

# Early Influences on Roman Culture

Three main groups of people settled on or near the Italian peninsula and influenced Roman civilization. The Latins settled west of the Apennine Mountains and south of the Tiber River around 1000 B.C.E. While there were many advantages to their location near the river, frequent flooding also created problems. The Latin's' settlements were small villages built on the "Seven Hills of Rome". These settlements were known as Latium. The people were farmers and raised livestock. They spoke their own language which became known as Latin. Eventually groups of these people united and formed the city of Rome. Latin became its official language.

## **The Etruscans**

About 400 years later, another group of people, the Etruscans, settled west of the Apennines just north of the Tiber River. Archaeologists believe that these people came from the eastern Mediterranean region known as Asia Minor (present day Turkey). By 600 B.C.E., the Etruscans ruled much of northern and central Italy, including the town of Rome. The Etruscans were excellent builders and engineers. Two important structures the Romans adapted from the Etruscans were the arch and the cuniculus.

The Etruscan arch rested on two pillars that supported a half circle of wedge-shaped stones. The keystone, or center stone, held the other stones in place. A cuniculus was a long underground trench. Vertical shafts connected it to the ground above. Etruscans used these trenches to irrigate land, drain swamps, and to carry water to their cities. The Romans adapted both of these structures and in time became better engineers than the Etruscans. They used arches to build bridges, stadiums, and aqueducts to carry water over long distances. They continued the use of the cuniculus to help with irrigation, drainage, and bringing water to the city.

The Etruscans also had two bloody sporting events that were adapted by the Romans. The Etruscan customs of slave fighting and chariot races became very popular in Rome. Slave fighting involved two slaves of a dead master fighting to the death with swords and small shields. After being congratulated, the winner was executed. During chariot races, the drivers were strapped to the chariots. If a chariot overturned, a driver could be dragged or trampled to death. In Rome, thousands of slaves died fighting as gladiators. These professionally trained fighters battled each other and wild animals. Romans also flocked to see charioteers risk their lives racing four-horse teams.

## **The Greeks**

The Greeks were also a major influence on Roman culture. The Romans learned about Greek culture when Greek colonists established towns in southern Italy and the island of Sicily. They also learned about Greek ways from trading and the many Greeks who came to Rome.

Greek architecture was one important influence on the Romans. The Greeks built marble temples as homes for their gods. Their temples had elaborate columns that added to their beauty. The Romans used Greek designs in their own public buildings. In time, Romans learned to use concrete to make even larger buildings, such as the Pantheon in Rome. They also used concrete to build huge stadiums like the Colosseum and Circus Maximus. These stadiums were used for gladiator fights and chariot races.

The Greek alphabet was used and changed by the Etruscans. The Romans borrowed and altered the Etruscan alphabet. Therefore, the Roman alphabet has its roots from the Greek alphabet. Like the Greeks, the Romans wrote in all capital letters. Like the Greeks, the Romans carved important documents, like laws and treaties, in walls and columns for all to see. Roman poets and writers were inspired by Greek poetry and myths.

Romans admired Greek pottery and art. Roman artists imitated the techniques used by Greek potters and artists. Soon, they developed their own style. While Greek artists tried to show an ideal, or perfect, human being or god, Roman artists made more realistic life-like works of art. The Greek influence on Roman painting and sculpture was so great that historians speak of “Greco-Roman art”. This is art that has the characteristics of Roman culture but with a strong Greek influence.

While Roman religion shows influences of many groups, it was the Greek religion that especially influenced Roman ideas about the gods. The Greeks worshipped a number of gods and goddesses and performed rituals and sacrifices to gain the gods’ favor. The Romans also sought the favor of the gods. The Romans adapted many of the Greek gods as their own, but gave them Roman names. For instance, the Greek god Zeus became Jupiter in Rome. Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, became Venus. The Romans were much less interested in telling stories about their gods than were the Greeks. The Romans were more concerned with performing exactly the right ritual to gain a god’s favor.