

Chapter 1

The Romans: Shaping Their World and Ours

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding what it meant to be 'a Roman'
 - ▶ Knowing how we now know what we know
 - ▶ Recognising how the Romans practically defined the modern image of power
 - ▶ Seeing how we use Roman ideas every day
 - ▶ Why we owe the Romans so much
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One of the most famous comedy sketches set in the ancient world was dreamed up by the 1970s Monty Python team in their movie *The Life of Brian* (1979). Set in ancient Judaea, a remote province of the Roman Empire, Reg, leader of the rebellious anti-Roman Peoples' Front of Judaea, is holding a morale-boosting meeting. He announces in a careworn and cynical voice, 'What have the Romans ever done for us?' His fellow rebels nod in agreement and then one after another of them pipes up:

- ✓ Aqueducts
- ✓ Sanitation
- ✓ Roads
- ✓ Irrigation
- ✓ Education
- ✓ Medicine
- ✓ Public order

Before long, the list is as long as your arm and Reg is forced to redraft his opening gambit by asking, 'Apart from law and order, water, roads (etc) what have the Romans ever done for us?' Silence follows until a wag adds 'Peace'.

Of course, that's a laugh and it's far too simple just to say 'oh the Romans were brilliant because they brought nice things like running water, sanitation, and nice roads'. But Reg's rebels did have a sort of point. The Romans, despite the fact that their Empire could also be brutal and oppressive, contributed a great deal to the world. Their influence was so profound, in fact, that it continued long after the Romans and their Empire had vanished. You can see evidence of this influence even today.

This chapter gives you a quick overview of who the Romans were and what they did. It also answers Reg's question, 'What have the Romans ever done for us?' from a twentieth-century perspective.

Being Roman

The key thing about the Romans is that you didn't have to come from Rome to be one. Of course, the original Romans did, but over time their Empire became made of conquered peoples who were awarded Roman status and privileges and who often fought to get them. People in the Roman Empire saw themselves as Roman, while they proudly maintained their own national and ethnic heritages. It was rather like people in the United States being proudly American and also proudly Native American, Polish, German, or Mexican, and so on. But it was the Roman bit that held them all together, just as it's the American bit that keeps the USA together now.

You can find out more information about what it meant to be Roman in the remainder of this part and in Part II.

The Roman national identity

With the Romans, it was all about image. The Romans maintained a fantasy that they were all no more than country villagers and farmers; simple hardy folk whose rural origins had given them the steely discipline and strength to win an Empire. This Empire, they believed, was their reward from the gods for being such a worthy people (for more about the gods, see Chapter 9).

This myth is true, to a point. In Rome's earliest days, around 1000 BC, it was just one of the many little villages – which were nothing more sophisticated than a collection of thatched cottages – dotted around Latium, a region in central Italy on the west coast.

Yet despite its modest origins, Rome became the biggest city in the whole of Europe and the Mediterranean area. At its climax, Rome had well over a million inhabitants. (To put this in perspective, consider that most other cities of the time would have had a struggle to find 10,000 people to call their own.) More important than its size, however, was its meaning: Rome wasn't just a place to live – it was a concept, a state of mind, as explained in more detail in Chapter 6.

The Romans never lost sight of their origins. Even though those origins were really long-lost in the mists of time, they saw themselves as peasant farmers and were constantly fantasising about returning to their roots (see Chapter 4 for more on this).

The Roman myth of destiny

The Romans very definitely believed that not only were they superior to everyone else, but that they had a preordained destiny to rule the world. They set the rules and the others had to play by them. Those who went along with this arrangement were welcome to join in. And the truth is that quite a lot of people did. All over the Roman world men and women happily called themselves Roman Spaniards, Roman Africans, Roman Gauls, and so on. This only reinforced the Romans' belief in their destiny.

The Romans believed their superior virtues had won them all this power and were very upset that all the wealth had brought decadence and corruption and lousy, violent sexual perverts for emperors and aristocrats (like Nero – see Chapter 16). This corruption of the Roman ideal flew right in the face of everything the Roman world was supposed to be: honest, law-abiding, self-disciplined. But it didn't dent the myth one bit. It only made them all the more determined.

The Golden Age

In Roman myth, Jupiter's father was the god Saturn. Romans believed that Saturn had taught the ancient peoples of Latium, whom he ruled over, how to farm. He also instructed them in liberal arts. Saturn was popular and his reign gentle, and this mythical age was called 'The Saturnian kingdoms', which is the Roman equivalent of 'The Golden Age'. That's what the Romans believed in – their Golden Age as

farmers. One of the Romans' most famous poets, Virgil, popped this into one of his most well-known poems, called the *Fourth Eclogue*, an allegory about the rule of Augustus (see Chapter 16). In his poem, Virgil said 'The Saturnian kingdoms are back'. In other words, 'The Golden Age is back'. Blatant propaganda, but it sounds good.

Other ancient civilisations

Roman civilisation lasted from about 753 BC up to AD 476 in the West. That's pretty remarkable when you think about it, but where do the Romans fit into world history? After all, the Romans didn't exist in some sort of historical isolation. Although the Romans thought they were the be-all and end-all, there *were* other civilisations about. So here's a potted look at the ancient civilisations who existed before, during, and after the time of the Romans.

- ✓ **Egypt:** By the time the Romans got up and running, the Egyptian civilisation had been going for nearly 5,000 years. By around 2700 BC, what you and I think of as ancient Egypt really got going – that's about 2,000 years before Rome was founded. During this period, the pyramids, built by the pharaohs, first started to appear. By about 1550 BC, Egypt had the astonishing pharaoh Akhenaten, and Tutankhamun, whose tomb is for sure the most famous ancient burial ever found. This period, called the New Kingdom, was the age of the Valley of the Kings, the great temple at Karnak, and other massive monuments like Abu Simbel, built by Ramesses II, the most famous of all pharaohs. But Egypt was already past her peak: Divided by rival dynasties, Egypt was invaded, first by the Assyrians, then by the Persians, and finally by Alexander the Great who established a Macedonian dynasty of pharaohs, whose last ruler, Cleopatra VII, had affairs with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Antony's defeat at Actium in 31 BC brought ancient Egypt to an end and the longest-established of all civilisations ever became just another Roman province.
- ✓ **Mesopotamia:** Mesopotamia is the land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates in what is now modern Iraq. The Sumerians (3500–2300 BC), who wielded their power from the cities of Ur, Eridu, and Uruk, had palaces and built temples on the top of towers called *ziggurats*. By 3000 BC, they had made a vast stride that set them apart from the hundreds of thousands of years of human development: They invented writing. After the Sumerians came the Akkadians (2300–2150 BC), who were highly skilled in bronze sculpture. But Mesopotamian civilisation came to a climax with the Assyrians (1400–600 BC), whose kings commissioned magnificent relief sculptures. Then came the Babylonians (625–538 BC), whose most famous ruler is Nebuchadnezzar II, who built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.
- ✓ **The Phoenicians and Carthaginians:** Phoenicia was where the coast of Lebanon and Syria is today, at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. The Phoenicians were brilliant seafarers, which incidentally the Romans never were, and one story is that they might even have sailed right round the coast of Africa. Major traders, the Phoenicians shipped their products, which included cloth, dye, and timber, everywhere they could and set up colonies all round the Mediterranean, including Spain, Malta, and Sicily. The most important Phoenician settlement was Carthage, which became Rome's most deadly rival. Founded by the ninth century BC in what is now modern Tunisia on the north coast of Africa, Carthage's wealth and influence spread north into Sicily and Italy, providing the biggest threat Roman expansion faced. It took the three Punic Wars to wipe out Carthage, finally destroyed in 146 BC, leaving the way open to the Romans to take total

control of the Mediterranean. (See Chapter 12 for information on the Punic Wars.)

✓ **The Greeks:** Greece, called Achaea in ancient times, was always the story of city-states dotted about the mainland and the various islands across the Aegean Sea. The first phase of Greek civilisation is called Minoan, after Minos, the mythical king of the island of Crete who lived at Knossos. Minoan civilisation started around 3000 BC and lasted till about 1400 BC when a natural disaster seems to have seriously damaged many settlements. Meanwhile, in Greece itself, famous strongholds like Mycenae and Tiryns had developed. On the north-west coast of Turkey was Ilium, or Troy. Somewhere around the time Minoan civilisation collapsed, the famous Trojan War took place, but no-one really knows how much of the story is myth or true. All we do know is that by 800 BC Homer's poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, had been composed. They set the pace for Greek literature, while Greek art was being developed, too. During this time, the Greek city states like Athens and Sparta developed. By the fifth century BC, Athens had reached its climax with the development of a sophisticated democracy and political theory in the age of Pericles. Greek colonies were dotted all round the Mediterranean, including southern Italy and Sicily. But the Greek city-states were forever fighting with one another. Athens and Sparta brought each other to virtual ruin in the Peloponnesian War. Weakened, Greece was easy prey first for Philip II of Macedon (357–338 BC) and then the Romans in 146 BC (see Chapter 12). But Greek art, culture, literature, and sport remained immensely popular in the days of the Roman Empire. Today, the Greeks are still heralded as the fathers of modern democracy and civilisation.

✓ **The Etruscans:** The Etruscans lived in what is now Tuscany and Umbria in Italy. Most of what is known about them comes from the excavation of their magnificent painted tombs and the grave goods, which were designed to make the afterlife as much like home life as possible. They were particularly good sailors and traders, but to this day scholars know little about them because their language still cannot be read properly. It was thanks to the Etruscans that Rome got off to a good start. The Etruscans built Rome's first walls, its temple to Jupiter, and also the great sewer called the Cloaca Maxima. Some of Rome's first kings were Etruscans too, including the last one, Tarquinius Superbus (more on him in Chapter 10).

✓ **Macedonians and Alexander the Great:** Ancient Macedonia was just a small mountainous area of northern Greece and part of what is now Bulgaria. In 338 BC, the Macedonian king, Philip II, took control of Greece, setting the pace for things to come. In 336 BC he was succeeded by his son Alexander, who proceeded to conquer a vast swathe of territory across the area of modern Turkey, Iraq, and Iran by defeating the Persian Empire and reached as far as the Indus valley on the fringes of India. He then seized Egypt and made one of his generals, called Ptolemy, pharaoh. Alexander died in 323 BC from a fever in Babylon at the height of his powers. But his empire was built totally around his own personality and with him gone it fell apart quickly, with his various generals ruling different parts of it. Along with the rest of Greece, Macedonia fell to Rome in 146 BC (see Chapter 12), with Egypt and Asia Minor following afterwards.

Roman history, blow by blow

Rome's early life was more about internal social struggles, beginning with the kings. With the kings gone, the Republic was created, and Rome gradually accumulated local allies in her bid to ensure her own security. As Rome's power grew, these allies came to want to share the same social privileges the Romans enjoyed. As she grew in power and prestige, Rome increasingly came into contact with international rivals like Carthage. A seemingly endless series of wars followed, which were far from conclusive, yet Rome prevailed simply because she constantly came back for more and ultimately wore down her opponents. By the first century BC, Rome was the most powerful state in the Mediterranean. (You can read the details about this early period in Rome's history in Part III.)

Rome then started falling apart because immensely powerful generals used their armies to pursue their own political ambitions. Decades of political chaos followed until Octavian brought the wars to an end and took over supreme power. He 'restored the Republic', so he said, but he really created himself as emperor – a spin most accepted in return for peace. Ruling as Augustus, the stability he brought made Rome even more powerful. By the early second century AD, Rome under the emperors was at her zenith, controlling the whole Mediterranean area, north-west Europe, central Europe, North Africa, Egypt, and the Middle East. (This period of Roman history is covered in Part IV.)

In the third and fourth centuries AD, with barbarians battering down the frontiers, it became impossible for one emperor to control it all. So by the fourth century, it was usually the case that at least two, and sometimes more, emperors ruled different parts of the Roman Empire. The basis of the division was between the East and the West. The Eastern Empire managed to survive until 1453 but it was a mere shadow of its former self. The Western half had really ceased to exist by the mid-400s, a thousand years earlier. (To find out about the events that led to the eventual fall of Rome, go to Part V.)

After the end of the Roman Empire in the West, Europe fragmented into numerous little kingdoms, principalities, and duchies. Imagine the United States falling apart and the governor of each state becoming the head of a local dynastic monarchy. To make things worse, each king had to constantly fight for his kingdom against rivals. Borders were always changing, and the threat of invasion was never far away. In England, for example, King Alfred of the Saxons in Wessex (AD 871–899) had to fight back the Viking invaders. In medieval Italy, even cities fought one another.

Today, what was once the Roman Empire is now dozens of independent countries. It's quite remarkable to think that an area once ruled by Roman emperors even to this day is broken up into so many parts. Only with the coming of the European Union have many European countries started co-operating again.

Discovering the Romans

You might very well wonder why anyone would need to discover the Romans, what with their ruined buildings all over the place and one medieval king after another falling all over himself trying to copy the Romans. Well, one of the reasons is the Dark Ages, when a lot of what Rome was all about was forgotten. Apart from a few exceptions, books and libraries were destroyed, and buildings fell down.

When the Renaissance came during the fifteenth century, European thinkers started to rediscover the classical world: They rediscovered Greek and Roman teachings, and printing made Greek and Roman books more widely available. Inspired by what they found, Renaissance men became interested in new forms of art, ancient books on politics and philosophy, and the whole idea of learning for learning's sake.

Even though the ancient Empire fell, it left behind ruins and literature that made the people throughout the ages – including our own – marvel at what the Romans had been able to accomplish.

Great ruins and ruined cities

All over the Roman world, great cities fell into ruin, but those ruins were so enormous that people wondered at them. In far-off Britain, a poem was written about the tumbled-down ruins of the great temple of Sulis Minerva and baths complex at Bath. The poet called the ruins the work of 'giants' because he, like most of his contemporaries in the Dark Ages, couldn't imagine who else apart from a giant could possibly have built anything like that.



Many of the mighty cities of North Africa like El Djem in what is now Tunisia were left to decay in peace. Even today they have massive ruins. El Djem has its vast Roman amphitheatre. Orange, in southern France, has a Roman theatre and an aqueduct. Athens has a vast Roman temple of Zeus and a library built by the emperor Hadrian (AD 117–138), who passed this way on his travels (see Chapter 17). Baalbek in the Lebanon has two colossal temples, and one of them – the temple of Bacchus – is still practically intact.

Rome itself remained home to some of the most enormous ruins: The Colosseum, the city's biggest amphitheatre, is still largely in one piece (see Chapter 8); the ruins of the imperial palaces still cluster across the Palatine Hill, and the baths of Caracalla look like a giant's cave complex. The Aurelian walls of Rome, built in the 270s (see Chapter 19 for information on the emperor Aurelian), still surround most of Rome.

The survival of Roman books

Roman writers were all hugely influential in different ways, but it's thanks to the survival of their texts that we know what we do about the Roman world. Consider these examples:

- ✔ **Cicero (Marcus Tullius Cicero) (106–43 BC):** Cicero was a great orator, lawyer, and statesman. Well aware of his importance, he published his speeches, treatises on government (*De Re Publica*), duty (*De Officiis*), the nature of gods (*De Deorum Natura*), and also a vast collection of his private correspondence. A great deal survives and he had a huge influence on thought and literature in early modern times.
- ✔ **Caesar (Gaius Julius Caesar) (100–44 BC):** Caesar wrote his own account of his war in Gaul (*Bellum Gallicum*), and also part of his civil war with Pompey (*Bellum Civile*). The texts are famous for sounding objective (though they aren't at all), and for their spare, terse style, but are exceptional historical resources for the time. To find out more about Julius Caesar, go to Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Catullus (Gaius Valerius Catullus) (84–54 BC):** Catullus was a young man when he died, and his passionate poetry of a new type for the age reflects that in his choice of subjects, particularly his interest in wine, life, and women. Catullus's poems are filled with his frustrations at his relationship with Lesbia, a married woman (probably Clodia Metelli) who was believed to have murdered her husband and was denounced by Cicero as a scandalous prostitute, a woman beyond his capacity to cope with.
- ✔ **Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro) (70–19 BC):** Virgil was the great state propaganda poet of the Augustan age. His most famous poem is the *Aeneid* (*Aeneis*), modelled on Greek Homeric epic poems like the *Odyssey*, which trace the adventures of Aeneas, the legendary founder of Rome, and include prophecies about the coming of Augustus. His other surviving works, the *Eclogues* (*Eclogae*) and the *Georgics* (*Georgica*), were designed to reinforce the Roman fantasy about their rural origins by creating an image of a world of primeval rural bliss. The *Fourth Eclogue* included a description of a messianic coming, which was, in fact, written to anticipate Augustus's dynasty, but which early Christians spotted as a possible prophecy of the coming of Christ.
- ✔ **Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus) (65–8 BC):** The son of an ex-slave (a freedman; see Chapter 2 for information on social classes) and a friend of the poet Virgil, Horace used his writing to support the Emperor Augustus. After Virgil's death, Horace replaced him as the poetic voice of the state. Horace's works include the *Satires* (*Saturae* – works of social criticism), the *Odes* (*Carmina* – poems about state events and everyday things), and the *Secular Song* (*Carmen Seculare* – which celebrated the Secular Games of 17 BC).
- ✔ **Livy (Titus Livius) (59 BC–AD 17):** Livy wrote a vast history of Rome from its foundation (*Ab Urbe Condita*). The work took most of his adult

life, and unfortunately only about a quarter has survived. Although his history relied in part on myth and legend in its early parts, Livy's an invaluable source for Rome's struggle against Carthage and other aspects of early Roman history.

- ✓ **Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso) (43 BC–AD 17):** Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is one of the most popular poems to survive from antiquity. A compendium of Greek and Roman myths, it tells the whole complicated story of which god did what and when and to whom, all in one place. Ovid was also a scoundrel who loved telling good stories about picking up girls in the circus.
- ✓ **Pliny the Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus) (AD 23–79):** Pliny the Elder's vast *Natural History* (*Historia Naturalis*) is the Roman world's equivalent to a modern one-stop encyclopedia of Everything You Ever Wanted To Know Plus A Whole Lot More. Pliny was an equestrian, the second grade of Roman top society (see Chapter 2), and served in the army. A relentless and tireless enthusiast for knowledge, Pliny described everything from geography to gemstones, and medicine to monuments. Curiosity killed the cat – Pliny was asphyxiated taking a close-up look at the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79.
- ✓ **Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Secundus) (c. AD 61–113):** Pliny the Younger was Pliny the Elder's nephew who got promoted to senatorial status. Pliny the Younger's chief value to us is as a letter-writer. Many of his letters survive, covering all sorts of fascinating aspects of life at the top in the early second century. Pliny provides an eyewitness account of the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, a complete description of his villa, and numerous other priceless anecdotes. The letters he exchanged with the emperor Trajan (AD 98–117 – see Chapter 17 for his reign) are the most important record of the management of a Roman province to have survived.
- ✓ **Suetonius (Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus) (c. AD 69–120+):** Suetonius wrote several works, but the only one to survive in full is an all-time classic of antiquity: the *Twelve Caesars*, which is a series of potted biographies of Julius Caesar (who wasn't an emperor) and then the first 11 emperors who came next, up to AD 96. Packed with scandal, intrigue, downright salacious gossip, and priceless historical detail, the *Twelve Caesars* is still a racy read and a not-to-be-missed chance to find out about some of the most extraordinary men in human history.
- ✓ **Tacitus (Cornelius Tacitus) (c. AD 55–117):** Tacitus wrote two major works: the *Annals* (*Annales*), and the *Histories* (*Historiae*), as well as an account of the German tribes (*Germania*) and a biography of his father-in-law (*Agricola*). The *Annals* covers the period AD 14–68, which is the reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, Caligula, and Nero. Most of the work survives. The *Histories* pick up where the *Annals* left off, but only the first section exists today. Tacitus was a genius of a historian who provides an unparalleled account of the first century AD. He was undoubtedly biased, but his terse style is a model of economy and his work is filled with damning and magnificent observations.

- ✓ **Cassius Dio, or Dio Cassius (Cassius Dio Cocceianus) (c. AD 150–235):**
Dio was a senator in Rome but came from Nicaea in Asia Minor (Turkey). He wrote a history in Greek of Rome that started with Aeneas and the Trojan War. Sadly only a chunk from the middle survives, covering the period 68 BC–AD 47. Some of the rest is made good by summaries written by later authors. But it's still vitally important.

The reason we know about any Roman authors at all is because people copied their works. The people we have most of all to thank for that are the monks in the monasteries of the Middle Ages. Thanks to their work, scholars ever since have been able to analyse some of the greatest Roman literature, poetry, philosophy, and history. Unfortunately, a huge amount has been lost and of what there is, it's sometimes obvious that the copyists made mistakes. Who wouldn't? Imagine spending your day in a freezing monastery copying out thousands of lines of a Roman epic poem!



Although various copies of the same text turn up in different monasteries, they usually all go back to just one manuscript that survived antiquity. Here's a for-instance. The Roman poet Catullus is well-known today. But his entire life's work survived in just one copy that was in Verona in Italy in the early fourteenth century. Within a few decades it was lost – forever. Fortunately, two copies were made before that date. If they hadn't been, we'd know nothing about Catullus today apart from one or two other fragments.

Bringing the Romans home: Roman artifacts

Part of the whole Renaissance experience was exploring the remains of the ancient world as part of a broader cultural education. The Grand Tour, the name given to the practice of sending out wealthy young men to explore Europe and its sights, reached its climax in the eighteenth century. A Tour could last a few months or even several years. Funded by his nobleman father or a wealthy patron, a young man toured the capitals of Europe, but the ultimate object of the exercise was always to reach Italy and see the ancient ruins of Rome. Here the young men would have been instructed to buy manuscripts, books, paintings, and antiquities to ship home to decorate their fathers' stately homes.

Some of the Grand Tour men became wildly enthusiastic collectors and today Europe's great houses and museums are packed with the results of the buying. The collections stimulated interest at home and helped encourage growing tourism into the nineteenth century.



Charlemagne and the monks

The Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne (AD 742–814) did a lot to get the ball rolling at Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) where he had his palace. This became the centre of what is known as the Carolingian Renaissance. Charlemagne also encouraged the copying of ancient Roman books in his library at Aachen. The copies his men made survived long enough to be copied

again by monks centuries afterwards, until printing arrived in Europe and changed everything forever. Under Charlemagne's rule, a new sort of handwriting called 'Carolingian minuscule' was developed to make copying easier. That's the basis of modern English handwritten characters today.

Roman excavations: The Pompeii sensation

On 24 August AD 79, Mount Vesuvius, near Naples, erupted catastrophically. Many settlements around the volcano were buried by falling pumice or drowned by a surge of pyroclastic mud filled with ash, rock, and pumice. The two most famous places destroyed were the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Yet many of the towns' buildings, complete with their contents and in some cases even their inhabitants, were preserved pretty much as they were on the day that Vesuvius erupted. Scavengers recovered what they could, but the towns and villas in the area were simply abandoned and forgotten about.

Centuries later, in 1594, Pompeii was rediscovered when work to divert a river near Pompeii uncovered some inscriptions; unfortunately nothing was done. It wasn't until 1748 that excavation began and has continued on and off ever since.

Pompeii caused a sensation amongst scholars, collectors, and wealthy men with an interest in the ancient world. The Emperor of Austria declared in 1769 that 3,000 men should be employed to clear Pompeii of its pumice covering. Once much of the town had been cleared, people could at last walk from room to room in an original house and admire the mythological and fantasy architectural scenes painted on the walls. They could walk from the house down a Roman street and visit the amphitheatre.

Pompeii stimulated other men to look for Roman remains in their own countries. In England Samuel Lysons (1763–1819) excavated the remains of a Roman villa at Bignor and published the colourful mosaic floors in a magnificent hand-painted volume. The designs influenced decorations in the houses of the rich and famous.

The Portland Vase

The Portland Vase is just one example of many great art treasures from the Roman world. Made of blue glass and decorated with white cameo classical figures, it's believed to have been made at the end of the first century BC and survived largely intact. By 1601, it was in the collection of a church cardinal. Then an Italian family acquired it. In 1778 it was bought by Sir Alexander Hamilton, a great collector of antiquities, but he sold it to the family of the Dukes of Portland two years later. They lent it to the potter Josiah Wedgwood, and it provided the direct

stimulus for a style of fine pottery that has been made by Wedgwood ever since. Unfortunately, it was broken badly in 1845 but has been repaired and is now in the British Museum.

Actually, some people believe the Portland Vase was made in the Renaissance but it's impossible to prove. It doesn't matter anyway. The point is, it was thought to be Roman and was very influential on art and design in the eighteenth century, like many other Roman artefacts at the time like sculpture, coins, jewellery, and ceramics.



What happened to the Herculaneum ruins? In the early eighteenth century, deep tunnelling near the town uncovered the perfectly preserved theatre. The tunnellers ransacked the theatre for its statues, keeping no record of exactly where they found them. They also hacked tunnels through some houses, badly damaging walls as they went. Modern excavations have opened up a small part of the town, and exposed some spectacularly well-preserved buildings. But the rest, along with the theatre, remains deeply buried to this day.

What the Romans Did for Us

Whenever we think of the Romans, we tend to think of men in togas and sometimes with a crown made of laurel wreaths. That's not at all inappropriate. On the whole, that's how Roman emperors posed on their coins and on their statues. But there was far more to the Roman image of power, and it was so successful an image it's been echoing down the ages ever since.

Yet probably the main reason the Romans had such an impact on themselves and everyone else wasn't just because they had the most efficient army. It had much more to do with language, the rule of law, and the whole concept of thinking about government and what it meant. These have all had a dramatic effect on the world since the Romans. Of course, they weren't completely original – actually, some people think that the Romans had scarcely an original thought in their heads – but they were extremely good at taking all sorts of ideas from elsewhere and putting them into practice. And in the end, it was the practice that counted.

The Roman image of power

It's as if the Romans had created the template for power: If you want to be a ruler, you have to pose as a Roman. That was the Roman genius – getting people to want to be Roman – and it worked just as well centuries after their time as it did in their own. As a result, there's a relentless parade of later European rulers who wanted to be Holy Roman Emperors, or who dressed up like an original Roman emperor for paintings and statues.

Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Emperor

Ever since the Roman Empire collapsed in the West European, rulers have often gone out of their way to model themselves on Roman emperors. The first great exponent of this was Charlemagne (AD 742–814), who became King of the Franks in what is now France in 768. He actively tried to recreate the Roman Empire by conquering parts of Italy, some of Spain, and even added Hungarian territory to his domains. Charlemagne actually tried to pretend that ever since Rome had fallen to barbarians in the year 410, the post of Roman emperor had simply been vacant and now it had passed down to him, the next in line. So he had himself crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Rome by the pope in 800.

After Charlemagne's death his kingdom was divided up amongst his three sons, so his Empire fell apart almost as soon as it had started. In 962 Pope John XII made Otto I, King of Germany (AD 936–973), a new Holy Roman Emperor even though his territory was outside the old Roman Empire. The revived Holy Roman Empire staggered on until the reign of Francis II (1792–1806).

Napoleon

Francis II gave up his title when Napoleon conquered most of Germany. Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) was crowned Emperor of the French in 1804, at the climax of a military and administrative career that had gone from success to success. In paintings and on medals, Napoleon was shown as if he was a Roman emperor, complete with the laurel wreath.

The Fascists

The Nazis, under Hitler, got some of their ideas about image of empire from the Romans, while Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) was determined to revive Rome's ancient power. He had the ancient Forum in Rome excavated and other important sites exposed to public display as part of his propaganda campaign.

The German and Russian words for their emperors, *Kaiser* and *Czar/Tsar*, both come from the Roman word *Caesar*, the family name of the first emperors (see Chapter 16).



The Victorians

During the nineteenth century, Great Britain controlled one of the largest empires the world has ever seen. Britain's dominions included Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The climax of the British Empire was under Queen Victoria (reigned 1837–1901), and the Victorians looked back to the days of the Roman Empire not only as their inspiration, but also as an outright justification of using force to seize territory and then impose what they believed were superior values and customs.

That's pretty much what the Romans did. Just as the Romans left Latin behind them and all the infrastructure of their world like roads and public buildings, so the Victorians littered the Empire with railways, government buildings, and the English language. Today India has long been independent from Britain, but the language of government there is still English and the nation is dependent on the railways originally laid out by the British.

The USA today

The British Empire is long gone. These days, we often hear the term 'the American Empire' because in the twenty-first century, the United States of America is the most powerful nation on Earth. Actually, it's an Empire like no other, because the USA does not seek to conquer other territories and keep a hold on them. If that's the case, then why am I banging on about the American Empire having anything to do with the Roman Empire? Well, if you look at any piece of American coinage you'll see this phrase and this word:

E Pluribus Unum (Liberty)

E Pluribus Unum is a motto of the United States. It's Latin for 'One out of many' and that means there's one nation made out of the many states (or people). So the United States uses the ancient language of the Romans to express its central identity. Liberty is the main aspiration of the constitution of the United States. And that comes from the Roman Empire, too, where *Libertas* was a goddess used on coins by Roman emperors to show off that that's what they were protecting.

The reason the United States has symbols of the Roman world is not because the United States want to be the Roman Empire of today, but simply because the Romans set the template for the image of power. And the ultimate symbol is the eagle, used by the Romans on their standards, and today the eagle sits proudly in the middle of the Great Seal of the United States of America, together with the motto *E Pluribus Unum* clamped in its beak.

The European Union

Much of Europe is today organised into the European Union. Unlike the Roman Empire, the European Union is dedicated to the peaceful development of Europe's political, commercial, and social interests. But the Roman Empire was the first time Europe was governed as a single entity. So that's why, when



the European Union was first created, the treaty was not only signed in 1957 in Rome but also on the very Capitoline hill itself, the spiritual centre of the Roman Empire.

Language

If you've read up to this point in the book, you've taken it for granted that you could do so. If you dropped in here right at this point, you're taking it for granted that you can read this section. Whichever you did, you've been using Roman letters. You've also been using some words that have their origins in the Latin language.

Alphabet soup

Latin comes from the ancient name for the part of the Italy where Rome lies: Latium. The earliest Latin inscription dates to around the end of the seventh century BC. The Etruscans, whose civilisation came before the rise of Rome (see the sidebar 'Other ancient civilisations'), had their own alphabet but very little is known about their language. However, it's very clear that the Latin-speaking peoples used some of the Etruscan letters and letters from Greek, to create their own alphabet, which went like this:

A B C D E F G H I K L M N O P Q R S T V X Z



And of course that's pretty much the same alphabet we use today. Latin doesn't have the letters *J*, *W*, or *Y*. The Romans used *I* to represent sounds we'd use *I* or *J* for, and they used *V* to represent sounds we'd use either *U* or *V* for. Otherwise, it's basically the same. Of course, we now use all sorts of different fonts for these letters, but the basic design hasn't altered.

Official languages

When the Romans conquered their Empire, they found people speaking a vast array of languages and local dialects. You can't run an empire with everyone speaking different words. That's why the British ruled their Empire by using English as the official language, and that's why English is the official language of the United States. So the Romans imposed Latin as the language of government across the Empire. Although everyone continued using local languages, in the West, Latin became everyone's second language, and in the East, Greek was used. What this all means is that the whole Roman Empire was managed with just two main languages: Latin and Greek.

Any self-respecting educated Roman would have been able to use both. Imagine if you set off on a journey from New York or London today to explore all the countries round the Mediterranean and all you needed was English and, say, Spanish. But today you'd need English, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, Turkish, and plenty of others.

Spreading a language like that had a colossal impact on local languages, and that's where you can see the effect of the Romans to this day. The so-called 'Romance' languages like French, Italian, and Spanish, owe a huge amount to the Latin of the Romans. English originally grew out of the Germanic languages, but when the early English-speaking peoples advanced south and west, they adopted Latin words which have ended up in English today. The other way Latin has found its way into English is when a new word is needed and Latin terms are used to make a new one.

Law 'n' order

The Romans had a fully-fledged legal system. They had laws, judges, lawyers, courts, and punishments. Men were tried, with the case being put for the prosecution and the case for the defence. Laws were not only written down, but the Romans also kept a record of case law which means when a law was tested before a court. It all went back to the Law of the Twelve Tables in 449 BC which first set out written law, though all it actually did was modify existing customary laws which weren't written down (see Chapter 10 for information about the Twelve Tables). This type of law is called civil law, and it has had a huge influence on European law.

In about 300 BC, Gnaeus Flavius is supposed to have published legal formulae for the first time. Until then, only priests knew them and had jealously guarded them as secrets. Gnaeus Flavius wasn't the only man who actively treated the law as something to be written about and analysed. Quintus Mutius Scaevola produced a textbook of Roman law which later lawyers made great use of. Men like these established the Roman tradition of seeing the law and its practice as a formal profession in its own right.

Over the next ten odd centuries, all sorts of new laws were passed and it became increasingly complicated. The Western Empire finally collapsed in AD 476, but the Eastern half of the Empire carried on and in AD 529 the Emperor Justinian I (527–565) had the whole lot codified into a single book of law (see Chapter 21 for information on Justinian's reign).

Justinian's book is called the *Codex Iuris Civilis*, or the *Book of Civil Law*. It became the basis of civil law throughout most of Europe right up until the end of the eighteenth century. These are some of the divisions of law it contained:

- ✓ **Citizen law:** Common laws that applied to Roman citizens
- ✓ **Law of Nations:** Common laws applied to foreigners in their dealings with Roman citizens
- ✓ **Private law:** Laws to protect private individuals
- ✓ **Public law:** Laws to protect the state

- ✓ **Singular law:** Laws covering special provisions for people in special circumstances that differ from normal situations
- ✓ **Unwritten laws:** Laws that had become customary over time
- ✓ **Written laws:** Laws made by the decisions of magistrates, the emperor's declarations, and the Senate's decisions



Civil law isn't the same as common law. In England the law is based on common law, which has been made along the way by countless decisions in courts. These decisions were made on three criteria: custom, precedent, and tradition.

Even so, English law has been influenced by Roman law, and so has law in Scotland, which is based on both common and civil law. In the United States, law also has a mixed tradition and it varies from state to state. Louisiana, for example, has laws based on the Roman civil law tradition and so does Canada. So while nowhere today has a legal system exclusively based on Roman law, almost everywhere has been affected by it to some degree.

Philosophy

This probably looks like a rather heavy, deep, and meaningful section. Well, I suppose it is, but plenty of people treat philosophy, and how it should affect the way we live and govern ourselves, as seriously today as the Romans did. The Romans took a lot of their ideas from the Greeks, and it wasn't really until the first century BC that Roman philosophy really started to get written down.

Roman philosophy came in two popular flavours: Epicureanism and Stoicism.

Epicureanism

The Epicureans were devoted to the idea of sensual pleasure with the ultimate aim being complete peace of mind. They took their name from a Greek philosopher called Epicurus (341–270 BC). It was generally believed that the Epicureans were all out for indulging in bodily pleasures, when in reality they were much more interested in pleasing their souls. Physical indulgences were favoured because they stopped the soul from being pained by denial. Epicureans also believed that matter was made up of indestructible atoms moving about in a void, controlled by natural forces: Change comes about when atoms are rearranged.



Lucretius (99–55 BC) is the most famous Roman Epicurean. He put his ideas about the soul, sensation, and thought, as well as the universe and its workings, into his massive poem called *de Rerum Natura* ('On the Nature of Things'), which has survived. Lucretius influenced many later philosophers such as Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655), a Frenchman. Gassendi accepted Lucretius's ideas about the atomic basis of matter and believed this should

form the foundations of scientific research. But he also believed this should be compatible with Christianity. Much more recently the English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) followed the same principles of trying to associate facts found in physics into a philosophical structure – which was pretty much exactly what Lucretius had started to do 2,000 years earlier.

Stoicism

Stoicism was much more popular than Epicureanism, and it was all about accepting things as they are – which was right up the Romans' street as there was nothing they admired more than manly virtues (which they called *virtus*) and being tough even in the worst possible circumstances. Stoics believed that only things that have a physical presence actually exist. The Stoics left a valuable legacy in their construction of a system of morality based on pure reasoning. They also anticipated the way in which the mind is thought to work today because they believed that the body and the mind must obey the laws of physics like everything else, and that, therefore, the state of mind was the result of that.

Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–80) was a Stoic Roman Emperor. He, like other Stoics, was dedicated to accepting life the way it is and responding to difficulties with self-sufficiency. Marcus Aurelius composed 12 books of *Meditations*, all of which have survived. Here's one of his thoughts, which gives you a good idea of his mindset:



'Consider yourself to be dead, and to have completed your life up to the present; and live the remaining time allowed you according to nature. Love only what happens to you and is spun with the thread of your destiny. For what is more suitable?'

The idea of city

Many of us today live in cities, far more than in ancient times. The Romans really established the idea, not just of a city as a place to live, but also as a place that was a centre of government with public services, security, and identity. For sure, cities had existed before the days of the Roman Empire, but on nothing like the same scale, nor were they anything like so widespread.

The very basis of the whole Roman world was the city. Where the Romans found cities, especially in places like Greece, Asia Minor (Turkey), and North Africa, they adapted them into Roman cities. In the West, they often had to build cities and link them into the infrastructure of the rest of the Roman world. Roman cities, while individually unique, were all modelled on a similar idea of what a city should be. So anyone travelling around the Roman world had a fairly good idea of what to expect wherever he or she went.

Norman architecture

The Normans, from Normandy in northern France, became the most powerful force in western Europe in the eleventh century. They understood what power was all about. Although they had nothing like the resources of the Roman Empire, they did what they could to copy the power of Roman architecture by using arches and vaults to create their castles and cathedrals. The style is called Romanesque for obvious reasons, and it heralded the great age of medieval architecture that followed.

Although the styles of cathedrals changed over later centuries, many have their origins in the

massive and heavy Norman arches of the original structures. Sometimes the churches and cathedrals were built out of Roman masonry that was still lying around. Take a look at St Albans Abbey church in England if you ever get a chance. It's built out of Roman brick and tiles taken by the monks from the ruined Roman city just down the hill. At the other end of the Roman world, the Roman Christian churches in Constantinople (now Istanbul) provided a template for the later mosque builders, who were amazed at the vast church of Santa Sophia built by the sixth-century Emperor, Justinian I (AD 527–565).



Many of the major cities of Europe today are a direct legacy of the Roman Empire. Consider London, capital of the United Kingdom, for example. It must be the most remarkable of all. London sits on the river Thames in England, but until the Romans came in AD 43, there was no London at all, or any kind of settlement apart from scattered farmsteads. The Romans spotted the potential of the river and an ad hoc trading settlement sprang up around a bridgehead that they built. Within a few generations, London had grown into the biggest Roman city with the biggest public buildings north of the Alps. Although it fell into disrepair when the Romans left, by the Middle Ages it was well on the way to being one of the largest cities in all of Europe.

The Roman influence on cities goes beyond Europe. Take a look at the great buildings of Washington DC, the US capital. When Pierre L'Enfant (1754–1825) produced his plans for the city in 1791, he got some of his inspiration from the classic Roman model of a street grid system. The Supreme Court (1928) uses the architectural model of a great Roman temple. Washington's Capitol (begun 1793) uses Roman types of architecture throughout, and, of course, most of the other state capitols are modelled on Washington's. Designed by Daniel Burnham, Washington DC's Union Station (opened 1907) owes its main design to the Baths of Diocletian (built AD 298–306) and its entrance to the Arch of Constantine (built 315), both in Rome.

A Long Time Ago but Not That Far Away

The Roman Empire in the West started to fall apart permanently about 1,600 years ago. In the broader history of the world, which runs into billions of years, that's no more than a pipsqueak of time. So it's not really that surprising that the Romans have had such a substantial effect on the world we live in today because they weren't very long ago.

There have been plenty of other influences along the way, and, of course, we do things the Romans could never have imagined. It's also true that there isn't a single person around today who can reliably trace his or her family tree all the way back to the Romans. But that's just because it's too long for the records to have survived.

The truth is that lots of us, millions and millions of us, have the genes of people who lived in the world of the Romans. And if you plucked a Roman out of his world and brought him to ours in a time machine, yes sure, he'd be amazed by our technology and how many of us there are. But once our Roman had settled down, he'd recognise huge amounts of his world in ours, right from the streets we drive down to the law courts where lawyers battle it out, and even to the lettering on our buildings and books. So if the Romans ever seemed irrelevant, they shouldn't do so now, wherever you live in the world today.