



Chapter 35

Daily Life in the Roman Empire

How did wealth affect daily life in the Roman Empire?

35.1 Introduction

In this chapter, you'll explore the daily life of people living in the Roman Empire at the height of its power—around 100 C.E. "All roads lead to Rome," boasted the Romans. For thousands of miles, road markers showed the distance to Rome. But more than roads connected the empire's 50 million people. They were also connected by Roman law, Roman customs, and Roman military might.

If Rome was the center of the empire, the Forum was the center of Rome. The word *forum* means "gathering place." The original Forum was an open area used for merchants' stalls, and for viewing races, games, and plays. In time, the Forum became a sprawling complex of government buildings, meeting halls, temples, theaters, and monuments. This was the heart of life in Rome.

In this chapter, you will visit this bustling center of Rome's vast empire. You'll learn about eight areas of daily life in ancient Rome and discover how life differed for the rich and the poor.

A vast network of roads helped to unite the Roman Empire.

Roman Roads, About 100 C.E.



◀ The Forum was the center of the city and the empire of Rome.

35.2 Daily Life in Ancient Rome

If you had visited Rome in the 1st century C.E., you would have seen a city of great contrasts. Nearly one million people lived in the empire's capital city. Rome was full of beautiful temples, stately palaces, and flowering gardens. Yet most of its people lived in tiny apartments crammed into narrow, dirty streets.

In the city's **Forum**, or public gathering place, wealthy Roman women shopped for goods, **accompanied** by their slaves. Proud senators strolled about, protected by their bodyguards, while soldiers marched through the streets. Merchants and craft-people labored at their trades. Foreigners roamed the streets from such faraway places as Britain, Spain, and Egypt. And in the midst of it all were Rome's slaves—hundreds of thousands of them, many of them captured in war.

People and goods flowed into Rome from the four corners of the empire. Wealthy Romans spent great sums of money on silks, perfumes, jeweled weapons, and musical instruments. They decorated their homes with statues, fountains, and fine pottery.

But the rich were only a small part of Rome's population. Most of the city's people lived in filthy neighborhoods filled with crime and disease. Their children were lucky to live past age ten. To keep the poor from turning into an angry, dangerous mob, Roman emperors gave away food and provided entertainment, such as gladiator contests and chariot races.

The empire had many large cities, but most people lived in the countryside. There, too, most of the people were poor. Some worked their own small farms. Others labored on huge estates owned by the rich.

Forum the center of most of the important public activities of the city Rome and its empire

The area known as the Forum was the heart of Rome's business, government, and religious life.



35.3 Law and Order

The Romans always believed in the **rule of law**. In the days of the republic, the Senate and the assemblies were important sources of law. But in the empire, the **ultimate** source of law was the emperor. As one Roman judge said, "Whatever pleases the emperor is the law."

Even in the empire, however, Romans honored some of their old traditions. The Senate continued to meet, and senators had high status in society. They had their own styles of clothing. They might wear special rings, pins, or togas (robes) trimmed with a wide purple stripe. Important senators had their own bodyguards. These guards carried *fasces*, bundles of sticks with an ax in the center. The fasces were symbols of the government's right to punish lawbreakers. When carried inside the city, the ax was removed, to symbolize the right of Roman citizens to appeal a ruling against them.

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

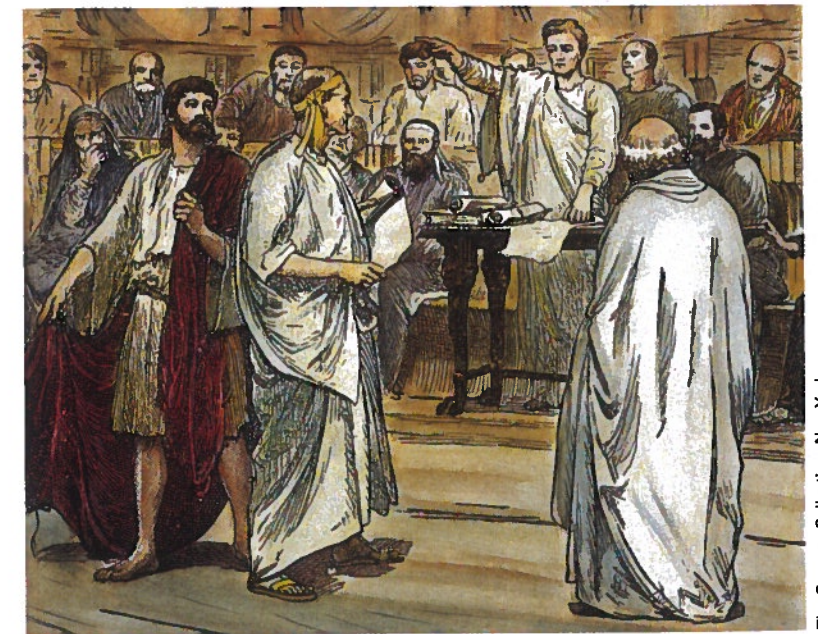
Romans tried to protect themselves against crime. Rich men tried to hide their wealth by wearing old, dirty togas when they traveled at night. Women and children in rich families were told never to go outdoors alone, even during the day.

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

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

rule of law the idea that people should live according to a set of agreed-upon laws

In Rome's law courts, lawyers represented both accused persons and their accusers.



35.4 Religion

Religion was important to the Romans. As you may know, the Romans adopted many Greek gods. They also adopted gods from other cultures to create their own group of gods.

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

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

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

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

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

Bulls were often sacrificed to Mars, the Roman god of war.



35.5 Family Life

Family life in Rome was ruled by the **paterfamilias** (pah-ter-fah-MEE-lee-us), or "father of the family." A Roman father's word was law in his own home. Even his grown sons and daughters had to obey him.

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

Wealthy Roman women ran their households. They bought and trained the family's slaves. Many had money of their own and were active in business. They bought and sold property.

Roman babies were usually born at home. The Romans kept only strong, healthy babies. If the father didn't approve of a newborn, it was left outside to die or to be claimed as a slave. Romans found it strange that other people, such as the Egyptians, raised all their children.

Babies were named in a special ceremony when they were nine days old. A good-luck charm called a *bulla* (BOO-lah) was placed around the baby's neck. Children wore their bullas throughout childhood.

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

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

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

paterfamilias the oldest male of a Roman household; his word was law for the family

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



35.6 Food and Drink

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

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

For breakfast, Romans usually ate a piece of bread and a bowl of beans or porridge. Porridge was an oatmeal-like cereal made from grains like barley or wheat. Lunch might include a small bit of cheese and bread, and perhaps some olives or celery.

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

Roman markets offered many choices to those who could afford them. Wealthy Roman women or their slaves shopped for the perfect foods for fancy dinner parties. Merchants often kept playful monkeys or colorful birds on display to attract customers. Shelves were packed with fruits, live rabbits, chickens, geese, baskets of snails, and cuts of meat. Large clay jars were filled with a salty fish sauce, called *garum*, that the Romans liked to pour over the main dish at dinner.

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



35.7 Housing

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

Wealthy Romans lived in grand houses, built of stone and marble. Thick walls shut out the noise and dirt of the city.

Inside the front door was a hall called an *atrium* where the family received guests. An indoor pool helped to keep the atrium cool. An opening in the roof let in plenty of light.

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

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

Nearby, many of the poor crowded into tall apartment buildings. Others lived in small apartments above the shops where they worked. Without proper kitchens, the poor cooked their meals on small portable grills, which filled the rooms with smoke.

The apartments were cramped, noisy, and dirty. Filth and disease-carrying rats caused sickness to spread rapidly. Fire was another danger. Many of the buildings were made of wood, and the cooking grills caught fire easily. In 64 C.E., a disastrous fire broke out that burned down much of the city.



In this atrium of a wealthy Roman’s home, you can see the roof opening that let in light and the indoor pool that helped to cool the house.

Unlike the rich, the empire’s poor lived in crowded, dirty apartment buildings.



35.8 Education

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

In wealthier families, boys and girls were tutored by their fathers, or often by slaves, until they were about six years old. Then boys went off to school. Classes were held in public buildings and private homes. Many of the tutors were educated Greek slaves.

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

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

Roman boys learned Latin, Greek, math, science, literature, music, and public speaking. They typically became soldiers, doctors, politicians, or lawyers. Girls might become dentists, real estate agents, or tutors. Some female slaves or freedwomen could become midwives (nurses who helped with childbirth).

Upper-class boys stayed in school until age 12 or 13. Boys from very wealthy families often continued their studies until they were 16, when they began to manage their own properties.

Wealthier Roman families hired tutors to teach their children.



35.9 Recreation

There were many forms of recreation in Rome. Wealthy Romans had a lot of **leisure**, because slaves did the work. The rich enjoyed plays in theaters and musical performances in one another's homes.

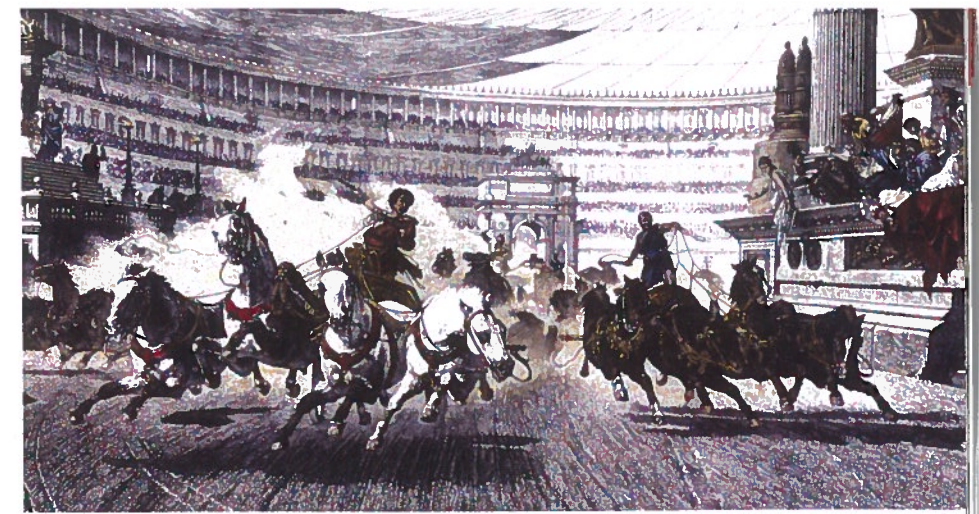
Both rich and poor often relaxed at Rome's public baths. There they could bathe, swim, exercise, and enjoy a steam bath or a massage. The baths also had gardens, libraries, shops, and art galleries.

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

Romans watched gladiators fight in large public arenas, like the **Colosseum**. Both men and women were gladiators. Usually, they were slaves or prisoners of war, although some won or bought their freedom in time. The crowd shouted as the gladiators fought each other and wild animals to the death. Many thousands of gladiators died bloody and painful deaths for the entertainment of the spectators.

A favorite gathering place was the **Circus Maximus**, a huge racetrack with room for 200,000 spectators. There, Romans watched thrilling chariot races. Wealthy citizens sat on plush cushions close to the track, with shades protecting them from the sun. The poor sat on wooden benches high above the track.

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



At the Circus Maximus, chariot races (top) thrilled thousands of spectators. Rome's gladiator contests (bottom) were bloody—and deadly.

Colosseum a large arena in Rome where gladiator contests and other games and sporting events were held

Circus Maximus a large Roman stadium primarily used for chariot races

35.10 Country Life

Rome was one of many cities scattered throughout the Roman Empire. But 90 percent of the empire's people lived in the country. There, too, rich and poor had very different lives.

Wealthy Romans often owned country **estates** with large homes, called villas. A villa was a place for Romans to invest their money in raising crops and livestock. And it was a pleasant place to relax in the summer's heat.

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

The empire's farms provided much of the food for Rome and other cities. They produced grain for bread, grapes for wine, and olives for oil. Goats and sheep provided cheese, and their skins and wool were made into clothing. Cattle and pigs were raised for their meat. Farmers also kept bees for making honey, the sweetener used by the Romans.

Slaves did much of the actual work of farming. Overseers, or supervisors, kept a close eye on the slaves and often treated them cruelly.

Many people in the countryside were not slaves, but their lives were hard. They lived in huts and worked their own small farms, trying to earn enough to survive. Or, they labored on the estates, tending the animals, helping with the crops, or working as servants. In the 1st century C.E., Paul of Tarsus, a Christian writer, summed up the lives of the empire's poor. He wrote, "He who does not work shall not eat."

At a Roman villa, lush landscaping surrounds the large house.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about daily life for the rich and the poor in the Roman Empire. Rome was a large, thriving capital city.

Daily Life in Ancient Rome Nearly one million people lived in the city of Rome. The Forum was its center. The empire had many large cities, but most people lived in the country.

Law and Order Romans believed in the rule of law. Laws were strict, but crime was common. Any Roman could accuse someone else of a crime. A jury decided the case.

Religion Religion was part of daily life. Romans made offerings to the gods. Festivals and holy days were held throughout the year. Each home had an altar for household gods and spirits. The Romans also honored their emperors as gods.

Family Life Each family was ruled by the paterfamilias. At nine days old, a baby was given a bulla, which he or she wore throughout childhood. Between 14 and 18, a boy became a man. Girls became adults when they were married, between 12 and 18.

Food, Drink, and Housing Only the rich had kitchens. The poor cooked on small grills or bought "fast food." The main foods were bread, beans, spices, vegetables, cheeses, meats, and garum. Drinks included water and hot water with herbs and honey. The rich lived in large houses, built around a central atrium. The poor crowded into apartment buildings.

Education and Recreation Many poor children in Rome learned trades, instead of going to school. Wealthier boys and girls were tutored by their fathers or by slaves until they were about 6. Then boys went to school. Roman boys learned Latin, Greek, math, science, literature, music, and public speaking. Upper-class boys stayed in school until age 12 or 13. The rich enjoyed plays and musical performances. Both rich and poor often relaxed at Rome's public baths. Besides celebrating many festivals, rich and poor alike enjoyed viewing gladiator contests and chariot races.

Country Life Ninety percent of the empire's people lived in the country. The wealthy often owned villas. Farms provided much of the food for the cities. Slaves did much of the farm work. Many country people were not slaves, but their lives were hard. They lived in huts and worked their own small farms or on the great estates.



Many wealthy Romans, such as this woman, were attended by personal servants and slaves.