

The Early Romans and Their Neighbors

Over the years, historians have tried to discover the truth about the founding of **Rome**. No one really knows who the first king of Rome was. We do know that the first people to live in the area that became Rome were the Latins. The Latins were one of several groups who had invaded Italy sometime before 1000 B.C.E.

Perhaps around 700 B.C.E., a Latin tribe built the village that eventually became Rome. They built their village on the Palatine, a hill in central Italy. The Palatine overlooks the Tiber River, at a location about a dozen miles inland from the sea. In time, the village of thatched huts grew into a mighty city that spread over seven hills.

As Rome grew, Roman culture was greatly influenced by two of Rome's neighbors, the **Etruscans** (eh-TRUH-skans) and the Greeks. The Romans borrowed many ideas and skills from these two groups, beginning with the Etruscans.

The Etruscans had come to control Etruria, a land just north of the Palatine, by about 800 B.C.E. No one knows exactly where they came from. They built some city-states and conquered others. By 600 B.C.E., they ruled much of northern and central Italy, including the town of Rome.

The Greeks also were a major influence on Roman culture. The Romans learned about Greek culture when Greek colonists established towns in southern Italy and on the island of Sicily. Romans also learned about Greek ways from traders and the many Greeks who came to Rome. Let's look at some of the ideas and customs the Romans learned from these two groups.

The Influence of the Etruscans

The Romans became great builders. They learned many techniques about engineering, or the science of building, from the Etruscans. Two important Etruscan structures the Romans adapted were the arch and the **cuniculus**.

Etruscan arches rested on two pillars. The pillars supported a half-circle of wedge-shaped stones. A keystone in the center held the other stones of the arch tightly in place. A cuniculus was a long underground trench. Vertical shafts connected it to the ground above. Etruscans used these trenches to irrigate land. They also used them to drain swamps and to carry water to their cities.

The Romans **adapted** both of these structures. In time, they became even better engineers than the Etruscans. They used arches to build huge public works, including bridges, stadiums, and aqueducts to carry water over long distances.

Romans also adapted two bloody Etruscan sporting events. The first was slave fighting. The Etruscan custom was to stage slave fights during funerals. Two slaves of the dead master fought to the death with swords and small shields. After being congratulated, the winner was executed.

The Etruscans also enjoyed watching chariot races. The charioteers, or drivers, were strapped to their chariots. If a chariot overturned, a driver could be dragged under the chariot's wheels or trampled by the horses. These fierce competitions often resulted in injury or death.

These Etruscan sports became popular in Rome. In Roman stadiums, thousands of slaves died fighting as **gladiators**. These professionally trained fighters battled either each other or wild animals. Romans also flocked to see charioteers risk their lives racing four-horse teams.

The Influence of the Greeks

The Romans borrowed and adapted ideas from the Greeks, as well as the Etruscans. Greek architecture was one important influence on the Romans. The Greeks built marble temples as homes for their gods. Temples like the Parthenon had stately columns that added to their beauty.

The Romans used Greek designs in their own public buildings. In time, they learned to use concrete to make even larger structures, such as the Pantheon in Rome.

The Romans also used concrete to build huge stadiums like the Colosseum, where gladiators fought. The Circus Maximus, where people watched chariot races, could seat more than two hundred thousand spectators.

Sometimes, the Greek influence on Roman culture was indirect. For example, the Greek alphabet was adopted and then changed by the Etruscans. The Romans then borrowed and altered the Etruscan alphabet.

The Greek alphabet had a more direct influence on Roman culture. Like the Greeks, the Romans wrote in all capital letters. The Greeks carved important **documents**, such as laws and treaties, into bronze or stone plaques. The plaques were **displayed** in the public squares. The Romans also carved inscriptions in walls and columns for all to see.

Many Roman writers were inspired by Greek poetry and myths. The Roman poet Virgil built on Greek tales of a long-ago conflict, the Trojan War. Virgil's poem, the *Aeneid*, told how Aeneas (ay-NEE-ahs), a Trojan prince, fled to Italy after the war. According to Virgil, Aeneas was the ancestor of the first Romans.

Both the Etruscans and the Romans admired Greek pottery, painting, and sculpture. The Romans got some Greek ideas from Etruscan art. They borrowed others directly from the Greeks.

Greek pottery was valued throughout the Mediterranean world for its usefulness and beauty. Greek potters created large clay vessels for storing food, water, and wine. They often painted black figures on the red clay. Some of their designs showed pictures of gods and heroes. Others showed people in their daily lives. The Romans eagerly took the work of Greek potters into their homes. Roman artists imitated the technique, but had their own style.

The Greek influence on Roman painting and sculpture was so great that historians speak of “**Greco-Roman art**.” Wealthy Romans often collected Greek art. They built monuments in a Greek style. Roman sculptors and painters used Greek art as models for their own work.

Roman artists also created a lively and realistic style of their own. Greek artists often tried to show an ideal, or perfect, human being or god. As Rome's power grew, much of Roman art celebrated great leaders and events. Roman sculptors became especially skilled in creating lifelike portraits. They made realistic busts, or statues showing the subject's head and shoulders. They also carved life-sized statues of famous military leaders. The statues often seemed just as powerful as the leaders themselves.

The religion of the Romans was a blend of many influences. For example, they followed Etruscan religious rituals in founding their cities. But it was Greek religion that especially influenced Roman ideas about the gods.

The Greeks worshipped a number of gods and goddesses. The gods governed every part of Greek life. The Greeks performed rituals and sacrifices to gain the gods' favor for everything from a good harvest to curing the sick.

The early Romans had their own gods and rituals. But their ideas about the gods changed as they came in contact with other cultures. When the Romans encountered a similar god from another culture, they blended that god's characteristics with those of their own.

The Romans adapted many of the Greek gods as their own, but they gave them Roman names. The greatest Greek god, Zeus, became Jupiter. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, became Venus. Ares, the god of war, became Mars.

The Romans were much less interested in telling stories about the gods than were the Greeks. Romans were more concerned with performing exactly the right ritual for a particular occasion.