

B.A. History (Hons.) Sem. II

Social Formations and Cultural Patterns of the Ancient and Medieval World

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Date: 30th March 2020

Unit I Roman Culture – An Introduction and some interesting facts

Ancient Roman culture grew through the almost 1200 years of Rome's civilization. The Romans conquered many peoples and brought back from their wars many things from each land. Their way of life was a mix of many cultures, influences, and religions. Architecture, painting, sculpture, laws, and literature grew to a high level. Slaves, and Christians were treated differently by different rulers. Rome was a trading nation which kept military control over a wide range of peoples, mostly around the Mediterranean.

Social division

There were four classes of people in Rome: the aristocrats, the equestrians, the common citizens, and the slaves. The aristocrat class had about 300 families, mostly senators. The aristocrat class was very powerful. The equestrians were merchants, government builders, and bankers who were rich. The common citizens were farmers, industrial workers, and the city mob. Slaves had to work hard and were usually released when they became old. Some slaves were trained to be gladiators for people to watch. Other slaves worked in rich homes as doorkeepers, litter-bearers, messengers, or servants. Some Greek slaves were teachers.

Religion

The original Roman religion had many Gods, with stories called Roman mythology. Sometimes they also worshipped foreign Gods. At the time of the birth of Jesus, the Roman Empire ruled the entire Mediterranean area. Jesus taught to worship God only. Because Christians worshiped only God and did not join in the festivals to other gods, Romans thought they were unpatriotic. Many Christians were crucified. Romans persecuted them for many years. Sometimes they were killed by animals for a show. However, Christianity still spread in the Roman Empire. A great change took place when Constantine I became emperor. He moved the capital of the empire to Byzantium, converted to Christianity, and protected Christians from harm. Many Romans continued to worship the old Gods.

Common People

In the Imperial Age, the poorer Roman houses were built of sun-dried brick. These houses only had one room. In this one room the family slept, ate, and had

visitors. In the richer homes, statues and paintings were shown. Small rooms were used as living and dining places. In the centre there was a court with a garden. It was decorated with fountains, plants, and flowers. Floors were often made of mosaics, tiles, or marble with lots of different colours. Some walls were painted. Dishes were made of pottery or glass. There was plumbing in some houses and in the public baths, and a sewer system was used. Hot air warmed the house from a heating system. Many rich Romans had two houses, one in the town and one in the country.

Poor people lived in buildings where the top floors were for the poorest. Sometimes they could have as many as 200 steps to reach them. Many fires happened. Buckets of water were used to put out fires, though many times it did not work. Poor people ate vegetables, fish, salt, cheese, fruits, nuts, and olive oil. Meat, especially beef, was usually not eaten. Breakfast was usually not eaten and, for lunch, leftovers were used. Rich people ate dinner before four in the afternoon. They usually ate from three to ten hours. Hands were washed between the courses. One emperor served 22 courses at his dinner parties. If visitors were invited to dinner, slaves were sent to bring them on time, because water clocks did not always work the same. People enjoyed eating grapes for dessert. At first, cold clams and oysters were eaten for dessert, but later people ate them at the beginning of a meal instead.

Baths

The public baths were used not only for bathing. Besides the hot water rooms and cold water rooms, there were gardens, stadiums, art galleries, libraries, and places to eat. There were even underground passageways to get to places more easily. Aqueducts fed water for the baths. They were so well built that some are still used. The Romans were very proud of their aqueducts. They thought they were better than the "useless" Egyptian pyramids. Big ships called quinqueremes had 300 people to row with oars. It could travel 100 miles a day. Trade paths were protected, for some things the ships carried were pearls, pepper, cotton, cinnamon, and silk. A pound of silk, at that time, cost a pound of gold. The language of Rome has influenced many cultures. Its influence can be seen in this Latin Bible from 1407.

Language and literature

The native language of the Romans was Latin. Its alphabet was based on the Etruscan alphabet, which was in turn based on the Greek alphabet. The surviving Latin literature is in Classical Latin from the 1st century BC. The spoken language of the Roman Empire was Vulgar Latin, which differed from Classical Latin in grammar and vocabulary, and eventually in pronunciation. Out of Latin came Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Italian. Latin was used for medicine and science words. Latin remained the main written language of the Roman Empire. Greek became the language spoken by the well-educated elite, because most of the literature studied by Romans was written in Greek. Roman literature was much influenced by Greek literature.

Some of the best known examples are the Aeneid by Virgil, Plutarch's Lives of Famous Men, and Odes by Horace. In the eastern half of the Roman Empire, which later became the Byzantine Empire, Latin did not replace Greek at all. After the death of Justinian, Greek became the official language of the Byzantine government. The expansion of the Roman Empire spread Latin throughout Europe. Vulgar Latin evolved into dialects in different locations, gradually changing into the distinct Romance languages.

Architecture

The Romans built great roads and bridges. They wrote plays and kept the Phoenician alphabet. The Romans were usually practical, and kept the Grecian culture alive. Many of the aqueducts they made are still there and used. Rome also had the first hospitals in the Western World. They also had the first system of state medicine for poor people. Their buildings were decorated by mosaics on the floors, and paintings done directly on the walls.

Music

Woman playing a kithara. A kithara is a Roman instrument. Romans' music was an important part of their lives. Song (known as Carmen) was part of almost every social occasion. Music accompanied spectacles and events in the arena. It was part of the performing arts form called pantomimus, an early form of story ballet that combined expressive dancing, instrumental music and a sung libretto. They were influenced by Etruscan and Greek music. What the Romans sang simply followed the natural melody of the song.

Status of Women

Women had low status in Rome as compared to men. Freeborn women in ancient Rome were citizens (cives), but could not vote or hold political office. Because of their limited public role, women are named less frequently than men by Roman historians. ... The one major public role reserved solely for women was in the sphere of religion: the priestly office of the Vestals. They worked a variety of jobs including merchants, wet nurses, midwives, scribes, and dancers. As you might expect, wealthy women had a much better life than peasant women. They were often educated and taught to read and write. Once married, they had servants and slaves who did most of the hard work around the house.

An ideal woman in Roman culture should be devoted to one man / husband. A good Roman woman was chaste, honourable and fertile. The following ancient Roman women have been considered, ever since, the embodiment of Roman virtue and as women to be emulated. Vesta was highly respected and revered. Vesta was the goddess of the hearth, the home, and domestic life in the Roman religion (identified with the Greek goddess Hestia). Sacrifices to the gods of the home were made by the fire and thrown into the flames.

Clothing Culture

Class Differences Roman dress differed from one class to another. The tunic was worn by plebeians (common people), herdsman and slaves was made from a coarse dark material. The tunic worn by patricians was made from white wool or linen. Magistrates wore the tunic augustic lavia, and senators wore a tunic with broad strips, tunica laticlavia. Military tunics were shorter than those worn by civilians.

Roman Men Wigs were worn by men as a disguise and to hide baldness. Hairstyles and beards varied with the times. In early Roman times, men wore long hair and full beards. For a while, they were clean-shaven with short hair. About 1 Century AD, they had started to style their hair, and wear beards again. Jewelry Rings were the only jewellery worn by Roman citizen men, and good manners dictated only one ring. Of course, some men did not follow "good taste", and wore as many as sixteen rings. Most early Roman jewellery resembled Greek and Etruscan jewelry, but Roman styles eventually developed. The Romans were fond of coloured stones such as topaz, emeralds, rubies and sapphires. Pendants, especially cameos in gold frames, were popular.

Wool, the most commonly used fibre, was most likely the first material to be spun. The sheep of Tarentum were renowned for the quality of their wool, although the Romans never ceased trying to optimise the quality of wool through cross-breeding. The production of linen and hemp was very similar to that of wool and was described by Pliny the Elder. After the harvest, the material would be immersed (most probably in water), it would be skinned and then aired. Once dry, the fibres would be pressed mechanically (with a mallet) and then smoothed. Following this, the materials were woven. Linen and hemp both are durable materials.

Silk and cotton were imported, from China and India respectively. Silk was rare and expensive; a luxury afforded only to the richest. Due to the cost of imported clothing, quality garments were also woven from nettle.

Wild silk, that is, cocoons collected from the wild after the insect had eaten its way out, also was known. Colours popular with Romans were red, indigo, blue, yellow, black and purple. According to Pliny the Elder, a blackish colour was preferred to red. Yellow, obtained from saffron, was expensive and reserved for the clothing of married women or the Vestal Virgins. There were far fewer colours than in the modern era. Archaeological discoveries of Greek vases depict the art of weaving, while writers in the field of antiques mention the art of weaving, dyeing and fibre production.

The variations of clothing worn in Rome were similar to the clothing worn in Greece at the same time, with the exception of the traditionally Roman toga. Until the 2nd century BC, the toga was worn by both genders and bore no distinction of rank - after that, a woman wearing a toga was marked out as a prostitute. The differentiation between rich and poor was made through the quality of the material; the upper-classes wore thin, naturally coloured, wool

togas while the lower-classes wore coarse material or thin felt. They also differentiated by colours used: the toga with a purple border, worn by male children and magistrates during official ceremonies the toga with a gold border, used by generals in their triumphs- toga entirely in purple, worn by statues of deities and emperors saffron toga - worn by augurs and priestesses, white with a purple band, also worn by consuls on public festivals and Red Borders - worn by men and women for festivals.

A Roman could tell how important or wealthy a person was from their toga. Free Roman men wore the toga instead of a cloak. It was originally an Etruscan garment worn in earlier times by both men and women of all classes. The toga was made from white wool or white Egyptian linen. It was square or rectangular in shape and was worn draped around the body. The toga was worn often during state occasions. Consuls and senators wore a toga edged with purple. Some Roman senators wore white togas that were ten meters long. Some emperors' togas were made entirely from either purple or black cloth. Black togas, though, were usually only worn in times of mourning. Togas looked like a white sheet 9 yards long. They were arranged very carefully, in a stylish way. Togas fell out of style rather early. (The toga was inconvenient, and people felt the cold when they wore it.) To get anyone to wear them, even very early emperors had to legislate the wearing of togas by at least senators. Eventually, the emperors gave up.

The Romans switched to comfortable tunics, which looked like long tee-shirts. They were far more practical. Tunics were made of cool linen, for summer wear, and warm wool, for winter wear. Sometimes, they wore trouser like garments.

Footwear also defined a person's position in society. Women wore closed shoes that were either white, green or yellow. Men wore sandals. Patricians wore red sandals with an ornament at the back. Senators wore brown footwear with black straps which wound round the leg to mid-calf, where the straps were tied. Consuls wore white shoes, and soldiers, heavy boots.

After the 2nd century BC, besides tunics, women wore a simple garment known as a stola and usually followed the fashions of their Greek contemporaries. Stolae typically comprised two rectangular segments of cloth joined at the side by fibulae and buttons in a manner allowing the garment to drape freely over the front of the wearer. Over the stola, women often wore the palla, a sort of shawl made of an oblong piece of material that could be worn as a coat, with or without hood, or draped over the left shoulder, under the right arm, and then over the left arm. The palla covered the respectable matron when she went outside. It is often described as a cloak. Women wore a tunica which was adapted from the Greek chiton. The tunica was usually knee-length. Over this the women wore a stola which was a full length from neck to ankle, high-waisted and fastened at the shoulders with clasps. The stola was usually either

white, brown or grey, though some were brightly coloured with vegetable dyes. A shawl, called a palla, was worn wrapped around the shoulders and arm, or could be draped over the head. Cloaks were worn to keep warm. Hats were not worn except by slaves but women were expected to cover their heads when walking outdoors.

Roman Clothing of Late Antiquity (after 284 AD)

Roman fashions underwent very gradual change from the late Republic to the end of the Western empire, 600 years later. In the later empire after Diocletian's reforms, clothing worn by soldiers and non-military government bureaucrats became highly decorated, with woven or embellished strips, clavi, and circular roundels, orbiculi, added to tunics and cloaks. These decorative elements usually comprised geometrical patterns and stylized plant motifs, but could include human or animal figures. The use of silk also increased steadily and most courtiers in late antiquity wore elaborate silk robes. Heavy military-style belts were worn by bureaucrats as well as soldiers, revealing the general militarization of late Roman government. Trousers - considered barbarous garments worn by Germans and Persians - achieved only limited popularity in the latter days of the empire, and were regarded by conservatives as a sign of cultural decay. In early medieval Europe, kings and aristocrats dressed like late Roman generals, not like the older toga-clad senatorial tradition.

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30.03.2020