

# Life of the People in Ancient Rome

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A drawing of people in ancient Roman society dressed in different clothing indicating their social status. Image from Wikimedia.

The history of the ancient Romans is mostly remembered for its wars and politics. Starting from the city of Rome, in the middle of today's Italy, the Romans took over most of Europe. They reached the northern parts of Africa and most of the Middle East.

About 2,000 years ago, the Roman Empire went through a time of peace called the Pax Romana. It lasted for about 206 years. During the Pax Romana, people who were rich built huge, well-decorated houses. They usually had servants or slaves who had to follow their every order. This was certainly not the life of the average citizen. Although the Roman Empire had many riches, most people were still poor.

## Family life and favorite foods

In Roman family life, the oldest male, known as the patriarch, made all the important decisions. The wife of the patriarch had to take care of the home. She also had to be loyal and obedient to her husband. Women could not be politicians and did not have many rights. They did get more rights in later years, like the right to own property.

The Romans had three main kinds of food: grain, grapes and olives. Every Roman ate these foods daily. The grain, which was mainly wheat, was used to make bread. The grapes were made into wine and the olives were used to make olive oil. Bread was eaten at most meals, especially for the poor. Wine was also served with almost every meal after being mixed with water. The water helped to weaken the effect of the alcohol.

The rich liked to experiment with what they ate. They enjoyed strange food such as jellyfish, peacock, ostrich and fungus. They held huge banquets that lasted all day.

Meanwhile, the poor ate bread, vegetables and porridge, a mushy bowl of boiled grain. They also got their protein by eating some meat and cheese.



## Togas, tunics and social status

When people imagine how the ancient Romans dressed, they usually think of a type of robe called a toga. Not all Romans could wear it, though. Togas were not very comfortable but they showed how important someone was.

The toga was made of an 18-foot-long piece of wool cloth that was carefully wrapped around the body. It did not need buttons or pins if it was wrapped well.

Most citizens wore a white toga, but if someone was important they wore a toga with a purple stripe. The emperor was the most important person in the empire. His toga was all purple.

Women who were married had to dress differently from women who were not. Unmarried women wore tunics, a loose sort of dress. Married women wore stolas, which were like togas.

Togas are no longer popular, but some Roman practices are still around today.

### **A day of exercise and a hot bath with some friends**

The Romans came up with the idea to go to a gym for a workout and then go sweat in a heated room, like a sauna. They also liked to go to the public baths. The baths were places where people could go socialize, exercise, read and relax, as well as to get clean.

A normal trip to the public baths was quite an event. It might begin with some exercise at a gym. Afterward, the visitor made a trip to a warm room, where someone would rub oil all over their body.

Another person then scraped the oil, dirt and sweat off the visitor's body with a metal tool. When clean, the Romans took a swim in the baths. There were both hot water pools and cold water pools. The waters of the public baths were continuously refreshed by aqueducts that carried water. The pools were heated by underground furnaces.



Finally, the visit ended by drinking special mineral waters. These were believed to have healing powers.

During the entire experience, visitors to the baths interacted with fellow citizens. They could meet, talk about politics and get to know each other. This chance to socialize may have been the most important part of going to the baths.