

Salvian on Life in the Later Roman Empire

The poor are being robbed, widows groan, orphans are trodden down, so that many, even persons of good birth, who have enjoyed a liberal education, seek refuge with the enemy to escape death under the trials of the general persecution. They seek among the barbarians the Roman mercy, since they cannot endure the barbarous mercilessness they find among the Romans.

Such is the case among almost all the lower classes, for the same circumstances force them to two very different alternatives.... They must endure the frequent, even continuous, ruin of state requisitions, always menaced by severe and unremitting proscription; they desert their homes to avoid being tortured in them, and go into voluntary exile to escape heavy punishment. To such men the enemy are kinder than the tax collectors. This is proved by their actions, for they flee to the enemy to avoid the oppression of the levies.

Although these men differ in customs and language from those with whom they have taken refuge, and are unaccustomed too, if I may say so, to the nauseous odor of the bodies and clothing of the barbarians, yet they prefer the strange life they find there to the injustice rife among the Romans. So you find men passing over everywhere, now to the Goths, now to the Bagaudae, or whatever other barbarians have established their power anywhere, and they do not repent of their expatriation, for they would rather live as free men, though in seeming captivity, than as captives in seeming liberty....

Yet we are surprised that the Goths are not conquered by our resistance, when the Romans would rather live among them than at home. Not only have our kinsmen no desire at all to escape from them to us, but they even leave us to take refuge with them. I could find occasion to wonder why all the poor and needy taxpayers do not follow their example, except for the one factor that hinders them, namely, that they cannot transfer their poor possessions and homes and their households. For, since many of them leave their tiny fields and shops to escape the enforced payment of taxes, how could they help wishing to take off with them, if it were at all possible, the property they are compelled to abandon?

...They put themselves under the care and protection of the powerful, make themselves the surrendered captives of the rich and so pass under their jurisdiction.... It is a serious and grievous situation, that the rich make a show of protecting the poor only in order to rob them, that they defend the wretched only on condition of making them more wretched still by this defense. For all those who seem to be enjoying protection assign to their patrons the bulk of their property (including real estate) before they receive any help, and thus the sons' inheritance is destroyed that the fathers may be secure. Protection for the parents is assured by the beggary of the children.

Therefore some of those of whom I speak, who are either shrewder than the rest or have been sharpened by necessity, have lost their homes and farms by such encroachments, or have fled before the taxgatherers, because they cannot hold their property, and seek out the farms of the rich and great, to become their *coloni*.