

Roman Educational Practices

Source: Horace: Satires, I.6.xi.70-90; Pliny the Younger: Letters, IV.13; Martial: Epigrams, X.62. From: William Stearns Davis, ed., Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources, 2 Vols. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-13), Vol. II: Rome and the West, pp. 227-230.

Horace: *Satires* I.6.xi.70-90

During the later Republic and Early Empire the craving for a good education was probably more prevalent than in any other age, barring the present. Even the lower classes were not usually illiterate (witness the numerous wall scribblings at Pompeii), although there was no system of free public schools. What one father did to give his son all possible advantages is told in this noble and touching tribute by Horace.

If I dare venture to speak in my own praise, and say that I live undefiled, innocent, and dear to my friends, let me confess that I owe all this to my father. A poor man he was, and on a lean farm, yet he was not content to send me to a local school¹ under the pedant Flavius, though boys of pretensions, sons of prominent centurions, went there with their school bags and writing tablets slung over their left arms, and carrying their teacher the fee in their hands on the Ides of eight months in the year. On the contrary, he had the spirit to bring me even as a child to Rome, to be taught those liberal arts which a senator or eques requires for his children. If anyone had seen my dress and the slaves that attended me in the big city, he would have guessed that I was maintained by some hereditary estate. My father—most faithful of guardians—was ever present at all my studies. Why need I say more? He preserved my modesty (the first point of virtue) not merely untainted, but free from the very rumor of taint. He was not afraid lest any one should reproach him² who turned out to be an auctioneer, or as my father was, a tax gatherer. I should not then have complained. But all the more is praise due to him, and from me the greater gratitude. As long as I keep my senses I will never be ashamed of such a father, nor apologize for my [humble] birth as do so many, asserting “it is no fault of theirs.”

Pliny the Younger: *Letters* IV.13

The following letter by Pliny to the famous historian Tacitus is witness to the interest taken in education under the Empire. The school here mentioned was, of course, not a mere primary school—that existed surely already at Comum—but one of the higher learning. Pliny’s munificence was by no means unique. Probably in no other age was so much money donated by wealthy men for education—especially in their home towns—until recently in America.

This letter contains a request: let me tell you why I ask it. When I was last in my native district³ a son of a fellow townsman of mine, a youth under age, came to pay his respects to me. I said to him, “Do you keep up your studies?” “Yes,” he answered. “Where?” I asked. “At Milan,” was the reply. “But why not here?” I pressed. Then the lad’s father, who was with him, said, “because we have no teachers here.” “How is that?” I asked. “It is a matter of urgent importance to you who are fathers,” and it so chanced that luckily quite a number of fathers were listening to me, “that your children should get their education here at home.”

For where can they pass their time so pleasantly as in their native town, where can they be brought up so virtuously as under their parent’s eyes; or so inexpensively as at home? If you put your money together, you could hire teachers at a trifling cost, and you could add to their stipends the sum you now spend on your son’s lodgings and travel money—no small sum. I have no children of my own, still, in the interests of the community—which I may consider as my child or my parent—I am ready to contribute a third part of what you may decide to club together upon. I would even promise the whole sum if I did not fear that if I did so, my generosity might be corrupted to serve private interests, as I see is the case in many places where teachers are employed at the public charge. There is only one way of preventing the evil, and that is by leaving the right of employing the teachers to the parents alone, who will be careful to make a right choice if they are obliged to find part of the money. You cannot make your children a better present than this, nor can you do your place a better turn.”

And now, my friend Tacitus, since this is a serious matter, I beg you to look out for some teachers among the throng of learned men who gather around you, whom we can sound on the matter, but not in such a way as to pledge ourselves to employ any of them. For I wish to give the parents a perfectly free hand. They must judge and choose for themselves: I have

¹ At Venusia, his home town.

² For giving an education to a son.

³ Comum, North Italy.

only a sympathetic interest and a share in the cost. So if you find any one who thinks himself capable, let him go to Comum, but on the express understanding that he builds upon no certainty beyond his confidence in himself. Farewell.

Martial: Epigrams X.62:

That the Roman schoolmasters, no less than their Greek predecessors, relied on the scourge to quicken slow wits is shown in the following from this writer of the end of the first century CE

Sir Schoolmaster—show pity upon your simple scholars, at least if you wish to have many a long-haired boy attendant

upon your lectures, and the class seated around your critical table love you. Then would no teacher of arithmetic or swift writing have a greater ring of pupils around him. Hot and bright are the days now under the flaming constellation of the lion; and fervid July is ripening the bursting harvest. So let your Scythian scourge with its dreadful thongs, such as flogged Marsyas of Celaenae, and your formidable cane—the schoolmaster's scepter—be laid aside, and sleep until the Ides of October. Surely in summer time, if the boys keep their health, they do enough.