

Thematic Questions on Roman Culture and Architecture

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What were some of the reasons the Romans emerged as a very practical people? In what areas of Roman life do we see evidence of their practical nature? Provide and explain at least one example (from both the Roman Culture Lecture Presentation and the Roman Architecture Lecture Presentation) of Roman contributions to the Humanistic tradition that reveals this practical and/or pragmatic outlook.

In 753 BCE, Rome was founded by twin brothers Romulus and Remus. It started as a small town and grew into a powerful empire known for its art, militia and politics. Rome observed monarchy, but in 509 BCE, the last king was overthrown, and the empire was turned into a republic. Republic was derived from “res publica”, a Latin phrase that meant “property of the people”. After the monarchy was demolished, the control of the empire was handed down to two magistrates called Consuls, who were elected annually. Much like today’s elections, the Consuls were elected through votes by the people. These consuls were elected from a senate, and they also performed duties as commanders in chief of the army. These rules and systems that the Romans had implemented in their daily lives made them very practical people. They had political interests that they used to make changes in the working of their country. They used strategic tactics to expand their empire through war and expeditions. They fought wars against Carthage, known as Punic wars, which helped them gain control of Sicily, the western Mediterranean, and a great part of Spain. By the end of the third Punic War, Carthage was defeated, and northern Africa was taken as a Roman province. Rome also set its eyes towards the eastern regions and captured Macedonia through the Macedonian Wars. The military expansion of Rome also resulted in cultural expansion. Rome learned a lot from Greek culture and adopted most of its art, philosophical and religious practices. They made their art and architecture with the need for practicality in mind. It was true that the art needed to be beautiful, but it needed to be practical; few pieces were made just for beauty’s sake. They used art in the construction of their baths, temples, buildings and homes. One of the reasons that art was made was

to honour gods or an important political or military individual. The arches and columns not only provided strength and stability to the buildings but also had relief work done on them to commemorate the achievements of Rome, its emperors and its people. The Arch of Titus and the Trajan Column are great examples of this. The Arch of Titus was constructed in honour of Titus, showing his first victory procession, his riding a chariot and scenes of him defeating the Jewish people. Trajan Column depicts the victory of the Roman emperor in the Dacian Wars. The thirty-meter-tall column has detailed relief work, and the statue of Trajan stands atop the column. Most of the Roman art was part of their architecture, making art more practical (Smarthistory, n.d.; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000).

How can the Pont du Gard aqueduct be seen to represent many of the major elements of Roman architecture? (What are these elements, and how do they illustrate/utilize them?)

Considered a Roman monument, Pont du Gard is a fifty-kilometre-long aqueduct that provided water to the city of Nimes (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). It was constructed over the Gard River in France. It is a three-story high aqueduct with a height of fifty meters, also serving as a bridge. As the aqueduct is Roman architecture, it is obvious that it has some of its architectural elements. These elements are briefly discussed along with the architecture of Pont du Gard to help you understand its architecture. The first element used in the Pont du Gard is the arch. Each arch has two piers, supporting it with a platform on top of them called the impost. Voussoirs, which are angled bricks, blocks, or stones, are used to make the arch. Voussoirs is placed on the impost. A keystone is placed in the centre of the arch from where other stones are placed; this not only helped in the placement of the stone but also in the consistency of the construction. Pont du Gard had rows of arches; these rows are called an arcade. The main reason the Romans used arches was that it allowed them to construct wider and taller buildings without worrying about the stability and strength of the building. It also helped in making the building look appealing. Arches made the walls of the building stronger, which is the reason that many Roman buildings, along with Pont du Gard, are still standing. The Romans had learned to use the arch in multiple ways, including as an aqueduct. The second element of architecture used in this aqueduct is a vault. Vaults were an extension of the arch and were used to increase the width of the Pont du Gard. There are two types of vaults: barrel vault, which was the standard vault, and groin vault, which was constructed by adjoining two barrel vaults. Pont du Gard is constructed using the barrel vault; however, these are only used on the lowest story of the aqueduct to provide stability and area for the bridge. The third element of Roman architecture is concrete, which is considered the greatest Roman invention and contribution to architecture. The cement for the concrete was made using water, lime, and volcanic ash, which is called pozzolana. This mixture provided strength to the Roman concrete. They used this concrete in the construction of the Pont du Gard and allowed for its high construction.

What are Roman mystery religions, and what are their major characteristics? How/where are these characteristics expressed in the assigned reading from the *Initiate of Isis*? What are some examples of Roman mystery religions? How did Roman culture and the existence of mystery religions pave the way for Christianity?

The Romans had their official gods and goddesses that they had adopted from the Greek culture, and to make them their own, they had changed names. The most prominent of these names is Jupiter, which was given to Zeus. Regardless of these gods and goddesses, the Romans also followed mystery religions in which they pledged their allegiance to one deity. These religions were called mystery religions as only the followers of these religions were privy to the prayer chants of the specific deity that they followed. They performed secret rituals in honour of their chosen deity. The members of these religions were promised salvation in the afterlife in exchange for their unwavering faith. In "Initiate of Isis", two of these mystery religions are discussed. The first is Isis, who is an Egyptian goddess and wife of the Egyptian god Osiris. Isis had one of the largest following as a mystery religion in the Mediterranean region of Rome. Her following was so vast that efforts were made to purge her religion for being disruptive, but it failed. The second mystery religion mentioned in the reading is of Mithras, who is the Zoroastrian god of sun and rebirth. He was believed to be a soldier who died at the hands of his enemies but became immortal after rebirth. His religion was known as Mithraism; this religion was so popular that historians believe that Rome could have officially chosen it as their religion if they had not chosen Christianity instead. Other mystery religions included the Syrian god of the sun, Sol Invictus, and the Greek god, Dionysus (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.). As mentioned previously, the followers of the mystery religion were promised salvation by their chosen deity, which was similar to Christianity. In Christianity, the followers of the religion attend the church, spend time in prayers and promise salvation to their followers in the form of forgiveness for their sins from God. So, when the Romans began to convert, it was not too different from their mystery religions. The problem for the followers was that they thought that only Jews could become followers of Jesus as he was a Jewish Rabbi. This meant that the Romans would not be able to convert; however, Saul of Tarsus, later known as Paul, brought a clear set of teachings in which he concluded anyone could convert to Christianity and openly accepted people from mystery religions. This allowed Christianity to grow over the years until it was accepted as the official religion by Constantinople in the 3rd century AD.

References

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