

MARKET-DAYS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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NO ASPECT OF COMMERCE in the Roman empire has been more neglected than that which involves the movement of goods within any given fifteen-mile radius;¹ yet this *local* trade must account for a good three quarters of the value of exchange throughout the economy as a whole. What was its routine? The question is best explored within three settings: in quite isolated rural markets, in villages, and in cities.

In almost every region of the ancient world one could find stretches of countryside too thinly populated to support any permanent economic centre; but a substitute might emerge in the form of a periodic meeting of the farmers roundabout to sell their surplus and to attract peddlers with a more varied stock of goods. Such a site would stand no chance of mention in our written sources, and its tents and booths would leave little trace for the archeologist; yet he might find at a cross-roads an area littered with coins, pottery, and other small objects attesting to the presence of crowds of people.² The usefulness of a gathering place like this is obvious. It made possible a little variation in the peasant's diet, an infusion of minor luxuries, and access to essentials like iron and salt. And in certain regions, for reasons of higher profits or necessity, only one crop was grown—olive trees, let us say, in southern Spain, in north-eastern Syria, or northern Africa. Here, life could not be supported at all without rural markets. It might then be the responsibility of the large landowner to supply a centre for exchange on his own initiative. His villa might serve as the place at which, on known days or seasons, his tenants gathered to buy and sell what they needed, while his stables and courtyard sheltered the traders overnight.³ Alternatively, a fair could be established on open ground, where a cluster of booths might in time become a sort of trading post. This is what must be meant by the phrase *vicum et nundinas constituere* or *instituere*,⁴ *nundinae* meaning market-

Presented essentially in the present form to a colloquium honouring Professor T. R. S. Broughton, to whom this is respectfully dedicated.

¹J. Gaudemet, "L'empire romain a-t-il connu les foires?" *Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin* 5 (1953) 25–42 is rather shallow, save on the legal aspects; the only other special study is the entry *Nundinae* in the *Real-Encyclopädie* (see below, n. 31).

²Such as has been found near Oxford: J. G. Milne, *JRS* 21 (1931) 101–103 (late first to fourth century).

³Vitruvius 6.5.2: "Persons dependent on country produce must construct stables and booths in their courtyards and, in the main building, barns, store-rooms, and whatever else can best accommodate the storage of produce."

⁴*CIL* 8.8280: *NN vicu et nundina V kal. et V idus sui cuiusque mensis constituit*, in

days. In the period of the Empire, permission for this act had to be sought from the appropriate authorities: in Italy, from the senate and consuls; elsewhere, and in the later Empire, only from the emperor.⁵ The privilege of holding a market brought profits, tolls or dues, crowds, and convenience of exchange⁶—though perhaps at someone else's expense. That would explain the efforts of the authorities to control the growth of *nundinae* lest they compete with each other.

The phrase just quoted, *vicus et nundinae*, reminds us of another seed from which markets developed: *vici*. The term in the context indicates roadside clusters of shabby shops, for manufacture on a small scale and for retail selling. They have been studied only in the northwestern provinces,⁷ but we know they existed elsewhere, and indeed in Thrace a long and interesting inscription records official efforts to resurrect commerce through the creation of such trade centres, called in Greek *emporia*: they are to be equipped with proper public buildings, and a population including a share of the local squirearchy is to be moved in by fiat to see to administration.⁸ Ordinarily, such unimportant communities were run only by a headman, an *emporiarch*, but the dictatorial emperor of the inscription, Septimius Severus, had in mind something more substantial.

We may now look further at the commercial life of already existing villages, choosing for illustration Castellum Celtianum in north Africa. Its population may have numbered a few hundreds, among whom we find six ploughmen, four tenant farmers, eight harvesters, two donkey-drovers, a goat-herd, beet-seller, oyster-woman, cook, innkeeper, straw-

Numidia. This is natural country for *nundinae*, and their prevalence is attested in *CIL* 8.270, on the saltus Beguensis in A.D. 138, and in the early fourth century, by Optatus Milevitanus (ed. Ziwsa, 81). As to the terminology, compare Riccobono, *Fontes Juris Romani Antejustiniani* (Florence 1941) 1.139, on the establishing of *fora* and *conciliabula*, and below, nn. 5 and 10.

⁵Suet. *Claud.* 12.2: *ius nundinarum in privata praedia a consulibus petit*; Plin. *Ep.* 5.4: *a senatu petiit ut sibi instituere nundinas in agris suis permitteretur; contra dixerunt legati Vicetinarum*, of the region near Padua; *Dig.* 50.11.1 (Modestinus); *Cod. Just.* 4.60 (Valentinian and Valens), forbidding the collection of market dues at *mercatus aut nundinae*, established *veterum indulto vel nostra auctoritate*.

⁶See the preceding note, and *Paneg. vet.* 4[8].9.3, a. 297, speaking of Gallic private *nundinae*. On tolls, *Cod. Theod.* 7.20.2 (326), granting exemptions to soldiers, and *Cod. Just.* 4.60, above.

⁷F. Oelmann, *Bonn. Jbb.* 128 (1923) 82–91.

⁸*SIG** 880 (Pizos, a. 202) = A. C. Johnson et al., *Ancient Roman Statutes* (Austin, Texas 1961) no. 274; L. Robert, *REA* 42 (1940) 306–308. For other *emporia* established by imperial decree, see *CIL* 3.4121 (by Constantine at Poetovio, meeting on Sundays); *Chron. pasch.* (Dindorf) 474 and Jerome *Comm. in Jerem.* 31.15 (a *panegyris* at Mamre and at Gaza, by Hadrian). Other markets in the same area are known from the Talmud, including one set up by Diocletian at Tyre; see M. Schwab, *Le Talmud de Jérusalem* 11 (Paris 1889) 185.

seller, baker, linen-merchant, messenger, shopkeeper, bean-seller, and two *nundinariae*.⁹ The list affords a perfectly typical sampling of common occupations; but we must note particularly the last two persons, "market-women," hucksters. Castellum Celtianum evidently had a calendar of set market-days. Perhaps, as at other similar centres in this part of the world, they were held twice a month—care being taken not to conflict with the days chosen by other neighbouring *nundinae*.¹⁰ The object in scheduling was to facilitate the movement of traders around the circuit, a matter to which we will return later; but it may be said here that our epigraphic sources abound in travelling merchants styled under various Greek and Latin terms, in whom we must recognize the suppliers of *nundinae* above and beyond the local population. Occasionally we hear specifically of their wanderings from one market-day to another.¹¹ Naturally they sought places where a crowd could be found. If need be, they would pay a sales tax for the privilege of trading,¹² though of course a market flourished best where no taxes were raised.

A Syrian of the fourth century describes the local "large villages, populous no less than many cities, and with crafts such as are in towns, exchanging with each other their goods through festivals (*panegyreis*), each playing host in turn and being invited and stimulated and delighted and enriched by them through giving of its surplus or filling its needs, setting out some things for sale, buying others, in circumstances far happier than seaboard markets. In the place of the latter's waves and swells, they transact their business to laughter and handclapping. They need little from the city because of this exchange among themselves."¹³ At one of these small places, Immae not far from Antioch, "a market (*panegyris*) was held drawing in merchants from all over and attracting

⁹H.-G. Pflaum, in *Carnuntina*, ed. E. Swoboda (Graz 1956) 134 f.

¹⁰As in *ILAlg.* 2.3604 (Castellum Tidditanorum, under Severus Alexander), where *nundinae agentur . . . pridie kal. et pridie idus sui cuiusque mensis ex auctoritate . . . leg. Aug. pr. pr.*; *CIL* 8.6357 (Castellum Mastarense, a. 212), *die III kal. . . et die III idum*; cf. *CIL* 8.270 in n. 4 above, and *SEG* 13 (1956) 518, a. 250/270, in which the proconsul of Asia permits Tetrapyrgia to establish "an agora for goods for sale on the fifteenth of the month. Let no other city whatsoever in Maeonia anticipate Tetrapyrgia in holding a market."

¹¹*Clerici negotia et nundinas sectantes . . . , circumeuntes provincias quaestosas nundinas* [*sectantes*], in Spain in about A.D. 300, in *Acta et symbola conciliorum*, ed. E. J. Jonkers (Leyden 1954) 9.

¹²Above, nn. 5 f.; Schwab, *op. cit.* (see n. 8) 183; cf. the *nundinae Emadaucapenses* established by Probus as *immunes*, in S. Gsell, *Atlas archéologique de l'Algérie* (Alger 1911) folio 17 no. 384; "the merchants of Asia who have arrived for the *panegyris* and tax-free market held in Cyzicus," *IGRR* 4.144 = *SEG* 4.707; and *SIG*³ 736, section 20 (Messenia, first century B.C.).

¹³Liban. *Or.* 11.230. For a different picture of the maritime city that can always fill its needs by import, compared with the inland city that can neither sell its surplus nor import what it lacks, see Greg. Naz. *Or.* 43.34.

a number beyond counting.”¹⁴ The picture of great throngs at mere villages is surprising enough to require some explanation.

This explanation may lie partly in the provision of good physical facilities in the villages of the region. Most had large stone granges to put up at least some of the many visitors—buildings with shops, stables, storerooms, and meeting halls.¹⁵ Another factor is the annual nature of these gatherings. Where they occurred once a year only, they would draw a larger attendance.¹⁶ In the third place, the occasion was made attractive by public feasts and wine-parties, band-music, and a holiday mood.¹⁷

But the most important factor of all was the connection between religion and commerce. A particularly clear demonstration lies in the worship of Jupiter Nundinarius or Mercurius Nundinator, sometimes by persons known to be merchants.¹⁸ The gods are thanked for the profit they grant in *nundinae*. But both Jupiter and Mercury, as well as many other deities, served trade further through the crowds they attracted to their shrines—crowds that provided a market for the exchange of goods. Jove at Olympia offered a setting so favourable that his festival could be called the *mercatus Olympicus*;¹⁹ at Baetocaece in Syria he presided over “sales-tax-free monthly holidays on the fifteenth and thirtieth” of each month.²⁰ Apollo’s festival at Delos was rightly termed “a commercial affair.”²¹ His mother Leto drew crowds to the *panegyris* in Lycia, his sister Artemis to Ephesus;²² throughout the eastern provinces the holy days of other gods were market days as well, and efforts were made to prevent possible conflicts in scheduling among the religious games of various cities.²³

¹⁴Theod. *Hist. rel.* 7 = PG 82.1365.

¹⁵G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord* 1 (Paris 1953) 28 f.

¹⁶If we draw an analogy with other annual or biennial fairs in Mesopotamia (Amm. 14.3.3); in Greece (Polyb. 5.8.5), where the “agora and *panegyris*” is combined with the elections at Thermus; or in Bithynia, in F. K. Dörner, *Inschriften und Denkmäler aus Bithynien* (Berlin 1941) 42.

¹⁷By analogy, again. See L. Robert, *RevPhil* 17 (1943) 189–192, on second-century Bithynian and Phrygian *oinoposia* provided to the public at the expense of private donors or temple funds.

¹⁸*CIL* 3.10820 (under Gordian); R. Egger, *Anz. oesterr. Akad. d. Wiss.* 102 (1965) 11–26, in part corrected by W. Schleiermacher, *Germania* 43 (1965) 321–323; more striking still, the dedication to the personified *Nundina Augusta . . . ex iussu* (!), in L. Barkoczi, *Brigetio* (Budapest 1951) 63, no. 254.

¹⁹Justin 1.3.5; cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 5.3; on the like character of the Isthmian games, Livy 33.32.2.

²⁰*CIL* 3.184 = *OGIS* 262 = *IGRR* 3.1020 (a. 253/9).

²¹Strabo 10.5.4.

²²*IGRR* 3.603; *SIG*³ 867.

²³For example, Strabo 12.3.36 and 12.5.3, cited by T. R. S. Broughton, with an excellent page of summary, in T. Frank, *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* 4 (Baltimore

In the West the same link joining shrine and fair, Italian or Spanish,²⁴ recurs in our written sources. In both East and West, archeology adds confirming evidence. It is striking how often the remains of some shrine or temple are found in conjunction with rooms for the display of merchandise. Pilgrims first paid homage to the god and then silver to the shopkeeper, all in the same sacred precincts of Jove in Damascus, of Dionysus in Troy, of Venus in Rome;²⁵ and when the day's excitement ended, they found a place to sleep and stables for their horses and mules ready for them nearby.²⁶

Urban fairs²⁷ are less often heard of because they were less necessary than rural ones. In a city, after all, a merchant could always find customers. They came in from the circumjacent farms and villages regularly. It was as if the city each morning drew in and exhaled a deep breath of country air—long ago, very much as today. "The peasants," runs a description of modern Syria, "must have not too long a journey to bring their produce to the city. It is desirable, even, that they should be able to make the round trip in one day; three or four hours' walk is the maximum. They leave before dawn for the city, their donkeys laden with cereals, olives, grapes, or figs, depending on the season. Towards seven or eight o'clock the bazaar is full; souks and khans bulge with goods, animals, and people. Towards ten o'clock, time to think of one's own purchases—the few items of luxury which the land does not yield: cloth bought in the city ever since rural production died, salt, sugar, soap, oil for the evenings. Towards eleven, the city is emptied and everyone starts home."²⁸

1938) 871; Schwab, *op. cit.* (see n. 8) 183 (Scythopolis, where, as the rabbi says, "the idol profits from the sales tax"). For measures against conflicts, see P. Le Bas, *Voyage archéologique* (Paris 1870) Part 5, no. 1620c, lines 14 f.

²⁴In Italy, at Fregellae (Strabo 5.3.10) and at Feronia in the seventh century B.C. (Livy 1.30.5; Dion. Hal. 3.32.1 f., showing incidentally, the equivalence of *panegyris* and *nundinae*; cf. also Cic. *Att.* 1.14.1); at Seville in 287 two women sell their pottery in the forum on the day of Salambo's festival, F. Cumont, *Syria* 8 (1927) 332 f.

²⁵B. M. Felletti Maj, *Siria, Palestina, Arabia settentrionale nel periodo romano* (Rome 1950) 71, 75; *SEG*³ 1.444; D. R. Dudley, *Urbs Roma* (London 1967) 123; cf. other examples, certain or probable, in H. Vetters, *Anz. oesterr. Akad. d. Wiss.* 103 (1966) 168, 170; F. Staehelin, *Die Schweiz in römischer Zeit*³ (Basel 1948) 432; R. Delbrueck, *Hellenistische Bauten in Latium* 2 (Strassburg 1912) 6; *Gallia* 25 (1967) 387; and G. T. Schwarz, *Die Kaiserstadt Avenicum* (Bern 1964) 74.

²⁶*RE s.v.* "Pandokeion" (A. Hug, 1949) col. 522, 535 f.; cf. *IGRR* 3.1020, accommodations in the city or (Polyb. 5.7.5) with one's friends. On the subject more broadly, see T. Kleberg, *Hôtels, restaurants et cabarets dans l'antiquité romaine* (Uppsala 1957) *passim*, esp. 49.

²⁷At Lyons, Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.47; at Cremona, Tac. *Hist.* 3.30.1; at Scythopolis, Cyzicus, Batnae, Tyre, see above nn. 8, 12, 16, 23.

²⁸J. Weulersse, *Bull. d'études orientales* 3 (1933) 36, on modern Antioch.

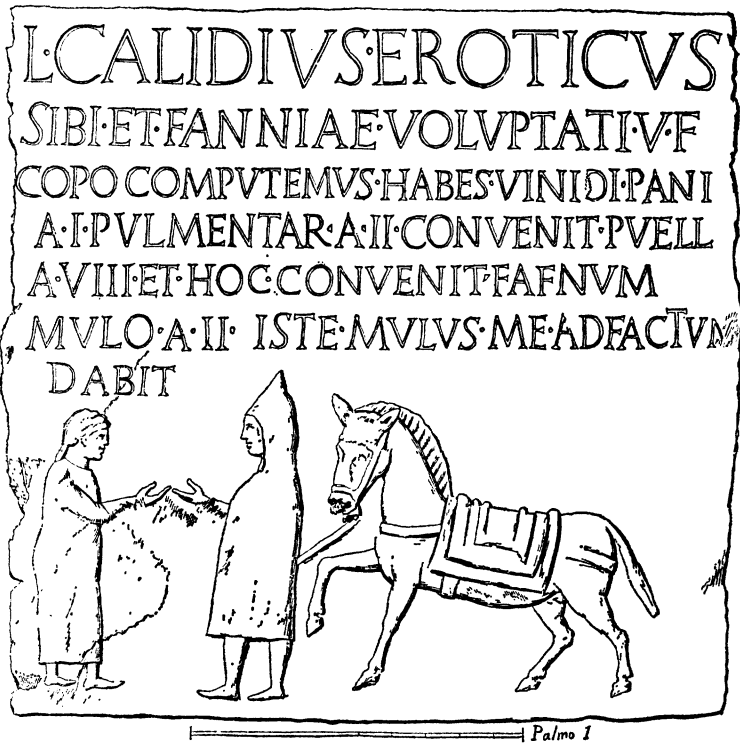


Figure 1

Still, we do encounter large urban *panegyreis* in the eastern provinces especially, the object of lavish expenditure by public-spirited citizens and of lavish praise by the city's flatterers.²⁹ While holy days exercised their usual attraction, so also did semi-religious athletic and artistic contests, and political activities. An orator of the second century describes the many types of persons drawn in by the governor's assizes: "litigants, jurors, rhetors, nobles, retainers, slaves, pimps, drovers, peddlers, prostitutes, and craftsmen. In this way people with things to sell get the best price, and nothing stands idle in the city—not draft animals nor lodgings nor women—which makes for prosperity in no small degree; for wherever the greatest throngs gather, there of necessity is the most wealth, and the place naturally thrives."³⁰

It is, however, in Italy that *nundinae* can be studied most fully. A writer of the second century B.C. mentions their earlier institution in Rome for the benefit of the farmers of the Latin plain, who shaved and

²⁹Menander, *Peri epideiktikon* (ed. Spengel, *Rhetores graeci* [Leipzig 1856] 3.425).

³⁰Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 35.15 f., cited by Broughton, *op. cit.* (see n. 23) 741.

bathed and came in for a big day (the ninth, as the word tells us, in the Roman fashion of inclusive reckoning; we would call it every eighth day).³¹ In addition, three periods of extended commerce, *mercatus*, fell right after the public games, for obvious reasons of convenience: on July 15–19, following the *ludi Apollinares*; on September 20–23, following the *ludi Romani*; and on November 18–20, following the *ludi plebei*.³² *Nundinae* and *mercatus* occupied prominent positions in the official Roman calendar.

Further south lay the rich and thickly populated agricultural zone of Campania, where we would expect to find the interdependence of town and country developed to its fullest. Pompeii had its own *nundinae*, we know; it had its large inns handy to the city gates; it even offers us a picture (fig. 1) of a visiting farmer paying off the innkeeper, along with a fragment of their conversation:³³

Mine host, let's settle the bill.
 You have a flagon of wine, and bread, one *as*; gruel, 2 *asses*.
 Agreed.
 For the girl, 8 *asses*.
 Agreed, again.
 And fodder for the mule, 2 *asses*.
 That mule will work it off for me.

The speaker has been in town just for a night and a day to sell whatever his mule brought in on its back, and now returns to one of the villages in the city's territory.

But the economy of Pompeii reached out far beyond its own territory into a wider network of commerce, and any of its citizens who engaged in business took, not his own city alone, but a dozen or a score of others for his "beat," buying and selling, always seeing to it (if he could) that his arrival coincided with the local *nundinae*. That job was not easy. Campania's calendar seems to have entangled itself in an exquisite chaos, due in fact to the independent operation of many calendars at different cities. One Pompeian, using the walls of his store for scratch paper, calculated on what days of the week the markets would fall during the ensuing month;³⁴ someone at nearby Suessula commissioned a marble plaque inscribed with a list of Campanian *nundinae*; and from

³¹Macrob. *Sat.* 1.16.34; *RE s.v.* "Nundinae" (W. Kroll, 1937) col. 1470.

³²A. Degraasi, *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13, 2 (Rome 1963) 377; *CIL* vol. 1, part 1, pp. 225, 248.

³³On the inns, R. C. Carrington, *Pompeii* (Oxford 1936) 110; on the inscription, *CIL* 9.2689, the translation of the last sentence being uncertain.

³⁴A. Maiuri, *NSc* 6.3 (1927) 98; A. Degraasi, *op. cit.* (above, n. 32) 305 = *CIL* 4.8863.

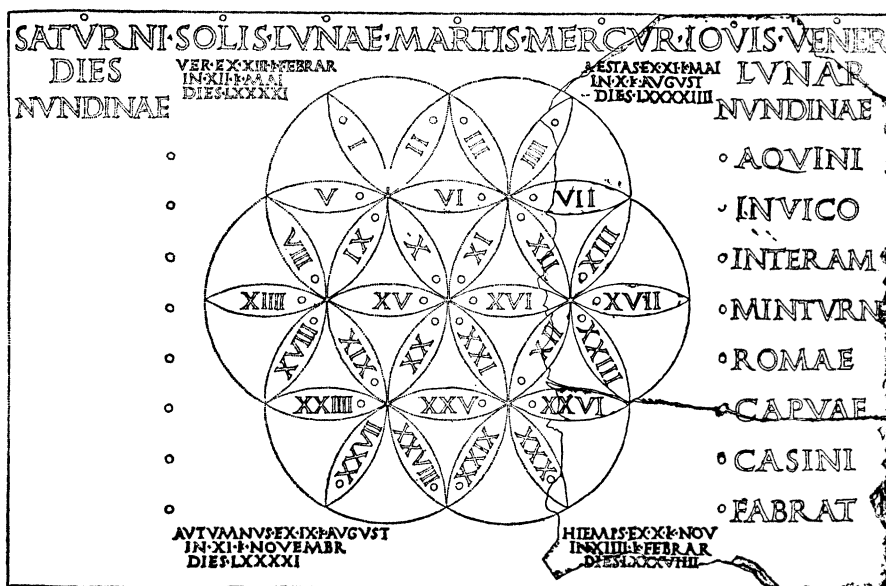


Figure 2

Allifae comes another set of three similar lists.³⁵ So many are the surviving attempts to rationalize the sequence of dates. The most elaborate of all covers a group of towns ranging northwest from Capua to Rome. The circles on it (fig. 2) appear to serve only for decoration. These inscribed calendars contain holes for pegs, as on a cribbage board, so that the user may keep track of the day of the week and the upcoming *nundinae* of each town.

All told, twenty-five place-names occur on the surviving lists, almost half of them on more than one list (fig. 3); but there is no logic to the order of names. They do not arrange themselves in an orderly itinerary, nor do they follow a pattern of regular rotation, every eighth day.³⁶

³⁵*CIL* vol. 1, part 1, pp. 218, 299; *CIL* 6.32505; Degraasi 301–303; also a list from Puteoli, *ibid.* 304.

³⁶In *CIL* 4.4182 the *nundinae* of Cumae fall three days before those of Pompeii, agreeing with *CIL* 4.8863 (expressed there as four days after); cf. W. F. Snyder, *JRS* 26 (1936) 17. But there are difficulties elsewhere. If the lists are clearly not arranged as an itinerary, then they should be in chronological order, as they are in *CIL* 4.8863: Pompeii on Saturday, Nuceria on Sunday, Atella on Monday, Nola on Tuesday, Cumae on Wednesday, Puteoli on Thursday, Capua on Friday. Yet the order is Puteoli, Atella, Cumae, Nola, in the Allifae list, where also the lists contain eight names each. And in the *Nundinarius Pausilypensis* the markets at Rome fall on a Saturday, at Capua on Sunday (Degraasi 304); yet in *CIL* 4.8863 Rome's and Capua's fall on the same day. Further problems are perhaps not worth exploration even in a footnote;

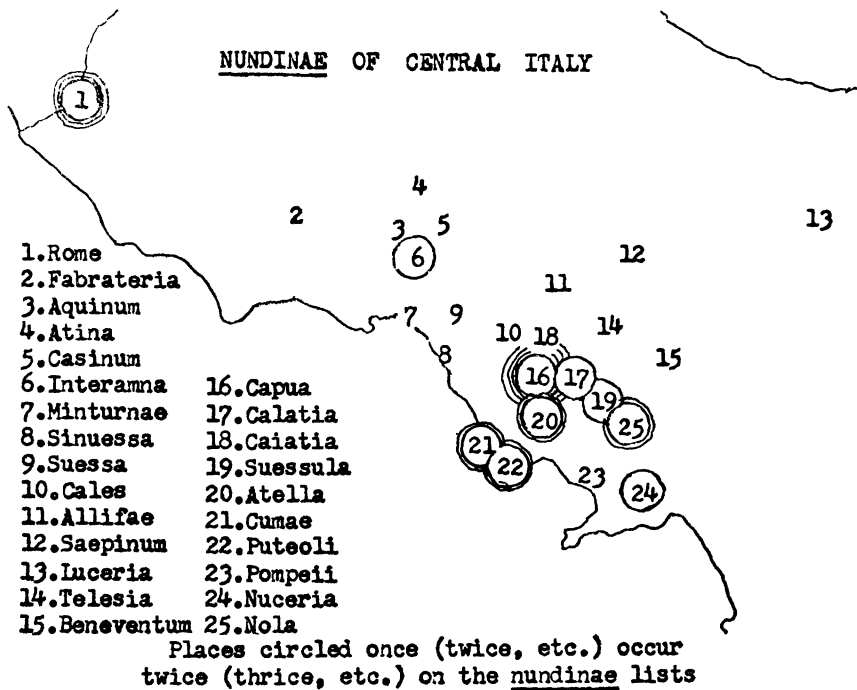


Figure 3

Though various explanations could be suggested, none rises above conjecture.

What is certain from the evidence, however, is the importance and completeness of the arrangements developed in this section of Italy for the exchange of goods between the rural population on the one hand, and urban and itinerant merchants on the other hand. Efficiency required that they be brought together in large numbers, whether once every seven, or eight, or fourteen, or thirty days, or less frequently still. To this end a variety of other purposes were adopted: assemblies for worship, spectacles and entertainments, elections, or assizes. We may assume throughout the empire such successful answers to the demands of commerce as can be seen so clearly on the map of Campania.

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but I must not leave the subject without expressing my thanks to the Naples Superintendent of Antiquities, Alfonso de Franciscis, for sending me a photograph of the circles-calendar, and to Agnes Michels for saving me from several errors.