
Intended for an audience already versed in ancient history, architecture, and the classics, *The Ancient Middle Classes* aims to make a case for the existence of a distinct Roman middle class as defined by economic status and cultural and moral values. The author, a classics professor at the University of Chicago, contends that this class grew out of the commercialization of the Roman Empire. The existence of permanent shops, the prevalence of rental property, and the lifestyle of business people and artisans living in urban areas are all described in detail and used to support Mayer’s contention.

Mayer starts by describing his research method and provides an introduction to social class during this time period. The author also spells out his thesis, stating that it was the middle class which made urbanization as well as the “mass culture” of the Roman Empire possible. Drawing upon archaeological evidence, Mayer, in the next three chapters of his book, then discusses Roman urban life, beginning with a review of households in Olynthus and Pompeii. Rentals were common and helped to create a commercial class. Strong archaeological evidence can be found for the presence of bakeries, taverns, bars, and fulleries where cloth was washed. As the merchant and artisan class grew so did their mark on urban life through the building of clubhouses, sanctuaries, and tombs. Remains of these buildings help us to understand this new middle class. Their pride in success and respect for family can be seen in fragments of wall paintings or funerary art. Through specific examples of tomb art, Mayer notes how certain motifs were used to evoke pain and grief and can thus lead us to a better understanding of the societal values of this class.

Mayer also contends that much Roman art was not made for elites but for the middle class or subelites as he calls them. Using Cicero as an example, the author examines the Roman’s private letters to provide insight into his taste in décor. The taste of a Roman upper class intellectual is then compared to archaeological evidence from middle class houses or artifacts. Middle class art buyers were generally not interested in narrative art but instead beauty, virtue, and mutual affection were deemed more important. Status display was far less significant than personal taste and consumption.

Clear photographic illustrations and line drawings help support Mayer’s thesis. Extensive notes provide further information for the researcher as does the concise index.

Mayer provides telling evidence of a Roman middle class based his criteria. These criteria, however, could be challenged by other scholars looking at other aspects of Roman society or interpreting his examples differently.

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