

Money for politics

The more generously politicians financed public investments with their own money, the more prestige they usually enjoyed. No matter whether the money was spent on lavish games, a costly building or the distribution of corn, the sponsor's descendants could be expected to still brag about those investments for a long time.

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Generosity means prestige

Generosity was such a highly respected virtue that the Romans even had a goddess dedicated to this quality, liberalitas. As Liberalitas Augusti it later became a vital element in the imperial catalogue of virtues.



Denarius of Severus Alexander, 222–235. Reverse: Liberalitas with tessera and cornucopia on the left. From Gorny & Mosch auction sale 204 (2012), 2423.

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Games to honour the gods I

The horse-riding jockey represented on these coins makes reference to the Ludi Appolinares, the games in honour of Apollo. Since Caius Calpurnius Piso had set the date in 211 BC, the games were celebrated annually from July 6 to July 13 in front of the Temple of Apollo on the Campus Martius. ...



Denarius of L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi, 90. Obverse: Apollo. Reverse: Jockey.

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Games to honour the gods II

... Images like these could be used and recycled for a long time whenever one of the family members was running for office.



Denarius of C. Calpurnius Piso Frugi, 67. Obverse: Apollo. Reverse: Jockey.

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The unofficial comitia

In theory, the Ludi Apollinares were first and foremost a religious celebration in the service of public health. However, in reality it was above all the entertainment factor which attracted enormous crowds to the Campus Martius, where they witnessed the gay and lavish games and chariot races or listened to lyrical competitions.



Finish of the chariot race, from: The Garden Arbor, 1880. Source: Wikicommons.

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Where the crowds converge

On this map of Campus Martius it is easily recognisable that the Temple of Apollo (marked in red letters), next to which the Ludi Apollinares were held, is located on the fringe. This must be seen in the context of its construction: After a major plague epidemic, the temple had been built and dedicated to an Apollo Medicus, imported from Greece, in 431 BC.



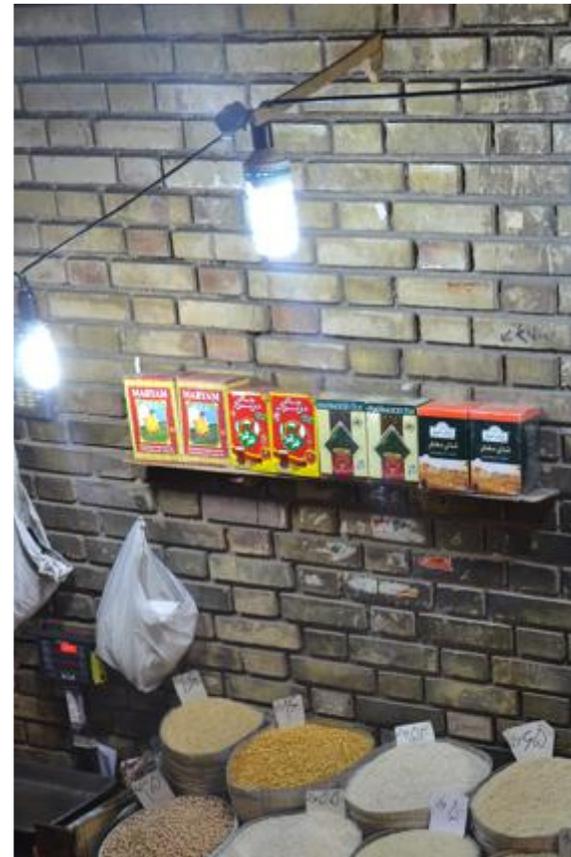
Source: Wikicommons / Joris1919.

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Panem et circenses

But Rome's politicians did not only provide games for the people, they also provided bread. At first, the Cura Annonae was established during famines in order to prevent speculation affecting corn prices: To this purpose, the aediles curules started out by buying corn from the surrounding Italian areas and reselling it to the Roman population at a low price. Since 210 BC, taxes were levied on corn from the Roman province of Sicily and, since 146 BC, the Roman province of Africa also had to deliver corn to Rome.



Corn on a bazaar in Tabriz/ Iran. Photo: Wikicommons / Oliver Weyer / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.de>

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Providing for the capital

In the course of the Republic, corn consumption rose steadily. At the close of the Republic, there were 200,000 authorised and listed male recipients entitled to corn free of charge. The allocated share per month was 5 bushels of corn (modii), weighed roughly 33 kg and could feed two people.



Stubble field. Photo: Wikicommons / H.-J. Sydow.

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Rome needs corn. Lots of corn.

Precisely this Cura Annonae is the theme of this coin, which depicts a corn bushel (modius) in the centre and flanking ears. The corn consumption of the Roman population is estimated at around 540,000 tons by several scholars. The corn was imported to Rome on ships via Ostia and other harbours. Having ancestors which had been responsible for the Cura Annonae in their position as praefectus was the best imaginable advertising for your own cause.



Denarius of L. Livineius Regulus, 42. Obverse: Head of Regulus.
Reverse: Modius and ear.

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The ruins of an ancient corn distribution station

In the 1st century BC, these columns, later integrated into the Basilica of Saint Mary in Cosmedin, belonged to a *statio annonae*, one of the central corn distribution stations in Rome.



Maria in Cosmedin, columns of the Statio Annonae. Photo: Wikicommons / Agnete / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en>

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Bread aplenty and a bold rewriting of history

This coin proves that history is always subject to novel interpretations. Lucius Minucius Augurinus, who had been called into office as praefectus annonae in 440/39, did such a horrifyingly lousy job that a private citizen by the name of Spurius Maelius decided to support the population himself by importing corn at his own cost. Augurinus, whose failure had been the sole reason for the intervention by Maelius, became so infuriated that he had Maelius killed. His ancestors reinterpreted the past by celebrating Augurinus for his heroic murder of a megalomaniac Plebeian and by representing him as distributing bread.



Denarius of C. Minucius Augurinus, 135. Obverse: Roma. Reverse: Columnia Minucia on the left; man handing out bread in front of it; Augurinus on the right.

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Water for the people

With this portrait the Marcii celebrated Ancus Marcius, their ancestor and builder of Rome's third and longest water pipe, the Aqua Marcia. According to ancient reports, 187,600 cubic metres flowed through it daily and made it one of the most important of the eleven existing Roman aqueducts (until today).



Denarius of L. Marcius Philippus, 56. Obverse: Head of Ancus Marcius.
Reverse: Aqueduct, equestrian statue on top.

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An ancient water pipe

The water flowing through the Aqua Marcia travelled 91 km from its source to the capital.



Source: Wikicommons / Coldeel.

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Jupiter's will manifested in lightning bolts

This coin shows the four sides of the Puteal Scribonianum/Libonis, which is said to have been built by a member of the Libo family as the respective ancestors liked to point out. A three-dimensional replica of the puteal from Veii shows the original form as it has been reconstructed: The bidental (a sacred place that has been struck by lightning and is split in two) was enclosed by a bar decorated with garlands and lyres. What is more, each side also depicts a different symbol associated with Vulcan, the god of metallurgy and mythical blacksmith of Jupiter's lightning bolts, these being ...



Denarius of L. Scribonius Libo, 62. Common obverse: Head of Bonus Eventus. Reverse: Puteal Scribonianum with various symbols of Vulcan.

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... hammer ...



Denarius of L. Scribonius Libo, 62. Common obverse: Head of Bonus Eventus. Reverse: Puteal Scribonianum with hammer as symbol of Vulcan.

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... tongs...



Denarius of L. Scribonius Libo, 62. Common obverse: Head of Bonus Eventus. Reverse: Puteal Scribonianum with tongs as symbol of Vulcan.

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... anvil ...



Denarius of L. Scribonius Libo, 62. Common obverse: Head of Bonus Eventus. Reverse: Puteal Scribonianum with anvil as symbol of Vulcan.

... as well as the pileus as headgear.



Denarius of L. Scribonius Libo, 62. Common obverse: Head of Bonus Eventus. Reverse: Puteal Scribonianum with pileus as symbol of Vulcan.

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Divine tools for human work

This copperplate print from a 1689 book depicting the different trades illustrates that hammer, anvil and tongs were equally necessary tools for minting coins.



Copperplate engraving by Christoph Weigel, "Der Münzer" (The moneyer, 1698). Source: Wikicommons / Deutsche Fotothek.