

Daily Life in Ancient Rome: Law and Order

In the days of the republic, the Senate and the assemblies were important sources of law. In the empire, the ultimate source of law was the emperor: “Whatever pleases the emperor is the law.”

Romans, however, honored their old traditions. The Senate continued to meet, and senators had high status in society. They even had their own styles of clothing like special rings, pins, or togas. Important senators had their own bodyguards who carried fasces, bundles of sticks with an ax in the center which were symbols of the government’s right to use physical punishment on lawbreakers.

Roman laws were strict, but crime was common in Rome. The most frequent crimes were stealing, assault, and murder. Roman police kept an eye on richer neighborhoods but rarely patrolled the poorer sections of the city. Some streets were so dangerous that they were closed at night.

Romans tried to protect themselves against crime. Rich men tried to hide their wealth by wearing old, dirty togas when they traveled at night. Women and children in rich families were told never to go outdoors alone, even during the day.

Any Roman, including the poor, could accuse someone of a crime. A jury of citizens decided the case. Accused persons sometimes tried to win the jury’s sympathy by wearing rags or dirty clothes to court or have their wives and children sob in front of the jury.

Romans believed that one law should apply to all citizens. Still, Roman law was not applied equally. The poor faced harsher punishments than the rich, sometimes torture.



Roman lawyers representing both the accused and the accuser.

Daily Life in Ancient Rome: Religion

Religion was very important to the Romans who adopted many Greek gods, as well as gods from other cultures to create their own group of Roman gods.

Romans wanted to please their gods because they believed that the gods controlled their daily lives. At Rome’s many temples and shrines, people made offerings and promises to the gods. They often left gifts of food such as honey cakes and fruit. They also sacrificed animals, including bulls, sheep, and oxen.

When someone was sick or injured, Romans would leave a small offering at a temple in the shape of the hurt part of the body. For instance, they might leave a clay foot to remind the god which part of the body to cure.

Special festivals and holy days were held throughout the year to honor the gods. But religion was also a part of daily life. Each home had an altar where the family worshiped its own household gods and spirits. The family hearth, or fireplace, was sacred to the goddess Vesta. During the main meal of the day, the family threw a small cake into the fire as an offering to Vesta.

In time, the Romans came to honor their emperors as gods. One emperor, Caligula (Ca-lig-you-luh) had a temple built to house a statue of himself made of gold. Every day the statue was dressed in the type of clothes that Caligula was wearing that day.

As the empire grew, foreigners brought new gods and forms of worship to Rome. The Romans welcomed these new religions as long as they didn’t encourage disloyalty to the emperor.



Bulls were often offered as a sacrifice to Mars, the war god.

Daily Life in Ancient Rome: Family Life

Family life in Rome was ruled by the *paterfamilias*, or “father of the family.” A Roman father’s word was law in his own home. Even his grown sons and daughters had to obey him.

Roman men were expected to provide for the family. In richer families, husbands often held well-paid political positions. In poor families, both husbands and wives often had to work.

Wealthy Roman women ran their households and bought and trained the family’s slaves. Many wanted money of their own and were active in business. Often they bought and sold property.

Roman babies, usually born at home, were kept only when strong and healthy. If the father didn’t approve of a newborn, it was left outside to die. Babies who were kept were named in a ceremony at nine days old. A good-luck charm called a *bulla* was placed around the baby’s neck. Children wore their bullas throughout childhood.

Between the ages of 14 and 18, a Roman boy celebrated becoming a man. In a special ceremony, he offered his *bulla*, along with his

childhood toys, and clothes, to the gods.

Roman girls did not have a ceremony to celebrate the end of childhood. They became adults when they were married, usually between the ages of 12 and 18.

Weddings were held at a temple. The bride wore a white toga with a long veil. The groom also wore a white toga, along with leather shoes that he had shined with animal fat. But the new husband did not become a *paterfamilias* until his own father died.



For young men and women in Rome, getting married was a step into adulthood.

Daily Life in Ancient Rome: Food and Drink

What Romans cooked and ate depended on whether they were rich or poor. Only the rich had kitchens in their homes. The poor cooked on small grills and depended on “fast food” places called *thermopolia*, where people could buy hot and cold foods that were ready to go. Even the rich often bought their daytime meals at *thermopolia* because the service was fast and convenient.

The main foods in ancient Rome were bread, beans, spices, a few vegetables, cheese, and meats. Favorite drinks included plain water, hot water with herbs and honey, and wine.

For breakfast, Romans usually ate a piece of bread and a bowl of beans or porridge (like oatmeal). Lunch might include a small bit of cheese and bread, and perhaps some olives or celery.

For dinner, poor Romans might have chunks of fish along with some asparagus and a fig for dessert. Wealthy Romans ate much fancier dinners. Besides the main part of the meal, they had special appetizers. Some favorites were mice cooked in honey, roasted parrots stuffed with dates, salted jellyfish, and snails dipped in milk.

Roman markets offered many choices to those who could afford them. Wealthy Roman women or their slaves shopped for the perfect foods for fancy dinner parties. Merchants often kept playful monkeys or colorful birds on display to attract customers. Their shelves were packed with fruits, live rabbits, chickens, geese, baskets of snails, and cuts of meat. Large clay jars were filled with salty fish sauce the

Romans like to pour over the main dish at dinner.



In Rome’s bustling marketplace, merchants sold many kinds of food and other goods.

Daily Life in Ancient Rome: Housing

Housing was very different in Rome for the rich and poor. The spacious, airy homes of the rich stood side by side with the small, dark apartments that housed the poor.

Wealthy Romans lived in grand houses built of stone and marble. The walls were thick to keep out the noise of the city. Inside the front door was a hall called an *atrium* where the family received guests. An indoor pool helped to keep the atrium cool. An opening in the roof let in plenty of light.

Beyond the atrium there were many rooms for the family and guests, the fanciest was the dining room. Its walls were covered in murals and mosaics made of tiles. Graceful statues stood in the corners. Some dining rooms had beautiful fountains in the center to provide guests with cool water.

During dinner parties, guests lay on couches and ate delicious meals prepared by slaves. While they ate, they listened to music played by slaves on flutes and stringed instruments like the lyre and the lute.

Many of the poor crowded into tall apartment buildings while others lived in small apartments above the shops where they worked. Without proper kitchens, the poor cooked their meals on small portable grills, which filled the room with smoke. The apartments were cramped,

noisy, and dirty which allowed sickness to spread rapidly. Fire was another danger. Many of the buildings were made of wood and the cooking grills caught fire easily. In 64a.d., a disastrous fire broke out that burned down much of the city.



The atrium of a wealthy Roman's home.

Daily Life in Ancient Rome: Education

If you had grown up in ancient Rome, your schooling would have depended on the type of family you were from. Many poor children in Rome were sent to work instead of school. They learned trades like leatherworking and metalworking to help earn money for their families.

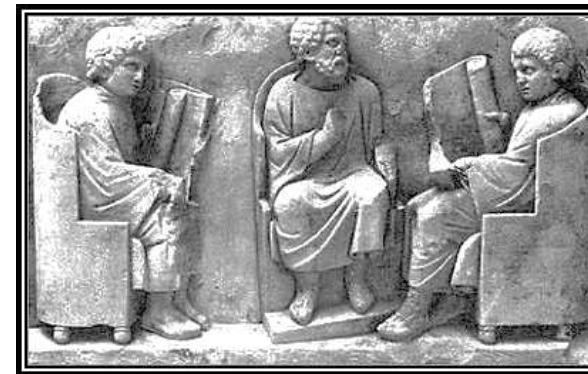
In wealthier families, boys and girls were tutored by their fathers, sometimes by slaves. At six or seven they went off to school. Classes were held in public buildings and private homes. Many of the tutors were educated Greek slaves.

A typical school day in Rome began very early in the morning. Students walked through crowded streets, carrying their supplies in a leather shoulder bag. On the way, they stopped at local breakfast bars where they bought beans, nuts, and freshly baked bread to munch on while they walked to class.

Inside the schoolroom, students sat on small stools around the tutor. They used a pointed pen called a **stylus** to copy down lessons on small wooden boards covered with wax. When the lesson was over, they rubbed out the writing with the flat end of the stylus so they could use the board over again. The school day lasted until two or three o'clock in the afternoon.

Roman students learned Latin, Greek, math, science, literature, music, and public speaking. Girls were trained to become dentists, real estate agents, tutors, or midwives (helps with childbirth). Boys typically became soldiers, doctors, politicians, or lawyers.

Students stayed in school until age 12 or 13. Boys from wealthy families often continued their studies until they were 16.



Children from wealthier Roman families were taught by tutors

Daily Life in Ancient Rome: Recreation

There were many forms of recreation in Rome. Wealthy Romans had lots of leisure time because slaves did so much of the work. The rich enjoyed going to plays in public theaters and musical performances in one another's homes.

Both rich and poor often relaxed at Rome's public baths. There they could bathe, swim, exercise, and enjoy a steam bath or a massage. Besides places to bathe and swim, the baths had gardens, libraries, shops, and art galleries and were more like a modern spa.

Roman emperors made sure to give the poor "bread and circuses" – food and entertainment to keep them busy and happy. Besides the many festivals throughout the year, rich and poor alike flocked to two spectacles: gladiator games and chariot races.

Gladiator games were held in large public arenas like the Colosseum. Both men and women were gladiators. Usually they were slaves or prisoners of war. The crowd shouted as the gladiators fought each other and wild animals to the death. Many thousands of gladiator sided bloody and painful deaths for the entertainment of spectators.

The Roman's favorite gather place was the Circus Maximus, a huge racetrack with room for 200,000 spectators. Wealthy citizens sat on plush cushions close to the track with shades protecting them from the sun. The poor sat on wooden benches high above the track.



At the Circus Maximus, dangerous chariot races thrilled thousands of spectators.

Men and women sat in separate sections at the Colosseum, but at the Circus Maximus they could sit together. A Roman poet said the Circus Maximus was the best place to meet a new boyfriend or girlfriend because you never knew who would sit next to you.

Daily Life in Ancient Rome: Country Life

Rome was only one of many cities scattered throughout the Roman Empire. 90% of the empire's people lived in the country. There, too, rich and poor had very different lives. Wealthy Romans often owned country estates with large homes called **villas**. A country estate was a place for Romans to invest their money in crops and livestock. And the villa was a pleasant place to relax in the summer's heat.

When they went to the country, wealthy estate owners checked up on how their farms were being managed. But they had plenty of time left over for reading and writing as well as hunting, picnicking, and taking long walks in the fresh air.

The empire's farms provided much of the food for Rome and other cities. They produced grain for bread, grapes for wine, and olives for oil. Goats and sheep provided cheese, and their skins and wool were used to make clothing. Cattle and pigs were raised for their meat. Farmers also kept bees for making honey, the sweetener used by the Romans. Slaves did much of the actual work of farming and were often treated cruelly by the overseers (supervisors).

Many country folk were not slaves, but their lives were very hard all the time. They lived in huts and worked their own small farms, trying to earn enough to live. Or they labored on the great estates, tending the animals, helping with the crops, or working as servants. In the first century A.D., Saint Paul, a Christian writer, summed up the lives of the empire's poor. He wrote, "He who does not work shall not eat."



At a Roman villa, lush landscaping surrounded a large house.