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SHORT ARTICLES AND MEMORANDA.

TEMPLE BANKING IN ROME.

By BENJAMIN BROMBERG.

BANKING is one of the oldest institutions known to man. Its history is lost somewhere in remote antiquity. But this much is definitely known : banking was born in the temples consecrated to the gods and goddesses of mythology in the Mesopotamian area thousands of years before the rise of Christianity. This custom of sanctuary depositories spread in due time to the other ancient civilisations on the continent of Europe. And Rome was no exception.

In the first quarter of the eighteenth century Father Montfaucon reported on the authority of learned classical antiquarians that there were about a thousand sanctuaries in pagan Rome.¹ Whether all of these performed banking functions is unknown but we can at least state that the larger shrines were repositories, particularly those situated in and around the various Fora, which were the business, financial, legal, religious, cultural and social centres of classical Rome.²

Our knowledge of Roman temple banking differs from that of the other states of antiquity in that it rests wholly upon the literature of the ancient writers ;³ whereas we have a number of inscriptions pertaining to the sanctuary finance of the neighbouring countries. Furthermore, in most instances our information with respect to the individual shrine banks of Rome is usually found in but one ancient literary work, so that, e.g., if Herodian's *History of His Own Times* had not been preserved we should never have known of the greatness of the banking Temple of Peace, which was the magnificent focus of attraction in the Forum of Peace or Vespasian. Herodian tells us that ". . . it was made a public receptacle of treasures, and every one carried to it his most valuable effects, as to a depository of unquestioned security."⁴ Unfortunately, in the year A.D. 191 a fire broke out in this sanctuary so that ". . . many who just before were exceedingly wealthy, were now reduced to poverty. So that there was a universal lamentation, all in general bewailing the public misfortune ; and each in particular mourning his private loss."⁵

Other important banking shrines of ancient Rome were the temples

¹ *Antiquity Explained*, II (London, 1721), 69. Eustace states that there were 420 Roman temples. *A Classical Tour Through Italy*, II (London, 1841), 314. However, I am more inclined to believe a figure nearer to that of Montfaucon's than to the one mentioned by Eustace.

² Juvenal, x, 23-5, says that the commonest prayer in every temple is for riches so that a man may have a big money-box in the forum. See also Barten Holyday's *Juvenal* (Oxford, 1673), p. 195.

³ However, we have some archæological evidences of Roman temple banking in the form of subterranean treasure chambers.

⁴ Bk. I, 14, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*

of Castor, Mars Ultor, Vesta and Ops Consiva. Thus we read in Juvenal about “. . . money to be placed at watchful Castor, since Mars Ultor lost even his helmet, and could not take care of his own property.”¹ In this *Satire* Juvenal alludes to a robbery of the fane of Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus, whereby not only could not the god guard the private wealth entrusted to him, but his golden helmet was also plundered by unbelievers. The Roman citizens found a better sanctuary in Castor’s hands in the Roman Forum proper, for the poet talks of *vigilem Castora*, which refers to guards placed around the temple to protect the shrine from attempts at theft.² Furthermore, we learn from inscriptions that Castor’s temple was also used as a depository of the standard weights and measures of Rome, as well as an assay or testing office for coins,³ and hence the place of a Roman mint and the chief Roman money-changing centre⁴ in the purest sense of that term. Besides, the archæologists have discovered that the banking offices of Castor’s shrine were situated in underground vaults, the entrance to which was a bronze door.⁵

Concerning the Temple of Vesta we know that in addition to its being a place for the deposit of wills and treaties it was also a convenient sanctuary for funds. Plutarch tells us that not only Roman citizens but strangers as well deposited their money in the custody of the Vestal Virgins.⁶ But, unfortunately, the Roman triumvirate forcibly sequestered this money⁷ to the despair of the depositors.

With respect to the Temple of Ops, Cicero and Velleius Paterculus inform us that Cæsar deposited seven hundred *sestertia* in this shrine. This money was duly entered in the account books of this fane, but Mark Antony appropriated it to his own account in the same temple.⁸

The above named Roman banking sanctuaries are the only ones to which the classical authors refer. However, Plautus in his *Aulularia* makes one of his characters, Euclio, deposit or rather hide his pot of gold in the shrine of Public Faith,⁹ which temple is introduced solely for the

¹ xiv, 258ff.

² Tertullian declares that in his time Cæsar’s guards kept watch and ward for the security of the Roman temples. *The Apology in Behalf of the Christians*, ch. xxix. For it will be remembered that these shrines were practically governmental institutions. Besides patrolmen the ancient sanctuaries were protected by a strong sacred enclosure or temenos wall. This *enceinte* may still be seen in Rome protecting the buildings within the Forum of Nerva. See Piranesi, *Opere*, I (Roma, 1756), tav. xxx, Dubourg, *Views of the Remains of Ancient Buildings in Rome* (London, 1820), pl. 14.

³ Henry Middleton, *The Remains of Ancient Rome*, I (London, 1892), 279, Tenny Frank, “The First and Second Temples of Castor at Rome,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome (M.A.A.R.)*, V, 1925, 79-80.

⁴ Cicero, *Pro Quin.*, ch. iv.

⁵ Middleton, *op. cit.*, I, 267, Walter Amelung and Heinrich Holtzinger, *The Museums and Ruins of Rome* (London 1906), p. 48.

⁶ *Antony*, ch. xxi.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Cicero, *Second Philippic* ch. xxxvii, *Eighth Phil.*, ch. ix, Velleius Paterculus, Bk. II, ch. lx.

⁹ Act III, Sc. x, Act IV, Sc. ii.

purpose of a word-play on Faith. Also we learn from Cicero of deposits made by himself for Pompey, and by M. Rufus for P. Sestius in unnamed sanctuaries.¹ Furthermore, the act of depositing in temples sums in dispute as to the amount of interest to be paid automatically halted the accumulation of interest from the moment of deposit.²

In addition, there is some evidence that in early days the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus had been used as a state treasury (there being a secret hiding-place in the throne of the god)³ and during the later republic the state treasury was housed in the temple of Saturn, as the phrase *aerarium Saturni* shows.⁴ But we have no notices, epigraphic or literary, of private individuals placing their funds in these temples, although archæological evidences similar to those found in the sanctuary of Castor have been observed in these two shrines,⁵ as well as in the Roman fanes of Concord⁶ and Julius Cæsar,⁷ the Italian temples of Capitolium at Pompeii,⁸ at Signia,⁹ and at Ostia,¹⁰ the Roman African sanctuaries of Victory¹¹ and Capitolium¹² at Timgad (anciently Thamugadi) and the Capitolium shrine at Lambessa¹³ (formerly Lambæsis).

What sort of banks did these Roman temples conduct? It appears that contrary to the general practice in the other economies, the Roman sanctuaries did not lend any money at all.¹⁴ Not only was this condition true in the early times of Rome, but it was also characteristic of the later stages of Roman economic development. What is the reason for this policy? We know that the banker of Roman antiquity was not so highly respected as is the banker of to-day. In fact, the ancient financier was a rather highly despised member of the economic community by reason of his usurious practices. Hence the Roman priests could not lend any money without exposing themselves to the opprobrium attached to the banking class. It should also be pointed out that the Romans never considered their shrines as banking institutions. For they made usury synonymous with the mean employment of banking.

Inasmuch as the Roman shrines were not money-lending establishments how did they support themselves? In the first place, it should be stated

¹ *Ep. ad fam.*, V, 20. ² *Ep. ad Att.*, Bk. V, 21, Bk. VI, 1.

³ Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, Bk. XXXIII, ch. 15.

⁴ Macrobius, *Saturn.*, Bk. I, ch. viii, Tertullian, *op. cit.*, ch. x.

⁵ Middleton, *op. cit.*, I, 267, 355.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I., 336. ⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 279 n.

⁸ August Mau, *Pompeii* (New York, 1899), p. 67.

⁹ Agnes Kirsopp Lake, "The Archæological Evidence for the Tuscan Temple," *MAAR*, XII, 1935, 96.

¹⁰ Rodolfo Lanciani, "Bankers and Brokers in Ancient Rome," *The Monthly Review*, XIII (October 1903), 148. Also to be found in the *Journal of the Canadian Bankers' Association*, XI (January 1904), 159.

¹¹ Albert Ballu, *Les Ruines de Timgad* (Paris, 1897), p. 148, R. Gagnat, "La Résurrection d'une Ville Antique Timgad," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1898, 216, Stéphane Gsell, *Les Monuments Antiques de l'Algérie*, I (Paris, 1901), 140, E. Boeswillwald, *etc.*, *Timgad* (Paris, 1905), p. 50.

¹² Ballu, *op. cit.*, p. 200, Martial Douël, *L'Algérie Romaine* (Paris, 1930), p. 23.

¹³ Boeswillwald, *op. cit.*, p. 167. ¹⁴ Lanciani, *loc. cit.*, 148.

that they did not open their doors as financial organisations. Their *raison d'être* was the worship of the gods or goddesses to whom they were consecrated. Their banking depository functions were secondary in character. And as a hypothesis it may be suggested that they were perhaps undertaken gratuitously by the priests as a public service. As to whether or not this really was the practice there is not sufficient evidence to decide. Archæologists have never discussed this matter, because they do not regard such questions as falling within their realm, and economists have not dealt with it for want of an adequate knowledge of the classics.¹ Nevertheless, an archæologist with an economic leaning, R. Lanciani, has observed “. . . they (the Roman priests) must have exacted a percentage from the depositors in return for their guarantee.”² This charge for the safeguarding of treasure was also stated many centuries ago by a classical scholar. This is what he said: “Castor had a Temple in Rome where the great money-masters kept their iron-barred trunks, when they durst no longer trust Mars with them . . . some of this gold Castor had for guarding it, though not very much, as may be gathered by his coat of plate, beaten very thin.” (!)³

But there would be more justification for the opinion that a fee was levied on all deposits of money if the Roman shrines had been solely banks and not houses of religious worship. Not being dependent on revenues from banking charges, the Roman temples had to have other sources of income. They were supported by gifts from worshippers, governmental subventions, rents from the leasing of divine property, revenues from the sale of cattle, oracular fees if the god were an oracular deity, and kindred sources.

¹ Thus one banker-economist devotes but one sentence, erroneous at that, to the entire question of Roman sanctuary finance. He states: “There is some evidence that in the early days of the Republic the temples were used as in Greece for the safeguarding of treasures, but the early Romans were so frugal that this probably occurred only on very special occasions.” (!) H. H. Manchester, “Safety-Deposit Vaults in Ancient Greece and Rome,” *The Banker's Magazine*, XCVI (April 1918), 477.

² *Op. cit.*, 148.

³ Robert Stapylton, *Mores Hominum* (London, 1660), pp. 449-50.