

# ANCIENT ROME – Economic History

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## ECONOMIC INNOVATIONS

**Overview** Ancient Roman civilization, which endured for a millennium and a half, depending on the cut off point you assign it, expressed the Romans' strong group desire to make *daily life* comfortable and efficient, to achieve a strong and protective *military presence*, and to *erect fitting memorials* to the great ancestors who had made the civilization possible. This three pronged social desire, of the Romans, was the driving force behind the civilization's advances in **technology**.

**Comforts of Daily life** For over a millennium, but especially in the privileged period of the Pax Romana, the semi-global peace that the Romans made prevail from the investment of Augustus to the fourth century C.E., the Roman people were tireless in improving the conditions of daily life. Let's review a few of their accomplishments.

**Water** The Romans went far to make water their friend, to devise means of bathing, assuring clean drinking water and clean public baths, to maintain hygienic hand washing practices, to create practicable flush toilets, and, through their brilliant system of aqueducts, to acquire the purest of waters from distant water sources.

**Temperature control** The Romans were adept at providing wood and charcoal sources with which heated braziers could function, and to keep their rooms at a closely regulated temperature, any time of year. Wealthier homes could be equipped with a *hypocaust* system, in which under-the- foundations streams of warm water would guarantee year round temperature comfort.

**Roads** The Roman road system was extensive, of great value both for individuals and for military movements, and above all--as we can still see today in Britain or France--offered wonders of careful construction. Typically the road bed was dug out down to bedrock level, covered with ground rock, then filled in with a layer of pozzolanic ash which proved chemical resistant and highly binding, and finally with broad polygonal paving stones. These road arteries were durable, and indispensable to the passage of goods and weapons.

**Military prowess** The Roman army was a daunting force in its heyday, say until the Age of Constantine in the fourth century C.E., and could during this period be counted on to repel barbarian incursions and to provide citizen security over a vast area. Among the technological advances, that made the Roman army formidable, were the latest in bronze armor, equipment and training for medical surgery--which saved innumerable lives on the battlefield--ready to hand pontoon bridges which could be rapidly assembled in siege warfare, artillery equipment and strategies for its use, and *Greek fire*, the terrible weapon used by the Byzantine navy, and likened today to an early form of napalm.

**Memorials to past greatness** An observant walk through downtown Rome, today, will impress us with the city's monumental character, the number of vast structures like the Coliseum or the profusion of triumphal arches, formal fountains dedicated to this or that dignitary, and monumental sculptures. The city is thick with the ancient Romans' desire to memorialize the great, and with the fruits of the *technical* know-how--sculptural, architectonic, and landscape sensitive--which was necessary to create this testimonial to the past.

## Readings

White, K.D., *Greek and Roman Technology*, Ithaca, 1984.

Derry, Thomas K., Williams, Trevor I, *A Short History of Technology: From the Earliest Times to A. D. 1900.*, New York, 1993.

### Discussion questions

Roman technology was advanced, for the ancient world. What did Roman technology strikingly lack, in order to be where modern technology is now?

Obviously Roman technology has debts to the Greeks. What about Egypt and Mesopotamia? What does Roman technology derive from those two cultures?

The ancient Romans invented many specific labor saving and comfort enhancing devices: the screw press; double glazing for windows; the flush toilet; and even, thanks to the Alexandrian scientist Hero, a proto steam-engine device. Who were the inventors of these devices? Scholars; men of business? Ordinary citizens? Trainees in mechanical workshops?

### TRADE

**Overview** One can imagine that, in a state intact for a thousand years or more, there would have been a long and profitable commercial development. Nowhere is that truth clearer than in trade, for Roman trade was from the outset a mainstay of prosperity for the state, and a natural byproduct of the greatly expansive tendencies of the ultimately almost world wide Roman Empire.

**Sea trade** During the Roman Empire, especially during the period from the first to the end of the third century, C.E., the great majority of Roman trading was carried out on the sea—usually the Eastern Mediterranean, though Roman ships could be found transporting goods as far as India and England. Shipbuilding had reached a peak: efficient production, effective provisions for carrying commodities—from tons of grain, even to iron, and with inclusion for special container devices for amphorae of wine and oil. The cost of sea transportation, which conveyed almost everything produced in the Roman Empire, was estimated to be 60 % lower than that of land transportation, for even though roads were astonishingly good—and the Roman road network was in all 80,000 kilometers in length—road movement was slow, dangers cropped up on all sides, and as a result goods shipment on land was exorbitantly high.

**Land trade** Trade by land was made valuable by the high level of engineering skills among the Romans. Roads, whether made of concrete—which Roman engineers invented—or of durable cobble stones still drivable in places like northern England—provided a reliable network of land transportation. From the hub of the Empire, Rome itself, the endless flow of foreign commodities, into the port of Rome, were distributed throughout the Empire, to many points inaccessible by ocean transportation. There was, for example, an extensive two way road which followed the coast of the Mediterranean in North Africa for 4800 kilometers, and another road, equally fit for servicing regions far from major ocean trade, which covered 2500 kilometers between the Black Sea and the North Sea. We know, from archeological evidence, that Roman citizens living thousands of miles from the capital lived well off of the trade that entered Rome: select foods, pottery, woolen garments, housing tiles from throughout the Empire.

**The place of trade in Roman culture and society** The fact, as just hinted, was that the Romans founded their wealth, their comfort, and their prestige on the fruits of their vast trading empire. Wealth from trade was not approved of by all, for Roman aristocrats—for instance, all the senators—turned up their noses at trade and commerce, believing it, as Aristotle had put, a sport for inferior men, concerned only with their self-interest. But wealth from trade could be vast, and was achieved on a democratic basis, for many women entrepreneurs made fortunes in the oil and wine trades.

### Readings

Grant, M., *The History of Rome*, London, 1993.

Ball, Warwick, *Rome in the East: Transformation of an Empire*, London, 2016.

### **Discussion questions**

What kind of commodity price oversight was there in ancient Rome? Did merchants and traders set their own prices? Or were they regulated?

Why was it so *very* much more expensive to trade on land than on sea?

What kind of system of weights and measures did the Roman state insist on? How did Roman merchants calculate nautical miles, so that they could invoice their trades?