

# Characteristics of the Roman World

## Timeline

There are three distinct time frames in the Roman era, which ran from 753 B.C. to about A.D. 476, or more than 1,000 years. Some dates for the beginning and ending of periods are controversial among historians, but most experts agree with the approximations.

The **first period**, from 753 B.C. to 509 B.C., is when Rome was founded. Romans believed that the ideal citizen was a simple man who thought about Rome before his personal interests. Their government had a senate and an assembly but no executive branch. The senate (the rich and noble) and the assembly (the common people) did not have much power until the second period of Rome. There was no middle class, only very rich and very poor people.

The **second period** goes from 509 B.C., or the beginning of the Roman Republic, to 31 B.C. In this era, the Romans developed a constitution that outlined the legal rights of the citizens of Rome. Only free male citizens were allowed to vote.

The Romans developed a democratic government that consisted of three groups. The Assembly of Centuries represented the wealthy people who governed the military. The Assembly of Tribes served as the voice of the common people but had very little power. Members of the powerful Patrician group were elected for life terms. They oversaw foreign matters, made laws and selected various officials.

The **third period** was called the Imperial Period. This is the most familiar period of Roman history. Free Roman citizens enjoyed the good life. Under Augustus Caesar, Rome captured and controlled France, Spain, Greece, Asia Minor, Palestine, North Africa and Great Britain. There also were a lot of slaves whose lives were far different from those of the free Roman citizens.

Christianity was born and became a major force in the life of the citizens. The end of the Roman Empire occurred in 476. This is when a German, Odoacer, removed the last ruling emperor from Rome. There are many different theories about why the Roman Empire collapsed. A decline in morals, public corruption, unemployment, inflation, urban decay and increased military spending are a few of the theories cited.

## The People

About 250,000 people lived in the city of Rome at this time. Roman society was built around status. There were few wealthy people, but they owned one-third of the property. They had lavish homes with several rooms and a courtyard. Public buildings took up about one-fourth of the city. This means that most of the people lived in less than half of the city. They lived in multistoried apartment buildings. There was no central plumbing so the people had to go to communal wells. The chamber pot, which was the Romans' alternative to a bathroom, often was emptied out the window. (Look out below!) Buildings were made with wood, so fires were a problem.

## The Government

The "patron" system was widely used. This means that people were selected for government positions because they were friends of someone in authority. Because of this, people worked to make friends. They believed that when people were linked together, there would be more stability in the community. In the third period (the Imperial Period), the government provided bread, oil and wine to the people at no charge. In just one year, the 250,000 inhabitants of Rome used 6 million sacks of grain free of charge.

## The Family

The father was the head of the household and had power over his wife and children. He could sell his children into slavery or even kill them if he chose. He could kill his wife if she was unfaithful. Most marriages were arranged, but the children did have some say in the choice. The legal age for marriage of a woman was 12.

Wives were not segregated, but rather were considered good company and the head of the household. They shopped and visited. They could control and inherit property.

### **Education**

In the early years, there was no public education. Children learned about farming, training for war and more in their homes. In the later years of the empire, the Romans were influenced by the Greeks and had Greek tutors teach the wealthy children about classic literature and art. Later, schools were established with Greek teachers for the children of wealthy parents. Literature, reasoning, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music were taught. Books were very treasured items. Remember that there were no printing presses, so books had to be copied by hand. Some households had slaves called “copyists” who did this work.

### **Slavery**

Slaves were generally acquired during warfare, but sometimes fathers would sell their children into slavery. The more slaves that a rich person had, the greater the status that was given to him. Slaves worked as footmen, messengers, accountants, tutors, secretaries, carpenters, plumbers, cleaners, goldsmiths, hairdressers, etc. They could be bought, given as gifts or inherited, and were bound to their master. The master decided how a slave would live. Some masters were kind and others made the lives of their slaves miserable.

### **Medicine**

The Romans followed the medical care of the Greeks. Most cures were herbal in nature and were passed down through the generations. Religion also played a part in the healing treatments. People would go to the temple, apply or smell herbs and pay the temple god a fee. In the later years Romans also had doctors. They didn't pay taxes and often made people more sick with their “cures.”

### **Entertainment**

During the Imperial Period (the third period), not only did the government of Rome provide bread for the people, it also provided entertainment. Circuses and theater were part of the entertainment, but these were far overshadowed by “blood sports.” Poor and rich alike watched heavily armed men kill thousands of animals for sport. The Circus Maximus was built and the sport was broadened to include animals fighting each other, male and female criminals put into the ring with starving animals and armed men fighting animals.

Gladiators also became part of the entertainment. The gladiators were usually criminals or slaves who were schooled in the art of killing. There were also boxing matches where boxers wore leather gloves with metal studs. Sometimes artificial lakes were formed and there were mock “sea” battles. Finally, chariot races were held and there was much betting on the outcome of the races.

Roman chariot racing fans resembled modern U.S. sport or European soccer fans. They wore the colors of their favorite racers, identified with their favorite teams and brawled with or even killed opposing fans.