

INTRODUCTION: A WRITER'S GUIDE TO THE ROMANS

Anyone who has picked up this book might fall into one of two general categories: someone who is interested in some way or form of recreating the Roman world, populating it with a set of characters, and putting them through their particular paces; *or* someone who is interested in how the process of reinterpreting the Roman world or re-creating it as historical fiction, film, or games might approach the subject. The fundamental goal here is not explicitly to direct the creative process; that would defeat its purpose of *guiding* an artist or a writer or a film-maker. This book isn't going to burden you with footnotes (although there are plenty of suggestions for further reading) or bury you alive under citations (although contemporary anecdotes are referenced). The novelist L.P. Hartley originated the expression 'the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there' (1953): as visitors who didn't grow up in a particular time or culture we will always look at that time and culture from the outside in. Historians love to categorise periods; they love to look for trends and developments that led to a particular outcome – we look backwards from a landmark event for all of the threads that led up to it both in our personal lives and in grander schemes. But just because you land on a particular spot, you cannot assume that, unlike all the roads in the Empire, these historical and cultural threads were deliberately leading down a particular path to a particular Rome.

Where do we find the real Romans? *Can* we find the real Romans? The answer is probably 'no'. Fiona Hobden (2009), in writing about how

Doctor Who portrays the Romans in the 2008 episode 'Fires of Pompeii', remarks that modern popular culture reinvents the Romans at about the pace of, if not somewhat behind, the scholarship – and even scholarship finds itself reinventing what we think and know about the Romans as new discoveries about them are made, or when sources are retranslated and re-evaluated. We are always looking for patterns that make strangers relatable to our own paradigms and understanding of the world. Because of the gulf of time and the fractionally surviving sources, the Romans are, to us, every bit as foreign as the Persians were to them. We inevitably put reflections of ourselves on to them – whether to make them more like 'real people' than alien objects studied through a careful reading of the texts, or to use them, much as the Romans did, to strike up parallels and commentary about ourselves. If the ancient Romans would be confused at how we portray them in our cinema, they might well be equally baffled at how we explain their customs and behaviour in our scholarship. Too many pieces are missing – not always because they have been lost to time, but because they weren't even recorded to begin with. For example, Hugh Bowden (2010) notes in his survey of ancient mystery cults that one of the reasons so little remains known about mystery cults is that the people who participated in them did not feel moved to write down the mundane aspects of their practices and beliefs.

Throughout this book, we look at the signposts that indicate what makes this person Roman, and that person not. We look at signs of status and wealth. We look for, as best can be recovered, attitudes and reactions in situations, and at those institutions that formed the framework of Roman life. At 350 pages, this book isn't going to provide aspiring writers with an encyclopaedic description of every facet of Rome's history, its people, economy, laws, games, and religion. No one author could possibly provide such a comprehensive study; fortunately, however, there exist excellent reference books, monographs, and specialist articles written by teams of experts in their particular fields.

Hence, we'll focus on sources and useful information about customs and practices around which you as author or artist might shape your characters and their physical and institutional environment. The scope

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here is limited to the general trends and themes from roughly between the late third century BCE and the early third century CE, with the occasional foray into the antecedents and legacy on either side of the period. Each chapter explicates its main themes with examples from the original sources. It provides additional sources to mine for the subject at hand and particular bits affected by scholarly debate, based on new discoveries or reinterpretation of written and material remains. This book is not *Mythbusters* or an exercise to point out all of the ‘goofs’ one might find in popular descriptions of Rome; it’s left up to you whether or not you will produce a work of careful verisimilitude or anachronistic silliness (or any of the flavours in between). That’s your call as creator.

A major theme throughout is the consideration of Roman identity: ‘How do you *know* someone is Roman?’ It’s a tall order considering the diversity and mix of people and cultures in the Empire across the four centuries covered here. There is no one exclusive surviving paradigm that can provide us with exact fittings and fixtures about what your Roman might look like, talk like, act like. Fortunately for us, however, the Romans themselves wrestled with this very question, especially as the Empire grew and accumulated diverse territories, and they reflected on aspects of *us versus them*. The Romans were keen to categorise people – by occupation, by nationality, by status. They became concerned about what makes a Roman especially during those times when they encountered external foes and internal upstarts. This is an interesting prejudice considering that the Roman city-state itself was a bricolage of people and languages and cultures almost from the very beginning; the Etruscans, great traders that they were, incorporated many things into their own society from other cultures that were subsequently passed on to the Romans. In some respects, the Romans deliberately distanced themselves from the Etruscans when establishing the Republic in the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE. For example, we associate Latin with the Romans – everything from Catholic Mass to lessons at school to *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* and the ‘Romans go home’ scene – but the Romans *weren’t* Latin originally; linguistically and culturally, they were Etruscan. The Romans began to identify

with the Latin tribes only when they broke away from Etruscan rule – fighting with, conquering, and then allying with the Latin League in the fifth century BCE, a conglomeration of local tribes and city-states unified in protection originally *against* the Romans.

As the Romans encountered each new culture, especially the mainland Greeks in the third and second centuries BCE, some of the old conservatives at Rome were horrified that the young aristocrats such as Scipio Aemilianus (185–129 BCE) were becoming dandified with their love of Greek culture, entertainment, plays, and philosophy. Cato the Elder, a poster child for the old traditions, identified as a true Roman (see Plutarch's *Life of Cato*) as a result of his frugality, his simplicity, his love of the land. Order, respect for authority, and discipline were his watchwords; so it is interesting that it was a Greek, Polybius (c. 208 – c. 125 BCE), who wrote a straightforward account of Roman activity in the Mediterranean in the third and second centuries, and that he dedicated an entire chapter (6) to the tidy and disciplined order and respect for authority described by the Roman constitution and the Roman army – as a lesson for his fellow Greeks back home. Roman writers from moralists and rhetoricians to comedians and playwrights also took advantage of the new cultures and customs coming into the Roman world from the Greeks, from the Carthaginians, from the East, from Germany and Britain: but such treatises and comedies sometimes tell us more about the *Romans* than they might about the outsiders.

Thus Chapter 1 kicks off with a consideration of the Roman people and looks at indications of 'Romanness': traditional values, social status and standing, speaking like a Roman, and naming conventions. Considered here are family relations (public and private life), the role of the *paterfamilias* and *materfamilias*; marriage and children; the 'rules' of Roman behaviour – how you might be initiated into Roman culture and tradition, and some features of these. There's a discussion here of particular Roman characters and qualities, such as the *mos maiorum* (ancestor worship), consensus and deference, *nobilitas* and *auctoritas*. Unlike Greek heroes of epic who were demi-gods and individualists, far removed in achievement from ordinary men and women, Roman character and heroes were

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accessible – anyone from aristocrats to the poorest people could emulate Manlius Torquatus or Lucretia. The chapter wraps up with an indication of the social hierarchy and an introduction to the patron–client relationship and social mobility.

With your dossier on how to blend in with Roman society, next you need to feed and clothe your characters. Chapter 2 looks at food and drink, clothing and accessories. This chapter isn't going to provide explicit lists of what to eat and what to wear, but rather some broader themes to keep in mind as you provide your Romans with the basics. Taste and smell are amongst our strongest senses and conjure up memories and emotions; it is no surprise that the feast is a set-piece in any epic, myth, or history of a momentous event. Rome was a public society – entertaining and hospitality were a way to show off social status as well, and to gain praise for one's honour and generosity amongst friends and clients. Mealtime and offering of food was an important occasion in antiquity. Political deals were made, alliances cemented, establishment of one's social status and one's place in the pecking order were put on display at table.

The first part of this chapter considers food and meals – what to think about when planning a sumptuous feast or how to nourish your characters with the basic staples of the Roman diet. Topics in this section include a consideration of the banquet versus the humble repast; the Mediterranean triad and diet staples in general; dining etiquette, cookery books and recipes, with a particular focus on Apicius; and a beverage brief – not to mention which foods *shouldn't* appear on a Roman table. There's also a short section on New World nosh that has no business there. The second part of the chapter considers appearance and attire. Soldiers carried *diplomae* in brass cases which hung around their necks and contained their identity papers. Travellers on state business might have official documents giving them licence to travel and access to important places. Ordinary inhabitants of Rome, however, did not carry an ID card beyond their appearance. Clothing (and hairstyles) made the man and woman in our period. Considered here are basic wardrobe staples and the effects of social status on what one could and could not

wear. Plenty of stories abound from the comic stage and the storytellers of mistaken identity due to loss or destruction of clothing, and how a long-lost aristocratic might be restored to his or her rightful inheritance on the discovery of a particular signet ring or other item of jewellery. Topics surveyed include the basic garments for men and women so that you can build a wardrobe; a primer on sumptuary law; colours and fabrics; the make-up box; and hair (facial and head).

Now that you've got people and they're fed and dressed, you might consider where and how to house them: in the country, the city, or the places in between. Fortunately, you have roughly 2.1 million square miles to play around with. Chapter 3 looks at some of the practicalities that go into creating the basics of civic space and on rural life in the Roman Empire. Status and identity feature here as with everything else: how basic or opulent your homes and accommodations will be will again depend on your characters' social standing and economic level. Décor reveals as much about the variety of goods on offer throughout the Empire and the cosmopolitan nature of the Empire as it does about your characters' wealth and good taste – or lack thereof. Whether or not your characters live in the city or in the countryside affects how they might view themselves or be viewed by others. Roman social snobbery related not only to someone's place on the economic scale but also to where someone lived, how many homes and villas they might possess, and the location of such dwellings. Here you can consider the ideal versus reality: the aristocratic dream was a home (or two or six) in the country or along the sea coast, or a place to escape the heat of summer or the dreariness of winter. Aristocratic poetry, satire, and letters abound in descriptions of lovely country estates, each run with the same order and efficiency of a military camp while remaining beautiful and cosmopolitan. Of course the reality was quite different: Cato (*De Agri Cultura*) and Columella (*Res Rustica*) might describe in their treatises on country living the best way to run such estates, but these are intellectual exercises for the aristocratic owner: the overseers were on a different plane altogether. As for the relationship between tenants and landlords, Juvenal's *Satires*, Martial's *Epigrams*, and Pliny the Younger's letters reveal that being a

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tenant and being a landlord in the first and second centuries of the imperial period led to similar sorts of headaches that tenants and landlords at present might suffer.

Topics in this chapter include the basic structure and parts of a city, essential especially if you're founding a colony, setting up a military outpost, or providing a clutch of provincials with a 'flat-pack' Roman city in emulation of them-down-there in Italy. There's a sample house layout and information on the types of buildings found in town and the various rooms one might find in a house, and different terms for various urban centres. Other topics include utilities (water and sewerage, heating and lighting), issues of safety and the dangers of city living (crime and fire mainly), and travel (conditions and directions). Finally, there is a consideration of the attitude towards city versus country living, the aristocratic ideal and the practical realities. Whilst you might include travel or the dynamic between someone from the far provinces encountering the life, noise, and speed of the centre in your storyline, you might also think about the city (or even the City) as a character itself – its appearance, contents, and 'personality' is as effective a catalyst for a plot as the individuals who inhabit it.

Now that your characters have character, have been fed and clothed, and are settling into their digs, they will need a bit of law and order. Chapter 4 surveys the basics of administration and legal business. Entire academic careers have been made over the past two and a half thousand years on the subject of Roman jurisprudence – not to mention the discussion, from academics and amateur enthusiasts, on Rome's principal means of peace-keeping: its army. Topics in this chapter include an overview of the administration of the Roman state, its magistracies and legal institutions, and its means of keeping order. You'll find a survey on how the Romans got things done (patronage and consensus), their love of hierarchy (organisation of the government), and the effects of status on their administrative, legislative, and military institutions. Two appendices act as handmaidens (or perhaps, since we're talking about administration and public order, *lictors* bearing *fascēs*) to accompany this chapter. Appendix 1 is a chart of key conflicts, hotspots,

opponents, and outcome or significance from c. 280 BCE through to 180 CE. Appendix 2 notes the main military and political movers and shakers of this period: a chart that matches up the big man or woman, what she or he is best known for, and a selection of the contemporary sources wherein you'll find his or her exploits. Long winter evenings will fly by as you sift through Justinian's formidable corpus of civil and criminal law accompanied with a side order of myriad contemporary texts on legal interpretation.

Chapter 5 looks at economic matters. Aelius Aristides famously called Rome 'the emporium of the world': 'All things converge here, trade, seafaring, agriculture, metallurgy, all the skills which exist and have existed, anything that is begotten and grows. Whatever cannot be seen here belongs completely to the category of non-existent things' (*Ad Romam*, 11–13). Aelius was part of the Second Sophistic, a group of Greek intellectuals who travelled about the Roman world, gave speeches for entertainment, and sometimes acted as ambassadors for the imperial government. His speech praises the great wealth of Rome, but there was in reality a tremendous gap between rich and poor in Roman society and far more 'not haves' than 'haves'. Between 200 BCE and 200 CE Rome prospered as its empire expanded. Major conquests in the East and Near East that brought in wealth and goods bolstered the economy, rising to heights during the *Pax Romana*, the first and second centuries CE. The provinces were great sources of revenue (and soldiers, who protected the peace and were supported by this revenue), which allowed for general political stability and peace in this era. The army built roads, and merchants followed; trade routes overland and across the Red Sea from the east brought in further goods, slaves, and wealth; urbanisation led to more marketplaces. As part of this survey on the economy, this chapter includes topics on the sources of Rome's wealth; land ownership and the labour force (with a focus on slavery); a coin spotter's guide and the value of money; shopping and foreign trade; taxation; and poverty and public relief. The Romans' characteristic preoccupation with status and social hierarchy is reflected in a discussion of their attitudes towards money-making and spending, and frugality and public benevolence.

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All work and no play make Gaius a dull boy – and most modern audiences associate Rome with leisure, entertainment, and spectacle thanks to everything from Victorian art and novels through to cinema, television, and world-building games. Chapter 6 is a survey of a selection of Roman pastimes – there are far more, of course. It should come as no surprise that snobbery and social status affected the Roman outlook when it came to sport and entertainment – as far as our intellectual writers were concerned, popular entertainment was the stuff of the lower classes and a waste of a conservative Roman aristocrat's time – except when it wasn't. Tiberius, for example, loved dinner parties and held trivia competitions about Greek mythology (and God help you if he caught you with a crib sheet) (Suet., *Tib.* 56.1); Caligula used to host poetry competitions wherein the losers had to blot out their poor efforts with their tongues – unless they chose to be beaten with rods or thrown into a river (Suet., *Gai.* 20.1).

The most popular entertainment and escapism that cut across the entire social and economic strata were sports and spectacle, especially from the first century BCE onwards through to the end of the fourth century CE in the West, and a few centuries beyond that in the East. Sport and spectacle were big money-spinners, and, while we may not have much in the way of sources that precisely describe an actual gladiator match or the details of a particular chariot race, there are myriad references in contemporary sources and many material remains depicting them. The activities in the arena and the circus not only kept the Romans preoccupied but they also reinforced notions of social hierarchy and status (with seating arrangements and with the punishments meted out) and presented through their lavish splendour a symbol of the might, wealth, and authority of the Empire. Some sports became particularly politicised: during the era of the Republic, games could earn the sponsor the love if not the votes of the common people. During the imperial period, emperors used public entertainment as a means to demonstrate their power and might and to reinforce flagging popularity (see Mahoney, 2001: 71–90. for other contemporary examples): as Fronto remarked, the Roman mob was kept under control by two

things: free grain and shows (Front., *Princ. Hist.* 17). The vicious riots at the arena in Pompeii (Tac., *Ann.* 14.17), commemorated in a fresco there, sadly have modern parallels in the violence that sometimes attends sporting events today. Many of these spectacles, at least superficially, continue to represent in modern eyes how Rome 'ought' to look. The key imagery for many modern stories set in Rome is the big scene at the arena, whether it's the showdown between the hero and his nemesis or the final moral victory for the Christian martyr against the pagan mob (or at least against the inevitable lions). This chapter scratches only the surface of the types of ways you can keep your characters entertained and amused. Here we'll limit ourselves to Roman attitudes towards spectacle, athletics, and public competition; chariot racing and gladiatorial games; baths and swimming; comedy theatre; dinner parties; music and dance; sexual entertainment and prostitution; gambling, dice, and betting (with a primer on a couple of board games).

The final topic that this guide considers in Chapter 7 is religion and religious practice. Religion of some form or another was inextricable from other aspects of Roman culture – public service to the state gods out of a sense of tradition, duty, civic responsibility; philosophy and intellectual study might take the place of impersonal ritual. The Empire encompassed a broad spectrum of beliefs, adapted and traded among the cultures in the Near East and into Western Europe. Religion and myth permeated all aspects of a Roman's life. It was impossible to tell where religion stopped and civic culture started; religion and myth were behind the inspiration for civic pride in the forms of art, athletics, building projects. There was a constant vigilance in looking for signs and omens about the future. State cults and myths did not offer a set of moral and ethical codes – Romans learned behavioural codes of conduct from other sources, such as family or philosophy; mythological heroes and the history or biography of past statesmen and generals provided models for one's values and aspirations. The Romans maintained a contractual relationship between the gods and humans akin to the patron–client relationship: sacrifice and ritual included a material exchange (a sacrifice) and visible reward – lack of either meant that people weren't

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performing their religious duties. Cults and sects from the Near East intersected throughout Roman life, across the Empire, in the form of Judaism, mystery cults, or, in the latter half of our period, Christianity. Eventually, after our period, state cults would be superseded by an official support of Christianity, but even then conversion to Christianity and Christian practices remained fairly superficial in terms of full conversion or universal dedication to beliefs in places even into the Middle Ages.

It would be, to coin a phrase, a Herculean task to include every aspect of religious practice in the Roman world, or a comprehensive list of sources, sourcebooks, and scholarship on the various flavours of religious practice in Rome and its impact on the state. Instead, see Chapter 8 for resources to get you started. We'll limit the discussion here to some of the major components of religion in the Roman world. These include discussion of foundation myths which provide the Romans with not only their heroes but also cultural values for emulation. Next is a look at the state cult (and a brief discussion of the pantheon and its origins) and the imperial cult (which became inextricably linked to the state cult). Also discussed is the *mos maiorum*, that is, the custom of venerating one's ancestors, as this practice plays a role in how Roman society and politics were folded together. State cults and the pagan gods were linked with civic duty, and the relationship between these gods and humans was impersonal. Other types of religious practice throughout the Empire fulfilled more emotional personal needs. Several instances of this type of religious practice in our period include the mystery cults, imported from the Near East, the Romans' relationship with the Jews, and the issue of the rise of Christianity. There is an entire industry of Roman fiction based around the relationship between the Christians and the Romans – with much of the basis of that literature and art going back to the earliest days of the Christians themselves. Fair play if you wish to revisit those experiences in your own fiction; here we focus more on how the Romans viewed the Christians – something one might not see as often in historical fiction and film.

Each chapter of this guide does make reading suggestions on the go. The last, Chapter 8, acts as a complementary standalone annotated

bibliography and resource centre. Here you will find recommended resources, collections, and databases related to each chapter, as well as good places to start your research and reading of relevant scholarship. Particular trends and debate in the scholarship are highlighted. Keep in mind, of course, that limits of space prevent the chapter from being densely inclusive, and of course new publications are appearing in print and online all the time. The chapter includes suggestions on general textbooks for background reading, and then introduces you to online collections and databases of contemporary sources before addressing each chapter topically. The resources suggested throughout this book and this chapter are, for the most part, in English or English translations of scholarship; be aware that if you have other languages at your disposal you'll find a rich scholarship on the Classical world not only from Western European scholars, but from those studying the Roman world from the modern perspective of those cultures and civilisations who were once neighbours and long-distance trading contacts with the Roman world.

Finally, before we get stuck in, a final word about Classical reception. As we've noted, the Roman world in popular culture won't necessarily be a world that would be recognisable to a contemporary Roman: as a writer, historian, or designer, one may strive for historical accuracy in design, but how that design is adapted, used, and acted upon is a component of *Classical reception*, that is, how the ancient world is interpreted by the current audience who engages with it. This is especially true with depictions of Roman art and entertainment, because not only do current fiction, non-fiction, and scholarship engage with sources pertaining to art and entertainment as the Romans may have enjoyed it, but we also bring to the table our own cultural baggage.

Classical reception is an entire field unto itself – but if you are putting together your own fictional vision of the Roman world in a story, a novel, a motion picture, or a game, then it is well worth your time to invest in at least an introduction to this important scholarly field. Start with Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (2008), Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas (2006), or Lorna Hardwick (2010). Don't overlook

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academic guidebooks such as David Schaps (2010). Dip into the seminal lectures of Arnaldo Momigliano (1992, for example) on the foundations of Classical historiography to understand how the study of the Classical world has been defined and redefined over the years by interpretation and re-evaluation of the sources – not only those by Roman writers, but how the views of Greek, Jewish, and other cultures influenced and continue to influence our interpretation of the Roman world.

Appreciation for film, television, and other popular media as part of Classical reception is fairly new in scholarship and complements what scholars of the Middle Ages refer to as *medievalism*. A key scholar for medievalism is Umberto Eco, who in his 1986 essay ‘Dreaming of the Middle Ages’ created a list of how the Middle Ages are used in fiction and filmed drama to particular effect; these categories may well be adapted as part of the Classical world on film and television. A good introduction to why the Rome we see on television or interact with through websites might not be recognisable to an actual Roman is Hobden (2009), who discusses how scholarship is constantly shaping and re-evaluating our own interpretation of Ancient Roman culture and society. McDonald (2008) provides a good summary of the debate in scholarship over the merits of film and popular depictions of the Classical world outside of modern entertainment. Fraser’s 1988 monograph *The Hollywood History of the World* was initially dismissed by one of this author’s post-grad tutors as ‘dumbing down’ the ancient world – that is, ‘HollyRome’ – but since the early 2000s the merits of HollyRome films have become a subject of scholarship in its own right: film, novels, and games aren’t *meant* to be textbooks, but one must be aware that popular depictions of the ancient world are frequently based less on academic scholarship and more on popular culture itself: for example, the nineteenth-century novels *Quo Vadis* and *Ben-Hur* and works of art by Jean-Léon Gérôme, while rooted in Classical scholarship, were wildly popular works of entertainment that still have enormous influence on how Rome was and is still depicted in media across the board. It’s important to develop an eye for critical reading not only of your contemporary sources but of influential popular histories of the era.



1 Woman with wax tablets and stylus, the so-called 'Sappho' portrait. Fresco, Pompeii, first century CE

This little guide is but a brief survey of a vast amount of resources, sources, and scholarship on the Classical world that is available for reflection, evaluation, interpretation, and creativity. It is intended to open doors for further reading and consideration as you construct your own Roman world – it's a welcome mat that invites you in to listen to the stories of the Romans and to contribute tales of your own. So *dextro pede* – best (right) foot forward, as the Roman would say – and enjoy.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations (and their flaws) are by the author.