UNIT 2 - CLASSICAL

World History

The City of Rome

The city of Rome was the capitol of the Roman Empire. As such, it embodied much of the daily rituals of Romans as well as highlighted many of the cultural features of the Roman Empire.

As you read this selection, respond to the following (either below OR on another sheet of paper).

~ Some assert that there were actually TWO Romes. Describe each of those worlds and reflect on what life would have been like for both a patrician and a plebeian.
~ What were bath houses? What functions did they serve in Roman society? Do we have anything in our society that serves a similar purpose?
~ How did Romans honor holidays? Why were there so many holidays?
~ Why were gladiator events so well attended? Why was cruelty inherent to such games? Do we still have "games" like these today?

Excerpt by
Tom Roberts

THE CITY OF ROME

"The City, the City," wrote the great republican statesman, poet, and philosopher Cicero to a friend, "stick to that and live in its full light! Residence elsewhere, as I made up my mind early in life, is to live in mere obscurity." With these words, Cicero was expressing what every good Roman felt about the capital of the Ancient world.

At the height of the Roman Empire, Rome was the center of wealth, taste, and fashion, and the only place on earth where a gentleman of leisure and style would have considered living. It was also the most spectacular tourist attraction in the Ancient world. The pride of Republican statesmen and the extravagant wealth of the emperors had filled it with noble buildings and monuments. From the Tiber to the Seven Hills, one spacious forum opened into the next, hedged by columned temples and stately basilicas. There were statues everywhere. A fourth century inventory of its buildings lists 10,000 of them— almost a second population in marble and bronze.

On the steep side of the Palatine and Capitoline hills— terraced facades, colonnades and porticos climbed to the high-pillared palaces of the Caesars and the gilded eaves of the temple of Jupiter. The slopes of the other hills were draped with luxurious gardens and cypress groves and crowned with imposing villas of the rich.

In the northwest district, the Campus Martius had become a sprawling complex of baths, stadiums, fancy shopping centers, and an impressive auditorium for the Popular Assembly. All this magnificence, linked by miles of covered, colonnaded walkways, gave ancient Rome the air of a permanent World's Fair. Among the attractions were two circuses, two amphitheaters, five lakes, four gladiator schools, 11 imperial baths for the public, 18 squares and forums, 38 parks and public gardens, 290 warehouses, 1,790 palaces, eight bridges, 700 public pools and basins, 500 fountains, 36 marble arches and 37 monumental gates — enough to make any visitor gasp in awe.

Only a step away from all these splendors lay another Rome. Behind the fine facades and noble forums stretched acre after overcrowded acre of tenements where Romans lived in such fetid slums as the world had never seen, nor ever would again until the 19th century. Side by side and block after block rose the tenements, their dingy apartments divided and subdivided into tiny cubicles, which were sometimes airless and windowless. Not that windows were such a blessing; glass was too costly for panes and the openings had either to be hung with cloths or skins, blown by wind and drenched by rain, or closed with solid wooden shutters which kept out bad weather and daylight.

There was plenty of running water, but the pressure from the public aqueducts could supply it only to the first floor, making this the most desirable and expensive floor of the building. People on the upper floors had to carry water up flight after flight of steep stairs or hire professional water carriers. The effort and expense did not encourage cleanliness, and Roman apartments were usually foul-smelling, crawling with vermin and caked with filth and soot. Cooking and heating all had to be done with small charcoal braziers, and fires were constantly breaking out. There were fire brigades, but never enough to cope with the peril. One clever businessman, Crassus — Julius Caesar's onetime colleague — used to rush to every fire he heard about. There in front of the burning building, he would pressure the landlord

to sell out, lowering his offer as the fire raged, until the desperate owner, seeing his investment going up in smoke, finally gave in. Thereupon, he sent in his 500-man building crew to salvage the property. By these devious tactics Crassus became the biggest real estate owner in Rome.

Slum buildings were shoddily built of beams, bricks and clay, and the walls were far too flimsy for the weight pressing on them. As immigrants kept streaming to Rome and emperors reduced available residential space with additional showcase public projects, real estate speculators, with no place to go but up, added more stories to their shaky buildings. Some were even as high as seven stories.

Always to be running up and down stairs, especially at night, was a nuisance. It was tempting simply to toss garbage out of the window into the street, and this was constantly done despite strict laws against it. A number of streets had sewage trenches running down the middle. The stench and the flies of Rome's slums were hardly to be endured. Garbage, animal and human carcasses from the arena, and perhaps even the corpses of the poor were flung indiscriminately into these pits. In all Rome there were few streets wide enough for carts to pass at the same time; thus, traffic jams were so bad under the Republic that one of Julius Caesar's first acts as Dictator had been to ban all vehicles from the center of the city until after dark. After dark, the waiting traffic rushed in and Rome turned into a nightmare of thundering wagon wheels. No sooner had the last wagon cleared the streets when the city groggily awoke to the din of the day. At this early hour, clients were on their way to the houses of their patrons to pay their respects and to pick up handouts of food or money. Almost every man owed homage to some patron; and men of standing all had armies of clients.

The system had its start in the early Republic when immigrants to the city found themselves without legal rights and turned to any available patrician (aristocrat) for protection. An aristocratic patron usually gave each of his clients a patch of land to live on, and guarded him from violence, helped him raise money for dowries, represented him in court and gave him a decent burial when he died. In return, the client gave his patron political support and bound himself and his family to his master with something resembling medieval feudal obligation. The relationship then was something almost sacred, and more binding, at least for the clients, than family ties.

The basilicas - the law courts - were oblong, one-room buildings with nave and aisles separated by rows of columns like a church, and usually open on the side facing the forum. Most basilicas were big enough to try several cases at once, although without dividing walls trials must often have turned into bellowing matches. Not that Roman lawyers needed any encouragement; most of them were happy for a chance to build up reputations as orators, and some of them even hired professional supporters to clap at the most dramatic moments, while water dripped away slowly in the water clocks which timed and limited their speeches to two hours.

About the middle of the afternoon the working day stopped; shopkeepers bolted down their shutters, judges emptied the courts, slaves dropped their loads, beggars stood up and stretched. It was time for the bath. There was no institution in the modern world that compares with the Roman bath. In a city where bathrooms were scarce, the public baths were the only place where people could get cleaned up. But cleanliness was only one of their functions. They were also clubhouses for every man; open to everyone down to the most wretched slave. They offered sociability, recreation, exercise and a multitude of different services under one echoing roof. The sight of crowds of nude Romans, all soaking, steaming and pounding their flabby citified flesh must have been a test for the strong stomach. The noise was appalling.

Rome had no fewer than 856 public baths, most of them hole-in-the-wall affairs. Some baths were for women only; in others women had their own rooms. The most popular baths, by far, were the 11 great imperial baths, as big as modern railway stations, which emperors had built from time to time in Rome to stimulate favor with the masses. The cavernous concrete structures, faced with brick and stucco, some sprawling over acres, have given modern Rome some of its most impressive ruins. In ancient times, the big baths contained not only separate hot-water, cold-water and sometimes lukewarm-water baths, steam rooms, private baths, medicinal baths with doctors in attendance, and locker rooms. But they also contained gymnasiums, libraries, reading rooms and lecture halls, lounges and even art galleries.

The interiors of the big public baths, long since stripped over the succeeding centuries, mounted what is surely the most extravagant display of public luxury the world has ever seen. The halls were paved wall to wall with acres of fitted marble. Hot and cold water gushed through massive silver mouths into sunken marble pools. The walls glistened with brilliant glass mosaics and multicolored marbles— the costly, exotic kinds that the Romans loved for their opulence and for their supposed properties of heat conduction. Under the bathers' feet the marble slabs were warmed by heated air that circulated under them from charcoal furnaces tended by sweating slaves toiling out of sight in the bowels of the building. Also out of sight and underground was a maze of vaulted corridors wide enough for wagons, and widening still further at intersections into regular traffic circles, along which attendants hurried with cartloads of clean and dirty linen... For all this the Romans paid a paltry quarter-cent entrance fee— but were well advised to spend extra pennies on tipping someone to watch their belongings. Towel snatching was common.

Toward the end of the afternoon the crowds in the baths straggled away to dinner, the one big meal of the Roman day. Romans are often pictured— and sometimes picture themselves— as gluttons, gorging themselves from dusk to dawn, vomiting to make room for more. But these were rare extremes. The average Roman was a moderate eater. Breakfast sometimes consisted of nothing more than a glass of water; lunch might be a cold sausage bought from a street vendor. Dinner was elaborate and often lasted for hours—it was the time for friends to get together for conversation, poetry readings, pantomime performances, and music. Guests reclined on cushioned couches— three guests to a couch— around a small table. The couches surrounded the table on three sides; the fourth was left open for serving. Perhaps because of the lack of refrigeration, the Romans habitually disguised their meat dishes with complicated and highly seasoned sauces. A pigeon dish, for instance, might come with sauce made of pepper, parsley, dried mint and saffron pounded into a paste and blended with wine, honey, vinegar, olive oil, crushed nuts and celery.

After the banquet was over, a Roman still had to grope his way home through steep and noisome alleys of the city. To any citizen, even when sober, Rome, after dark, was a dangerous place. There was no street lighting, and there were not enough night watchmen. Rome had no public nightlife. The moment the sun set, families drew back behind closed shutters, leaving the black maze of streets outside to rumbling traffic, a million screaming cats, as well as murderers and thieves. Rich men had torch-bearing bodyguards to light their way and wait outside villa gates while they caroused. But the poor Roman picked his way home warily and alone, his heart in his mouth.

The Romans loved holidays and celebrated them by staging the most elaborate and lurid spectacles the world has ever seen— triumphs, imperial birthdays, feast days, dedications— any excuse

would do. Little by little, decade after decade, they grew until there were over a hundred public festivals. On top of these were special holidays like Trajan's 123 day celebration when he defeated the Dacians on the Danube River. One can only imagine how groggy the capital must have been after a four-month government-backed binge.

In 80 C.E., Rome got a setting worthy of its spectacles when, in a hundred days of continuous celebration, Emperor Titus dedicated the Colosseum. From 80 ponderous arches the amphitheater rose four stories to a height of 150 feet. Vast multiple passageways funneled crowds of 50,000 with efficient speed to their proper seats— the senators, Vestal Virgins, top civil servants and other notables to the front rows, the emperor and his retinue to his box, the lower classes to the higher tiers, and the ragged proletariat to the top. There was elaborate stage machinery. Whole sections of the floor could be lowered to permit a change of scenery. Ramps and elevators brought wild beasts up from subterranean cages. The whole floor could be flooded in a jiffy for the reenactment of historic naval battles...

For a change of pace there were the animal shows when beasts were sometimes pitted against each other in bizarre combinations, like the rhinoceros against wild bulls. The scale of the carnage could be appalling. Once, in Pompey's day, 17 elephants, 500 lions and 410 other African animals were slaughtered. At Trajan's triumph, 11,000 animals were butchered in the arena. In the third century, the Emperor Probus, after defeating the Germans, transformed the Circus Maximus into a forest filled with game— 1,000 ostriches, 1,000 wild boars, 1,000 stags and 1,000 sheep— then let the people rush in to capture or kill whatever they could lay hands on. Keeping the arenas of the Empire adequately stocked was a full-time occupation for an army of game hunters. They operated with such efficiency that in time whole populations were exterminated; elephants vanished from Libya, lions from Thessaly, and hippos from the lower Nile.

Rival to the Colosseum was the Circus Maximus, stretching nearly half a mile along the foot of the Palatine Hill beneath the gorgeous palaces of the Roman emperors. Around the track in rising tiers sits the holiday crowd, 250,000 strong, in togas and parasol hats against the glare, all swaying and shouting. Through the choking dust the figures of the four charioteers can be made out, erect and masterful, helmets and short tunics marked with the color of their teams— White, Red, Blue, and Green— reins tied to their waists, urging their foaming teams around the course for the standard seven-lap, five-mile race. The strutting young charioteers were idols of the mob. Monuments were raised to them everywhere. They had their pick of Rome's women; they earned fortunes in fees and gifts, and were sometimes raised by imperial favor to high posts in the government.

But the people who fascinated the crowd even more were the gladiators, who provided the hard core of the entertainment in the arenas. They were a desperate and dangerous breed. Most of them were prisoners of war, condemned criminals and slaves. But even free men sometimes joined the profession out of sheer love of danger and combat. In the big imperial gladiator schools they lived under the harshest discipline, and always under close military guard. In one common kind of gladiator duel one fighter was armed with a shield and a short sword, and protected by an elaborate cuirass and a huge, embossed helmet The other was naked and unarmed save for a trident like the sea-god Neptune's and a large net which he tried to fling over his opponent to ensnare him. The odds were about even.

Whenever a duelist was struck down, the excited cry "Habet!—He has it!" swept the Colosseum. The wounded gladiator raised his left hand in a plea for mercy. If he had fought bravely the spectators

might wave their handkerchiefs or raise their thumbs and spare him. Thumbs down meant death. In the intervals between bouts the blood-drenched sand was shoveled up and fresh sand sprinkled on the floor. Attendants fancifully costumed as Charon, the mythical ferryman of the River Styx, swarmed around the corpses, probing with hot irons and smashing the skulls of any that showed signs of life. The sight of suffering drew little sympathy. Pliny the Younger, a famous poet, found the gladiator fights "such a depraving sight, but one that inspired indifference towards death and love of honorable wounds, and aroused ambition even in slaves and culprits." In all the writings of pagan Rome the only voice raised in protest to such violence is the famous dramatist and senator, Seneca, who observed,. "I happened to drop in upon the noon show in the arena in hopes of some milder diversion— a spice of comedy, a touch of relief to rest man's eyes after a glut of blood. Far from it. All the previous fighting had been soft-heartedness. Away with such bagatelles! Now for butchery pure and simple!".