

What things cost in Ancient Rome

When studying Ancient Rome, it is only natural to wonder what the price of everyday items might have been. In order to fully understand the price of an item, you must also consider the wages workers received at the time the item was purchased.

Before you study the information below, it is helpful to understand that professions were valued differently in ancient times than they are today. Likewise, the value of items was different then than now. For instance, in today's world, one might spend 20% of their total income on food, but in ancient times the cost may have been 50% or more of one's total income. In fact, during parts of the history of Rome, food costs were so high that without free wheat subsidies from the government, the common people would not have been able to survive! These subsidies were known as 'doles' and according to AEJ Morris's *History of Urban Form* [1970 George Godwin LTD], up to 1/3 of the citizens of the capital city received this public assistance.

Grain formed the foundation of the common Roman's diet. It was not uncommon for grain to be the only thing a poor Roman ever ate. The cost of baking bread was very high to a poor Roman, so if no access to a communal, public oven could be had, the grain would be crushed and made into a porridge known as 'puls' that was likely similar in taste and texture to modern polenta. While we take it for granted today, meat was an extravagant luxury that most Romans could not afford to indulge in.

Clothing was another expensive proposition. One 'libra' (Roman pound, just under $\frac{1}{2}$ of a modern pound - 326 grams), of fine silk cost more than a dozen human beings. It seems absurd to us today, but such was the case, because Ancient Romans lacked the production machines of today that make cheap fabric possible. For the commoners, fashion was not a consideration- clothing was utilitarian, had to be durable, and was patched until finally the garment became the thing from which patches were taken for its replacement.

Historically, the cost of living has expanded to consume all of the income that is available to the majority of the people in the society. As technology has enabled faster production, technology has also introduced new things to consume the income the increased productivity creates. The ancient Romans did not have many things to pay for in comparison to life today, yet it was every bit as much a struggle for them to survive as it is today- and probably, it was even more of a struggle for them.

As you read the data below, consider what you might have been in Ancient Rome. Would you have been a carpenter? A mason? Would you have been fortunate enough to receive an education and become an advocate (ancient equivalent of the modern lawyer)? Pick your profession, and then take a look at the kind of food and clothing you would have been able to afford. You might gain a new appreciation for modern life!

All the prices and wages are listed in denarii communes, which were not actually silver denarii as we usually think of when discussing ancient Roman coinage. Denarii communes, or d.c., were notational currency. What this means is, an exchange rate was given, telling how much of the currency in circulation at that time (nummii) it took to equal one d.c. This made it easy to change the value of the money in circulation, without having to rewrite and redistribute the entire Edict. A series of exchange tables are at the end of this handout.

Wages in 301 AD in the Roman Empire

All data based on Diocletian's "Edict of Maximum Prices" issued in 301 AD

General Laborers

brick maker, for every 4 fired bricks and preparation of the clay	2
brick maker, for every 8 sun dried bricks, and preparation of the clay.....	2
clerk (based on specified bath attendant wage)	25
farm laborer, with maintenance	25
lime burner, with maintenance	50
mule driver, camel driver, with maintenance	25
sewer cleaner, working a full day, with maintenance	25
shepherd, with maintenance	25
water carrier, working a full day, with maintenance.....	25
all other general labor.....	25

Skilled Laborers

barber, per customer.....	2
cabinet maker, with maintenance.....	50
carpenter, with maintenance, daily	50
stone mason, with maintenance	50
figure painter, with maintenance	150
fuller (Wool weaver), per cloak.....	175
marble paving and walls custodian, with maintenance.....	60
wall mosaics worker, with maintenance	60
model maker, with maintenance	75
other plaster worker, with maintenance.....	50
parchment maker, for a quaternion, white or yellow parchment.....	40
shipwright of a river vessel, with maintenance	50
shipwright of a seagoing vessel, with maintenance	60
tessellated floormaker , with maintenance	50
wagon blacksmith, with maintenance	50
wagonwright, with maintenance	50
wall painter, with maintenance	75

Professionals

advocate, for opening a case.....	250
for pleading a case.....	1000
scribe, for the best writing 100 lines.....	25
for second quality writing	20
secretary.....	35
notary, for writing a petition or legal document.....	10

Teachers in Ancient Rome

A teacher in ancient Rome would have lived in the home of a wealthy patrician, who would have provided the teacher with food and clothing appropriate to the house. The teacher would not have had much spending money, but would have lived comfortably just the same. These are salaries in denarii per month, per student.

elementary teacher.....	50
arithmetic teacher	75
greek or Latin literature or Geometry	200
teacher of rhetoric or public speaking	250

Soldiers in Ancient Rome

Soldiering was one of the best ways a Roman male could provide for his family. The base wage was low, not enough to live on. Four times a year, a soldier received a “Donative” greater than his annual base pay. Additionally, soldiers received an annual “Annona” subsidy for grain purchases. The best soldiers hoped to be recruited to the Praetorian Guard, the soldiers who guarded the Emperor. These soldiers were paid roughly 3 times the base wage of the average soldier, and likely enjoyed many additional privileges as well.

Soldiers had high expenses in their profession, but they still came out much better than the average citizen even after expenses. The soldiers were expected to pay for much of their own equipment, rations, and clothing. They even had to pay part of the cost of burial for their fallen from their unit.

Soldiers' Pay:

average Roman soldier,annually.....	1800
Praetorian Guard, annually	5500
annual grain annona (1 per year)	600
donative (4 per year)	2500
Additionally, every soldier received a grain allotment of 30 modii of wheat per year that would be worth.....	3000
 Total Annual Pay for an average Roman Soldier	15,400
For a Praetorian Guard	19,100
<i>Compare that to a general laborer working 305 days a year.....</i>	<i>7625</i>

Soldiers' Costs:

boots, without hobnails	100
shoes, soldiers	75
saddle.....	500
polisher, for a sword.....	25
for a helmet	25
for an axe	6
for a double axe.....	8
for a sword scabbard.....	100

Prices in 301 AD in the Roman Empire

All data based on Diocletian's "Edict of Maximum Prices" issued in 301 AD

The Edict of Maximum Prices was an attempt to control runaway inflation and poverty in the Empire. The penalty for exceeding the prices of the Edict was severe: death. Not satisfied to execute just the seller, Diocletian decreed that the buyer was to be executed as well. As a final measure, if a seller refused to sell his goods at the stated price, the penalty was death.

Food

Dry Foods

Prices refer to one modius unless otherwise indicated. 1 modius=8 liters dry measure.

alfalfa seed.....	150
barley.....	60
barley, cleaned.....	100
beans.....	60
beans, crushed.....	100
chickpeas.....	100
flaxseed.....	150
hayseed.....	30
lentils.....	100
millet, crushed.....	100
millet, whole.....	50
oats.....	30
peas, crushed.....	100
peas.....	60
rice, cleaned.....	200
rye.....	60
salt.....	100
sesame.....	200
wheat.....	100

Fruits & Vegetables

cabbage or lettuce, head.....	_
dessert grapes, libra.....	1
fenugreek, modius.....	100
peaches, one, up to.....	_

Prices in 301 AD in the Roman Empire

Food (continued)

Meats and Fish

Prices refer to one libra unless otherwise noted. 1 libra=326 grams or just under _pound.

beef.....	8
chicken.....	60
fish, freshwater.....	12
second quality.....	8
fish, saltwater.....	25
second quality.....	16
goose, fattened.....	200
not fattened.....	100
goat.....	12
lamb.....	12
pheasant, depending on variety.....	125-250
pork.....	12
sausage, depending on variety.....	10-16

Wine, Beer & Oil

Prices refer to one sextarius. 1 sextarius=1.14 Pints or .546 liters

beer, Celtic or Pannonian.....	4
Egyptian.....	2
Aminean, Falernian, Picene, Sabine, Tiburtine regional wines.....	30
aged wine.....	24
second quality.....	16
chrysattic wine.....	24
Maeonian wine, boiled down one-third.....	30
must, boiled down.....	16
must, boiled down one-half.....	20
rose wine.....	20
spiced wine.....	24
wine with wormwood.....	20
vin ordinaire (ordinary wine).....	8
olive oil, fresh.....	40
second quality.....	24
liquamen (fish sauce seasoning).....	16
second quality.....	12
vinegar and wine vinegar.....	6

Prices in 301 AD in the Roman Empire

Clothing

Fabric

Prices are per item or libra for raw materials.

african cloak	500
Dalmatian tunic.....	2000
hooded cloak, Laodicean.....	4500
soldier's winter tunic.....	75
wool from Tarentum	75
white silk	12,000
purple silk †	150,000

† Purple silk was to be used only at the direction of the Emperor under penalty of death.

Boots and Shoes

boots for mule drivers or farm workers, without hobnails.....	120
boots for soldiers, without hobnails.....	100
women's boots.....	60
patrician's shoes.....	150
senatorial shoes.....	100
equestrian's shoes	70
soldier's shoes.....	75

Sandals and Gallic Sandals

double-soled Gallic sandals for farm workers.....	80
single soled Gallic sandals.....	50
Gallic sandals for runners.....	60
women's oxhide sandals double-soled.....	50
women's oxhide sandals single-soled.....	30

Exchange Rates of Currency to Denarii Communes From 297 to 308 A.D.

Number of Denarii Communes exchanged for:

Period Coin (mat'l.)	293-300	300-301	301-307
Aureus (gold)	600	1200	2400
Argenteus (silver)	25	50	100
Nummus † (billon)	5	12.5	25
Radiate (billon)	2	2.5	5
Laureate (bronze)	1	1	1

†Base Currency Unit

To determine the buying power of the currencies above for a given time period, compare the exchange rate of the actual currency to the prices or wages listed on the preceding pages in denarii communes using the formula below:

$$(\text{Price from list in d.c.}) \times (\text{Number of coins exchanged per d.c. from chart above}) = \text{Cost or Wage in actual currency}$$

Suggestions for further reading

Tenney Frank, *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore, 1940)

Jo-Ann Shelton, *As The Romans Did* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998)