Main Idea

Power and Authority

The Romans developed many ideas and institutions that became fundamental to Western civilization.

Why It Matters Now

Evidence of Roman culture is found throughout Europe and North America and in Asia and Africa.

Terms & Names

- Greco-Roman culture
- Virgil
- Tacitus
- Pompeii
- Aqueduct

Setting the Stage

Romans borrowed and adapted cultural elements freely, especially from the Greek and Hellenistic cultures. However, the Romans created a great civilization in their own right, whose art and architecture, language and literature, engineering, and law became its legacy to the world.

The Legacy of Greco-Roman Civilization

Under the Roman Empire, hundreds of territories were knitted into a single state. Each Roman province and city was governed in the same way. The Romans were proud of their unique ability to rule, but they acknowledged Greek leadership in the fields of art, architecture, literature, and philosophy.

By the second century B.C., Romans had conquered Greece and had come to greatly admire Greek culture. Educated Romans learned the Greek language. As Horace, a Roman poet, said, “Greece, once overcome, overcame her wild conqueror.” The mixing of elements of Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman culture produced a new culture, called Greco-Roman culture. This is also often called classical civilization.

Roman artists, philosophers, and writers did not merely copy their Greek and Hellenistic models. They adapted them for their own purposes and created a style of their own. Roman art and literature came to convey the Roman ideals of strength, permanence, and solidity.

Roman Fine Arts

Romans learned the art of sculpture from the Greeks. However, while the Greeks were known for the beauty and idealization of their sculpture, Roman sculptors created realistic portraits in stone. Much Roman art was practical in purpose, intended for public education.

The reign of Augustus was a period of great artistic achievement. At that time the Romans further developed a type of sculpture called bas-relief. In bas-relief, or low-relief, images project from a flat background. Roman sculptors used bas-relief to tell stories and to represent crowds of people, soldiers in battle, and landscapes.

Roman artists also were particularly skilled in creating mosaics. Mosaics were pictures or designs made by setting small pieces of stone, glass, or tile onto a surface. Most Roman villas, the country houses of the wealthy, had at least one colorful mosaic. (See the Social History feature on pages 166–167.)
In addition, Romans excelled at the art of painting. Most wealthy Romans had bright, large murals, called frescoes, painted directly on their walls. Few have survived. The best examples of Roman painting are found in the Roman town of Pompeii and date from as early as the second century B.C. In A.D. 79, nearby Mount Vesuvius erupted, covering Pompeii in a thick layer of ash and killing about 2,000 residents. The ash acted to preserve many buildings and works of art.

**Learning and Literature** Romans borrowed much of their philosophy from the Greeks. Stoicism, the philosophy of the Greek teacher Zeno, was especially influential. Stoicism encouraged virtue, duty, moderation, and endurance.

In literature, as in philosophy, the Romans found inspiration in the works of their Greek neighbors. While often following Greek forms and models, Roman writers promoted their own themes and ideas. The poet Virgil spent ten years writing the most famous work of Latin literature, the *Aeneid* (ih•NEE•ihd), the epic of the legendary Aeneas. Virgil modeled the *Aeneid*, written in praise of Rome and Roman virtues, after the Greek epics of Homer. Here he speaks of government as being Rome’s most important contribution to civilization:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

Romans, never forget that government is your medium! Be this your art—to practice men in habit of peace, Generosity to the conquered, and firmness against aggressors.

**VIRGIL, Aeneid**

While Virgil’s writing carries all the weight and seriousness of the Roman character, the poet Ovid wrote light, witty poetry for enjoyment. In *Amores*, Ovid relates that he can only compose when he is in love: “When I was from Cupid’s passions free, my Muse was mute and wrote no elegy.”
Western Civilization

Western civilization is generally seen as the heritage of ideas that spread to Europe and America from ancient Greece and Rome. Some historians observe, however, that Western civilization does not belong to any particular place—that it is the result of cultures coming together, interacting, and changing. Still, the legacy of Greece and Rome can be seen today.

The diagram below shows how ancient Greek and Roman ideas of government, philosophy, and literature can be traced across time. As with many cultural interactions, the links between the examples are not necessarily direct. Instead, the chart traces the evolution of an idea or theme over time.

Influence of Greek and Roman Ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Philosophy</th>
<th>Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>509 B.C.</td>
<td>Aristotle developed his philosophical theories.</td>
<td>Homer wrote the Odyssey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400s B.C.</td>
<td>Thomas Aquinas attempted to prove the existence of a single god using Aristotelian ideas.</td>
<td>19 B.C. Virgil used the Odyssey to guide his Aeneid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600s</td>
<td>1781 Philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote that Aristotle’s theories on logic were still valid.</td>
<td>1922 James Joyce patterned his epic, Ulysses, after Homer’s work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1776</td>
<td>Present Scholars still hold conferences focusing on questions Aristotle raised.</td>
<td>2000 The Coen brothers’ film, O Brother, Where Art Thou?, brought a very different adaptation of the Odyssey to the big screen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

about 800 B.C.

RESEARCH LINKS For more on Western civilization, go to classzone.com
The Romans also wrote excellent prose, especially history. Livy compiled a multivolume history of Rome from its origins to 9 B.C. He used legends freely, creating more of a national myth of Rome than a true history. Tacitus (TAS•ih•tuhs), another Roman historian, is notable among ancient historians because he presented the facts accurately. He also was concerned about the Romans’ lack of morality. In his *Annals* and *Histories*, he wrote about the good and bad of imperial Rome.

Here, Tacitus shows his disgust with the actions of the Emperor Nero, who many consider to be one of Rome’s cruelest rulers.

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

While Nero was frequently visiting the show, even amid his pleasures there was no cessation to his crimes. For during the very same period Torquatus Silanus was forced to die, because over and above his illustrious rank as one of the Junian family he claimed to be the great grandson of Augustus. Accusers were ordered to charge him with prodigality [wastefulness] in lavishing gifts, and with having no hope but in revolution. . . . Then the most intimate of his freedmen were put in chains and torn from him, till, knowing the doom which impended, Torquatus divided the arteries in his arms. A speech from Nero followed, as usual, which stated that though he was guilty and with good reason distrusted his defense, he would have lived, had he awaited the clemency of the judge.

_TACITUS, Annals_

### The Legacy of Rome

The presence of Rome is still felt daily in the languages, the institutions, and the thought of the Western world.

**The Latin Language** Latin, the language of the Romans, remained the language of learning in the West long after the fall of Rome. It was the official language of the Roman Catholic Church into the 20th century.

Latin was adopted by different peoples and developed into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Romanian. These languages are called Romance languages because of their common Roman heritage. Latin also influenced other languages. For example, more than half the words in English have a basis in Latin.

**Master Builders** Visitors from all over the empire marveled at the architecture of Rome. The arch, the dome, and concrete were combined to build spectacular structures, such as the Colosseum.

Arches also supported bridges and aqueducts. Aqueducts were designed by Roman engineers to bring water into cities and towns. When the water channel spanned a river or ravine, the aqueduct was lifted high up on arches.
The Colosseum was one of the greatest feats of Roman engineering and a model for the ages. The name comes from the Latin word *colossus*, meaning "gigantic." Its construction was started by the Emperor Vespasian and was completed by his sons, emperors Titus and Domitian. For centuries after its opening in A.D. 80, spectators, both rich and poor, cheered a variety of free, bloody spectacles—from gladiator fights to animal hunts.

The Colosseum has been the model for sports stadiums worldwide. How is the design of modern stadiums patterned after that of the Colosseum? What are the similarities?


What do the kind of spectacles the Romans watched tell us about them as a people and about their leaders?

**Facts About the Colosseum**
- Built—A.D. 72–81
- Capacity—45,000–50,000
- Materials—stone and concrete
- Size—157 feet high, 620 feet long
- Arena—287 feet long, 180 feet wide
- Entrances—80 in all
- Exits—giant staircases that allowed the building to be emptied in minutes
- Velarium—a retractable canvas awning that shielded spectators from sun and rain
- Arena—central area where spectacles took place
- Passageways—walkways that led to seats
- Elevators and ramps led from the cells and animal cages in the Colosseum basement to trapdoors concealed in the arena floor.
Because Roman architectural forms were so practical, they have remained popular. Thomas Jefferson began a Roman revival in the United States in the 18th century. Many large public buildings, such as the U.S. Capitol and numerous state capitolists, include Roman features.

Roman roads were also technological marvels. The army built a vast network of roads constructed of stone, concrete, and sand that connected Rome to all parts of the empire. Many lasted into the Middle Ages; some are still used.

**Roman System of Law** Rome’s most lasting and widespread contribution was its law. Early Roman law dealt mostly with strengthening the rights of Roman citizens. As the empire grew, however, the Romans came to believe that laws should be fair and apply equally to all people, rich and poor. Slowly, judges began to recognize certain standards of justice. These standards were influenced largely by the teachings of Stoic philosophers and were based on common sense and practical ideas. Some of the most important principles of Roman law were:

- All persons had the right to equal treatment under the law.
- A person was considered innocent until proven guilty.
- The burden of proof rested with the accuser rather than the accused.
- A person should be punished only for actions, not thoughts.
- Any law that seemed unreasonable or grossly unfair could be set aside.

The principles of Roman law endured to form the basis of legal systems in many European countries and of places influenced by Europe, including the United States of America.

**Rome’s Enduring Influence** By preserving and adding to Greek civilization, Rome strengthened the Western cultural tradition. The world would be a very different place had Rome not existed. Historian R. H. Barrow has stated that Rome never fell because it turned into something even greater—an idea—and achieved immortality.

As mighty as the Roman Empire had been, however, it was not the only great civilization of its time. Around the same period that Rome was developing its enduring culture, different but equally complex empires were emerging farther east. In India, the Mauryan and Gupta empires dominated the land, while the Han Empire ruled over China.