

Society in Ancient Rome

Ancient Rome existed for over a thousand years. The Roman Empire spanned from Spain to the Middle East. The family, led by the father, was the center of Roman society. Women were citizens but did not have a role in government life. Cities were large and dirty. The Forum was the public square. Patricians were wealthy landowners. Plebians were the common folk. Many people were slaves. Christianity became the official religion in the 4th Century. Roman culture was practical-minded and heavily influenced by the Greeks.

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).

Its golden age (Pax Romana) was from around 30 BC-180 CE. Rome fell in 476 CE. Society changes over a thousand years. Nonetheless, we can examine the basics of Ancient Roman society to examine what life in Roman times would be like. Let's check it out.

Family Life

Families were the basic unit of Roman society. Adoption was a means to join a family. Julius Caesar adopted Octavius (Augustus) as his heir.

A Roman household included parents and their children, married children, other relatives, and enslaved servants. The father (paterfamilias) was the head of the family. Your status passed on through your father. Fathers punished children and arranged marriages.

Roman children had many toys. They played with balls, dolls, hoops, and jacks. Telling stories was also a popular family activity. Families also went to see chariot races and other amusements.

Wealthy families sent their sons to school. Sometimes, a father hired a tutor. Girls did not go to school. They learned domestic tasks from their mother.

When a boy was between 14 and 16, they became a man. They disposed of their toys. Men wore a toga, a loose-fitting robe, which symbolized being a Roman male citizen. Young men became soldiers, joined the family business, or worked in the government.

Women in Rome

Women could be Roman citizens. Nonetheless, they had an unequal place in society. They could not work in government. Some women served as priests and had religious duties.

A woman's place depended on the wealth and influence of her father and husband. A wealthy woman could have a lot of influence behind the scenes.

Women could own land, run businesses, and sell property. They could divorce.

Women ran the household and helped their families with shops and other businesses. In public places, they sat separately from men. One place women could socialize with each other was in Roman bathhouses. They also shopped, visited friends, and worshipped in temples.

Patricians and Plebeians

Patricians were wealthy landowning nobles. They served in the Roman Senate.

They lived in large homes, often made of brick, with tile floors with beautiful designs. Patricians were wealthy and could afford lavish art and sculptures. They owned slaves.

Plebeians were farmers, craftsmen, laborers, and soldiers. Plebeians, like patricians, obtained their status at birth. Most Romans were plebeians.

A third of Romans were slaves. They were not citizens. Slaves sometimes were educated, including being teachers. Slaves were of no particular race or ethnicity.

Over time, the legal differences between plebeians and patricians diminished.

Public Life

There were many large cities in Ancient Rome. The city of Rome had over one million people.

Romans were excellent at public planning, including aqueducts (carrying water), arches, bridges, and roads. The city center was the Forum. The Forum was a marketplace and public square. Temple and public buildings surrounded it.

Wealthy Romans lived in comfortable homes. They also had countryside estates called villas. Most Romans in rural areas were small farmers.

Most city dwellers lived in crowded, noisy homes. Roman apartments could be six stories high. The homes were usually wood and stone. People threw their garbage out in the street.

The Roman government provided "bread and circuses" or free grain and entertainment. Romans watched chariot races and gladiator contests. Most gladiators were enslaved people or criminals. They were cheered on like sports heroes are today.

An amphitheater was Ancient Rome's answer to modern-day sports and music arenas. There was an open space for performances with seating surrounding it. The largest Roman amphitheater was the Roman Colosseum in Rome. It was just east of the Roman Forum.

Religious Life

Ancient Romans believed in many gods (polytheism). We now call them "pagans," which was a dismissive term used by those who believe in one God.

People believed in many supernatural beings found in rivers, watching over homes, and everywhere else. Jupiter was the king of the gods.

There was a civic and personal duty to worship the gods. Public rituals, including properly honoring the emperor, often involved government officials.

Christianity first arose in the First Century. It became the official religion of Rome in the 4th Century. Before then, there were periods when the government persecuted Christians.

Roman Culture

Ancient Greece greatly influenced Roman culture. Romans copied many Greek ideas. The twelve leading gods of Rome overlap the twelve gods of the Greeks.

Romans were more practical than the Greeks. The Greeks loved to talk about ideas. Romans liked ideas that had day-to-day benefits.

Roman myths and legends often focused on heroes involved in their history. Virgil wrote *Aeneid* to show how a survivor of the Trojan War became the founder of the city that began Rome.

Roman literature included odes (poems), satire (poking fun), and histories. Other writers dealt with practical subjects, including Galen's work on human anatomy and medicine.

We continue to read some of these books today. Julius Caesar's accounts of his military exploits continue to be a means for students to learn Latin, the language of the Romans.

QUESTIONS

How did the structure of the Roman family, with the father as the head, reflect and influence the broader societal norms and power structures in Ancient Rome?

In what ways did the roles and rights of women in Roman society differ from those of men, and how did these roles vary depending on social status?

How did the distinction between patricians and plebeians shape the social and economic landscape of Ancient Rome, and how did this dynamic evolve over time?

Analyze the impact of Roman public planning, such as the construction of aqueducts, bridges, and roads, on the daily life and health of city dwellers in Ancient Rome.

Discuss the role of entertainment, like chariot races and gladiator contests, in Roman society and its significance in maintaining public order.

How did the transition from polytheism to Christianity as the official religion in the 4th Century influence Roman society and government?

In what ways did Ancient Greek culture influence Roman culture, particularly in the realms of mythology, literature, and religious practices?

Evaluate the practical orientation of Roman culture and its contributions to literature, science, and technology, compared to the more philosophical approach of the Greeks.

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