

## Leisures in Ancient Rome

Early leisure in Rome was initially determined, and in an obvious way, by pastoral and rural works, called *otii dies*, as we find them sung by Lucretius (*De rerum natura*, canto V, 1440-1460): "Man learned to imitate the clear voices of birds, before making the poems ornate with sweet melodies heard. The zephyr sighs, through the chalms, taught the rough flutes. Then, little by little, the sweet laments of the flutes under the fingers of the singers in the woods and jungles sounded; flute, invention of the idle days of the shepherds. Thus were revealed in the light of reason all those arts that soften our lives" (*At liquidas avium voces imitauer ore ante fuit multo quam levia carmina cantu concelebrare homines possent aurisque iuvare, et zephyri cava per calamorgo um sibila primum agrestis docuere cavas inflare cicutas inde minutatim dulcis didicere querellas, tibia quas fundit digitis pulsata canentum, avia per nemora ac silvas saltusque reperta, per loca pastorum deserta atque otia dia. Sic unum quicquid paulatim protrahit aetas in medium ratioque in luminis eruit oras*).<sup>1</sup>

Similar references are found in the Georgics of Virgil: "With thee (farmer) worship Ceres all the rough youth, and for her mix thy milk, thy hive, and thy sweet wine; three turns give the propitious victim around the new maidens, and the whole choir and the vain field with cries invoke the favor of the goddess; and let no one dare to harvest the mess of ripe ears without before, with twisted leaves of cork oak, not to give the agitated dance and song in her praise" (book first).<sup>2</sup> Through such quotations, it can be seen that the leisure of the ancient

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<sup>1</sup> Personal translation.

<sup>22</sup> Virgilio, P. M. e Horacio, Q., *Obras Completas* (Complete Works), M. Aguilar Editor, Madrid, 1945.

Latins, integrated to the agrarian work, was usually filled by singing and dancing, planting and harvesting, paying homage to the gods and to nature on the days of rest, that is, on the holidays. But the poet himself, an urban and cultured man, ends the *Georgics* by saying in what circumstances he could write them: "At that time, the loving Parthenope gave to me, Virgil, what to keep me, flourishing in studies of mild leisure and which, for entertainment, I made the shepherds sing" (fourth book).

And of leisure Horace is not forgotten in his *Odes*, as we can already see in the first: "There are those who do not despise an aged glass of Masico, nor consume a part of the whole day, sometimes stretched out under a green bush, sometimes near the place where a sacred fountain is meekly born. Or he advises an imaginary character, during the snowy winter: "Temper the rigor of the cold by throwing wood on the fire and take out, O Taliarco, abundant wine of four years, ripened in tina sabina... And since you are a young man, do not disdain sweet loves or avoid dancing, while your greenness is far from the slow reed. When the time is right, seek the squares of people, seek the music of the night" (Ode 9a).

It is interesting to note that in the three authors mentioned above, who are in the transition of the Republic to the Empire, the word *otium* already designates the time released from civic and religious commitments (edility, questura, senatoria, position of flame, or priest, for example), with regard to the class of patricians and knights, as well as the activities then chosen, and also the time personally released from work with regard to clients, freed and plebs (who could also have access to certain public positions). That is why, in older authors such as Quintus Ennius - active in the transition between the 3rd and 2nd

centuries before our time - the same word applied only to the time of truce of the Roman armies and the common life in the barracks.

Already in the times of the Monarchy there were reports of rustic festivals (*feriae rustici*), such as *robigalia*, *floralia*, *compitalia* and *palilia*, to which converged religious rites and vows relating to a precise time of agricultural work (planting, prevention of pests, harvesting) also encompassing amusements, shows or competitions. The *robigalia*, for example, instituted by King Numa (seventh century B.C.), and held on April 25, were intended to prevent the spread of a cereal disease, rust. There was a parade out of the city, the sacrifice of a dog or a red-haired bitch (near the ferruginous), the invocation of the gods and, finally, young and adult races were promoted. Also the *floralias*, officially consecrated in the year 513, intended not only to celebrate the goddess Flora (*Mater florum*, like the song Ovid) and the return of spring, at the beginning of May, but also to exorcise plant sterility. Very simple at the beginning, their dances were converted, due to the characteristics of fecundity and renewal of the biological cycle, into obscene choreographic presentations by naked women (including courtesans). As for the *Lupercalias*, whose origins are uncertain and diversely told by Plutarch (Life of Romulus), Dionysius of Halicarnasso (Roman Antiquities) and also Ovid (Fastos, II), they were related to the time of greatest appearance of hungry wolves (*lupi*) in the fields, after the lean winter season, or to the history of the fertility found by Roman women in Romulus' time. They took place in February, consisting, besides offering rituals, of a race of men dressed only in sacrificial goat skins, placed around the waist, and lasted until the Christian era, because Pope Gelasius, in 495, even wrote a letter against this pagan celebration by the Catholic faithful.

The culture of entertainment and celebration, more characteristic of the Romans than of the Greeks, is already revealed in the name used by the Latins for theatrical performances - *ludi scaenici*, i.e., scene games - which were only spread after the Punic Wars, the time of Livio Andronicus and Gneo Nevius, both writers of tragedies and comedies. Plauto, an extremely fertile actor and comedographer (about 130 plays), active in the transition of the 3rd and 2nd centuries, became the great reference of Roman theater, not only for the sociological description and the *mores* (customs) of his time, but also for the fixation of types later copied by the *Comedia dell'arte*, such as the braggart soldier, the cunning slave, the adulterous parasites, the loving couples in difficulty.

The *Ludi romani* or *Ludi magni*, in honor of Jupiter, were instituted in the republican era in the middle of the fourth century and were practiced in September. For a long time they were restricted to fights and races, and it was not until the end of the third century that tragedies and Latin comedies were included. According to Cicero (In *Verrem*, II, indictment against Caius Verres) there was a 45-day break between the *Ludi Magni* and the *Ludi Victoriae Sullanae*, meaning that the great feast ended around the 19th of the month. But before that, from 6 to 13 July, there were the *Ludi Apollinari*, established at Fulvio Flacco's consulate (212 BC), dedicated, as the name indicates, to the god Apollo, and made up of both horse races and theatrical performances, especially those of the *toga praetexta* (with Roman characters of patrician origin or knights).

But the festivals that perhaps most influenced the emergence of the carnival of the Middle Ages were the Saturnalia (Saturnales). It was a time when the god Saturn was re-enthroned and the mythical golden age was remembered at the end of December (at the time of

Domitian, the period was fixed between 17 and 23). During the period, as it is known, the slaves could consider themselves free men and behave as such; a princeps was elected by lot to wear a mask and clothing with highlights in red (the future king momo?), symbol of inferior forces, from the depths of the ground, which had to be placated with parties in his honor and gifts. Usually, saturnalia began with banquets and could easily degenerate into orgiastic rituals.

During most of the empire, and given its wealth, both in Rome and Athens, as well as in the major cities of Italy and in the present territories of Spain or France, much of the life of the citizens took place outside the domestic environment, that is, in the squares and in those public buildings that offered the services or conditions of a domus free of charge. The water fountains and toilets were numerous, and in all the neighbourhoods there were spas (saunas), with places for massage, *palestra* (practice of physical exercises), reading parchments (library area) or rooms for meetings and conversation between friends and acquaintances. In these places there was a lot of discussion about politics, making the baths the substitute for the Greek agora. They also served the development of Roman public architecture and decoration, by the application of marbles on the facades, commonly grandiose, and mosaics on the floors.

It is known that the working day in Rome began between six and seven in the morning, according to the office, and ended between noon and the first of the afternoon, which shows us that a large part of the non-slave adult population had plenty of free time. In addition, in the course of the year, we must add the *dies festi* (festive or celebratory days, some of them already mentioned), consecrated to the numerous deities, and the *feriae publicae*, the public holidays, which became frequent after Augustus, commemorative of victories

and conquests of the empire. For this reason, it was common the influx of public to the horse and car races (chariots and quadrigas) held at the *Circus Maximus*, a stupendous structure 600 meters long and 140 meters wide, with capacity to receive, at the time of Julius Caesar, 250 thousand spectators (according to Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, book 36).

Alongside these equestrian competitions, the other major public spectacle in the entire empire was the combat of gladiators, or gladiators and beasts, held in amphitheatres (such as the Coliseum, the most imposing of all) and circuses. Such fights appeared in the region of Etruria, in 264 B.C., as homage to dead warriors, being taken and trained in special schools the prisoners of war, slaves and criminals. Some shows became famous in antiquity, like the one promoted by Julius Caesar, with 300 pairs of gladiators, one of Domitian, among women and dwarves, and the biggest of all, Trajan, with 5 thousand pairs of fighters.

The existence of all the annual festivals and plebei shows, offered free of charge, complemented the habit instituted in the Republic and maintained in the Empire, that of the cereal distribution (*lex frumentaria*) or its direct sale at prices below those of the market. Hence Juvenal, in his Satyres (X), wrote the famous sentence according to which “populus duas tantum res anxius optat, panem et circencis” - the people anxiously await two things, bread and circus. All this proves that mass entertainment was not created as a result of the industrial revolution, but with the Roman slave society.

At the other end of popular and mass leisure, that is, personal, solitary and scholarly leisure, we find the work and examination of Seneca (*De otio*), a text of fine wisdom of one who knew how to reconcile stoicism and Greek epicurism. The text reminds us of the

stoic maxim that the juice of good is to live according to nature; but nature has formed us not only for action, but also for the contemplation of things (for philosophy, for science, for the arts). And being in agreement that, because we necessarily live in society, it is very difficult to be immune to vices, so there is no other way to avoid them than to isolate ourselves, whenever possible (if we believe that virtues are better than vices, otherwise...). Only this fact alone can make us a little better, even though nothing prevents us, living apart, from approaching virtuous men, personally or by reading, and extracting an example with which to model our life. And this is only possible in a quiet life, far from the public, the mass and the usual mediocrity. In this way our life can proceed uniformly and constantly, without being disturbed by ideas and appeals of the most diverse and opposite. Moreover, if the numerous evils which afflict us were no longer enough, we would pass from one vice to another out of necessity, naivety or ephemeral pleasure. Let us keep at least one of them, that which is more familiar and less harmful to us.

Already at that time, Seneca regrets to see that, in the midst of the action of daily life (especially him, who lived an extremely dangerous political life, not only in the reign, but in the court of Nero, as his former preceptor and then adviser), the torment that is to see that our choices, besides being bad, are very fickle, shaken that we are here and there, as by wind and wind, devoting ourselves sometimes to one thing, sometimes to another, in a little bit of desires and regrets, because we are always dependent on the opinion or consent of others, above all in the struggles proper political or institutional powers (in today's world of invasive advertising and loss of privacy, caused by computer networks, I believe that our rich philosopher would find himself in a dead end, except for the madness or suicide,

which in real life he was forced to commit). Continuing on the subject, he writes: "But what do you do, Seneca? Did you betray your school? Your stoic companions say clearly that it is necessary to participate in active life until one's last breath, to give oneself to the common good, to help men, to act, in short, in a concrete way, making an effort in the first person? Why do you graft the precepts of Epicurus on those who are basic in Zenon?...Now, I will demonstrate to you that I do not distance myself from the teachings of the Stoic school, just as his disciples did not distance themselves. And I will prove to you by saying only two things: first of all, that one can dedicate oneself entirely to contemplation, after childhood, seeking an adequate norm of life and practicing it in isolation; secondly, that one can do it differently, even if one has already committed oneself to the social sphere, when life is leaning towards the sunset, passing on to others the testimonies in the care of practical things, as they do, for example, the Vestals, who divide their tasks according to age, first by learning the sacred rites and, at the end of all the training, dedicating themselves to teaching... Epicurus said, 'Let the wise not participate in public life, except under some circumstances'. Zeno, instead, 'The wise man participates in public life if there is nothing to stop him'. The first sustains isolation as a principle, the other as an occasion... Let us imagine two types of State, one immense and truly in this way, in the sense of embracing diverse gods and peoples, and in which our gaze is not fixed on this or that small angle, but measures the boundaries following the course of the sun; the other, much smaller and specific, in which we are born by destiny... To the greater we can serve even by leading a life of retreat, dedicated to meditation and I do not know how we could do it better, but on the condition that it is [the retreat] dedicated to the study and practice of virtue, asking if it



is only one or if there are so many, if what makes someone virtuous is the natural nature or education... We say that the greatest good is to live according to nature, and our nature has two faces, one turned to contemplation and the other to action. As for the first, contemplation, the proof of its validity lies in the very fact that our desire to know the unknown and alive is the interest of what is reported ... is what leads us to explore the deepest secrets, consult books and learn about people. This curiosity gave us nature, which, aware of its own art and fascination, created the testimonies of an admirable spectacle... And if the ideal State, though figuring in our mind, is nowhere to be found, then contemplative life imposes itself on all as a necessity, being an anchor of salvation".

In short, scholarly or contemplative leisure is extremely useful for the practical life of young people and adults, and fills in a tranquil and seductive way the inevitable and loneliest time of old age.

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