

### **III. The Roman Alimentary Program and Italian Agriculture**

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In the waning years of the first century of the Christian era there was established in Italy by the Roman government a welfare service to provide for the support of the sons and daughters of poor citizens. The project was well conceived and efficiently organized, clearly the product of civilized and sophisticated people. This venture is commonly called the alimentary program. By it the indigent young people of the Italian towns and villages each month were furnished sufficient funds for food and clothing until they reached the age of fifteen years. To finance the necessary expenditures the government prevailed upon landowners in each municipality to accept loans of imperial funds at an annual interest of five per cent, and these loans were in sufficient quantity that the income therefrom would satisfy the local needs. Although agents of the central government made the loans and the program was under their general supervision, most of the administrative detail, including the collection and distribution of the payments of interest, was in the hands of local municipal officials.

A wealth of inscriptional allusions to the alimentary program, combined with literary references and notices on coins, indicates that it became popular almost immediately. The references extend over a period of one hundred and seventy years until the military anarchy and inflation of the later part of the third century A.D. rendered investments worthless. But for five generations the evidence is so widespread and its content so matter of fact that there can be little doubt that the Romans considered the program desirable and workable.

The apprehension of social and economic problems, and the long-range planning to confront them that the alimentary program displays, have long been matters of interest and comment in the Western World. But a tendency to treat one or another aspect of the program separately has led to a number of misconceptions concerning its legal and administrative nature and to no

clear idea of the intentions of the Romans to sponsor by this program agricultural reform in Italy as well as to support the children of impoverished villagers. It is the aim of this paper to correct the misconceptions and to give a comprehensive view of the program. To do this, there will be a brief description of the social and economic situation in Italy in the Principate that convinced the Romans that action was needed, and a similarly brief discussion of the ideas and practices that inspired the program. There then will follow a detailed description of the organization and administration of the institution, and an explanation of its agrarian aspects.

In the early days of the Principate it became clear that all was not well with the heartland of the empire. Italy had two major problems, both of which were of concern to the empire as a whole. The population of the empire was ebbing steadily at a time when imperial expansion created needs for a surplus, and there was a parallel economic decay, which increased the burdens of the rest of the empire in a number of ways.

The population decline was a phenomenon of long standing. It had caused concern in the last half of the second century B.C. and was further aggravated by the immense losses of life during the civil wars of the first century B.C. Nor did the long Augustan peace effect a sufficient reversal of the trend. The reasons are diverse, but in the beginning they seem to have been based upon economic factors and social ideals. The regulations and practices evolving around the Roman senatorial order forced its members to be genteely well-to-do; yet for many the opportunities for moneymaking were strictly limited by law and custom and, in a poor country, the profits from the respectable exploitation of the land were not unbounded. Furthermore, successful competition for the highly prized magistracies in Rome, which must be held to maintain family prestige, generally demanded wealth considerably above the legal minima. Heads of family, therefore, conscientiously limited the size of their families so that their descendants would be able to maintain the family's traditions. This practice might not have done much harm were it not for the tendency, repeatedly observed in history, for the ideals, fashions, virtues, and vices of the upper classes to find their way, however changed or distorted, to the mass of the citizens: quickly to the

urban, more slowly to the rural populations. And from the early second century B.C. the urban population was increasing rapidly. The effects of Hannibal's devastation of Italy, followed by the growth of large estates based on changed economic conditions, brought about a rapid abandonment by the peasantry of their farms, while the cities, especially Rome, grew. There not only the example of their betters but also the extreme difficulty of gaining a livelihood taught the masses to avoid parenthood. And there is evidence that the remaining rural population followed the same course, though more slowly.<sup>1</sup>

By her conquest and organization of the Mediterranean world Rome had done more than merely subjugate it. She had also implicitly undertaken to furnish unity in order to furnish stability to that world. For this task there must be a constant supply of Italians that, whether in colonies or commanding troops, could provide the homogeneous nucleus that would ensure a latinized world. Augustus realized the importance of the problem. He recognized also that there were two courses of action possible. An

<sup>1</sup> Ancient evidence for a declining birth rate in Italy in the Augustan period and early Principate is scanty but suggestive: the need to enroll slaves and freedmen in the army in 7 A.D. to protect Italy (Velleius 2.111; Dio Cass. 55.31; Suet. *Aug* 25), and after the disaster of Varus in 9 A.D. (Dio Cass. 56.23; Suet. *Aug*. 25); the notoriety of the attempts to escape childbearing (Tac. *Ann.* 3.25-28); the dangerous paucity of free-born citizens in Rome compared to the other denizens (Tac. *Ann.* 13.27); the rapid decrease of the number of Italian recruits in the army in the first century A.D. (H. M. D. Parker, *The Roman Legions* [Oxford 1928] App. B, 272-76); the value as a prodigy and as propaganda of a rural citizen with eight children in 4 B.C. (Pliny, *HN* 7.13.60), a phenomenon that was not considered abnormal in earlier days (in 171 B.C.: Livy 42.34). There is indeed a rise in the Augustan census figures between 29 B.C. and 13 A.D. from 4,063,000 to 4,937,000. The interpretation of these figures is controversial (cf. J. Beloch, *Bevölkerung der griechisch-römischen Welt* [Leipzig 1886] 375-78 and T. Frank, *CP* 19 [1924] 329-41), but they would include not just any expansion in Italy, but all the constantly increasing citizen population in the provinces. Yet this is only about one-half of one per cent increase a year, which is only half of that of 20th century pre-Mussolini Italy alone (see Frank, above). For further remarks on this problem, see A. Landry, "La dépopulation dans l'antiquité gréco-romaine," *Rev. hist.* 177 (1936) 1-33. Because for the past century records have been kept with greater care, we will find instructive the demonstrable relations of population trends between the upper classes and the urban and rural populations in the western world, trends that are indicated but not proved by the meager ancient data. Especially instructive are the publications of the United Nations Economic and Social Council: UNESCO, *Population Trends: Findings of Studies on the Relationships between Population Trends and Economic and Social Forces* 1 (New York 1950). See also R. von Ungern-Sternberg, *The Causes of the Decline in the Birth-Rate within the European Sphere of Civilization* (Cold Spring Harbor 1931); A. M. Carr-Saunders, *World Population* (Oxford 1936); and W. S. Thompson, *Population Problems* (New York 1930).

indirect attack on the declining birthrate might be made by seeking to change the practices of the nobility and thus set an example for the rest of the country. This could be done by making fertility practical and fashionable, and by penalizing the celibate or the childless. Or direct action could be taken that would entail financial assistance for impoverished parents by means of rewards, subsidies, or grants-in-aid. The use of these devices presupposes that economic factors weigh more heavily in declining birthrates than do social or intellectual ones.

Augustus undertook a few direct measures: he extended the grant of donations or largesse on festive occasions to children, and he made frequent gifts of one thousand sesterces a child to poor parents that made themselves known to him (Suet. *Aug.* 41, 46; Dio Cass. 51.21.3). But his main efforts were indirect: by means of legislation he tried to encourage a return to earlier moral standards and to the propagation of larger families, especially among the upper classes. His best known laws severely penalized acts jeopardizing the sanctity of the family, and offered considerable financial and political advantage to those who entered upon fruitful marriages. Although his laws are cited throughout the remainder of Roman history, there is sufficient evidence, both explicit and implicit, that the nobility displayed a great deal of ingenuity in evading the provisions of these laws; and there is no evidence that they had any effect on the masses.<sup>2</sup>

As old as the population problem, and in many ways connected with it, was the economic decay of agrarian Italy. The devastation and desertion of many Italian farms during and subsequent to the Second Punic War led, in the late Republic, to the creation of huge plantations or ranches especially in southern Italy and Etruria, and also to relatively large "scientific" farms with olives and grapes as the most important crops. Both of these were profitable ventures. Most of the profits of the ranches, however, appear to have belonged to Roman magnates who ran their distant possessions with slaves and bailiffs. The smaller highly

<sup>2</sup> The basic evidence on the *Lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis* is to be found in *Dig.* 24.2.9; 48.5.13, 15-16, 23-24; Paulus, *Sent.* 2.26.4, 6, 14; Suet. *Aug.* 34; Dio Cass. 54.30; Plut., *Apophthegmata Augusti* 9. On the *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* and *Lex Papia Poppaea nuptialis* in *Dig.* 4.4.2; 23.2.19, 44; *Forma Idiologi* 24-25, 28-30, 32; Riccobono, *Font.* 474-75; Ulpian, *Tit.* 13, 16, 29.3-7; Gaius, *Inst.* 2.111, 207, 286; 3.42, 46-47, 50, 52; Dio Cass. 53.13; 54.16; 55.2; 56.1-10; *Frag. Vat.* 197; Baviera, *Font.* 503; Gellius 2.15.4.

cultivated farms of from sixty to one hundred acres tended to belong to the burgesses of the various Italian municipalities. These men would live nearby their estates and could supervise them carefully. It was for them that the handbooks of Cato, Varro, and Columella were composed. On their prosperity depended the prosperity of their towns, and in the late Republic and early Principate they were indeed prosperous. The public and private works in numerous places sufficiently attest this. But with the Augustan peace and the imperial consolidation of the first century A.D. there was some decrease in the available slave labor, while there was a steady flow of money into the hands of the new Roman nobility, which wished to invest in Italian land. The very large estates, then, had continued to multiply in Italy, but now at the expense of the municipal bourgeoisie whose members were the backbone of the local economies. Most of these new owners had no intention of becoming resident managers of their estates; but they exploited their properties by letting them to tenant farmers (*coloni*), some of whom were sharecroppers cultivating grain, vines, and olive trees. Others clearly allowed their acquisitions to revert to pasture. While these practices may have been lucrative for the owners, most of the income was now lost to the local economies, and the land itself suffered, for tenant farmers are notoriously indifferent farmers. Actually, the evidence on the agricultural situation in Italy in the first century A.D. is not very full, and its interpretation is controversial.<sup>3</sup> But there are a number of indications that something was amiss with Italian agriculture: legislation against the destruction of farm buildings by absentee owners (Riccobono, *Font.* 288–90); Domitian's

<sup>3</sup> On the early steps in the deterioration of Italian agriculture, see Cedric Yeo, *TAPA* 79 (1948) 275–307. For the most pessimistic view of Italian agriculture in the early Empire, see W. E. Heitland, *Agricola* (Cambridge 1921) 272–74, 299–300. M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford 1957) especially 59–66, 98–101, 194–206, believes that the scientific farmers had ruined themselves by an over-production of wine, and that they were forced out of their holdings by the competition of the new absentee landlords who depended on tenant farmers to till the land and who encouraged a return to cereal culture. He admits that this was a blow to municipal economies but insists that it followed the economic facts of the epoch and that investors received an attractive return on their investments. The letters of Pliny the Younger provide much evidence for the cultivation of estates by tenants for absentee landlords, while the *SC Hosidianum* of 44 A.D. (Riccobono, *Font.* 288–89) seems directed mainly at those who would return cultivated lands to pasture; and the case of *Alliatoria Celsilla*, tried under this *SC* (Riccobono, *Font.* 289–90), is almost explicit on this point.

attempt to limit provincial competition with Italian produce (Suet. *Dom.* 7.2, 14.2); the need to infuse new blood periodically into agricultural colonies<sup>4</sup>; the oft quoted statement of the elder Pliny that the *latifundia* had been the destruction of Italy (*HN* 18.6.35); and the enthusiastic acceptance of loans from the government through the alimentary program—cumulatively these seem significant.

The first steps taken in Italy directly to combat the population problem resulted from private initiative. And in a generation or so this precedent was followed by the central government, but in combination with a significant agrarian aspect as well. The private origins of the program are not wholly surprising but have something natural and essentially “Roman” about them. The assumption of a limited responsibility by the wealthy for numerous hangers-on is as old as Roman history. It is found in the ancient and sacred institution of clientage and in its new and somewhat corrupt revival in the late Republic, when ambitious nobles furnished to the disinherited proletariat some sort of livelihood in exchange for political support. Furthermore, the Romans enjoyed the teachings of Greek philosophers from the second century B.C. onward, and little by little they learned to appreciate certain principles of mutual assistance that they found there. Especially influential was Panaetius of Rhodes (ca. 185 B.C.—ca. 109 B.C.) who tried to instill in the Romans the idea of *liberalitas*, a “spontaneous inclination to good actions and generosity.”<sup>5</sup> And in the Hellenistic East Roman administrators, ambassadors, and soldiers found numerous cases of private and public generosity calculated for the provision of cheap grain in the public markets or to the support and education of the youth. While these examples were before the Romans for many years, any public experiments along these lines would have to wait for a government that was stable, paternalistic, and authoritative. The Senatorial government of the late Republic was quite inadequate for this; and it was only after the Flavians had abandoned the genial fiction that republican government really was continuing that the

<sup>4</sup> Augustus and Nero were both active in sending new colonists to older foundations (Bourne, *Public Works of the Julio-Claudians and Flavians* [Princeton 1946] 29, 53), and Nerva purchased and distributed lands to the poor citizens of Rome (*Dig.* 47.21.3.1; Dio Cass. 68.2).

<sup>5</sup> Von Arnim, *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta* 3.291; Festus, s.v. “Liberales.”

administration was free enough and secure enough to make plans with some expectation that they would have the continuity and length of life to prove their worth.

Our first example, then, of a fund established to assure the nurture of the indigent children of an Italian municipality was a private undertaking. It belongs to the middle of the first century of our era or earlier. One Titus Helvius Basila, a man of some prominence, for he had been aedile, praetor, proconsul, and legate of the emperor, left 400,000 sesterces to Atina in Latium with directions that the increment of this sum should be used to furnish grain to the needy children of the place, and that a nestegg of 1,000 sesterces should be presented to each upon his reaching his majority (*CIL* x.5056 = *ILS* 977).<sup>6</sup> There is nothing in the inscription that records the act to indicate that this was considered novel or extraordinary in the first century. Chance has preserved for us no further evidence of such private foundations until late in the same century and in the second, and most of them overlap the institution of the public program. But the matter of fact nature of Basila's inscription indicates that by the middle of the first century A.D. the needs and ideals of the contemporary world had led Roman magnates to the opinion that the establishment of funds to assist the children of the poor was a sensible way both to achieve public esteem and to combat social and economic weaknesses.

Similar private endowments are found in various places in Italy: at Tarracina, Ostia, and Florence; while the most famous, though not the largest, is perhaps that of Pliny the Younger at Como. One of his letters gives us added information on how his grant was financed: he made a fictitious sale of a piece of land worth considerably more than 500,000 sesterces to the public agent of Como. He then undertook to rent it from the community for 30,000 sesterces a year (i.e. six per cent interest). By this means, he reasoned, the principal was secured to the community, and the interest was certain, since the value of the property was so much greater than the rent charged that it therefore always would be sure to find a tenant. Such generosity as

<sup>6</sup> Kubitschek (*RE* I [1894] 1485) refers Basila to the age of Augustus because he is called *legatus Caesaris Augusti*. But this may refer equally to Claudius or Nero, and a mention of his daughter in the Flavian Age makes one of the latter more likely (Des-sau, *ILS* 983).

this was not confined to Italy alone. Inscriptions from Hispalis in Baetic Spain, and from Colonia Julia Curubis and Sicca Veneria in Africa record the establishment of alimentary funds for boys and girls in those places.<sup>7</sup>

The Roman alimentary system, then, took its rise from the convictions of citizens. It was not something originally imposed by authority. Augustus' solution to the population problem, to change the nation's ideals and habits by legislation, showed a clear understanding of the causes of that ill but a poor grasp of human nature. Though the poets might hymn the Augustan dispensation as signalling a rebirth of public and private virtues, and though the nobles hankered for the political and financial advantages that obedience entailed, none was committed. Leading citizens set about vigorously to circumvent the corrective laws, sometimes openly conniving with the emperor himself to enjoy the benefits derived from marriage and parenthood without actually fulfilling the specifications of the laws about them. But through his tradition, experience, and taste the Roman could appreciate the application of alimentary funds to the problem. Here was something tangible; its effects should be demonstrable; and to the donor it promised prestige and memorials that he highly prized. Ultimately it is the people that fashions public policy; the rules conform to the nature of the ruled: in this case the citizens judged that the population problem was in greater need of an economic solution, and this conviction the government finally accepted and elaborated.

At the very end of the first century of our era Emperor Nerva assigned to the State a responsibility that had previously belonged only to the private conscience. "He ordered girls and boys born to needy parents to be reared at public expense throughout the cities of Italy" (*Epitome Caesaris* 12.4); and thus he initiated the government in its most ambitious welfare program, the alimentary institution. A coin that is attributed to his reign, though its authenticity is suspect,<sup>8</sup> sums up neatly the spirit of the program. Nerva, seated on a curule chair, is stretching out his hand to Italia,

<sup>7</sup> Endowments in Italy: *CIL* x.6328 = *ILS* 6278; *CIL* xi.1602; *CIL* xiv.350; *CIL* v.5262 = *ILS* 2927; Pliny, *Ep.* 7.18; 1.8.10. Outside Italy: *CIL* ii.1174; *CIL* viii.980 = *ILS* 6817; *CIL* viii.1641 = *ILS* 6818.

<sup>8</sup> H. Cohen, *Description historique des monnaies frappées sous l'empire romain*<sup>2</sup> (Paris 1880-1892) 2.12.142; J. Eckhel, *Doctrina numorum veterum* (Vienna 1792-1839) 6.408. But see A. Merlin, *Rev. num.* 10 (1906) 298-301.



by whom stand a boy and a girl, and it bears the legend, "The Wardship of Italy, Decree of the Senate" (*Tutela Italiae SC*). It is fitting that this step should have been taken in Nerva's reign. That was the time during which the Roman world first reached its civilized stage; and planning, such as the national alimentary program was, is a hallmark of civilization. Planning requires both a stable government and an efficient bureaucracy, and the Romans were now achieving both of these accessories of civilization.

Not much further evidence is available from Nerva's brief reign, but it is clear that he intended that the State should not replace, but rather should supplement, organize, and facilitate private foundations. Ulpian tells us that Nerva was the first to make the receipt of legacies by every municipality in the Roman Empire legal (*Tit.* 24.28). The significance of this in regard to the alimentary institution is revealed by Paulus' statement that legacies could be made to municipalities if they provide for the nurture of persons of infirm age (*Dig.* 30.122 pr.). The emperor realized the expense of the program upon which he had launched the State and made every effort to encourage the private donations described in the preceding paragraphs.

Trajan furthered the development of the alimentary institution enthusiastically. He was instrumental in the extension of these grants for the support of poor children to many of the cities of Italy, and he freely endowed the program out of his own funds (*Dio. Cass.* 68.5; Pliny, *Pan.* 27.3). No stone was left unturned to win the support and sympathy of the people by emphasizing the importance that the emperor attributed to it and explaining the ideas and hopes that animated him. Coins issued throughout his reign celebrated the undertaking as a joint project of emperor, Senate, and people<sup>9</sup>; inscriptions referred to his careful provision for Italy's immortality and his munificence in this respect (*CIL* vi.1492 = *ILS* 6106; *CIL* ix.5825); sculptured works represented young people paying their grateful homage<sup>10</sup>; and Pliny in the *Panegyric* praised him as a true father of his country, who was deeply concerned with its future and who hoped to sustain its vigor by these efforts (especially 26.3–7, 27.1, 28.5).

<sup>9</sup> Cohen (above, note 8) 2.18.7–19.

<sup>10</sup> *CIL* x.6310 = *ILS* 282; H. Jordan, *Topographie der Stadt Rom im Alterthum* (Berlin 1878–1907) 1.2.222.

Although there are scattered references elsewhere, our detailed knowledge of the alimentary institution is really based on two inscriptions that are dated early in Trajan's reign. These two documents are very much alike and contain much of the same information, but they do not seem to have been compiled for exactly the same purposes. One refers to the territory of the Ligures Baebiani, not far from Beneventum in Samnium, and appears to have been composed chiefly for the convenience of a local official of the program.<sup>11</sup> It emphasizes the items that actually made up the local income of the alimentary program. Since these items consisted of the interest on loans made by the government to local landowners, the amount so lent and the value of the property offered as security were given, though not very accurately. Clearly the important information here is the amount to be collected from each landowner by the local official. The second document issues from Veleia, a small town in northern Italy not far from Placentia (*CIL* xi.1147 = *ILS* 6675). Its primary purpose was to furnish a list of properties in Veleia that had been pledged as security for loans by the emperor.<sup>12</sup> The definition and evaluation of these properties are, therefore, much more exact than they are in the Baebianan document. The Veleian document, however, is not concerned with the local administration and does not give the amount owed annually by each proprietor, although this can easily be computed from the information given in the preamble and body of the inscription.

Though these two inscriptions are our most important sources, evidence of the ubiquity of the developed program is found from the foothills of the Alps to the toe of the Italian peninsula. This evidence is in the form of inscriptions testifying to the existence of local officials of the alimentary institution. We can also identify nine districts into which the whole peninsula seems to have been divided for administrative purposes.<sup>13</sup> A consideration of the geographical distribution of this testimony alone leads to an important confirmation of the basic ties between the program and the economic state of the peninsula. Of the thirty-nine towns that

<sup>11</sup> *CIL* ix.1455 = *ILS* 6509. The date is 101 A.D. Henzen, *Ann. dell' inst. di corr. arch.* 16 (1844) 5-111, treats the document in detail. He discusses its nature as an album of the *quaestor alimentorum*, especially on 69-75.

<sup>12</sup> F. G. de Pachtère, *La Table hypothécaire de Veleia* (Paris 1920) 2.

<sup>13</sup> De Ruggiero, *Diz. ep.* 1.405-406, has collected the evidence for thirty-nine such towns as well as for the administrative districts.

clearly enjoyed the benefits of the program, only four are in Apulia, Lucania, or Bruttian territory. These were areas where devastation, depopulation, and agricultural poverty extended far back into the Republic. But equally, only six are attested for the richer areas such as Campania and the Po Valley. The other twenty-nine are found in areas with poor soil, often mountainous, but where the farmers of small or moderately sized holdings still struggled for existence: where the land was marginal, but where there was a real need for help and a real hope that such help might prevent a deterioration into the situation characteristic of the far South, perhaps even leading to an improvement. The more-or-less chance evidence from the towns is, moreover, corroborated by the size of the administrative districts. The territories of the rich Transpadane area and of the denuded southern lands alike were placed in single large districts, while the intermediate marginal regions received seven separate administrations centered about the great highways that traversed those areas.

The benefit for the young people might take the form of grain or of money. In Rome itself it appears to have been grain (e.g. *CIL* vi.10222 = *ILS* 6065; *SHA*, *M.Ant.* 7.8); but there the stores of publicly owned wheat and the natural affinity of the institution with the dole of grain to the poor made it the obvious choice. Grain appears to have been distributed by one of the private foundations as well (*CIL* x.5056 = *ILS* 977). At Veleia, however, the distribution was in money: sixteen sesterces a month for legitimate boys, twelve for legitimate girls and illegitimate boys, and ten for illegitimate girls. While the arrangements elsewhere in Italy are not specifically stated, the close connection of the local officials with the municipal treasuries suggests that the situation at Veleia was normal.<sup>14</sup> In most places it certainly would be more convenient to pay in cash, and most of the private endowments were so arranged. Pliny the Elder indicates that twelve sesterces a modius would be a good price for quality grain in his day (*HN* 18.10.90); and if this was approximately the case in the early second century, the pecuniary allowance would cover a fair portion of the cost of purchase of the necessary grain, even for a growing boy.

<sup>14</sup> This official is often the *quaestor pecuniae publicae et alimentariae*, *quaestor sacrae pecuniae alimentariae*, *quaestor rei publicae et alimentorum*, etc.

Both boys and girls, legitimate and illegitimate, were eligible for the benefits of the program, but legitimate boys were by far the greatest in number: at Veleia there were 245 such boys as opposed to thirty-four girls and two illegitimate children. The number supported among the Ligures Baebiani is not indicated, but 10,045 sesterces in interest are specified in the inscription. If this is only for half the year, and the rate was the same as that at Veleia, provision was thereby made for something more than one hundred children.<sup>15</sup> The private endowments appear to have established generally a minimum age of three years, while the maximum varied from fourteen to sixteen for boys, thirteen to fourteen for girls. For the public program the maximum ages were fixed under Hadrian at eighteen for boys and fourteen for girls (*Dig.* 34.1.14.1).

Primarily the alimentary institution undoubtedly was devised to combat the population problem by assisting the young people of Italy and by encouraging the poor to have families. In this respect it was a magnified version of the earlier private foundations except that its command of greater funds and its bureaucratic structure made it a more flexible instrument, for it could increase or decrease its efforts wherever the current economic situation made it wise to do so. But the emperors chose to invest their funds for this program with the landowners of the various depressed areas. This they did because they believed that thus they could also in some way counteract the agricultural difficulties of Italy. The significance of the agrarian aspect of the program, however, has been obscured by two frequently repeated misconceptions. One is that the loans to the landowners were not simply mortgages or hypothecs, but were actual sales to the State, which then gave the former owner a perpetual leasehold. This was first posited by Henzen,<sup>16</sup> using Pliny the Younger's arrangement with Como as his model. He made this suggestion because in Roman law heirs owed only the principal on debts contracted by their predecessors, and he felt that this would be disastrous to a system that depended on a steady flow of interest. This view was followed essentially by Mommsen when he edited the inscrip-

<sup>15</sup> Th. Mommsen, *CIL* ix, page 129.

<sup>16</sup> Henzen (above, note 11) 24–28. Kubitschek (*RE* 1 [1894] 1485) however, de Pachtère (above, note 12), and Segré (*Bull. Ist. dir. rom.* 2 [1889] 78–106) do treat the contracts as hypothecs.

tion of the Ligures Baebiani.<sup>17</sup> The second misconception, held by a majority of scholars, is that the loans were irredeemable. The only reason for this conclusion, so far as I can see, is that neither the Veleian nor Baebianan document specifies a terminal date upon which the loans were to be redeemed. Much has been said about the bad features of this arrangement<sup>18</sup>; and Matthiass was thereby led to suppose, with a solution not unlike Henzen's, that the landowners really alienated their lands to the State and received them back as hereditary tenants. But because it seemed unlikely that anyone would willingly thus encumber himself in perpetuity, he further suggested that the former owners could at any time redeem their estates by repaying the purchase price.<sup>19</sup>

The misgivings concerning the program are, when viewed realistically, as unfounded as are the solutions offered to allay them. Neither of the documents that are our primary evidence for the program, the tablets from Veleia and from the Ligures Baebiani, is a contract; and therefore even if there were terminal dates set for the loans it would be surprising to find them there. Further, the municipalities of the empire drew income from the loan of their capital funds; and it would be no more difficult for administrators of the alimentary program to enter into new agreements with heirs or purchasers, or to reallocate its money, than it was for the municipalities to do so. This was the purpose of the imperial bureau. Such activity certainly was simpler and required less administrative expense than to acquire the ownership and management of a vast number of Italian estates.

Of course the rules concerning loans by the State may have differed from those of private law or from the regulations surrounding the municipal loans: there may even have been special rules for the alimentary institution itself.<sup>20</sup> Still, there is enough pertinent or parallel evidence known from private law to make possible a simple and rational exposition of the program and one

<sup>17</sup> *CIL* ix, pages 127–28.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Carcopino, who does consider the contract as a sort of hypothec, calls such a loan “une hypothèque virtuelle . . . les sommes qu'il a versées entre les mains ne sont pas remboursables . . .” (*REA* 23 [1921] 295).

<sup>19</sup> B. Matthiass, *Jahrb. f. Nationalökonomie und Stat.*, N.F. 10 (1885) 503–19.

<sup>20</sup> Roughly contemporary are the imperial regulations governing the mining community of Vipasca, the *Lex territorii Metallum Vispascensis dicta* (Riccobono, *Font.* 502–7). Here there are not only special rules connected with grants of monopoly, but also the monopolists may exact pledges (lines 41, 45, 53).

that is in keeping with our evidence about it. It would be natural for a state-wide program to follow in many details the procedures already developed for the placing and protection of loans by the municipalities; even though the emperor, as creditor, submitted his disputes with individuals to the authority of private law (*Tac. Ann.* 4.6.5.). We have considerable information about the practices used when municipalities lent capital to private individuals. There are a number of legal references to the practice (e.g. *Dig.* 22.1.30, 33; *CodTheod.* 12.11.1); and we also have a discussion in Pliny's letters concerning some of the problems encountered (*Ep.* 10.54, 55). Municipalities lent money as close to the legal maximum rate of interest (twelve per cent a year) as possible. They demanded security for these loans either in the form of pledges or hypothecs (*Dig.* 22.1.33.1), and were therefore sometimes at a disadvantage when competing with private capital, for the latter might not demand such security. They were probably often forced thereby to a somewhat lower rate of interest. These loans were redeemable, but it was established policy not to call them in so long as the interest was paid regularly,<sup>21</sup> and this extended not just to the original debtors but also to their heirs (*CodTheod.* 12.11.1). In this too, then, municipal loans differed from private ones. One administrative feature connected with the obligations to the municipalities by private individuals is of particular interest to us: in some cases at least, persons that pledged property to the municipalities were listed in the corporate accounts of the municipality along with a description of their securities, and the whole was displayed each year in some conspicuous spot in the city concerned.<sup>22</sup> This seems strikingly like

<sup>21</sup> *Dig.* 22.1.33 pr.: "si bene collocatae sunt pecuniae publicae, in sortem inquietari debitores non debent et maxime, si parient usuras . . ." (Ulpian). One infers from the reference to possible "demand" that these loans either were given a *certus dies* for payment, or were payable on demand, which was the same as a simple contract (*Dig.* 45.1.48, 1.135.1). In either case the debtor could pay at any time that he wished before the creditor made his claim.

<sup>22</sup> *Lex Malacitana* 63; Riccobono, *Font.* 215. In this particular case the persons obligated were not debtors, but were sureties pledging property as security for the proper execution of certain civic business. The publicity afforded where the public interest is concerned, however, and the language, which has several parallels in the alimentary documents, render a reference to this document pertinent at this point: ". . . quaeque praedia subdita subsignata obligatae sint quique praediorum cognitores accepti sint, in tabulas communes municipum eius municipi referantur facito et proposita habeto per omne reliquom tempus honoris sui, ita ut de plano recte legi possint," etc.

the publication of the lists of landowners and their pledged estates in our two chief alimentary inscriptions.

We should emphasize, of course, that the creditor in the case of the alimentary loans was an individual, the emperor, rather than the municipal treasuries or the Senatorial Treasury whose procedures the municipal ones followed (*Lex Malacitana* 64: Riccobono, *Font.* 216). And the emperor, or his *fiscus*, did not enjoy all the privileges in regard to debtors that the public treasuries did. Nevertheless, when organizing so extensive a program it would be but natural that the example of the municipalities should be consulted wherever their procedures did not clash with the principles of private law. This seems all the more probable when we take notice of the municipalities' previous experience in making loans for interest, and when we consider that the alimentary program was effectively organized at a municipal rather than at a district or regional level. A study of the characteristics of municipal loans that we have noted, combined with a careful reading of the pertinent alimentary documents and the evidence of the law codes, should lead us to a relatively simple picture of the operation of the imperial alimentary program and its relations both with the municipalities and the landowners. And once the legal and contractual rôle of the landowners in the whole system is seen, it will be simpler to discern in what respects the program was also devised for their relief.

1. The need for financial assistance to impoverished children in each municipality was reviewed and redetermined periodically. As more cases came to light, or as the purposes and utility of the program were better understood, new allocations of imperial funds to the stated municipalities were made.<sup>23</sup> The program was, therefore, not static as most private ones with set endowments had to be.

2. As soon as the amount needed had been determined, it was calculated how much principal must be invested in loans at five

<sup>23</sup> At least three allocations of money were made at Veleia: not only the case recorded by *CIL* xi.1147, but earlier ones by Cornelius Gallicanus (*id.*, col. 7.31–60; col. 2.37; col. 3.12; col. 5.38, 56) and by Pomponius Bassus (*id.*, col. 3.12, 53). Among the Ligures Baebiani there were at least two: the case recorded in *CIL* ix.1455, and an earlier one (*id.*, col. 2.26, col. 3.14, 18). Since the earlier case mentioned among the Ligures Baebiani is called *Obligatio viii*, we may infer that by this time there were at least ten general disbursements of imperial funds for the program.

per cent a year in that same community to satisfy requirements.<sup>24</sup> This rate of interest was very low, but the amount allowed to local landowners at this rate was strictly limited to not more than ten per cent of the real wealth that they offered as security. This limitation undoubtedly left considerable room for more expensive investors, such as the municipalities themselves.

3. The loans themselves were thereupon placed by imperial agents, not by local officials.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the municipalities themselves were numbered among the recipients of the loans (*CIL* ix.1455, col. 3.21–33; *CIL* xi.1147, col. 6.60–78), and if there was an appreciable difference between the alimentary and municipal rates of interest, here was an opportunity for a lucrative reinvestment of the borrowed funds, although we have no evidence that they were actually so used.

4. As security the borrowers put up real estate worth at least ten times the amount pledged, and sometimes considerably more. This was in no sense a sale, but a pledge of security for the loan of money received, a hypothec. Not only is it unlikely that large numbers of Italian landowners would so enthusiastically alienate their lands, but the language of the documents and the legal status of certain land, the *ager vectigalis*, included in the program are fatal to the theory that a sale by mancipation such as Pliny had used was included in the program.<sup>26</sup> But from the days of

<sup>24</sup> 52,000 sesterces a year were needed at Veleia. The emperor lent 1,044,000 which, the superscription states, would at five per cent yield the amount needed (*CIL* xi.1147). In the document from the Ligures Baebiani (*CIL* ix.1455) a marginal notation of the interest in each case proves to be two and one-half per cent of the principal. Mommsen has reasonably suggested (*CIL* ix, pp. 128–29) that collections were made twice a year and that the interest here too was five per cent.

<sup>25</sup> Cornelius Gallicanus is referred to (*CIL* xii.2602) as a *legatus Augusti equestribus stipendis* in the ninth consulship of Domitian (83 A.D.); and Titus Pomponius Bassus was an extremely distinguished public servant, the recipient of a letter of congratulations from the younger Pliny at his retirement (*Ep.* 4.23), and created a patron of Ferentinum in 101 A.D. because of the liberal manner in which he had carried out his assignment whereby the emperor *aeternitati Italiae suae prospexit* (*CIL* vi.1492).

<sup>26</sup> The verb used consistently in the alimentary documents is *obligare* ("to bind" or "to obligate") not *mancipare* ("to make formal sale"). The latter was the procedure used by Pliny. Furthermore, large portions of the land obligated at Veleia were *ager vectigalis* (e.g. col. 1.5, 41; col. 2.96; col. 3.87; col. 4.37, 57; col. 6.28, 36, 46, 49, 53, 79), which technically was the property of the municipality; and though it was liable to rent to the community, it was liable to hereditary possession and could be mortgaged, but it was incapable of mancipation. For *ager vectigalis* see *Dig.* 6.3.1 (Paulus). The appearance of *ager vectigalis* in these documents also is fatal to the



the Republic to the late Empire *ager vectigalis* could be pledged or alienated freely to private persons and hence to the emperor and his fiscus (Appian, *BCiv.* 1.10; *Dig.* 19.1.13.6; 43.9.1; 50.16.219). And when such pledge or obligation had been made to the emperor, there was no question of sale or that other rights had been altered: "... what we pledge to the fiscus (*quod fisco obligamus*)," says Pomponius in language very like that of the alimentary documents, "we are able to claim and defend as our own in the meantime (i.e. as long as the pledge is not forfeited), and to alienate it, and to place servitudes upon it" (*Dig.* 50.17.205).

5. While the money was lent by imperial agents, the annual interest was collected, perhaps every six months, by local officials who were generally called quaestors.<sup>27</sup> These men were also responsible for the distribution of the money among the eligible recipients. Normally these officials administered the local alimentary funds alone, though occasionally the same man also was in charge of the municipal finances or even was the chief magistrate of the municipality. In the Baebianan tablet the emphasis placed on the amount of interest due and the relatively careless description of the estates themselves lend credence to a suggestion that it was a copy of a local quaestor's records that he used in order to exact the proper payments from the hypothecated estates. As long as the estates could be identified, an exact description of the ones that had been pledged would be of little real value to him.<sup>28</sup>

6. The loans could be redeemed, probably whenever the fiscus called for payment or the debtor wished to disencumber his estate. We have already noticed that the absence of a terminal date in the documents from Veleia and the Ligures Baebiani has

theory that the alimentary system employed the peculiar form of suretyship mentioned in the Charter of Malaga and utilized by the municipalities and the Roman Senate. This had the name of *praediatura*, and both Bruns (*Font.*<sup>7</sup> 346) and Pernice (*Labeo* 3.168-69) believed that alimentary obligations were of this type. But *praediatura* were characterized by a type of pledge known as *praediorum subsignatio*, while the alimentary documents consistently refer to their contract as *praediorum obligatio*; and also *ager vectigalis* could not be offered as security in such contracts (*Cic. Flac.* 32.80).

<sup>27</sup> The titles include *quaestor alimentorum*, *quaestor alimentorum Caesaris*, *quaestor sacrae pecuniae alimentariae*, *curator pecuniae alimentariae*, etc. For a complete list with references, see De Ruggiero, *Diz. ep.* 1.407-8.

<sup>28</sup> It has been objected that a document of this sort would not be preserved on bronze. But if there was a rule requiring publicity, local curiosity or just economic considerations of brevity may have brought about the choice of the quaestor's document rather than some more exact but longer one.

led many to suppose that the loans could not be repaid, and that this assumption is completely without basis since neither document reproduces the individual contracts. Municipal loans certainly could be redeemed,<sup>29</sup> and it is contrary to custom, to the spirit of Nerva and Trajan, and to all likelihood of success that so strange a phenomenon as an irredeemable loan should appear at this time and in this connection. It is true that contracts for loans at interest sometimes stated that the amount owed became due when the creditor asked for it (*qua die petierit*: e.g. Arangio-Ruiz, *Font.*, *Negotia* 394, 395); and this phrase probably appeared both in the municipal and in the alimentary contracts, but this does not constitute a condition: it merely admonishes the debtor to make speedy payment when the loan is called in (*Dig.* 45.1.48; 45.1.135.1). A loan containing such a phrase became payable immediately upon establishment.

7. Municipal charters contained directions for a publication of the sureties and securities offered to the municipalities in the conduct of public affairs (*Lex Malacitana* 63; Riccobono, *Font.* 215), and it appears that the alimentary institution adopted a similar policy. The Liguens Baebiani effected the publication by erecting in bronze a copy of the accounts kept by their quaestor. At Veleia a similar bronze record was erected, but it seems to have been a copy of the records of the contracting rather than of the administering official, for its descriptions of the estates obligated are much more exact, while the calculation of the interest due from each estate is lacking. Such public notice served, of course, as a proud admission by local landowners of their social responsibilities, but it also warned prospective purchasers of encumbrances upon certain estates of the area.

8. Ordinarily there would be little reason for the emperor to call in his loans. Responsibility for the alimentation of each age-group would last from ten to fifteen years, and presumably other eligibles would be found as the older ones reached the maximum age. Demand would be made, however, whenever the debtor failed to meet his interest payments. Presumably the agreement to pay interest was included by a stipulation in the original contract by which the loan was made. Any failure to meet the obligation to pay interest regularly would, then, lead

<sup>29</sup> See note 21, above.

to a demand for the principal and the interest up to that point. If this demand was not honored, the creditors could proceed against the estate, by selling the thing pledged, to satisfy the claims for both principal and interest (*Dig.* 13.7.8.5). Any surplus from the sale belonged to the debtor (*Dig.* 13.7.42), but since the pledges were worth at least ten times the loans, probably the debtors were moved to find the money elsewhere and satisfy the debt. Otherwise they would lose title to the land in return only for the cancellation of the debt and whatever residue an indifferent seller, such as the State, might acquire. The emperor's policy to lend only when the security was far more valuable than the loan, then, probably reduced wasteful litigation to a minimum. For such as there might be, however, special provision was made, since the emperor Nerva for the first time created a special praetor to administer suits between the *fiscus* and private persons (*Dig.* 1.2.2.32).

9. The whole program as described above was devised to run with as little administrative machinery as possible. We have already noted that local officials collected the interest payments and distributed the funds. A small hierarchy of regional and national officials also existed. These men represented the emperor and the *fiscus* and were concerned with the principal and its allocation. Such assignment must have included the duty to transmit complaints and petitions to Rome, to represent the *fiscus* in litigation with delinquent debtors, to replace old borrowers, to find new borrowers, and to arrange a settlement with heirs or new owners of hypothecated estates.

10. For administrative purposes Italy was divided into nine districts. Of these, seven were named after and were dependent upon the great roads that traversed them (Aemilia, Appia, Clodia, Flaminia, Salaria, Tiburtina, and Valeria). The remaining two, in the extreme north and south (Trans Padum—Histria—Liburnia and Apulia—Lucania—Bruttii), were far greater in area but far less important for the program because of peculiar features of population and topography.<sup>30</sup> Over these more remote districts were placed procurators of the *alimenta* who were of equestrian rank.<sup>31</sup> The others received directors who generally were of

<sup>30</sup> See above, 56-57.

<sup>31</sup> For lists and titles of officials of the program, with the pertinent references, see De Ruggiero, *Diz. ep.* 1.406-8.

senatorial rank and who were given the title of prefects of the alimenta. In a very large number of cases the prefect was also the curator of the road that served his district.<sup>32</sup> The intimate knowledge that the curators of roads might acquire concerning the financial health of the countryside probably recommended them for the second office. In other cases the two offices were held in succession rather than contemporaneously<sup>33</sup>; and sometimes there will be found a prefect of the alimenta who had never previously been a curator.<sup>34</sup> Hirschfeld suggested that from Marcus Aurelius to Macrinus a senatorial prefect of consular rank administered the whole Italian program from Rome replacing the regional prefects, who were more commonly of praetorian rank<sup>35</sup>; but this suggestion has not received universal approval.<sup>36</sup> Whatever the details, it is clear that the choice of high ranking senatorials to represent the emperor and the fiscus was meant to signify the united interest of the emperor and the Senate in the well-being of Italy, which was traditionally a senatorial responsibility.

The alimentary institution, thus constituted and administered, enjoyed a long and useful career. The large number of inscriptions honoring both local and regional officials testify to its vigor, and their complimentary tone to its popularity. Hadrian supported and extended the benefits of the system (*SHA, Hadr.* 7.8). He also defined its scope (*Dig.* 34.1.14.1) and may well have been responsible for the regional organization: at least the positions of Cornelius Gallicanus and Pomponius Bassus in Trajan's reign seem quite informal. Nor did Hadrian confine his bounty to Italy alone; for in the new city of Antinoopolis in Egypt he established a fund that financed the upbringing of any child whose parents registered him within thirty days of his birth as being in

<sup>32</sup> E.g. *curator Viae Salariae et alimentorum* (*CIL* vi.1509).

<sup>33</sup> E.g. *praefectus alimentorum . . . curator Viae Latinae novae* (descending order, *CIL* x.5398).

<sup>34</sup> E.g. *praefectus alimentorum per Aemiliam* (*CIL* xiv.3601).

<sup>35</sup> O. Hirschfeld, *Die kaiserlichen Verwaltungsbeamten bis auf Diocletian* (Berlin 1905) 217-20.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Th. Mommsen, *Römisches Staatsrecht* (Leipzig 1887) 2.1080. An interesting reference appears in the *senatus consultum* passed to diminish expenses at gladiatorial combats (Riccobono, *Font.* 298). Here authority for enforcement was given in the Transpadane area and in each of the regions of Italy to the alimentary prefect or, in his absence, to the curator of the road, etc. This is dated between 176 and 178 A.D., and the language seems to indicate a plurality of prefects at that time.

need of aid (*Sammelb.* 7602). A number of honorary inscriptions from Picenum and Umbria dedicated to Emperor Antoninus Pius by the *pueri et puellae alimentari* of the various places probably indicate that the program was still expanding during his reign and that new funds continued to be needed (*CIL* ix.5700; xi.5957, 6002). He also established an alimentary fund for a group of girls who were named the *puellae Faustinae* (*SHA, Anton. Pius* 8.1)<sup>37</sup> in honor of his wife Faustina. Since this title does not seem to be used outside Rome, it may be that the emperor wished to make compensation to the girls of Rome, since they were not eligible to partake of the regular festive distributions of grain and money that the boys had enjoyed since Trajan.<sup>38</sup> Marcus Aurelius interested himself in improving the program (*SHA, M. Ant.* 11.2), and he followed the example of Antoninus Pius in founding the *novae puellae Faustinae* in honor of his dead wife, the younger Faustina, as well as establishing a group of boys and girls in celebration of the marriage of Lucilla and Verus (*SHA, M. Ant.* 7.8, 26.6).<sup>39</sup>

In the century following the reign of Marcus Aurelius the literary references are extremely scanty; but there is such a wealth of inscriptional evidence testifying to the continued administration of the program that one must suppose that it had, for the most part, reached a sort of balance and required less imperial attention. One exception is found in the brief reign of Pertinax. A cryptic passage in his biography alludes to a certain corrective action on his part in regard to the program, but what the situation was that he had to correct is not clear.<sup>40</sup> It is probable, however,

<sup>37</sup> For a celebration of these on coins see Cohen (above, note 8) 2.433.261–63 and Eckhel (above, note 8) 7.22, 40.

<sup>38</sup> The *frumentationes* and *congiaria*. A suggestion of Henzen (above, note 11) 24.

<sup>39</sup> Again, these were probably confined to Rome. There is one inscription from outside Rome, Ficulea in Latium (*CIL* xiv.4003 = *ILS* 6225) honoring Marcus, but the dedicants call themselves simply *pueri et puellae alimentari*. See also Eckhel (above, note 8) 7.48.

<sup>40</sup> *SHA, Pertinax* 9.2–3: “. . . obeundis postremo cunctis muneribus fiscum parem fecit. Alimentaria etiam compendia, quae novem annorum ex instituto Traiani debebantur obdurata verecundia sustulit.” This perplexing passage has stimulated a number of suggestions of varying merit. For example, Mommsen ([above, note 36] 2.1080–81) thought that Marcus Aurelius had been forced to call in the capital and had been paying the annual interest on it from the fiscus. This Commodus had failed to do for nine years. Hirschfeld ([above, note 35] 223) interpreted this as meaning that Trajan had instituted some sort of annual payments by the fiscus and that Commodus failed to honor them. Kubitschek (*RE* 1 [1894] 1487) understood the Latin

that he revived the practice of reinvesting in the program any capital that was returned by borrowers, a practice that had been neglected by his predecessor.<sup>41</sup> Alexander Severus established a special group of alimentary boys and girls on the model set by Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius (*SHA, Alex. Sev.* 57.7). These were called the *Mammaeani* and *Mammaeanae* in honor of his mother, Julia Mamaea. After Alexander Severus, mentions of the program become more infrequent, and the last reference to a prefect of the alimenta is in an inscription honoring a man that was probably urban prefect in 271 A.D. (*CIL* vi.1419). By the time of Constantine the institution seems to have completely disappeared: in 315 A.D. the emperor directed the fiscus to give immediate aid to any applicant that reported that he was unable to support a newly born child, such aid to take the form of food and clothing (*CodTheod.* 11.27.1). No mention of the alimentary system was made there or thereafter.

The detailed analysis and description of the alimentary institution show that it was an efficiently conducted program, that it supported children adequately, and that it provided loans to Italian landowners on comparatively generous terms. The last

to mean that Pertinax was unable to pay the arrears of the past nine years for the farmers that had government loans and that were unable to pay. Ashley (*Eng. Hist. Rev.* 36 [1921] 16) strangely translates the section concerned, "Pertinax, with hardened heart, cancelled nine years' arrears ex instituto Traiani," and is uncertain whether there had previously been direct grants of public revenues, a stoppage of the income on the way to the recipients had occurred, or hard times had made the annual payments impossible.

<sup>41</sup> I believe that the passage should be rendered, "... finally, he made the fiscus equal to all the demands for expenditure made upon it; and with a stubborn sense of decency (*verecundia*) he even undertook to make those alimentary outlays, based on a precedent established by Trajan, that had not been made for nine years." One cannot be sure, but it seems likely that in the mechanics of the program, as we understand it, annually an appreciable amount of capital would return to the administrative officials for reinvestment. This money would come from investors who wished to disencumber their estates, or were forced to disassociate themselves from the program because they failed to meet their interest payments. The management of this capital was an important reason for the existence of a bureaucracy above the municipal level. It seems that Commodus had not followed the precedent established by Trajan, whose practice now amounted to an obligation: to keep the capital, when it returned, invested in the program. Hence the reference to Pertinax's sense of decency that had prompted him to resume the responsibilities that Commodus had abandoned. An even simpler, though perhaps not so likely explanation, would be that Commodus had failed to expand the program when new cases of need arose, although Trajan's policy in this respect now amounted to an obligation. Pertinax had special knowledge and interest in this matter, for both he and his successor, Didius Julianus, served as alimentary prefects prior to their elevation (*SHA, Pertinax*, 2.2; *Did. Jul.* 2.1).

of these points now claims our attention: the loans as an aspect of agrarian policy or farm relief. We must discover why the landowners in such numbers were eager to enter into this financial arrangement with the *fiscus*. We then should be able to assess the purposes and pertinence of the whole program. Ultimately, in respect to the perennial Italian agrarian problem, three questions need to be answered concerning the alimentary institution: Was it rational? Was it curative or merely palliative? Was it effective?

Probably it would be both unfair and untruthful to neglect the rôle that humanitarianism or an intelligent appreciation of the population problem played among the landowners. For more than a century imperial propaganda and law had emphasized the need for a concerted effort toward a dynamic birthrate. And we have seen that the imperial program contemplated, and was indeed paralleled by, independent endowments made by private persons. The seemingly eager cooperation of the landowners in accepting the alimentary loans from the emperor could be partially explained, then, by the educational efforts of the emperors begun by Augustus.

And on a material plane it must be admitted that these loans were extremely practical. If one really needed money, he might look far to find more liberal terms of interest or greater security from precipitate demand for principal as long as annual interest was paid. What is more, since the amount of imperial money so lent was severely limited (to no more than one tenth of the value of the land pledged), and the legal rate of interest was so much higher than that demanded for this very limited supply of money (twelve per cent as compared to five per cent), it was perfectly possible for the borrowers to relend what they borrowed, pay the interest, and make a good profit besides. We have no evidence that this was actually done, but the inherent possibility must be noticed.

There is, however, a far more serious social and economic aspect to the program, and one whereby the treatment afforded the agrarian and alimentary problems turns each into a specific for the relief of the other. We have already noted that the distribution of the evidence suggests that the alimentary program was far more important in those sections of Italy having much marginal land than it was in the rich Po Valley or in the irreclaimable

barrens of southern Italy.<sup>42</sup> By marginal land I mean that land that could be cultivated and made productive with proper care, but that had been abandoned to pasturage or waste. It has been fully demonstrated that Italy for three centuries had experienced a tendency to develop larger estates from the small holdings, sometimes to the degree of vast ranches or *latifundia*. A study of the names of the estates and their owners in those very tablets from Veleia and the Ligures Baebiani with which we have been concerned shows clearly that far fewer owners held lands in those communities than had done so a century or two earlier.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it had been recognized since the Gracchi that somehow the population problem was related to the decrease of the number of cultivators of the soil. In the first century of our era Pliny the Elder made the oft quoted statement that the *latifundia* had been the ruination of Italy (*HN* 18.6.35); and a number of the emperors whose names are connected with the alimentary program signified the importance that they attached to smaller more intensively cultivated units: Nerva, who founded the alimentary system, spent 15,000,000 *denarii* settling members of the Roman plebs on farms.<sup>44</sup> Hadrian, who showed a special interest in the program, was also greatly concerned with the recovery of marginal land and passed special legislation assisting those who brought it back into cultivation.<sup>45</sup> And Pertinax consigned and gave free title to all imperial lands in Italy that were not cultivated to whoever would cultivate them for ten years (*Herodian* 2.4.6). The prevalence of this idea, then, lends credence to the suggestion that Trajan may have hoped that the money would be used to improve the land, and that landowners found it profitable to do so. After all, once it was started at Veleia, and its benefits were

<sup>42</sup> See above, 56-57. That there was a connection was seen by Carcopino (*REA* 23 [1921] 298-303), though he seemed to suppose a far more explicit condition attached to the loans than we have any evidence for.

<sup>43</sup> For analyses and descriptions of these see Th. Mommsen (*Hermes* 19 [1884] 393-416); J. Kromayer (*Neue Jahrb. f.d.kl. Alt.* 33 [1914] 145-69); M. Besnier (*REA* 24 [1922] 118-22). On the extent of an Italian plantation system see C. Yeo (*Finanz-archiv* 13 [1952] 321-42).

<sup>44</sup> Dio Cass. 68.2. Dio does not state whether the amount was 15,000,000 sesterces or *denarii*, but Greek practice makes the latter more likely.

<sup>45</sup> The *Lex Hadriana de rudibus agris et iis qui per X annos continuos inculti sunt* (Riccobono, *Font.* 494) certainly gave rights of possession (*possessio*) to those who undertook the cultivation of marginal lands in the provinces, perhaps in Italy as well. Cf. also the *Lex colonis Fundi Villae Magnae* (Riccobono, *Font.* 488-89).



seen, there was an enormous increase in the number of persons anxious to participate.<sup>46</sup>

How did the emperor expect that his loans, if spent in reclaiming marginal lands, would produce important and permanent benefits? To effect the agricultural improvements that were desired the landowners must spend the money that they borrowed on local labor. The great reason why pasturage had replaced more intensive exploitation in many places was that it required less labor, for certainly no one denied that a jugerum of vineyard or wheat would yield far greater profits than a jugerum of cow-pasture. And this labor would be bound to consist, in part at least, of the partially or completely unemployed of the locality, that is, the fathers and brothers of the very same impoverished children who enjoyed the interest from the alimentary loans. By the injection of the principal into the local economy, jobs had been created and the general poverty of the area was thereby decreased. Furthermore, if the productivity of the land was permanently enhanced, cultivation, pruning, gathering, reaping, and all the other tasks associated with intensive cultivation would long continue to improve the opportunities for the day laborer; while the profit per unit of land would be markedly increased for the landowner. Everyone was better off, and the need for the alimentary payments themselves might be gradually decreased thereby. In one sense the program could be likened to a painless progressive taxation: a way had been contrived for the families that had acquired large estates at the expense of weaker neighbors to contribute to the rehabilitation of the very persons that they had displaced.

We can now appreciate that the local character of this program had many advantages, indeed that this was one of its most important aspects. In the first place, it was administratively expedient: this method entailed the creation of the smallest bureau possible and made use of competent officials already on the scene, the local quaestors and the regional curators of the highways. Secondly, it was psychologically acute: by investing the principal in the localities where the interest was needed it allowed the citizens of

<sup>46</sup> There were, for instance, only six in the previous settlement by Gallicanus recorded at the end of *CIL* xi .1147, but forty-six in the settlement that it principally records. But perhaps this is partly due to a smaller estimated need at the earlier time. We cannot be sure about this.

each municipality to enjoy a sense of responsibility for the welfare of their own people and a sense of pride when they contemplated the monumental records of their cooperation. And finally, it was economically sound: there was a great deal of sense in letting out the alimentary funds in the same areas where there were the greatest number of poor children. If the funds had been lent in Rome, for example, the proceeds paid to the children of an Italian municipality would have been little more than a handout, and the area where economic conditions most needed improvement would have been aided only slightly. But as it was, the needy communities reaped all the secondary benefits of an increased economic activity and thereby might ultimately be freed from need for further aid.

The alimentary program proves, then, to have been truly practical. What is more, the direct effects of the loans on the productivity of Italy, and their direct and indirect effects on the impoverished families of each municipality, show that they were designed not just as a palliative, but as a cure for both the population and the agrarian problems from which the peninsula suffered. It remains to consider whether the program was effective.

We are bound first to observe that any social and economic experiment that was continued for one hundred and seventy years must be said to have enjoyed some sort of success. Certainly five generations of participants did not allow themselves to be deluded so uninterruptedly. And there is another indication of its probable financial success. After Hadrian almost all the literary references are probably to special and rather limited foundations in the city of Rome itself.<sup>47</sup> Yet there are copious epigraphical allusions both to local and to regional officials of the program through the reign of Alexander Severus. Even the mention of difficulties prior to the reign of Pertinax indicates that irregularities were abnormal. The steady though unspectacular references to a functioning organization are probably the best evidence that we could hope for that the alimentary institution for years proved a self-perpetuating financial success.

It cannot be asserted that the program was equally successful in increasing the population of Italy. Evidence is not explicit,

<sup>47</sup> The *puellae Faustinianae* of Antoninus Pius (*SHA, Anton. Pius* 8.1); the *novae puellae Faustinianae* of Marcus Aurelius (*SHA, M. Anton.* 26.6); and the *Mammaeani* and *Mammaeanae* of Alexander Severus (*SHA, Alex. Sev.* 57.7).

it is true,<sup>48</sup> but the parallel data that have been gathered from other societies certainly do not seem encouraging. Once the pleasures of the limited family or of childlessness have been tried, an improvement in the economic situation has seemed only to confirm the new taste. In other civilizations economic progress has not necessarily been followed by moral regeneration; and peoples bent on suicide have hardly been restrained at all. It is not inappropriate to observe in addition that with the advent of Christianity celibacy, which had been in Rome a social vice but a lucrative one, now became a major virtue.

Ultimately, then, it was internal weaknesses in the ideals of the Roman people that jeopardized the social aspects of the program. Its economic side, however, in keeping with Roman ideals, was more successful; but to be so it required political tranquility and monetary stability. These it enjoyed for many years. But external forces, the military anarchy and resultant financial confusion of the third century, gave the coup de grâce to this more successful side of the experiment; and by the time of Constantine revolution, confiscation, and inflation had left nothing of it except a few inscribed memorials. It is part of the irony of history that this admirable, thoughtful, workable, long-range, and carefully integrated program, which was unique in Roman history, was the product of authoritarian government; and that the very attitudes that spawned authoritarian government—the indifference, the weariness, the materialism, the need for protection and security—also effected the destruction of its finest social effort.

Seeds of destruction, it seems, are present at every birth, and neither men nor states nor institutions completely escape their touch. In the creation of the alimentary institution there were present three conditions, all of them necessary for its conception, yet fatal to its permanence: a mature civilization, a people that wanted assistance, and an authoritarian government.

There must be a mature civilization for extensive social and economic planning to be conceived and brought to life—a civilization with its efficient bureaucracy, developed banking methods, sentimentality, and widespread urbanity. But civilizations are also narcissistic. They gloat over the many material attractions

<sup>48</sup> But see A. E. R. Boak, *Manpower Shortage and the Fall of the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor 1955) for a thorough discussion of the evidence that there is.

that they have contrived and, charmed by these, they constantly try to improve upon them and more thoroughly to enjoy them. With this circumstance it is natural that the alimentary program should be successful in the economic sphere, and it is equally natural that the social aspect should face rejection; for the possession of children tends to interfere with the full enjoyment of many of the numerous benefits that civilizations offer for adults. And the more prosperous a man is, the more advantages there are to claim an increasing portion of his energies. While the alimentary institution, to judge from its hearty acceptance by landowners, was a success in respect to the agrarian problem, and while it undoubtedly fed and clothed many children, it does not seem to have encouraged the Italians to raise more children. Indeed, it is tempting to suppose that the more successful that it was in increasing the prosperity of the various communities, the more unlikely it became as a solution to the population problem.

Secondly, for the creation of the alimentary system there had to exist both the need for material aid and the willingness to accept it. The economic conditions after the Second Punic War, and the social and political ones after the Gracchan Age, at least, had ensured these conditions. But generations of governmental support for hundreds of thousands of Italians, without requiring from them any tangible service, made it clear to them that they had rights on which they could insist, but taught nothing of commensurate duties. Moreover, Italian municipal politics, vigorous though they may have been in the first and second centuries, after elections pretty much disregarded the average citizen; and the control of affairs for most of the year was largely in the hands of a coterie of the well-to-do. And Italy had now been protected from foreign aggression for so many years by a paternalistic government that it must have seemed invincible to the ordinary citizen. There had grown up in Italy, then, a social and political irresponsibility based on an arrogant and childish belief in "rights" and confidence in immunity to danger. Such a state of mind boded ill for the alimentary program because that called for comprehension and some sense of national responsibility.

Finally, long range planning required a government not subject to the whims of a fickle electorate. It needed the long-term servants of its bureaus, and the ability to promulgate "administrative

law” (as opposed to legislative law), which permits instant and expeditious handling of problems, though it is at the same time a non-democratic aspect of government. But such a government, though efficient and often painless, is expensive—too expensive for an agricultural economy. Furthermore, it is far separated from the people. Ultimately, given the lack of vigor and irresponsibility of the peoples of the heartlands to maintain and defend themselves, the authoritarian and bureaucratic government had to turn to vigorous but equally irresponsible hirelings from the frontiers. And they, by the callous and brutal exercise of the power that was thus abandoned to them, caused such economic and political havoc that the alimentary system, created for the eternal welfare of Italy, disappeared.