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Just Laws and Restrained Insolences: The Rationale behind the Use of Waged Harvesting Gangs in the Roman World.

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One of the most pressing problems for pre-industrial farming was the increase of necessary labour inputs in the harvest season compared to the rest of the year. In the Roman world, the employment of seasonal wage labour was one of the strategies used to cope with this seasonal increase in labour demand. Older scholarship has had a tendency to downplay ancient rural wage labour, and thus the role of the waged harvesting gang in Roman agriculture. However, significant evidence from the Roman period points towards waged harvest labour being organized in gangs led by a foreman. Although some recent scholarship has already tried to characterize these gangs and have compared them to more modern organizations of wage labour, the structural reasons that gave rise to such organization in the Roman world have so far been unexplored. Therefore, in this paper, I intend to explore the legal, economic, and logistical reasons for the organization of Roman waged harvest labour in contractor-led gangs, considering what benefits and advantages the different parties derived from such organization. In particular, emphasis shall be placed on the adjudication of legal liability, the displacement of risks, and the need for close supervision.