

Peasants, Farmers, or What?
The Translation of *Rusticus* and the Economic Imagination

The Latin term *rusticus* is nearly always translated as “peasant” in English, but this translation imports cultural and economic schemas rooted in medieval and early modern European history and in modern peasant-studies scholarship (see Freedman 1999; Dyer 2007; Handy 2009). The term “peasant” is often taken to imply a monolithic and predominantly dependent rural population aiming at autarky and unengaged with markets (see Hopkins 1980; Ellis 1993). Decades of archaeological work across western Europe, however, have demonstrated that rural inhabitants of the Roman world often enjoyed higher standards of living and were more economically integrated than older models allow, indicating that it is time to rethink the ‘peasant’ schema (Hollander 2018; Bowes 2025). This paper enters into this larger debate from a new angle—asking if our translations themselves have set us up for a misconception of Roman economic structures. The paper examines the stereotypes associated with the terminology for rural populations used in Latin texts, specifically the term *rusticus*, posing a deceptively simple question: are those stereotypes similar to those employed in modern English (inflected by Medieval sources) or not? If the associations contained in the term *rusticus* are similar to those contained in the term peasant, then it follows that the cultural category ‘peasant’ might not be dissimilar to that of *rusticus*, and translating *rusticus* as “peasant” (along with the economic connotations that this term implies) may be justified. Conversely, if the two sets of connotations differ markedly, translating *rusticus* as “peasant” is misleading, particularly insofar as it imports the feudal economic and social schemas implied by that term.

The examples I will present suggest that republican and early imperial Latin speakers’ associations around *rustici* were on a different register than those attached to the term ‘peasant.’

The English term carries associations of disinterest in profits, laziness, unintelligence, and a static way of life deeply segregated by social class (Freedman 1999; Knight 2000). In several examples ranging from Plautus to Cicero, and pseudo-Virgil to Valerius Maximus, I demonstrate that while Roman usage of the term *rusticus* is similar in some ways to the English usage of ‘peasant,’ there are important differences. First, while the term ‘peasant’ denotes a class of people typically impoverished and segregated from political power networks, our Roman sources (e.g., Cicero in *In Verrem* or Valerius Maximus) present *rustici* as being more socioeconomically and politically diverse. Second, while ‘peasants’ are seen as unconnected with markets, Roman jibes against *rustici* (in Plautus’ *Mostellaria*, Cicero’s *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino*, the letters Cicero’s son Marcus, and Ovid’s *Remedia amoris, inter alios*), while generally quite negative, present them as being almost obdurately hardworking and profit-conscious, to the point of becoming boring for the urbane city dweller. My main contention is that stereotypes of *rustici* reflect a different and more variegated cultural category than that implied by the term ‘peasant.’ *Rustici* (and associated terms like *agricolae* and *aratores*) are shown to be rural dwellers with strong and permeable social networks involving urban elites, often almost fanatically obsessed with money-making and marketing. This represents a marked departure from the cultural category of “peasant” in modern scholarship and its antecedent English usage. Given the extent to which reconstructions of Roman social and economic structures depend on translation, interpretation, and even imagination (Millar 1981; Brunt 1988), small shifts in the associations surrounding terms like *rusticus* can materially affect how those structures are modelled and understood.

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