

EUROPE'S DEMOGRAPHIC FUTURE: CLUES FROM GRECO-ROMAN FECUNDITY



SOME 150 YEARS AGO, AROUND THE TIME OF

Italy's Risorgimento, Italians were as fertile as their alluvial plains, averaging a healthy five children per couple. That bounty triggered food shortages and mass emigration. The youth who remained matured into the engineers and laborers who built the industrial triangle of Milan, Turin, and Genoa.

Those former champions of fertility have now become chronic abstainers. Italy's total fertility rate fell below two children per women in 1977. Today, couples give birth to barely more than one child.

Net of migration, Italy's primary and secondary school age population is set to shrink by more than 40% by 2050. Fortunately, this is not the first time a great civilization has faced falling fertility and population collapse. Mediterranean history offers a lesson.

Hidden in the ancient libraries of Byzantium are the remnants of a forty-volume opus written by the Greek historian Polybius around 150 BC. They chronicle the period when Rome displaced Greece as the dominant world power.

Greek influence had peaked in the Classical period, the age of the Parthenon and Alexander the Great. But a process was then set in motion that would weaken the Greek empire just as Rome's foundations were solidifying.

Polybius diagnosed the cause:

"In our own time the whole of Greece has been subject to a low birthrate and a general decrease of the population, owing to which cities have become deserted and the land has ceased to yield fruit, although there have neither been continuous wars nor epidemics."¹

He continued:

"... men had fallen into such a state of pretentiousness, avarice, and indolence that they did not wish to marry, or if they married [did not wish] to rear the children born to them, or at most, as a rule, but one or two of them ..."²

Civilizations thrive when cities gain critical mass. But prosperity breeds the very habits that undermine it: fewer babies, less economic activity, depleted armies, defenceless empires. →

→ In the 6th century BC, Greek explorers sailed to the northern tip of Africa where they encountered Silphium, an herb (now extinct) prized for its aphrodisiac and contraceptive properties. The plant was so valuable it was eventually worth its weight in silver.

Whether from philosophical introspection or hedonistic diversion, Greece depopulated. The Romans, with greater manpower, built the next empire ... until they also got their hands on the Silphium seed. During the era of Silphium abundance, Rome's birth rate collapsed despite rising prosperity, longer and healthier lives, and relative peace.

In 18 BC, the Roman Emperor Augustus responded by penalizing the unmarried and childless. When that failed, the Papia Poppaea law of AD 9 targeted celibacy and adultery. Neither worked.

Theories for Rome's demographic decay abound. Lead-infused wine was thought to have caused sterility and mortality.³ Others noted noble males' preference for only-child brides, hoping low fertility was hereditary. Natural deselection, if you wish. The most entertaining explanation is Stanford classicist A.M. Devine's contention that male reproductive damage results from repeated immersion in excessive heat. Pliny the Elder counted 170 bathhouses in Rome by 33 BC, and most Roman men bathed at least daily.

Whatever the reasons – hedonism, contraceptive herbs, lead poisoning, or excessive heat – fewer babies were born, troops were depleted, and Rome fell into decay. By the Middle Ages, the population had collapsed to 20,000, and much of the city was farmland.

European leaders, while benefiting from many classical traditions, would be wise not to sleepwalk into Greece and Rome's demographic traditions if they want to preserve Europe's greatness for generations to come.

Nor does Europe need to wait 1,600 years for the next renaissance. The answer to Italy – and Europe's – imminent depopulation is neither extra visas for foreign financiers nor flat taxes for the wealthy. Recruiting retirees won't rejuvenate the country.

Young students, on the other hand, integrate well. They learn local languages, fall in love, build careers and often stay. Bologna founded Europe's first university in 1088. Italy knows how to attract young minds; it has simply forgotten to try.

Italy leads Europe's demographic decline; what works here becomes the continent's template. Court the booming and talented populations of Africa, the Middle East, South America, and Asia. Set a target of reducing the median age from 49 to 37 within a generation.

Plant saplings, not oaks. ■

REFERENCES

¹ PATON (LOEB CLASSICAL LIBRARY): POLYBIUS, THE HISTORIES, VOL. VI: BOOKS 28-39, TRANS. W.R. PATON, REV. F.W. WALBANK AND CHRISTIAN HABICHT (CAMBRIDGE, MA: HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2012), 37.9.

² IBID

³ SC. GILFILLAN, ROMAN CULTURE AND DYSGENIC LEAD POISONING, MANKIND QUARTERLY, JAN 1, 1965.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DAVID MUNRO uncovers demographic trends that move financial markets, inform government policy, underpin real estate and healthcare, suggest business opportunities, and identify when a country is ripe for revolution.

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