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## VII.2 On sumptuary laws in a democracy

- The Spirit of Law - Book VII. Consequences of the different principles of the three governments with respect to sumptuary laws, to luxury, and to the condition of women -

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## VII.2 On sumptuary laws in a democracy

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We have said that in republics, where the wealth is equally shared, there can be no luxury ; and as this equality of distribution constitutes the excellence of a republic, it follows that the less luxury there is in a republic, the more it approaches perfection. There was no luxury among the early Romans ; there was none among the Lacedæmonians ; and in republics where equality is not utterly lost, the spirit of commerce, work and virtue make it so that everyone can and desires to live on his own assets, and consequently there is little luxury.

The laws for a new division of the fields so insistently demanded in some republics were by nature salutary. They are dangerous only as a sudden action. By taking wealth away from some all at once, and similarly increasing that of the others, they cause a revolution in every family, and must produce a general one in the state.

As luxury establishes itself in a republic, the mind turns toward one's private interest. To persons who require nothing but necessities, the only things left to desire are the country's glory and one's own. But a soul corrupted by luxury has many other desires. Soon it becomes the enemy of the laws that shackle it. The luxury which the garrison of Rhegium began to know led them to slaughter the inhabitants.

As soon as the Romans were corrupted, their desires became immense. This we can gauge by the price they put on things. A pitcher of Falernian wine [1] sold for one hundred Roman denari ; a barrel of salted meat from Pontus cost four hundred ; a good cook four talents ; young boys were priceless. When in the general impetuosity everyone was motivated to sensuality, what became of virtue ? [2]

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[1] Fragment of the 36th book of Diodorus, related by Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *Extracts of Virtues and Vices* [anthology of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, in fact book 33, [p. 392](#)].

[2] *Cum maximus omnium impetus ad luxuriam esset, ibid.*