PhD in Ancient History, was previously a research fellow at the University of Siena and obtained the national scientific qualification for the role of *professore associato* in Ancient History. She is contract professor of "*Epigrafia Romana*" at the University of Rome Tor Vergata and of "Storia di Roma e del Mediterraneo Antico" at the University of Macerata. She participated in various editorial and research projects promoted by the *Direzione Generale dei Monumenti*, *Musei e Gallerie Pontificie* (*Musei Vaticani*), the *Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma*, the *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei,* and the *Deutsches Archäologisches Institut di Roma*. Since 2002 she has been collaborating on the international project "*Electronic Archive of Greek and Latin Epigraphy* (EAGLE) - Promotion and creation of a general virtual archive of Greek and Latin epigraphy of the ancient world" for the *Epigraphic Database Rome* database, and is currently working on the "New edition of the section of volume XIV of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* relating to *Praeneste* and the *ager Praenestinus*" financed by the *Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften* of Berlin. Among the research interests in the field of economic and social history, two main thematic nuclei stand out: the first concerns the study of luxury craftsmanship through literary, archaeological, legal, and above all epigraphic sources; the second concerns the patrimonial geography and the social fabric of the Roman and Lazio suburbs, in particular of the ager Albanus, characterised by the presence of the imperial Albanum and numerous villas belonging to members of the senatorial aristocracy. Among her publications dedicated to the above themes are: *Oro, pietre preziose e perle. Produzione e commercio a Roma* (Edizioni Quasar, 2016) and her essays published in 2020 in the volume *Albanum I. Ager Albanus. Von republikanischer Zeit zur Kaiservilla – Dall'età repubblicana alla villa imperiale* (Sonderschriften, 24).

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Prologue

Luxury is fashionable in studies of Antiquity, and particularly studies of the Roman world. The world economic crisis of 2008-2013 and the current complex economic situation in Western countries certainly have fertile ground for comparison, namely an investigation of how the richest 1% of the Roman population, who controlled 99% of the resources, lived. Naturally, this also concerns the fact that each generation of scientists (be they historians, archaeologists, or Romanists) asks different questions of the sources and the data. It is now the turn of luxury to suggest answers to help us better understand the Roman world.

The concept of luxury in Rome, as well as in our contemporary societies, is complex. Products were considered luxurious based on their scarcity or exclusivity, although at times it is difficult for historians to assess which products or places deserve this epithet. However, other components must be considered, such as hedonism, politics, or the much-acclaimed-up self-representation of the senatorial establishment. A Romanist cannot forget the fundamental role played by the republican *leges sumptuariae*, who ineffectually attempted to repress the luxury that was considered excessive by the *mos mairoum* of the highly traditional senatorial families.

The defenders of tradition – the simplicity and austerity of the Roman way of life – such as Cato, saw luxury and ostentation as the result of the Hellenization that was gladly accepted by the aristocratic class, believing that it was a threat to the preservation of customs and their traditional values, as well as a source of corruption. Violations of these customs, such as excessive luxury, resulted in the censors (as caretakers of such *mores*) writing an infamous censorship note, which was recorded in the census next to the name of the person affected. This could in turn give rise to various measures to his detriment, such as transferring him to a lower category in the census, including him in the list of citizens excluded from voting, imposing a fine, increasing the quota that he had to contribute to public coffers, removing him from his position as senator, or excluding him from the equestrian order. Luxury thus became a political weapon, one that was also used to try to contain and limit the capacity of women as they gradually reached what could be considered a certain degree of emancipation and patrimonial autonomy. They were required to maintain decorum, and any excess luxury in their clothing, or indeed any part of their life, was controlled.

One fact is indisputable: the culture of luxury is associated with political power and the attempt to preserve a certain anthropological and social model. Historians have demonstrated this for Antiquity, just as sociologists and anthropologists have done so for the present.

I will not go into detail about each chapter that makes up this volume, as this is not the function of a prologue. I do, however, wish to express to the reader my conviction concerning the high quality of all the works published here, which range chronologically from the 2nd century BC to the 6th century AD, and which geographically include the entire empire, from the Roman capital to provinces such as Lusitania, Mauretania Tingitana, or Britannia, among others. This volume offers a holistic reflection on the concept of luxury in Roman times, a reflection that is based on a variety of sources: literary, legislative, archaeological (gardens, funerary urns, jewelry, statues, furniture), epigraphic, and numismatic.

Barcelona, November 2022

Mª Eugenia Ortuño Pérez

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Luxonomics, a proxy for Roman studies

Lluís Pons Pujol

Jordi Pérez González

This volume focuses on luxonomics, or the economy of luxury in Roman times, and how its study is an element that is essential to understanding the history of the period.

On October 4, Jean-Jacques Guiony, chief financial officer of LVMH Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton SE – the world's leading group of luxury brands – said: "Luxury is not a proxy for the general economy". Faced with rising inflation, geopolitical turmoil and the collapse of several stock markets, it may seem that his words are correct, especially when he reiterates that "Everyone is talking about the recession, but nobody has seen it yet"[1]. If the recession is confirmed, if luxonomics goes in the wrong direction, then even LVMH may not be able to resist. Even if the sector does enter crisis, it is a global phenomenon, and thus the whole world is compensated; after all, when one sector is stagnant, another grows in a different part of the world[2]. Thus, the universal nature of the luxury economy over time has made it something inexhaustible, which can – and will – be detected in any society. Luxury will always be present. Even the health of the economy can be a sign that things are going well and that basic needs are covered. It is thus not surprising that the study period proposed in our book is that with the greatest economic stability and territorial expansion in Rome's history. The conditions were thus present to increase the consumer base of this type of goods (a fact that would lead to a more complex production of more unique products for consumption by the highest part of the elite pyramid). However, these conditions also indirectly promoted a growing market for products in order to meet growing demand, a fact that could cause them to lose their prestigious status, as these products would subsequently be more easily attained, popularising their consumption[3]. All of this is before we factor in the diffusion of the copies derived from this new culture of Roman luxury. As its consumption was mainly focused on material culture, more remains of its existence have been preserved, and consequently one of the most vital and prolific fields of study has been generated. Despite this, apart from the original works[4] on the subject or those focused on the urban craftsmanship[5] of these elaborations, as well as the publication of catalogues of collections or museums[6], there are no works that gather knowledge of the luxury economy in Rome for the period such as that which is presented here[7].

[1] Felsted 2022.
[2] Campuzano 2003.
[3] An example is the current debate on whether *garum* should be considered a luxury food, or if its everyday presence in Roman markets makes it a common product. See Van der Veen 2003; García Vargas, Sáez Romero 2018 and Duprat 2022. In this line, there are currently products whose prestige has declined in recent decades due to their accessibility and affordable prices, e.g. sea bass or turbot; EU Studio 2022.
[4] Van Meurs 1605; Friedländer 1862 y Baudrillart 1881.
[5] Holleran 2012; Giacomo 2016.; Parisini 2021 and Pérez González 2021.
[6] E.g. Fontanella 2009.
[7] In press are the works of Olson and Romana Berno on luxury in Antiquity, while the book resulting from the International Workshop 'Magnificentia Et Luxus. Materials and Technology of luxury in the early Imperial period', organized in Tarragona on 11/3-4/2022 by Diana Gorostidi Pi, Simona Perna, Virginia García-Entero and Anna Gutiérrez García, is in the process of writing.

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Today, luxury consumers can choose where they get their items from, how they get them, and when; they can even be changed up until the last minute. Customer expectations of reducing environmental damage are also driving a greater desire for transparency in the supply chain, redefining luxury, making it *eco* and more digitised[8]. Close to 30% of global luxury sales will take place online by 2025, and the acquisition of immaterial visual culture is on the rise, compared to the traditional prestige assets of material culture. This type of consumer luxury bears little or no resemblance to that of Ancient Rome, and Antiquity is perhaps less likely to offer transparent and sustainable answers concerning the depletion or serious environmental damage generated in the original phase of the traceability of resources turned into luxury products[9].

The older the society, the more difficult it is to use contemporary indicators to draw conclusions about the distribution of income and its purchasing power. However, a large body of research suggests that the elite top 1% of Roman society controlled a similar proportion of the national wealth as did their counterparts in the magnate period of the late 19th century until the present[10].

Today, for example, the legendary 1% who head the list of top-earners in the US now own 45% of the country's wealth. This elite group of 300,000 Americans has amassed almost as much income as the other 150 million at the bottom of the list. And yet the greatest change in wealth has not taken place in this group, but rather in the top 0.1%, and within these the 0.01% percent. The smaller the group, the more exponential is the increment of growth[11].

Faced with the hypothetical power held by the common people in Ancient Rome, the elite seized control of economic resources and monopolised public office. The nobles outwardly defended the institutions of the Republic, such as its elections, but in reality these were monopolised by chosen individuals of the same social class. They regarded the lower classes as morally and intellectually inferior. The automatic equation of hardship and moral inferiority was so entrenched that *egens* – the poor or needy – became a term to define abuse. Following the same logic, the term *locuples* – the rich – acquired a broader meaning, and was used in aristocratic circles as a synonym for praise. The basis of wealth as a personal virtue lay in the aristocratic belief that only wealthy men had freedom of choice, and thus only they were capable of acting in accordance with moral principles[12].

The idea of luxury, in its first expressions, was built and developed based on ethical and moralising objectives. For most of the Greek philosophical schools, and indeed until the Enlightenment, luxury was synonymous with excess and vanity, precipitating the restlessness of the soul, simplicity, independence, and inner strength. The race to acquire these false pleasures weakened the body and mind, and was responsible for the corruption of customs and urban decay. Moral criticism governed the analysis of

[8] On this, see: Okonkwo 2010; Beauloye 2016; Gardetti, Muthu 2018; Armitage 2020; DeAcetis 2022; Eppen Beauloye 2022; Haslam 2022, Kombarova 2022 and Phillips 2022.
[9] There are several examples of Roman knowledge of the negative impact and contamination derived from some of its productions. On the felling of *Mauretania citrus* to make tables, see Pons 2021. On the possible use of lead objects in winemaking, see Aguilera 2018. On the use of mercury for the extraction and purification of gold, see Rodríguez Almeida 1986; 1994 *cfr*. Chic 1991. Along these lines, on lead pollution in Greenland ice, derived from its use in the Roman metallurgical industry, see the research by Hong et al. 1994. A current parallel on the use of mercury in the Bolivarian gold sources and the contamination of its rivers can be found in Mendoza Reyes 2022a and 2022b. Finally, on the policies or strategies of control over their Roman frugality, see Gildenhard, Viglietti 2020.
[10] Kampfner 2016, 55.
[11] Kampfner 2016, 32-33.
[12] Kampfner 2016, 55-56.

luxury until the 18th century, with the well-known 'sumptuary dispute', at which time the first apologies for wealth and superfluity arose.

The idea that the consumption of luxury goods has great repercussions – whether negative or positive – for the economy in general, and for urban sectors in particular, is a traditional theme of 18th century bibliographies, and was defended by great European thinkers of the period[13]. Montesquieu and Voltaire saw luxury as a vital element of the French economy, generating employment for thousands of people. Even Mandeville (1729) claimed that without luxury, England would experience a sharp economic contraction and catastrophic unemployment, since "luxury employed a million poor people"[14]. For his part, Galiani, when describing (and defending) the new commercial society, wrote in 1751 that it permitted the progress of human nature, since it fostered the monetary instrument that encouraged exchanges and multiplied commerce. Luxury "cannot be more than the introduction of trades and the sale of merchandise that are for enjoyment and not an absolute necessity for life. Therefore, luxury cannot appear until the necessary arts are already sufficiently supplied with workers"[15]. Today, the value attached to luxury has gone from being an essentially negative term, threatening social virtue, to an innocent stratagem supporting consumption[16]. Recently, Antoine Arnault (head of communications and image at LVMH) even said that the fur industry created jobs, with whole companies depending on its trade[17].

In this sense, there is a current fundamental contradiction, which could be transferred to the luxury economy of Antiquity. While overconsumption and materialism worry us, they also seem inevitable in advanced economies[18]. Current studies of economic ethics focus on the structural problems of poverty, international trade, and workers' rights, but rarely, if ever, do such studies speak directly of the excesses of the wealthy, including the upper classes. Examples can be found in the new elite consumers of the emerging super-economies of Asia or Latin America,[19] and the consequent emergence of novel scenarios for their critique[20], as well as the various strategies that this group uses to avoid social rejection. Surprisingly, for some of the wealthy, the key is to perform the ultimate balancing act: signalling their success, but in a more understated manner[21] - showing off in a veiled way instead of showing obvious images of them next to material goods.

We could consider that some elite consumption spaces of Ancient Rome resemble these new trends, where showing wealth now implies a more humble way of boasting, even going so far as to hide it. This all depends on the periods of anger or public tension towards exposing wealth, during which laws were at times enacted against its use. For us, an ideal scenario would be to discover, through the law, the existence of a persistent luxury economy in Rome. We could start a debate here about the difficult balance between the consumption of prestigious goods when taken to extremes, such as those attributed to Caligula, Nero, Heliogabalus, etc., against the defenders of the *mos maiorum*, and the moral life of moderation, as defended by philosophers such as the Stoic Seneca[22]. Perhaps the most interesting

[13] Roncaglia 2019.
[14] Jurado Sánchez 2006, 212.
[15] Carmagnani 2012, 59.
[16] Berry 1994.
[17] Dean 2022.
[18] Cloutier 2015.
[19] McNeil, Riello 2016.
[20] Yip 2021.
[21] Ruíz 2018.
[22] Featherstone 2016.

question to answer would be: why do we tolerate some kinds of wealth and not others? How does the historiographical construction of certain characters lead to their elitist consumption in a culture of seduction, turning sumptuary excess into something *chic*?

Undoubtedly, the rapid and ferocious expansion of the Roman Republic soon caused the values and concepts of the archaic Republic to change. Thus, authors such as Plautus denounced in their comedies the widespread corruption of a system that was degenerating, fed by the loot obtained in the wars of conquest, and hoarded by the most prominent members of the urban elites[23]. From then on, luxury was used as a political issue, generating a discourse of double standards. The origin of these problems was said to be foreign, more specifically oriental, a region that became the ideal culprit for the loss of traditions[24]. It is worth asking why these various sumptuary laws were enacted (as we are already advancing their ineffectiveness), if they had a moralising purpose, if they acted against the control of the family patrimony of women and men, or if, on the contrary, they demonstrate a conflict within the ruling class in which an attempt was made to restrict the political influence of the equestrian establishment[25]. Without knowing if it is one of these answers – or all of them at the same time – in this volume, we propose various scenarios in which to discuss it.

Faced with the idea of a primitive economy based on poverty as suggested by anthropology, it is necessary to defend the existence of a certain form of luxury even before the domestication of plants and animals, before the domain of textiles, pottery, or metallurgical arts, and before the emerging monarchies surrounded themselves with gold and splendour. Luxury was born before the history of luxury properly began[26]. At first, luxury had a cumulative nature – that of rare objects – as opposed to the manufacture of high-cost goods, which would come later.

The appearance of the State and of societies divided into classes – separated into owners and subjects, nobles and plebeians, rich and poor – gave way to new logics of accumulation, centralisation, and hierarchisation. At this moment in history, architecture, furniture, sculptures, palaces, patios, gardens, decorations, and other elements appeared that conveyed the grandiloquence of the heavenly or earthly superior power. From then on, everything was divided into splendour and the ordinary, as state-hierarchical societies deepened the inequality of wealth, the social division between means of owning and spending, lodging and dressing, eating, having fun, and even dying. In parallel, the lavish signs that underline social inequality, ruinous oppression, and prestige rivalries increased through unproductive consumption[27].

The rapid growth process of the Roman Republic was paralleled by the rise of the equestrian class to new political positions, the accumulation of power in the hands of a few, and the loss of decision-making influence among the senatorial class. The incredible, but also inevitable ‘disarmament’ of the traditional senatorial class, propitiated in part by the new place occupied by the equestrian class, led to intensify the expenses of prestige while expanding the luxury classes. Within this framework, luxury spending in terms of clothing, jewellery, carriages, and domus, were imposed with greater force in order to sustain their status, while the traditional senatorial class encountered competition, in terms of signs of wealth, from the great equestrians, and later on from rich manumitted slaves. With the

[23] Fernández Vega 2015.
[24] Pons, in press.
[25] A synthesis can be found in Dari-Mattiacci, Plisecka 2012.
[26] Lipovestsky, Roux 2014, 21-22.
[27] Lipovestsky, Roux 2014, 37.

dynamics of enrichment on the part of merchants and bankers, luxury ceased to be an exclusive privilege, a condition based on birth, and began to acquire an autonomous status – it became more 'democratic', having been emancipated from the link with tradition and the hereditary hierarchical order. In the age of inequality, luxury became a sphere that was open to fortunes acquired through the world of finance and long-distance trade, as the provinces and cross-border trade provided the ideal conditions to make a fortune[28].

In summary, the emergence of new wealthy classes, Roman expansion, and the growing number of regions that experienced luxury consumption all contributed to generating the development of the luxury economic sector. Already, the sector was systematically built as a hierarchical, differentiated, diversified market, where exceptional luxury coexisted with intermediate and accessible luxury. From that point on, luxury resonates in everyday life – it is no longer possible to speak of luxury, but of luxuries, at various levels, for different audiences[29].

We do not pretend here to solve the difficult task of defining the philosophical, sociological and historical concept of luxury, nor of studying this omnipresent idea in all societies[30]. Today, we know that there are many meanings and ramifications of luxury, a changing concept that assumes various scenarios and social scales and cannot be specified in number, whether singular or plural[31]. Luxury (or luxuries) is accessible, inaccessible, and intermediate; it is a pyramid in which more and more borders are broken[32]. There are formats that allow a product to be popular and affordable to potential consumers and make owning or consuming it a social marker. For a long time, the best minds have emphasised the universal, anthropological character of luxury; "O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars Are in the poorest thing superfluous. Allow not nature more than nature needs, Man's life's as cheap as beast's [---]"[33]. All of which leads us to consider if the question we must answer is: luxury, for whom?

Considered groundbreaking by the editors, this volume brings together the contributions of leading experts in the study of luxury to present the full range of perspectives on the production and consumption of luxury items and, moreover, from the variety of approaches offered by Ancient History. The book is organised in chronological order, and the evolution of the luxury economy is divided into areas of consumption, production, and criticism. The analytical focus on the interaction between the notions of need and desire suggests that the historical development of luxury and business in Rome can be divided into five categories: houses, clothing, jewellery, food, and leisure.

Apart from the prologue by Maria Eugenia Ortuño Pérez and this first chapter as an Introduction, the volume consists of twenty contributions by twenty-five specialists from three different countries, with texts in English, French, Italian and Spanish. The chapter by Alejandra Gruzmán and Diana Gorostidi Pi opens with a detailed analysis of Plautus' *Auluria* and the description of the luxury trade at a time of legislative tension against the industry and public consumption of these products (ca 215-195 BC). Later, but still during the Republican period, Luis Amela Valverde addresses *luxuria* based on the specific case of Lucullus and the criticism of the excesses of the nouveau riche, which enables him to discuss the social model built on the acceptance of luxury that depends on their public or private

[28] Lipovestsky, Roux 2014, 38-39.
[29] Lipovestsky, Roux 2014, 15.
[30] On this, see: Armitage, Roberts 2016.
[31] Donzé, Pouillard, Roberts 2020.
[32] Campuzano 2003.
[33] Shakespeare, W. 1605. *King Lear*: Act. 2, Part 1.

consumption. This is followed by Sanaa Hassab's contribution on luxury in the cities of the Roman province of *Mauretania Tingitana*, with elements that are both characteristic and common among the consumers of the Mauritanian tribal elites. Simona Perna's proposal offers an interesting vision of funerary luxury in female tombs, based on the consumption of cinerary urns made from highly diverse ornamental rocks – an authentic sumptuous matryoshka, where some elements are mixed to be seen, while others (those that were part of the final ritual farewell to the deceased) were at times hidden, perhaps to avoid pillage, manipulation or malediction. This is followed by the chapter by Gian Luca Gregori and Letizia Rustico on the *corinthiarii* of Rome, a group of artisans specialised in making objects from precious metals. Along these lines, Laura Parisini details the existence of the professionals of the *ars plumaria*, highlighting the complexity of their manufacturing techniques, particularly those related to the textile interlacing of precious metal threads. Next, Nova Barrero Martín highlights the portable luxuries for female consumption in public and private environments, focusing her work on the earrings from *Augusta Emerita* (Mérida) and the *Lusitania*, comparing techniques and details that are typical of the territory, as well as stylistic importations from other territories of the Roman empire. Albert Sabaté Morales talks about the use of jewels – especially pearls and precious stones – in the religious statuary of the Latin West, taking as an example the donation of *Vibia Modesta* to *Victoria*, in order to discuss the meaning of these donations, as well as their problems.

This is followed by a contribution from Mª Luz Neira Jiménez who, in addition to organising a notorious mosaic sampler, integrates it into her research as an essential element in the dinners served, helping to create an atmosphere for the domestic dramatisation of the performances offered by the host. Starting from the literary discourses against luxury, Irene Mañas Romero analyses the growing demand for domestic sumptuousness, observing the transition of these luxury goods to a greater number of consumers, which made their production cheaper, but also criticising imitations, including extravagance and the toleration of changes to how marble was used. Rosario Rovira Guardiola then continues with a synthesis of a specific imperial house, planned for the greatest luxury leisure, and how the different architectural and sculptural elements formed part of the emperor's residence. Chiara Romano introduces us to the search for luxury in domestic environments, highlighting the swift adaptation of internal gardens to the Greco-Oriental taste, as well as the improvement and refinement of other essential elements in the scene: trees, wall paintings, furniture, mosaics, fountains, etc. In this line, Rocío Cuadra Rubio collects some examples of furniture known from paintings, mosaics, and archaeological remains in order to highlight furniture as an important element in the composition of any room.

Alfredo Buonopane's proposal makes visible, through an epigraphic catalogue, the presence of women as an active part of artisan groups dedicated to the production of precious objects from their epigraphic testimonies, which, despite their limitations, are a source of pride in his profession. Meanwhile, Giovanna di Giacomo analyses through epigraphy and literature the presence of *caelatores*, establishing the existence of fashions, or identical traditions, in the manufacture of cups, *crustae*, etc., whose demand would come to generate a certain standardisation in production, defining the creations of their authors. The next section opens with a criticism of luxury by Francisco Javier Casinos Mora who, from a detailed temporal examination of luxury restrictions, describes the moral debate that was promoted to limit its use among members of the political elites. His research focuses on the use of purple inks, which allows us to observe that the parameters of luxury remain the same despite the passing of decades. This is followed by Juan Antonio Jiménez Sánchez, who provides a detailed review of the criticism of luxury in the *Historia Augusta*, paying special attention to the elaboration of moralistic texts based on the intentionally pessimistic portrait of rulers such as Heliogabalus, an example of a decaying hero, and whose tastes are exaggerated by consuming the rarest products. Pere Maymó i Capdevila then focuses on the consumption and ostentation of the wealth consumed by the new ecclesiastical community of Rome. This allows him to view the continuous association of the elites with the Church, whether through donations or gifts (many of them diplomatic), debating the morality of the texts when justifying these donations for charitable reasons. The final section is completed by David Martínez Chico with a debate on the nature of two gold tabulae ansatae in a religious enclosure within the *Longovicium* fort (Lanchester, Durham), namely whether they are luxurious or not, and the experimental recovery of *vinum mulsum*, the most exclusive Roman wine, in a text realised by Antonio Aguilera Martín, Miquel Sunyer, Josep Maria Vaquer Llop, and Juana Gómez Sánchez.

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