

◀ The Roman Forum was the center of business, government, and religious life.

Daily Life in the Roman Empire

35.1 Introduction

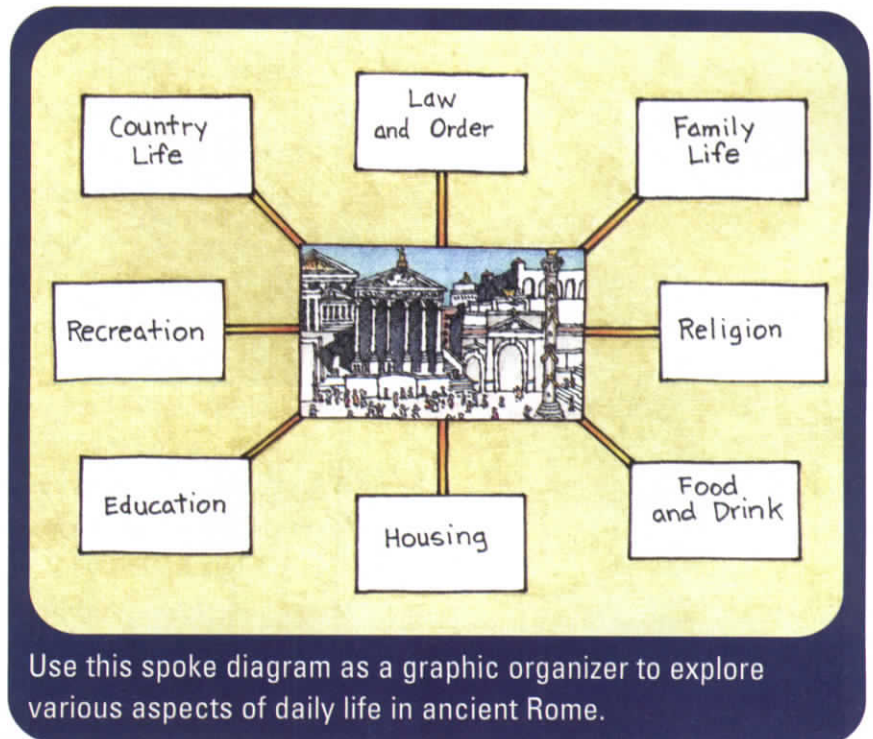
In the last chapter, you learned how Rome became the center of a sprawling empire. In this chapter, you'll explore what **daily life** was like for people living in the empire at the height of Rome's power—around 100 C.E.

"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 in Rome was an open area used for merchants' stalls, races, games, and plays. In time, the Forum

became a sprawling complex of government buildings, meeting halls, temples, theaters, and monuments. This collection of buildings and plazas was the heart of Rome's religious, business, and government life. If you wanted to find out what life was like for people in the Roman Empire, the Forum would be a good place to start.

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





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

35.2 Daily Life in Ancient Rome

If you had visited Rome in the first century or two C.E., you would have seen a city of great contrasts. Nearly a 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 markets, wealthy Roman women shopped for goods, accompanied by their slaves. Proud senators strolled with their bodyguards while soldiers tramped through the streets. Merchants and craftspeople 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 fabulous sums of money on silk, 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 the age of 10. To keep the poor from becoming a dangerous mob, Roman emperors gave away food and provided entertainment like gladiator games 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.

Let's take a closer look at daily life in the empire.

35.3 Law and Order

Romans always believed in the rule of law. In the days of the republic, the Senate and the assemblies were important sources of law. 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 their old traditions. The Senate continued to meet, and senators had high status in society. They even had their own styles of clothing. They might wear special rings, pins, or togas (robes). Important senators had their own bodyguards. The guards carried fasces, bundles of sticks with an ax in the center. The fasces were symbols of the government’s right to use physical punishment on lawbreakers.

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 richer neighborhoods but rarely patrolled the poorer 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 faced harsher punishments than the rich and sometimes even torture.

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





Bulls were often offered as a sacrifice to Mars, the Roman god of war.

35.4 Religion

Religion was very important to the Romans. In an earlier chapter, you learned that the Romans adopted many Greek gods. They also adopted gods from other cultures to create their own group of Roman 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.

Special 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 worshiped its own household gods and spirits. The family hearth, or fireplace, was sacred to the goddess Vesta. During the main meal of the day, 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, 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 gods and forms of worship to Rome. The Romans welcomed these new religions as long as they didn't encourage disloyalty to the emperor.

35.5 Family Life

Family life in Rome was ruled by the *paterfamilias*, 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 often had to work in order to feed and care for their families.

Wealthy Roman women ran their households. They bought and trained the family’s slaves. Many wanted money of their own and were active in business. Often 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. Romans found it strange that people like 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* 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 celebrate 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.



Roman parents allowed only strong, healthy babies to live.

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





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

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*, where people could buy hot and cold foods that were ready to go. 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, cheese, and meats. Favorite drinks included plain water, hot water with herbs and honey, and wine.

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 much fancier 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. Their 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 the Romans liked to pour over the main dish at dinner.

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. The walls were thick to keep out the noise 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. 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 like 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 allowed 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 opening in the roof that let in light and the indoor pool that helped to cool the house.

Unlike the rich, Rome's poor lived in crowded, dirty apartment buildings.





Children from wealthier Roman families were taught by tutors.

35.8 Education

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

In wealthier families, boys and girls were tutored by their fathers, and often by slaves, until they were six or seven. Then they 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.

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

Roman students learned Latin, Greek, math, science, literature, music, and public speaking. Girls were trained to become dentists, real estate agents, tutors, or midwives (nurses who helped with childbirth). Boys typically became soldiers, doctors, politicians, or lawyers.

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

stylus a pointed instrument used for writing

35.9 Recreation

There were many forms of recreation in Rome. Wealthy Romans had lots of leisure time, because slaves did so much of the work. The rich enjoyed going to plays in public 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. Besides places to bathe and swim, the baths 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 games and chariot races.

Gladiator games were held in large public arenas like the Colosseum. Both men and women were gladiators. Usually they were slaves or prisoners of war. 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.

The Romans' favorite gathering place was the Circus Maximus, a huge racetrack with room for 200,000 spectators. There Romans watched and gambled on 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 at the Circus Maximus they could sit together. 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, dangerous chariot races thrilled thousands of spectators.



Rome's gladiator games were bloody—and deadly.

At a Roman villa, lush landscaping surrounded a large house.



35.10 Country Life

Rome was only 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 country estate was a place for Romans to invest their money in crops and livestock. And the villa 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 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 used to make 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 country folk were not slaves, but their lives were very hard all the same. They lived in huts and worked their own small farms, trying to earn enough to live. Or they labored on the great estates, tending the animals, helping with the crops, or working as servants. In the first century C.E., Saint Paul, a Christian writer, summed up the lives of the empire's poor. He wrote, "He who does not work shall not eat."

villa a large house in the country

35.11 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about daily life in the Roman Empire. As the center of the vast empire, Rome became a thriving city. Yet Rome's magnificent temples and monuments were surrounded by narrow, dirty streets crowded with the city's poor.

Rich and poor did have some things in common. They worshiped the same gods, and they enjoyed some of the same spectacles. But in both the city and the countryside, rich and poor lived very different lives. While the wealthy enjoyed many pleasures, the poor struggled to survive.

To the proud Romans, Rome was the center of the world. Yet a great change was brewing in a poor and distant part of the empire. In a province called Judea, a man named Jesus was attracting followers. In the next chapter, you will learn how his teachings gave rise to a new religion, one that would shake the foundations of the mighty Roman Empire.

Many wealthy Roman women were attended by personal servants.

