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The Roman Heritage

(509 B.C.-476 A.D.)



The Apostle Andrew in a mosaic from Ravenna, Italy.

Chapter Outline

1. Greco-Roman Civilization
2. Rise of Christianity
3. Breakdown of Unity
4. Collapse of the Empire

For six years, the general Constantine had fought many rivals for control of the western part of the Roman Empire. In 312 A.D., Constantine was master of most of Italy. But he still had to capture the city of Rome, which was the stronghold of another general. As Constantine marched on Rome, he knew his forces were badly outnumbered.

Years later, Eusebius (u SEE bee uhs), a Christian bishop and friend of Constantine, described the day before the crucial battle. "About noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, Constantine saw with his own eyes . . . a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, bearing the inscription, 'Conquer by this.' At this sight, he was struck with amazement, and his whole army also . . . witnessed this miracle.

"And while he continued to ponder . . . its meaning, night suddenly came on; then in his sleep the Christ . . . appeared to him with the same sign . . . and commanded him to make a likeness of the sign that he had seen in the heavens and to use it as a safeguard against his enemies."

At dawn, Constantine prepared for the upcoming battle. He called in artisans and described the sign in his dream. According to Eusebius, they shaped "a long spear, overlaid with gold" into a cross. Above the cross was a "wreath of gold and precious stones," which encircled two Greek letters, the first two letters of Christ's name. Constantine ordered his soldiers to inscribe the same two letters on their shields and had the jeweled cross carried into battle.

Constantine triumphed in the battle for Rome and became the Roman emperor. A year later, in 313 A.D., he proclaimed freedom of worship for every-

one in the Roman Empire, including Christians. Before his death in 337 A.D., Constantine was baptized a Christian.

The conversion of Constantine to Christianity changed the course of history. For centuries, Christians had struggled to survive in the face of severe persecution. By 312 A.D., Christianity had won many converts, but Christians were still a minority in the Roman Empire. By embracing Christianity, Constantine not only ended the persecution but also opened the way for Christianity to become the official religion of the empire.

Christianity was only part of the heritage Rome transmitted to the peoples of its empire. Through Rome, Western Europe was introduced to the advanced learning of the ancient Mediterranean world, including Greek art, science, and philosophy. In addition, Rome made its own contributions, especially in government, law, and engineering. Yet even while Roman civilization flourished, internal and external forces were weakening the ties that bound the empire together.

1 Greco-Roman Civilization

"Greece has conquered her rude conqueror," observed the Roman poet Horace early in the *Pax Romana*. Everywhere Horace looked, he saw evidence of Greek influence. Romans studied Greek art and architecture as well as Greek theories of government. Romans who traveled to Athens and to Alexandria in Egypt absorbed the ideas of *Hellenistic* civilization.

Romans preserved much of Greek culture, but they also retained their own traditions. The result was a blend of Greek and Roman traditions. Through Roman conquest, Greco-Roman civilization was carried to every corner of the empire.

Art and Architecture

When the Romans conquered Greece, they shipped home thousands of Greek statues. Roman sculptors did a brisk business copying Greek works, and talented Greek artists found rich patrons in Rome. In time, however, Roman sculptors developed their own style. Greek sculptors idealized the human form, using athletes as models of perfection. Romans created more realistic portraits.

Roman artists produced beautiful paintings to decorate the walls of private homes. Although few Roman paintings have survived, peaceful landscapes and scenes based on the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* were preserved in Pompeii (pahm PAY), a city buried by a volcano in 79 A.D. Romans also designed magnificent mosaics, pictures formed of chips of colored stone. In the homes of wealthy Romans, mosaic pavements covered parts of the floor.

While Romans borrowed many ideas in architecture, they also made important advances. From the Etruscans and Greeks, they learned how to use columns and arches. Then they improved on the arch by inventing the dome, a roof formed by rounded arches. The Romans also introduced new building materials such as concrete, a mixture of lime and earth. New building techniques allowed architects to design massive structures. For example, the Colosseum had three stories of arches and columns.

Roman architecture was more ornate than the simple, elegant temples of classical Greece. Emperors erected solid, richly decorated monuments, such as huge public stadiums, to symbolize Roman strength.

Technology and Science

The Romans applied their technical knowledge to many practical concerns. They built strong bridges, supported by arches, to span turbulent rivers. Romans designed roads to last forever. They made them of heavy blocks set in layers of crushed stones and pebbles. Roman roads were still in use as recently as 100 years ago, and the stone foundations can be seen in parts of Europe today.

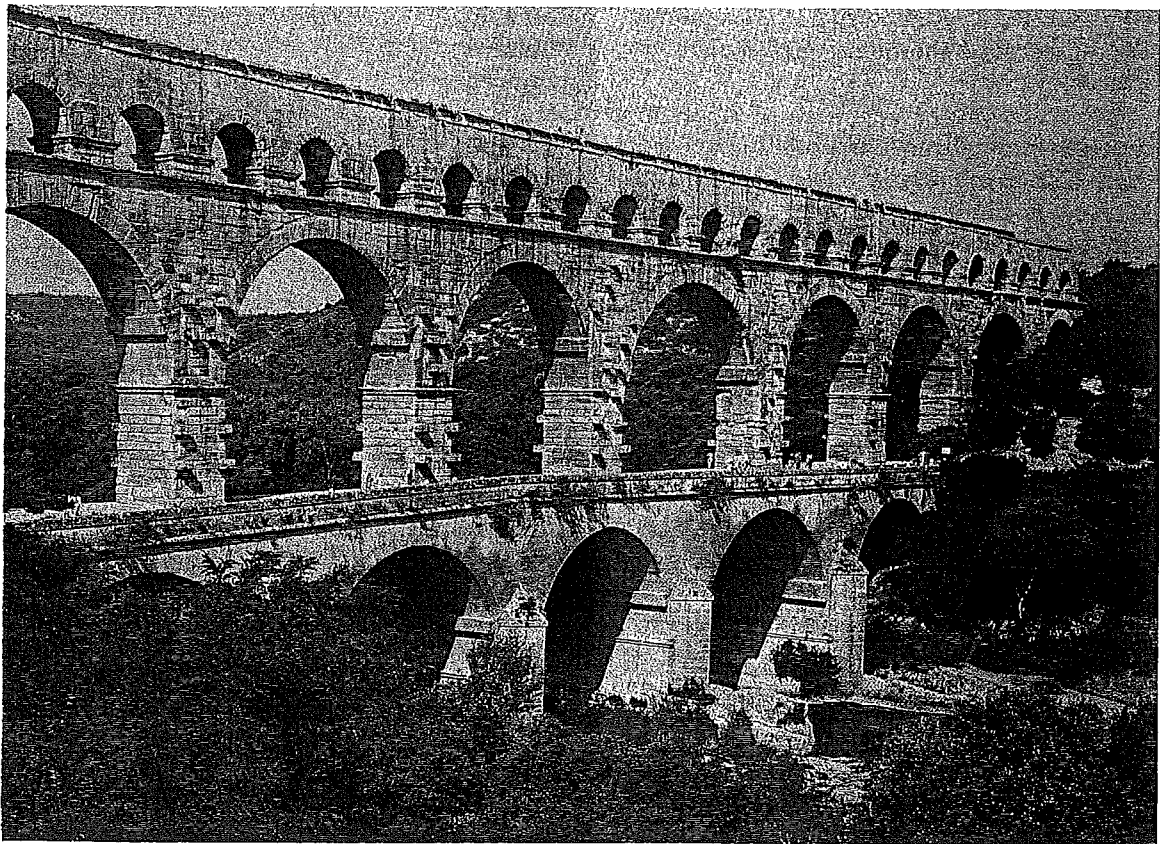
Romans constructed *aqueducts* (AK wuh duhkts) to carry water from reservoirs in the country to the cities. Roman aqueducts, some of which have survived, were canal-like stone structures that tunneled through mountains and spanned valleys.

The major Roman contributions to science and medicine were collections of information similar to encyclopedias. Pliny

(PLIHN ee) the Elder produced the 37-volume work *Natural History*, a storehouse of information on subjects ranging from astronomy to medicine, geography, and botany. Pliny's curiosity about natural occurrences proved to be his downfall. In 79 A.D., he visited Pompeii to observe the erupting Mount Vesuvius (vuh SOO vee uhs) and was killed by the poisonous gases from the volcano.

Scientific works produced during Roman times were studied for centuries. The Greek physician Galen (GAY luhn) wrote a medical encyclopedia that was used in Europe until the 1400s. The ideas of the astronomer Ptolemy also influenced scholars for hundreds of years. Ptolemy taught that the earth was at the center of the universe and that the sun and planets revolved around it. Those theories were not disproved until the 1500s.

Roman engineers were proud of their practical achievements. Aqueducts like this one carried water from the countryside to the cities of the empire. "Who will venture to compare these mighty aqueducts with the idle pyramids or the famous but useless works of the Greeks?" boasted one Roman engineer. The Roman aqueduct in Segovia, Spain, is still used as part of the public water system.



Roman Literature

Roman writers adapted Greek literary forms such as lyric poetry and drama to the Latin language. Romans also developed new styles of writing that were influenced by Greek oratory, the art of persuading an audience.

Some statesmen, such as Caesar and Cicero, were fine writers. When Caesar was away on military campaigns, he kept his name before the public by writing the *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*. In this work, he skillfully combined a history of the wars with reminders of his own military successes. Cicero developed a clear, logical style of writing that became a model for other writers. In essays on government, morality, and philosophy, he expressed his admiration for the Roman Republic and for the Roman idea of justice.

Poets. Under the emperor Augustus, Roman literature flourished. Augustus supported writers, especially those who praised Roman achievements. The poet Horace was famous for his odes praising Rome and the Pax Romana.

The poet Virgil admired the early Republic. When Augustus commissioned him to write a poem celebrating the rise of Rome, Virgil composed the *Aeneid*. Although the *Aeneid* imitated the heroic epics of the Greek poet Homer, who wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, it emphasized Roman justice, practical wisdom, and power:

You, O Roman, remember to rule the nations with might. This will be your genius—to impose the way of peace, to spare the conquered and crush the proud.

Historians. During the Pax Romana, Rome produced many historians. Livy, a contemporary of Virgil, wrote the lengthy *History of Rome*. Unlike the Greek historian Thucydides, who tried to be impartial, Livy admitted that his goal was to glorify Rome. "I do honestly believe that no country has ever been greater or purer than ours or richer in good citizens and noble deeds," he claimed.

Another well-known historian, Tacitus (TAS uh tuhs), wrote the *Annals*, a history of Rome from the death of Augustus to 70 A.D. Unlike Livy, he was critical of Roman em-



Many Roman women were well educated in history and literature. A few wrote poetry. With slaves to do the housework, well-to-do women like the one pictured here had the leisure to take an active part in the intellectual and political life of Rome.

perors. But he seemed resigned to the present. "I may regard with admiration an earlier period," wrote Tacitus, "but I accept the present, and while I pray for good emperors, I can endure whomever we may have."

Roman Law

To deal with the practical problems of government, Romans developed a system of law, today considered one of Rome's greatest achievements. Roman law established a common standard of justice for the entire empire. Under Roman law, an accused person was considered innocent until proven guilty. Judges based their decisions on evidence presented in court. They also followed standard procedures to ensure a fair hearing for both sides in a dispute.

Roman law evolved during the Republic and was suited to the needs of a simple farming society. When the law was first written down (in 415 B.C.) it applied only to Roman citizens. As Rome expanded, two systems of law developed: civil law and the law of nations. Civil law dealt with claims of Roman citizens. The law of nations dealt with the claims of foreigners and took local customs

into account. Eventually, the two codes were merged into a single law system that applied everywhere in the empire.

During the Pax Romana, punishments were less severe than they had been during the Republic. Furthermore, the law code provided some protection for slaves and women. It set limits on the absolute rights of fathers and husbands. Also, women and slaves were given the right to own property.

Roman law was the foundation for the law codes that developed in Europe and were carried to other parts of the world.

SECTION REVIEW

1. Identify: Pliny the Elder, Galen, Ptolemy, Virgil, Livy, Tacitus.
 2. Define: aqueduct.
 3. How did Roman sculpture differ from Greek sculpture?
 4. What contributions did the Romans make to science and medicine?
 5. What was Livy's opinion of Rome?
 6. What two systems of law developed as Rome expanded?
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2 Rise of Christianity

During the Pax Romana, a new religion, Christianity, spread across the Greco-Roman world. At first, Christianity was just one of the many religions practiced within the Roman Empire. But by 395 A.D., it had become the official religion of the empire. The success of Christianity was due in part to the religious climate of the Roman world.

The Religious Climate

Roman emperors tolerated different religious practices. Officially, Romans were required to offer sacrifices to the emperor, who was thought to have divine power. These ceremonies had little religious meaning, however. They merely symbolized a person's loyalty to Rome. As long as people made formal sacrifices, they could worship as they chose.

Many Romans continued to worship the old gods, such as Jupiter and Mars. Others turned to mystery religions similar to ones that had developed in ancient Greece. People who believed in mystery religions used magical signs and secret passwords hoping to win immortality. Mystery religions gave people in the huge impersonal Roman Empire a sense of belonging.

Roman Rule in Palestine

The Hebrews, or Jews, were among the peoples in the empire whose religions were tolerated. Roman officials in Palestine respected the Hebrew belief in one God and excused Jews from worshipping the emperor. For example, the face of the emperor was not imprinted on coins issued in Palestine because Hebrew law forbade Jews to worship images.

Although Rome allowed Jewish leaders to enforce their traditional laws, many Jews resented foreign rule. Some Jews believed that a *messiah*, a savior chosen by God, would lead the Hebrews to freedom from Roman rule. One group, the Zealots, sought political freedom through armed resistance to Rome. But Rome responded to criticism and violence with severe punishment.

In 66 A.D., the Jews in Palestine rose in revolt. Rome sent an army to destroy Jerusalem. In 70 A.D., Rome abolished the Jewish state, which had existed since ancient times. The Jews were enslaved and dispersed throughout the empire. But scattered Jewish communities survived elsewhere in the empire. In these communities, the Jews preserved their religion and culture.