

# From the Alphabet to Public Toilets: Achievements in Ancient Rome

Ancient Rome began as a small community and grew into a grand empire from Great Britain to the Middle East. Pax Romana (Roman Peace) was its golden age of over two hundred years. Rome learned from the people they conquered, including the Etruscans and Greeks. They were practical people, inventing the arch and concrete. They had public baths and toilets. Our alphabet and language arose thanks to them. Christianity began in the Roman Empire. Roman law inspired our legal system. We still read Roman literature and history.

## Ancient Rome

Legend holds that two brothers established Ancient Rome in 753 BCE after surviving an assassination attempt with the help of a she-wolf. Rome expanded over the centuries to become a magnificent empire spanning from Spain to the outskirts of Persia (Iran).

## Pax Romana

The Roman Empire began as a small community around the city of Rome.

The Roman military was a fundamental part of their successful expansion. The highly skilled and organized Roman legions conquered lands from Great Britain to Persia (Iran).

Pax Romana (27 BCE - 180 CE) was the height of their power. This extended "Roman Peace" was a period of thriving trade and commerce. The arts and sciences flourished. Greco-Roman classical civilization reached everywhere throughout the Mediterranean.

## Credit Where Credit Is Due

Rome knew a good thing when they saw it. They learned and adapted from other cultures.

The Etruscans were an earlier regional power in Italy, which the Romans eventually conquered. They influenced Roman clothing, engineering techniques, food, and more.

Ancient Greeks also inspired Roman culture, including their twelve leading gods and goddesses.

Romans were open to a variety of religious faiths from various cultures. You did not have to believe in any specific religion as long as you took an oath supporting the emperor.

The Roman Empire eventually adopted Christianity as the official faith. Christianity started in Roman-controlled Palestine. It spread throughout the Roman Empire, often thanks to the smoothly operating trade routes found in the Roman Empire. Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and used it to help unite the empire.

## Architecture and Engineering

The Romans were great at public works projects. They constructed military roads (an early national highway system), aqueducts, and marble buildings.

They built arches and domes. Arches supported aqueducts, bridges, and buildings. Some Roman roads were in use after a thousand years. They invented and used concrete.

Aqueducts brought water from the hills to the cities. Different aqueducts fed water to Roman homes, bathhouses, and fountains. Sewers removed the waste.

The Roman Colosseum is an arena sitting sixty thousand people. It had a removable awning to protect people from the sun. It had a system of ropes and pulleys bringing up animals from below. Sometimes, the event planners flooded the arena to have mock naval battles.

Romans drained marshland, irrigated their fields, and organized crops to increase yields.

### **Julian Calendar**

We have the Romans to thank for our calendar from January (Janus was the god of beginnings) to December (the tenth month). Their calendar began in March and ended in February.

Julius Caesar reformed the calendar. The official calendar had become out of step with the actual calendar based on natural events. The Julian Calendar had twelve months with thirty or thirty-one days (except for February). There are 365 days, except for leap years.

The calculations were about eleven minutes off, which eventually led to problems. We now use the Gregorian Calendar, which got things back on track.

### **Language and Literature**

Latin, the Roman language, is the root of Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese). We use the Latin alphabet. We also use Roman numerals for some purposes.

Romans wrote diverse types of literature, including odes (poems), satires (humorous accounts), and mythical tales about Roman history. Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* about a survivor of the Trojan War whose descendants founded Rome. Ovid wrote about the creation of the world and humans.

Seneca wrote philosophy. Latin students still read Julius Caesar's military autobiography. He came, he saw, he conquered! Cicero was a famous orator and writer.

### **Roman Law**

Ancient Rome was a republic before becoming an empire. People voted for their leaders.

The Romans developed bodies of law on business matters, family relationships, individual rights, and international affairs. Roman citizens were equal before the law and had fundamental rights

(A famous expression of the rights of Roman citizenship is found in the Christian Bible. The Apostle Paul proclaims that he is a Roman citizen and insists on an audience with the emperor.)

Roman law influenced the legal systems of Western Europe and the United States.

## **Science and Technology**

Romans were excellent at popular mechanics.

They were practical scientists specializing in sanitation, public health, and engineering. They had running water and public toilets. Romans used water power for mines and mills.

Galen was a physician who wrote medical textbooks read into the Middle Ages. He performed experiments involving the nervous and circulatory systems.

Ptolemy was an astronomer. Ptolemy's theory that the earth is the center of the universe was incorrect. Nonetheless, he was a skilled observer of the cosmos and a mathematician. Ptolemy carefully mapped over one thousand stars. He pioneered trigonometry principles.

The Greeks provided an idealized version when they made statues of people. Romans provided a more accurate vision, warts and all. If a man had a big nose, so did his statue!

## **QUESTIONS**

1. How did the adoption of various elements from conquered cultures like the Etruscans and Greeks contribute to the development and success of the Roman Empire?
2. In what ways did the Pax Romana period influence the cultural, scientific, and economic development of the Roman Empire?
3. Analyze how the Roman military's structure and strategies were pivotal in expanding the Empire's territories from Great Britain to Persia.
4. Discuss the impact of Roman architecture and engineering innovations, such as the development of concrete and aqueducts, on modern engineering and architecture.
5. How did the Roman Empire's religious tolerance and eventual adoption of Christianity as the official faith affect its political and cultural landscape?
6. Examine the role of Latin, Roman literature, and law in shaping the foundations of Western European and American societies.
7. What were the long-term impacts of Roman scientific advancements and public health initiatives on later civilizations?
8. Analyze the significance of the Julian Calendar reform by Julius Caesar and its influence on the modern calendar system.