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2. Rome: Roman Civilization

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2. Rome: Roman Civilization

Abstract

For our purpose, the importance of the Romans lies in the fact that it was most directly from the ruins of their civilization that our own developed. Therefore, before completing the account of the decline and fall of their empire, we will consider the cultural contributions made by the Romans.

The Romans were not great cultural innovators. During the early republic, they were a simple agricultural people who were isolated from the civilizations upon whom the Greeks had drawn as well as from the Greeks themselves. As they began to expand, they came into contact with the Greeks -- first in southern Italy and then in the Balkans -- and began appropriating from them. But this was not properly Greek (or Hellenic) Civilization from which they were borrowing. It was what is known as Hellenistic, and that requires some explanation. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Rome, Greece, Golden Age, Tiber River, Roman Republic, citizenship

Disciplines

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Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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2. Roman Civilization

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The Romans were not great cultural innovators. During the early republic, they were a simple agricultural people who were isolated from the civilizations upon whom the Greeks had drawn as well as from the Greeks themselves. As they began to expand, they came into contact with the Greeks -- first in southern Italy and then in the Balkans -- and began appropriating from them. But this was not properly Greek (or Hellenic) Civilization from which they were borrowing. It was what is known as Hellenistic, and that requires some explanation.

We have already noted that Alexander the Great died in 323 B. C., after a reign of thirteen years, during which time he conquered a large empire stretching from western India to Egypt and the Balkans. Politically, this empire then split into a number of states, the most important of which were Macedonia (including Greece), Syria (the name often given to the Asiatic part of the Alexandrian empire), and Egypt. The characteristic form of government in these successor states was despotic monarchy, but the Greeks were permitted enough freedom to conduct one more significant political experiment. Several Greek cities succeeded in establishing briefly a state in which the powers of government were divided between the cities themselves and a central government. This arrangement is called

federalism. Some of the framers of the American constitution in 1787 had familiarized themselves thoroughly with this Hellenistic Greek achievement.

Bustling activity characterized the economic life of the successor states. In some areas such advanced agricultural methods as crop rotation and fertilization were practiced. More than one hundred new cities were established, some of them (like Alexandria in Egypt) by Alexander himself. Industry and trade flourished within these cities and gave rise to a higher level of commerce than mankind had ever before attained. New techniques were devised and old ones expanded to accommodate the businessman. These included a larger supply of coinage, banks, and credit instruments (one of them similar to the modern check). The benefits of this economy accrued mostly to the very few, leaving the large majority of people relatively untouched by the increased production of goods and services.

Culturally, there was a partial fusion of the Greek and the Oriental (used here to refer to the culture of people living in that part of Asia west of India and south of the Caspian Sea). It was quite unlike anything that had ever occurred before, and the result of the fusing is called Hellenistic Civilization. The most significant thing about Hellenistic Civilization is that it represented an attempt to make one world of the highly developed cultures of the Tigris-Euphrates valley, Egypt, Greece, and the intermediate regions. Many Greeks went abroad after the conquests of Alexander, either as government officials in the new cities or as businessmen. Throughout the Hellenistic world their culture was studied and copied. Their language was used by the educated classes everywhere. In turn, Oriental ideas and institutions filtered into the Mediterranean basin. We must not exaggerate. Culturally, Greeks never became Persians and Persians never became Greeks. One world seems to have been Alexander's dream, but it never was an actuality. But there was enough cross-fertilization to eliminate forever the distinctions which the Greeks had drawn between themselves and the "barbarians."

There is considerable evidence that, by the time of Alexander, much of the Greek creative energy had about run its course. The large volume of Hellenistic literature contains much that is worthy but little that would be called great. Hellenistic architecture was displayed, not so much in temples as in public buildings, palaces, and private homes. It is monumental and ornate, but more derivative than original. Hellenistic sculpture and painting gives the impression of realism. In portraying life as it was actually lived, it sometimes borders on the offensive. Much effort was spent in rehashing Greek learning into the forms of summaries and compendiums, projects which were more valuable in preserving what was already known than they were in contributing new knowledge. Euclid (lived about 300 B. C.) illustrates this. He assembled the previous work done in geometry and then, like many other Hellenistic compilers, added something original of his own, in the

form of the new theories which he devised. His text was used to teach geometry for more than two thousand years. Finally, during the Hellenistic period antiquarians set to work collecting objects of a more creative past.]

*One of the exceptions from the foregoing generalizations is the field of natural science. Hellenistic scholars had more data available to them than did the Greeks, and had some more respect for the practical. One of them, Aristarchus (lived about 270 B. C.), asserted that the earth revolves around the sun, but this remained the minority opinion until modern times. Ptolemy (c. 90 - 168), expressing the opinion of the majority in an honest attempt to explain what was observed in the heavens, formulated the geocentric theory which Copernicus disproved in the sixteenth century. Another, Eratosthenes (c. 276 - c. 194 B. C.), estimated the diameter of the earth (he and many others assumed that it was spherical) with a reasonably small error. Herophilus (lived about 300 B. C.) and Erasistratus (lived about 300 B. C.) dissected human bodies and made pioneer contributions to physiology and medicine. Much of this scientific work was done at Alexandria, in Egypt, where Hellenistic monarchs had gathered a tremendous library and patronized scholars who studied and worked there. Men like Archimedes (c. 287 - 212 B. C.), who studied in Alexandria but lived in his native Sicily, along with their investigations in the field of pure science, were able to invent useful devices, such as steam engines and water pumps, but they were never really put to practical use.]

This, in brief, was the culture which the Romans came upon when they conquered most of the Hellenistic world and which they recognized immediately as more advanced than their own. In the face of opposition from those who thought that the old Roman ways were still best, things Greek were introduced and became fashionable. This is true whether they happened to be art objects brought from the wars to adorn Roman houses or the Greek gods, from Zeus on down, who were taken over and given Roman names. There was virtually no Roman literature or architecture and no philosophy before the Greek models for these endeavors were available. Greek slaves were assigned to teach many Roman youths, some of whom went to Greece to finish their education. A Roman poet summed it up by saying that, as he saw it, conquered Greece took Rome, her capter, captive. To a certain extent, this situation persisted through the remainder of their history, for the Romans continued to draw upon the East. It is important to remember that, culturally, the Roman Empire always remained basically divided. While the Romans were able to carry civilization to the barbarian West, they could do little more for the Greek East than unite it politically and economically, give it law and order, and provide the atmosphere in which it could follow its own lines of development.

And yet, we cannot dismiss Roman Civilization quite like this. Actually, in many respects, Roman strengths complemented Greek. Whereas the Greek was inclined to scorn the practical, that

Epicurean - eat, drink & be merry

was the Roman's forte and he was apt to be uninterested in (some would say downright incompetent in) the abstract, the theoretical. Furthermore, when the Roman took over something Greek, he often changed it to fit his needs and actually made it a part of himself. Roman architecture is not simply Greek architecture recopied; the Roman incorporated such features as the arch and the dome into their prevailing Greek patterns. Nor is Roman bust sculpture simply Greek sculpture recopied; Roman conviction that a man's character is expressed in his facial characteristics led to a realism which went beyond the Hellenistic. When his experience required something that could not be borrowed from the Greek, the Roman was not incapable of originality. For example, he developed several literary forms, including the essay and satire, which had not been characteristic of the Greeks.

The great contribution of the Romans is in the practical sphere of government and law. They united the Mediterranean world politically for a long period of time. If it be granted that a modicum of political order is necessary to the natural development of civilization, then their achievement was definitely a positive one -- more than the rather negative role often attributed to the policeman. Although there were many occasions when the mailed fist was scarcely concealed beneath the surface of things, the agent of imperial cohesion was not primarily force, but mutual respect and law. It is true that the Roman policy of allowing a considerable degree of local autonomy was, in a very real sense, forced by circumstances. Nevertheless, the Romans understood human nature sufficiently to turn necessity to good advantage. The spirit of tolerance and the accommodation to custom which provincial officials were expected to display in most matters paid dividends in the loyalty and cooperation which long outlasted the Pax Romana.

[It was in the process of governing that the practical ^{technology} Romans built roads, ^{and} which were not equalled until the eighteenth century; bridges, a few of which were still in use in the nineteenth century; aqueducts, twelve of which carried more than 300,000,000 gallons of water to the city of Rome each day; public buildings, whose ruins can be seen from Palestine to Spain; and hospitals for army personnel and sometimes for civilians, the first such institutions in European history. All of this was done by a people with exceedingly little interest in pure geometry or in the theory of medicine. Evidences of this achievement stood for centuries. Not only were they of antique value, but they served, even if in ruins, as an inspiration and a model for men who were trying to restore the essence that we know as civilization when it slipped away from the Western Roman World. ^{both theaters}

Two philosophies which were developed in Greece at the beginning of the Hellenistic period had considerable influence upon the Romans and upon their contribution to Western culture. In many respects they began as philosophies of despair, coming as they did at a time when the independent polis was disappearing

from the scene. Its place was being taken by the large and impersonal state in which the thinking individual must have felt that he was being submerged completely. Under these circumstances, the polis-centered thought of Plato and Aristotle could have little appeal. A thinking man would have to find the good life apart from the state or, at most, only coincidentally with it. Where but within himself could he seek the completeness of his life. What the self-conscious individual who did not want to abandon philosophy needed and wanted was an ethical rationale that would enable him to resist whatever winds might blow in a vastly different and uncharted world. The recurring theme of individualism so pronounced in Hellenistic art, literature, and also in philosophy testifies to the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty. Both Epicureanism and Stoicism appealed to upper-class Romans at a time when their horizons were being extended beyond their proud city and beyond Italy, and when they too were feeling the very foundations of old and cherished ways cracking beneath them.

* Epicurus (342-271 B. C.) and his followers based their philosophy on the assumption of Democritus that man (and everything else in the universe) is nothing more than a combination of atoms, which separate when he dies. The gods exist, but they have nothing to do with man and the world. For those who had a fear of death and who were trying to compensate for it, Epicurus had a simple comfort. When one is alive, he wrote, there is no death. When death is present a man is no longer. Thus, there is no reason at all to fear. Since man is a chance combination of atoms, there can be no real purpose in this universe other than the purposes of individuals. The goal of life, according to the Epicureans, must be happiness, which they interpreted to mean freedom from fear and pain rather than sensual indulgence. They were convinced that the so-called vices usually involve pain, and the so-called virtues, pleasure. But, if carried too far, virtue brings pain, too. The recommended course, then, was to keep human wants so few and simple that they could be satisfied with a minimum effort. Particularly after about 100 B. C., this philosophy won adherents among the Romans. Some of them kept it on the plane just described, while others chose to justify by it the life summed up in the phrase: eat, drink, and be merry

Brings to gether by chance
not being disappointed
Upper class Romans

* Stoicism, which was much more influential than Epicureanism, underwent a longer period of development and was changed considerably from its original version. Founded by a man named Zeno (355-263 B. C.), a native of Cyprus, Stoicism took its name from the stoa, or Athenian porch, from which he taught. The Stoics did not accept the Epicurean view that the universe and man were chance combinations of atoms. They believed that the world was governed by a divine spirit. This spirit might be called Providence, God, or Reason. The Stoics held that man possessed a spark of this divine spirit within himself. His goal in life was virtue, not happiness, following a path laid down by Reason. But should a man persevere, since the path of virtue is filled with frustrations? The Stoic answered

Also upper class Roman

*Upper class)
Older Romans believed this
Duty was ~~virtue~~ virtue.*

affirmatively. There was no hope of reward in this life or in another, but a man had to follow Reason simply because he knew deep within himself that it was his duty. All such externals as fame, wealth, ridicule, or poverty were to be scorned. One must exercise his own will and be indifferent to both pain and pleasure. He must keep a stiff upper lip in the face of whatever comes or, to put it another way, in the face of whatever God decrees. Some Stoics condoned withdrawal from the world, even suicide, but they were in the minority. It is evident that, unmodified, this was hard, chilly, and -- to be sure -- stoical doctrine.

*Just is Justice
(Natural)
Lex is Roman
made Law*

Three things might be said of Stoicism at this point. First, when it was introduced into Rome during the second century B. C., it appealed to many Romans because of its intense emphasis on duty and self-control. They recognized a similarity to declining republican virtues which they hoped to restore. Second, Stoicism was primarily a philosophy and an ethical system, not a religion. It posited no gods to placate and offered no hope of personal immortality. The most one could expect was that the spark of the divine within man would return to the divine spirit after death -- a small comfort to most men. There were Romans during the empire and others who virtually made Stoicism into a monotheistic religion, with a God to whom prayers could be directed and who had provided for the survival of a soul after death. This, however, represented an addition which was no part of the original system.

Third, Stoicism was extremely significant for the future because of two of its emphases. First, since all men have the divine spark within them, all men are brothers and are equal before God. It was only one step to add that they should be equal before the law. Second, the Stoics stressed that there is a law which our reason leads us to comprehend, above man-made laws and at all times to be their model, from God, incapable, and fittingly called natural law. These two emphases came at one of the crucial turning-points in human political development. In a very real sense the Stoics were able to provide an answer in the field of thought -- they coined the word cosmopolis (world state) -- to correspond with the action of Alexander the Great in reaching for some more-inclusive political institution than the city-state, one in which the individual would of necessity be but an infinitesimal part of the whole. Had not the Romans actually succeeded in doing what Alexander's death prevented him from completing? Should not Roman citizenship and the system of Roman law, dealing with individuals who were engaged in the slow and tortuous process of adjusting to a world-state, bear at least some evidence of Stoic influence?