

Cato, *De agricultura* (selections)

[I] It is true that to obtain money by trade is sometimes more profitable, were it not so hazardous; and likewise, money-lending, if it were as honorable. Our ancestors held this view and embodied it in their laws, which required that the thief be mulcted double and the usurer fourfold; how much less desirable a citizen they considered the usurer than the thief, one may judge from this. And when they would praise a worthy man, their praise took this form: "good husbandman, good farmer"; one so praised was thought to have received the greatest commendation. The trader I consider to be an energetic man, and one bent on making money; but, as I said above, it is a dangerous career and one subject to disaster. On the other hand, it is from the farming class that the bravest men and the sturdiest soldiers come, their calling is most highly respected, their livelihood is most assured and is looked on with the least hostility, and those who are engaged in that pursuit are least inclined to be disaffected. And now, to come back to my subject, the above will serve as an introduction to what I have undertaken.

When you are thinking of acquiring a farm, keep in mind these points: that you be not over-eager in buying nor spare your pains in examining, and that you consider it not sufficient to go over it once. However often you go, a good piece of land will please you more at each visit. Notice how the neighbors keep up their places; if the district is good, they should be well kept. Go in and keep your eyes open, so that you may be able to find your way out. It should have a good climate, not subject to storms; the soil should be good, and naturally strong. If possible, it should lie at the foot of a mountain and face south; the situation should be healthful, there should be a good supply of laborers, it should be well watered, and near it there should be a flourishing town, or the sea, or a navigable stream, or a good and much travelled road. It should lie among those farms which do not often change owners; where those who have sold farms are sorry to have done so. It should be well furnished with buildings. Do not be hasty in despising the methods of management adopted by others. It will be better to purchase from an owner who is a good farmer and a good builder. When you reach the steading, observe whether there are numerous oil presses and wine vats; if there are not, you may infer that the amount of the yield is in proportion. The farm should be one of no great equipment but should be well situated. See that it be equipped as economically as possible, and that the land be not extravagant. Remember that a farm is like a man —however great the income, if there is extravagance but little is left. If you ask me what is the best kind of farm, I should say: a hundred *iugera* [approximately 62 acres] of land, comprising all sorts of soils, and in a good situation; a vineyard comes first if it produces bountifully wine of a good quality; second, a watered garden; third, an osier-bed; fourth, an olive grove; fifth, a meadow; sixth, grain land; seventh, a wood lot; eighth, an arbustum; ninth, a mast grove.

[II] When the master arrives at the farmstead, after paying his respects to the god of the household, let him go over the whole farm, if possible, on the same day; if not, at least on the next. When he has learned the condition of the farm, what work has been accomplished and what remains to be done, let him call in his overseer the next day and inquire of him what part of the work has been completed, what has been left undone; whether what has been finished was done betimes, and whether it is possible to complete the rest; and what was the yield of wine, grain, and all other products. Having gone into this, he should make a calculation of the laborers and the time consumed. If the amount of work does not seem satisfactory, the overseer claims that he has done his best, but that the slaves have not been well, the weather has been bad, slaves have run away, he has had public work to do; when he has given these and many other excuses, call the overseer back to your estimate of the work done and the hands employed. If it has been a rainy season,

remind him of the work that could have been done on rainy days: scrubbing and pitching wine vats, cleaning the farmstead, shifting grain, hauling out manure, making a manure pit, cleaning seed, mending old harness and making new; and that the hands ought to have mended their smocks and hoods. Remind him, also, that on feast days old ditches might have been cleaned, road work done, brambles cut, the garden spaded, a meadow cleared, faggots bundled, thorns rooted out, spelt ground, and general cleaning done. When the slaves were sick, such large rations should not have been issued. After this has been gone into calmly, give orders for the completion of what work remains; run over the cash accounts, grain accounts, and purchases of fodder; run over the wine accounts, the oil accounts — what has been sold, what collected, balance due, and what is left that is saleable; where security for an account should be taken, let it be taken; and let the supplies on hand be checked over. Give orders that whatever may be lacking for the current year be supplied; that what is superfluous be sold; that whatever work should be let out be let. Give directions as to what work you want done on the place, and what you want let out, and leave the directions in writing. Look over the livestock and hold a sale. Sell your oil, if the price is satisfactory, and sell the surplus of your wine and grain. Sell worn-out oxen, blemished cattle, blemished sheep, wool, hides, an old wagon, old tools, an old slave, a sickly slave, and whatever else is superfluous. The master should have the selling habit, not the buying habit.

[V] The following are the duties of the overseer. He must show good management. The feast days must be observed. He must withhold his hands from another's goods and diligently preserve his own. He must settle disputes among the slaves; and if anyone commits an offence, he must punish him properly in proportion to the fault. He must see that the servants are well provided for, and that they do not suffer from cold or hunger. Let him keep them busy with their work — he will more easily keep them from wrongdoing and meddling. If the overseer sets his face against wrongdoing, they will not do it; if he allows it, the master must not let him go unpunished. He must express his appreciation of good work, so that others may take pleasure in well-doing. The overseer must not be a gadabout, he must always be sober, and must not go out to dine. He must keep the servants busy and see that the master's orders are carried out. He must not assume that he knows more than the master. He must consider the master's friends his own friends. He must pay heed to anyone to whom he has been bidden to listen. He must perform no religious rites, except on the occasion of the Compitalia [The festival held annually at the cross-roads, in honor of the Lares Compitales. It occurred soon after the Saturnalia, in December, on a day or days appointed by the praetor.] at the cross-roads, or before the hearth. He must extend credit to no one without orders from the master and must collect the loans made by the master. He must lend to no one seed-grain, fodder, spelt, wine, or oil. He must have two or three households, no more, from whom he borrows and to whom he lends. He must make up accounts with the master often. He must not hire the same day-laborer or servant or caretaker for longer than a day. He must not want to make any purchases without the knowledge of the master, nor want to keep anything hidden from the master. He must have no hanger-on. He must not consult a fortune-teller, or prophet, or diviner, or astrologer. He must not stint the seed for sowing, for that brings bad fortune. He must see to it that he knows how to perform all the operations of the farm, and actually does perform them often, but not to the point of becoming exhausted; by so doing he will learn what is in his servants' minds, and they will perform their work more contentedly. Also, he will be less disposed to gad about, will be in better health, and will enjoy his sleep more. He must be the first out of bed, the last to go to bed. Before then he must see that the farmstead is closed, that each one is asleep in his proper place, and that the stock have fodder.

[LVI] Rations for the hands: Four *modii* [51 pounds] of wheat in winter, and in summer four and a half for the field hands. The overseer, the housekeeper, the foreman, and the shepherd should receive three. The chain-gang [The field-hands, and especially the unruly, were chained together, and at night kept in an underground prison, the *ergastulum*.] should have a ration of four pounds of bread through the winter [approximately 5,000 calories], increasing to five when they begin to work the vines, and dropping back to four when the figs ripen.

[LVII] Wine ration for the hands: For three months following the vintage let them drink after-wine. In the fourth month issue a *hemina* [9.23 fl. oz., i.e., a little over a cup] a day, that is, 2½ *congi* [2.16 gallons] a month; in the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth months a *sextarius* [two *heminae*] a day, that is, 5 *congi* [4.32 gallons] a month; in the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth months 3 *heminae* [3.46 cups, i.e., a little less than a quart] a day, that is, an *amphora* [6.92 gallons] a month. In addition, issue 3½ *congi* per person for the Saturnalia and the Compitalia. Total of wine for each person per year, 7 *quadrantals* [48.44 gallons]; and an additional amount for the chain-gang proportioned to their work. Ten *quadrantals* [69.2 gallons] of wine per person is not an excessive allowance for the year.

[LVIII] Relish for the hands: Store all the windfall olives you can, and later the mature olives which will yield very little oil. Issue them sparingly and make them last as long as possible. When they are used up, issue fish-pickle and vinegar, and a pint of oil a month per person. A *modius* [about 18 pounds] of salt a year per person is sufficient.

[LIX] Clothing allowance for the hands: A tunic 3½ feet long and a blanket every other year. When you issue the tunic or the blanket, first take up the old one and have patchwork made of it. A stout pair of wooden shoes should be issued every other year.

Translation by W. D. Hooper and H. B. Ash (1934)