
UNIT 2 ROMAN EMPIRE: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE*

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The central theme of this Unit is the study of the economic and social structure of Rome from Early Republic to the Principate and the Late Empire. After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand how wars and conflicts for expansion brought about far-reaching changes in the Roman society and economy,
- know about the emergence of the new rural institution of *Latifundia*,
- understand the main features of the slave mode of production,
- learn the process of the transformation of Roman society,
- analyze the Roman social formations based on slavery, and
- appreciate the finer aspects of Roman art and architecture.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Ancient Rome was primarily an agrarian and slave-based economy. Agriculture and trade were the dominant sectors of economy, supplemented only by small-scale industrial

* Dr. Promilla Srivastava, Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi, Delhi

production. The society was dominated by the notions of class and status. Large-scale use of slave labour was one of the most significant features of the late Republic. Beginning from the first century CE the Senate lost its powers and gradually the monarchy got established. New taxation system was introduced and the role of different classes in the economy also got transformed. The slaves were permanently settled by the landlords on their estates and they were given small plots to look after themselves. Though, slavery did not disappear altogether, the changes in varied aspects of Roman society had far reaching consequences on the history of Europe and Asia in the early middle age. According to an estimate while around 225 BCE there were 600,000 slaves in Roman Italy, they swelled to 20 lakhs by 31 BCE.

For the study of economic and social structure of ancient Rome, this Unit has been divided into three main periods of Roman history: Republic (509-27 BCE), Principate (27 BCE-284 CE) and Late Empire (284-476 CE). The key aspects of society and economy of each period have been examined in detail.

2.2 NATURE OF ECONOMY

The Roman civilization of the Ancient World, which left a deep impact on the subsequent civilizations of the West, was based on cities. These cities derived their wealth from the surplus extracted from the countryside. Behind this urban culture and polity lay the rural economy, agriculture remained the dominant factor in the economy and towns invariably drew their wealth from the countryside.

2.2.1 Economy Under the Republic

Land was the principal source of wealth in the Roman empire throughout its history. Vast tracts of land were used for cultivation of cereals and other agricultural products, especially those of olives and wine, and also served as pastures for cattle, sheep and horses. The 'Twelve Tables' suggest a largely agricultural way of life in Rome in the 5th century BCE. Agriculture was to remain the essential basis of Roman activity, generally through the smallholders working their land. Arable farming and viticulture were more common than the activity of stock-raising. The towns were never the main centres of manufacturers, traders or craftsmen. They were centres where powerful landowning classes lived and derived their income from corn, oil and wine produced in estates and farms situated outside the cities. These landowners were largely absentee landlords. This was possible because of the existence of slave-labour in the countryside which provided wealth and leisure to the ruling landowning class that thrived in the cities.

Slave Economy

Slavery had existed early in Rome but only during the classical period (2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE), it was a huge and massive institution, though other labour forms – free tenants, dependent tenants and urban artisans – also existed. However the dominant mode of production was based on slavery. According to Perry Anderson, slavery was the economic hinge that joined the town and country together and provided for the huge profits of the ruling class. The traditional structure of the Italian economy was transformed by the wars fought for mastery of the Mediterranean world. Two aspects of the transformation of the Italian economy stand out: first, the increase in the wealth of the Roman elite, and second the massive growth of slavery.

The importance of industry and manufacturing was small as compared to agriculture. Manufacture was carried on a small scale, conducted usually by individuals or

small groups making items for everyday use such as bricks, tiles and pots or leather products and cloths.

According to Hopkins (1978) seven processes affected the growth of slavery in Rome: (1) continuous war, (2) the influx of booty, (3) its investment in land, (4) the formation of large estates, (5) the impoverishment of peasants, (6) their emigration to towns or provinces, and (7) the growth of urban markets. All these processes were interwoven. M.I. Finley (1980) holds the view that slavery becomes widespread in the economy when two conditions are present. First, when the internal supply of labour in a given society is severely deficient in relation to its demand for labour. Secondly, when there is considerable landed property in the hands of a small class. Early in the Republic (326 BCE), the legal use of debt bondage had been abolished. However, rural indebtedness led to the concentration of landed property in the hands of the nobility. With the abolition of debt bondage, there was no bonded labour force available at the hands of big landlords. Slavery came to provide the manpower for their estates. Moreover, improved farming methods learned from Greeks and Carthaginians encouraged rich aristocrats to buy more and more land. Abandoning the cultivation of grain, they introduced large-scale production of olive oil and wine, or raising of sheep and cattle. This change was especially profitable because of the huge supply of war-prisoners from the conquered land to work as slaves on the estates. These large plantations, based on slave labour, called '*Latifundia*' were now common in many parts of Italy.

The *Latifundia* that emerged as a result of Roman warfare transformed the economy. The supply of slaves was obtained through the wars of conquest, although banditry and piracy were also important sources of slave supply. These *Latifundia* did not always form consolidated blocks of land, farmed as single units. The typical pattern was for the *Latifundist* to possess a large number of medium-sized **villa** estates, sometimes contiguous but often distributed across the country. Even the management functions were delegated to slave supervisors and *bailiffs*, who were responsible for putting slave gangs in the fields while the *Latifundists* lived in the cities. Even the dispersed holdings of *Latifundists* were remarkably larger than their Greek predecessors, often exceeding 300 acres in extent, while the consolidated estates like the younger Pliny's seat in Tuscany might be 3000 acres or more in size. According to Perry Anderson, rise of the Italian *Latifundia* led to a great extension of pastoral ranching and the intercropping of vine and olives with cereal cultivation.

The rural slave *Latifundium* developed by the Roman Republic also penetrated the colonies founded by it in the Western Mediterranean region. The river routes of Spain or Gaul assisted this penetration. With more land for Romans there came other developments in the field of farming. Although cereal production in Italy continued to be important and was necessary for subsistence, more cash crops like olives and vines were planted, though these tended to benefit the rich, since these take years to produce fruit.

As Perry Anderson mentions, Spain and Gaul remained with Italy, the Roman provinces were deeply marked by slavery down to the final end of the Empire. Towns were established by the Romans in the Western Mediterranean region which were built along the banks of navigable rivers. Although these towns were not many in number as the Eastern Mediterranean region, they were much larger than those founded by Rome in the East. In Rome, by the Late Republic the influx of slave labour, to an extent, not only transformed agriculture but industry and trade were also overwhelmingly transformed by it. According to an estimate of P.A. Brunt, perhaps 90 per cent artisans in Rome itself were of slave origin. Those involved in manufacture now had more opportunities.

Early Rome was not a major centre of international trade such as the city-states of Athens or Carthage or some of the wealthier Etruscan cities in the north. Trade mainly catered to the local markets and dealt in local produce. Trade was initially linked to essential items or a few luxury goods for the well-off classes in society. Merchants were not held in great respect, though with the passage of time, many of them became very rich (equestrian class) but still were not accepted as equals by the landholding class. Although a monetary system was in operation, transactions were done in bronze, measured by weight. Coins were probably not issued until 300 BCE. The problem of land transport was a serious constraint in the field of trade and commerce. Main roads were relatively few and were initially built for military use, and even along a paved route movement by cart was slow and the carrying power of animals limited. On the other hand, transportation through the medium of ships in the Mediterranean was much cheaper although it required considerable initial investment. Moving goods by navigable rivers was important, though often carried on a small scale.

The largest industry in ancient Rome was that of mining which provided stones for enormous building projects and metals for tools and weapons required for the conquest of the Mediterranean world. Greece and Italy provided marble for buildings that have been admired by the ancient and modern people alike. In Spain, large quantities of gold and silver were used for minting coins and making jewellery. In Britain, mines produced iron, lead and tin for weapons. Although most work was done by slaves and **freedmen** (slaves who had been set free), but free labour was also available.

2.2.2 Structure of Economy Under the Principate

The economy of the Early Empire remained basically agrarian and the huge estates, *Latifundia*, prospered. The age of Augustus was known as the Golden Age in Roman history. The unification of the Mediterranean improved the governance and facilitated economic expansion. The economy continued to be based on slavery. Agricultural and artisanal production techniques also improved. For example, screw presses promoted oil production, kneading machines facilitated the manufacture of bread, glass-blowing became widespread. The Dacian kingdom (168 BCE-106 CE) was conquered and its gold mines annexed.

Rome's unification of the ancient world had far-reaching economic consequences. During the Principate (1st and 2nd centuries CE) great expansion of trade and commerce took place. This was due to a number of factors. Firstly, the *Pax Romana* was responsible for the elimination of tolls and other artificial barriers. Secondly, it also led to the suppression of piracy and brigandage, and thirdly, reliable coinage was now established. In addition, the West witnessed the longest period of peace which promoted trade and commerce. Industry also registered some growth but its expansion was hindered by the fact that wealth remained concentrated in the hands of the ruling class and no mass market for industrial goods developed.

The empire's rapidly expanding economy enabled Augustus to fund a vast, popular programme of public works – theatre of Marcellus, Curia Julia (Senate House), Claminian Cricus, Cricus Maximus, and also doubled the water capacity of Aqua Marcia along with three aqueducts – Julia, Virgo and Alsoctiva. Augustus used to say that 'he found Rome a city of brick, and left it a city of marble'. An ambitious building programme was launched which provided considerable employment to the plebeian class. The practice of distributing corn to the poor citizens was continued which also came to include wine and oil by the end of the 2nd century CE. Economic growth continued well

into the reigns of the 'good emperors'. Internal peace and efficient administration helped in the growth of agriculture, as well as trade and industry, by making it easier to market products at a distance. Small farms continued to exist, but more and more large estates, managed by absentee owners and growing cash crops, dominated agriculture.

2.2.3 Slave Mode of Production and the Crisis

According to Perry Anderson, the slave mode of production was the decisive invention of the Graeco-Roman world. If it provided the basis for the flowering of the Graeco-Roman world, it was also responsible for its decline. In Roman theory, the agricultural slave was called 'instrumentum vocale', the speaking tool; one grade away from the livestock that constituted an 'instrumentum semi-locale' and two from the implement which was an 'instrumentum mutum'. They became the standard objects of sale and purchase in the metropolitan markets. They could be shifted from one region to another and could be trained in a number of different skills. As Perry Anderson suggests, the wealth and ease of the propertied urban class of classical antiquity rested on the broad surplus produced in the countryside by slave labour.

According to some critics, slavery hindered the growth of technology. The slave had no incentive to innovate and could not be trusted with any expensive implement. Slave relations of production ultimately tended to paralyse productivity in both agriculture and industry. There were undoubtedly some technical improvements in the slave economy. They included among others the spread of more profitable wine and oil cultures (the cultivation of grapes and olives); the introduction of rotary mills for the grinding of grain; the two-field rotation system; botanical knowledge and field drainage also increased. There was, thus, no complete halt to technological development. Slave women often served as in-charge of grinding grain or cultivating the fields. In the manufacturing establishments and shops they worked as spinners, weavers and cloth makers. However, some select few who were educated worked as secretaries, clerks and readers.

But, as has been pointed out, no major cluster of inventions ever occurred to push the economy forwards. There was an overall technological stagnation in the ancient economy. The existence of a reservoir of labour capable of unlimited exploitation (which slavery was) discouraged the use of labour-saving devices. Reliance on human and animal labour conditioned Roman technology to operate within narrow limits. No labour-saving devices of any kind were ever introduced in the four centuries of its existence and 'the boundaries of the Roman agrarian economy' were soon reached and rigidly fixed.

Another factor that contributed to a crisis in the slave economy during the Empire was a sharp decline in the number of slaves and their rising prices. Traditionally, the supply of slaves largely depended on the foreign conquest since prisoners of war provided the main source of slave labour in antiquity 'with the final closure of the imperial frontiers after Trajan, the well of war captives inevitably dried up'.

The commercial trade could not make up for the shortages that resulted. The result was that prices of slaves started to rise sharply and it has been estimated that they were by the 1st and 2nd centuries CE eight to ten times the levels of the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. This sharp rise in their prices exposed the contradictions and risks of slave labour for the owners. For the slave owner each adult slave represented a perishable capital investment which would be wiped off completely at his death. Thus, the slave-owner would now be more hesitant to purchase additional slaves.

Declining rate of reproduction was another cause of the decline in the number of slaves. The slaves were housed in prison-like conditions and few female slaves were employed because they were not so profitable to the owners. The result was a very low rate of

reproduction which would have reduced the size of the labour force over the course of time. To prevent this decline in slave numbers, some owners encouraged slave-breeding during the Principate. This might have deferred crisis in the slave economy but it did not provide any long-term solution to it. Meanwhile, the rural free population was increasing to compensate for losses in the slave sector. Thus, a crisis was already brewing in the rural economy by the end of the Principate.

Meanwhile, there was no growth in trade and industry to offset the decline in agricultural production. A population overwhelmingly made up of subsistence peasants, slave labourers and urban poor limited the scope of the market. The propertied classes maintained their traditional contempt for trade. Merchants were a despised class, frequently recruited from freedmen. Lack of interest and lack of demand both worked against technological advancement in industry and limited its scope.

The financial and political crisis added onto this decline in slavery. The Roman empire was at its peak during the first two centuries CE but by the second century CE it was clear that difficult times lay ahead. The central government took extreme measures to save the declining economy. Political stability declined along with monetary stability. While there was a significant decline in population, the cost of government, however, kept rising. An ever increasing need for money compelled the emperor to adopt the policy of increased taxation and led to inflation by debasing the coinage. The situation was precipitated by a series of attacks by the Germanic tribes on the Empire. Domestic political instability combined by ferocious attacks launched by the Germanic tribes brought other problems within the terrain. Destruction caused by war and epidemics further reduced and weakened the population. Lands were deserted and there was a sharp fall in the agricultural production. In Gaul, the exploited masses broke-out in full-scale rural uprisings (called Baccaude) and it seemed that the empire would soon collapse.

The financial crisis aggravated by the barbarian attacks led to drastic changes in the army. Inflation had forced emperor Commodus to raise the soldiers' pay and the Severan emperors (a Roman imperial dynasty) had to double it to keep up with the increasing prices. This increased the budget by as much as 25 per cent. To raise money, emperors resorted to new taxes and debased the coinage. To attract men into the army, discipline was relaxed and military service became the path to social advancement.

As emperors devoted their attention to the defence of the frontiers, they were less able to preserve internal order. Piracy, brigandage and the neglect of roads and harbours all hampered trade – as did the debasement of coinage and inflation. Small artisans and craftsmen were drifting out of the towns, seeking security and employment in the estates of big landlords, despite official decrees banning such migrations. Throughout the empire in most provinces, urban trade and industry progressively declined and many towns withered and disappeared.

2.2.4 Decline of Slave Economy and the Rise of Colunate System

According to Perry Anderson, the final solution to the crisis which had manifested itself in the countryside was found there itself which paved the way for an altogether new mode of production. Owners now increasingly ceased to provide for the upkeep of many of their slaves directly. Instead they set them up on small plots of land to look after themselves and pay surplus produce to their landowners. At the same time, villages of small peasants and free-tenants fell under the 'patronage' of great landlords in their search for protection against fiscal exactions and conscription by the state, and came to occupy economic positions very similar to those of ex-slaves. Economic pressure, thus,

forced many members of the lower classes to become ‘**coloni**’ (tenant farmers) and coloni steadily replaced slaves as agricultural labour. ‘Coloni’ were the dependent tenant peasants tied to their landlord’s estate, and paying him either in cash or in kind for his plot, or cultivating it on a share-cropping basis. The ‘**colonus**’ (plural ‘**coloni**’) generally retained about half the yield of their plots. Thus, with formation of the colonate system, the economic importance of slavery declined but it did not disappear altogether. Slavery continued to survive in the imperial household and survived the fall of the Roman Empire.

The decline of the empire in the West proceeded rapidly in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. The Centre gradually lost its control over members of the upper classes who moved to the country and came to dominate a large class of dependent labourers. They lived in their fortified estates, called Villa, where the peasants often sought protection from both barbarian invaders and imperial officers collecting taxes. They became the victims of rich landlords and became tied to their estates. By the fifth century, the Western empire had dissolved into isolated estates belonging to rural aristocrats who dominated a large class of dependent peasantry, i.e. the ‘**coloni**’. The central government increasingly lost its ability to provide order and security to the people of the Empire. Trade and communication declined and regions became increasingly self-sufficient.

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) How was the Roman agrarian economy transformed by the rise of *Latifundia* ?

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- 2) Analyse the factors which led to the rise of slavery in Rome.

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- 3) Discuss the factors which led to a crisis in the slave economy in the Roman Empire.

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- 4) How was the Roman society transformed by the wars of expansion ?

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- 5) What is meant by the colonate system ? How did it lead to an increase in the power and wealth of rural aristocrats ?

2.3 SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Roman social structure was highly stratified. The society was divided into many classes which had their own contradictions and were in clash with each other. In this Section, we will study in detail the social orders and their struggle.

2.3.1 Traditional Division of Society

Roman tradition is unanimous in holding that there existed under the monarchy a group of families known as *Patricians*, the landowning aristocrats who served as priests, magistrates, lawyers and judges. The poorer citizens or the *Plebeians* were craftspeople, merchants, labourers and small-holders. The *Patricians* succeeded in the early years of the Republic in acquiring both a monopoly of state power and almost the complete control of resources of the community. According to sources, members of both the groups were full citizens, with the obligation to bear arms and with membership in the popular assembly. However, after the expulsion of the kings, the *Plebeians* are described as completely subordinate to the *Patricians*, who had wealth and monopolized public office.

2.3.2 Struggle of the 'Orders'

The early Republic was a period of economic difficulties which weighed heavily on the lower orders and increased their resentment at the *Patrician* exclusiveness. At the same time, the fact that some of the lower orders (not the very poor) contributed the manpower on which the military success depended, conferred bargaining power which they were not slow to utilize. Soon there emerged a *Plebeian* movement which set out to break the *Patrician* monopoly of the state and to reduce the extent of economic exploitation of the poor by the rich – known as the *struggle* of the orders (For further details, please see Unit 1 of this Course, **Section 1.5**).

For more than two centuries after the establishment of the Republic, the *Plebeians* struggled for political and social equality threatening to secede from the city if their demands were not met. The newly enriched *Plebeians* succeeded in gaining access to one of the two consular offices from 366 BCE onwards, but it was only in 172 BCE that both Consuls were for the first time from amongst the *Plebeians*. The poorer *Plebeians* also succeeded in securing the establishment of 'Concilium Plebis' early in the fifth century BCE which was later recognized as a constitutional body called the Tribal Assembly (287 BCE) which was presided over by its own officers called 'Tribunes'. However, the *Plebeian* organisation was simply grafted on the Roman state and did not lead to an end of the oligarchic rule. Aristocratic supremacy within the Republic was not seriously shaken.

The *Plebeians* in course of time secured other fundamental rights and safeguards. The 'Law of Twelve Tables' (450 BCE) provided for the codification of Civil Law, whereby the use of arbitrary exercise of judicial authority by the *Patricians* was reduced. Marriage between *Patricians* and *Plebeians* was legalized and enslavement of citizens for debt (*nexum*) was abolished by a law passed in 326 BCE.

2.3.3 Growth of the Roman Empire and Transformation of Society

The growth of Rome from a small city state to the dominant power in the Mediterranean world in less than four hundred years (509-133 BCE) profoundly affected its economic and social structure. The Roman wars of expansion led to an increase in the power and wealth of the senatorial aristocracy. But it steadily weakened the number of smallholder class. Peasant agitation for land reform had been stifled by the suppression of Gracchi brothers (See **Unit 1** of this Course, **Section 1.6**). But now their demands centered on allocations of land to discharged veterans (war-survivors, soldiers who were recruited from the Roman peasantry). Senatorial aristocracy had made enormous profits by the wars of conquest but refused to share their profits with the soldiers. The soldiers came to look up to their successful generals for economic rehabilitation and generals now started using their armies for political advancement.

The lowest order of the *plebeians* consisted of propertyless citizens (the *Proletari* class) who were artisans, labourers, and petty shopkeepers, whether slave, freedmen or free-born. In 538 BCE free grain was distributed for the first time and soon it became a permanent feature of Roman political life. In the large metropolis of Rome, without the presence of any serious police, the urban mob could exercise a lot of pressure in times of crisis and contributed to the fall of the Republic.

The Late Republic witnessed an important military development. This period, which witnessed serious political and social crisis, was also a period of major military campaigns in West Asia. Powerful military commanders entered into violent conflicts to control the state and struggle for power dominated the closing years of the Republic (See **Unit 1, Section 1.7**).

2.3.4 Social Stratification under the Principate

The victory of Octavian over Mark Antony at Actium ended a century of civil strife and brought peace to Rome by establishing a monarchy hidden behind a republican façade. The society also witnessed significant changes. Firstly, the Senate slowly faded into the background and a new bureaucracy was drawn from the equestrian order. The state became increasingly militarized. Secondly, a sharp line came to be drawn between the 'honestiores' (Senators, Equestrians) and the lower classes, the 'humiliores'. The 'honestiores' enjoyed legal privileges: lighter punishment for crimes, immunity from torture, and a right of appeal to the emperor. As the time passed it became more difficult to move from the lower order to the higher. Thirdly, the monopoly of central political office enjoyed by the Roman aristocracy was broken and there was increasing 'provincialization' within the empire. The provincial gentry had supported Augustus in his rise to power and they achieved major success when finally senators and even emperors began to be chosen from provincial families. By 212 CE, the citizenship had been extended to almost every free inhabitant of the empire. Thus, the Romans brought the upper classes of the provinces into their own government, spread Roman laws and culture and won the loyalty of influential people.

The Society into which many Provincials entered as Roman citizens was dominated by class and status. The inequalities of wealth, social standing and privilege in the society were immense. The poor normally lived in *insulae* (an apartment building housing a number of families); which the rich people primarily possessed *domus* (single family homes). The influence of the upper classes in government, society and religious organization remained widespread. Their influence was further increased by the practice of 'clientela' by which individuals deemed of inferior status (*clients*) were personally dependent on a more socially distinguished person (*patron*), offering him political support by voting for him or attending him in political gatherings. In return the great man offered benefits such as loans or protection, for example, by using his influence in law courts.

The physical maintenance and political conduct of the cities of the Roman Empire vested in the hands of the aristocracy. By generosity, munificence, these local aristocrats built their cities, sustained their physical activities, patronized their literary culture and provided their entertainments. In return they were acclaimed as 'benefactors' or 'patrons' of their cities and exercised a lot of influence.

2.4 SLAVERY AND SOCIETY

The Roman society during the Principate and the Late Empire continued to be hierarchical. It was like a pyramid with a small elite group at the top consisting of senators and 'equites'. The pyramid continued to be based on slavery. Even among the slaves there was hierarchy. *Vilicus*, the slave steward/overseer, who himself was the slave managed the lands, in the absence of the lord. His wife was in-charge of supervision (*vilica*) of the domestic affairs. There were probably about two million slaves at the end of the republic and their numbers remained buoyant in the imperial period. Slave labour was used in various ways and there were mainly three types of slaves in the Roman world:

- i) Domestic slaves lived in the household with the family and performed all tasks related to it. Almost every Roman household kept slaves from a few to thousand. In the first century CE Caelius Isodosus has as many as 4116 slaves. In fact, slaves became rather more of a 'public show of affluence'. The number of slaves held by individuals was partly a mark of status and even the less well-off like soldiers and war veterans could also be found owning a few slaves. The wealthy houses employed a large number of domestic slaves working as nurses, cooks, gardeners, cleaners, etc. but in most households slaves performed a variety of tasks. Within the domestic slaves there existed hierarchy and specialization. The *procurator* managed the business outside the home; *atriensis* managed the house; *dispensator* managed the supplies and the storage; *silenarius* maintained discipline among slaves.
- ii) Industrial slaves employed in mines, factories, in the galleys and on large farming estates were known as *Latifundia*. They mostly lived and worked in the harshest conditions. Slaves in the *Latifundia* would be overseen by an overseer who was probably also a slave and who could be very harsh on them.
- iii) Public slaves were owned by the state and performed many tasks like working on construction of roads and public buildings or cleaning of temples and baths. The maintenance work of aqueducts (*cura aquarum*) was almost exclusively performed by public slaves – 'slaves of Caesar'. Slaves were also employed in public baths who served the bathes as masseurs, anointers, delapidators and perfumers. During

the banquets they worked as cooks and served the masters and guests the sumptuous meals. Many of them worked as gladiators. Their role as gladiator was extremely dangerous. In animal hunts often slave gladiators were pitted against animals. They were also part of the militia as rousers with navy and also served military as 'batman'.

In Roman Law, slaves were considered to be the property of their owner. As M.I. Finley (1980) says, the totality of the slave-owner's rights was facilitated by the fact that the slave was an outsider to the society to which he was introduced as a slave. He was denied the most elementary of social bonds – kinship. There were slave families but these were the privileges that could be granted unilaterally by a slave-owner and withdrawn unilaterally. Moreover, a slave-family could be dispersed by sale. The slave was also answerable with his body for all offences.

How the slaves were treated?

The way in which a slave was treated depended almost entirely on his or her circumstances. Slaves working in *Latifundia* or mines usually lived and worked in terrible conditions. There was no distinguishing mark used during Republic to differentiate slaves from free citizens. However, in the late empire period, collars were put in some cases; while they also had restriction not to keep 'long hair' and 'garments made of skin'. They could not technically be 'married', though they could enter into *contrubernium* (union with no legal right). But in some kinds of work, especially skilled work, the master might treat his slaves well, and even perhaps help set them up on their own. But ultimately it was the master who decided their fate. Some masters might take particular care of slaves when fell ill, others might follow the advice of typical landowner, Cato, by cutting down the rations of sick slaves, cutting off slaves' tongues or of selling-off those who were elderly or diseased, just like old (decrepit) oxen, old tools, and 'anything else that is superfluous'.

But some slaves of rich masters were allowed to prosper and even acquire slaves of their own. During the Roman Principate and Late Empire Imperial slaves were in the best position to do well for themselves, even before they became freedmen. Finley (1980) has rightly said that in the 1st century CE the greatest opportunity for social mobility lay among the imperial slaves.

Roman literature abounds with examples of cruelty to individual domestic slaves. 'All slaves are enemies', was a Roman proverb. Tens of thousands of slaves were systematically exploited on farms and in mines. They were at the mercy of their masters. They would be overworked, neglected, thrown out, beaten or even killed and they had no real chance of protecting themselves.

The mutual hostility of master and slave, which slavery inevitably evoked, showed through both collectively and individually (Keith Hopkins). Between 135 and 70 BCE there were three major slave rebellions in Sicily and Italy, which were probably incited by the concentration and neglect of thousands of newly enslaved. The first servile war (135-132 BCE) began as revolt of the plantation slaves against the Roman Republic under the leadership of Eunus (of Syrian origin) and Cleon. Planter-slaves brutally murdered the plantation-owner Damophilus. However, in 132 BCE with heavy troops deployment rebellion was quashed. The second servile war began in 104 BCE led by Salvius and later after his death by Athenion. The tumult continued till 102 BCE. Finally, it was supported by the state militia. Among all the three revolts, 73-71 BCE slave rebellion of gladiators led by gladiator general Spartacus was the severest. It had deep impact on Roman history, Pompey and Crassus exploited it for their political gains. It also sowed the seeds for the transition of Roman Republic into an Empire. After 70 BCE

slave rebellion (led by Spartacus) no serious large-scale revolts took place.

Most slave resistance involved neither open rebellion nor murder. It probably took the form of guile, deceit, lying and indolence.

Manumission/Freedmen

There were three classes of freedmen: *ingenuus*, the freeborn who could not be enslaved; the *libertinus*, slaves who gained freedom through **manumission**; and the third were those who purchased their own freedom out of their '*peculium*'. Although Roman society was status conscious and hierarchical, there was at times a surprising degree of social mobility and one of the main routes was through the setting free (manumission) of slaves. Almost all slaves freed by their masters received Roman citizenship. A slave who joined monastery would become free. However, permission of the master to join was a must.

According to Keith Hopkins (1978), historians of ancient slavery have usually described the emancipation of slaves from a humanitarian point of view: they have seen it as a softening element in a harsh system. It is true that for the individual slave, manumission was an act of generosity by the master. But as pointed out by Hopkins, Roman slaves frequently paid substantial sums for their freedom. During their years of service, some slaves were allowed to earn a small sum of money, the '*peculium*' with which they could eventually buy their freedom. Masters also freed slaves as an ostentatious token of their wealth and power.

Roman slaves once freed could blend into lower class society. Some ex-slaves gained considerable wealth and social prominence. In the provinces, ex-slaves of the emperors supervised the collection of taxes and kept an eye for the emperor on the activities of senatorial governors. Private owners used freedmen as business agents, confidential secretaries etc. Many skilled slaves gained their freedom and a few amassed huge fortunes. But the slaves once freed had to overcome the considerable social stigma of their service origins. The upper classes often sneered at freedmen and despised their wealth. Although much of their resentment might have been directed at those very prominent freedmen who acted as secretaries and through their proximity to the emperor were able to gain a lot of power, influence and benefit.

There was a legal regulation that established the relationship of freedmen with their previous masters. The master acted as a kind of patron and the freedman owed obedience and services of different kinds and was legally subject to severe punishment if he defaulted. Furthermore, freedmen could not be admitted to the ranks of senators and equites, and could not marry into the upper classes and could not serve in the legions.

Slavery was so vital to Roman civilization that when the supply of slaves became scarce (by the end of 2nd century CE) a crisis started brewing in the economy. This crisis coincided with political instability and foreign invasions. Eventually the Empire in the West began to decline.

2.5 ROMAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The Roman art and architecture looms large that have impacted the art forms across the world.

Architecture

The signature markers of Roman architecture are its temples, basilicas, baths, theatres

and amphitheatres. The monumental architecture of Rome dates back to the 6th century BCE, the period of the establishment of the Republic (509 BCE). In the early phase Roman architecture was greatly influenced by the Etruscan forms — the truscan porch and terracotta decoration. The Capitoline temple of Rome shared close resemblance to Etruscan architecture of Signia and Veii. However, Roman expansion, particularly during BCE 200 to CE 50 brought the Romans in close contacts with the Greeks led to the increasing influence of Greek architectural forms on Roman architecture, which is particularly evident in the 3rd century BCE temple of Gabii and the temple of Apollo at Pompeii (120 BCE), temple of Fortuna Virillis (40 BCE), all reflect the deep impact of the Hellenizing movement. However, late Augustan temples of Concord, Castor and Pollux in the Roman forum do suggest ‘native freedom of arrangement of the limited spaced and highly elaborate mouldings’ (‘Roman Architecture’ 1965: 404). The use of Roman concepts is more evident in the secular architecture — the Roman vaulted spaces in Stabian baths at Pompeii (120 BCE), Tullianum (100 BCE) and Tabularium (78 BCE), though in ornamentation Hellenistic style was used. The Roman influence outside Italy can be seen in the theatres and amphitheatres of Arles and Nimes (16 BCE). From 1st century CE onwards this Greek motifs and ornamentation became more grand and elaborate which is evident in the Colosseum (75-82 CE), which assumed climax under Trajan and Hadrian (c. 98-138 CE) — the Forum of Trajan, villa of Hadrian at Tivoli. Nonetheless provincial buildings did retain ‘great individuality’. In the buildings from CE 200 to the Age of Constantine emphasis seems to be more and more on ‘majesty’ than on ‘material substance’. ‘Even before the end of the 2nd century deep cutting with sharply contrasting light and shadow had begun to detract from the impression of the solid forms in carved ornament’ (‘Roman Architecture’ 1965: 405). The finest example of light and shade can be seen in the arches of Septimius Severus (c. 200 CE). In the palace of Diocletian (c. 300 CE) arched colonnades were extensively used.



Figure 2.1: Roman Temple at Nimes in France

Credits: Danichou, January, 2011; Waterborough, June, 2019

Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/MaisonCarr%C3%A9.jpeg>

The earliest building material used was *tufa*, a volcanic rock available in abundance which was comparatively soft to work with bronze tools. However, later harder volcanic stones from the Alban Hills were used. In the Late Republic travertine from Tibur (Tivoli) was the chief stone used in the buildings (particularly in the exterior of the Colosseum). Marble was used largely for decoration. In the Flavian palace on the Palatine and Hadrian's villa at Tivoli marble is extensively used. Bronze was vastly used for doors, grilles, and panel cuttings. The pozzuolana (fine chocolate-red volcanic earth), largely available in beds at Pozzuoli (Naples), mixed with lime provided the fine 'natural hydraulic cementing' ('Roman Architecture' 1965: 405). In the early stone buildings square blocks laid in 'headers and stretchers' (*opus quadratum*) were used. Another characteristic feature of Roman architecture was use of stone columns and piers, often monolithic. By the 1st century BCE barrel vaulting was extensively practiced. The finest example of Roman vaulting can be seen in the Basilica of Maxentius (c.310-320 CE).

Roman basilicas were covered halls served as courts of justice and were also a place for banking and commercial transactions. The prominent of these were Basilica Julia and Basilica Aemiliaon, the southern and northern sides of forum at Rome. **Roman baths** across the world are known as the chief marker of Roman life. They numbered 1000 in Rome alone. Among the best preserved of these baths is the Stabian baths at Pompeii. Another marker of Roman society is their theatres and amphitheatres. Among the prominent theatres that still survive are theatre at Pompeii, Taormina in Sicily, Ostia in Italy and Orange in France. However, the building that stands out is the Roman amphitheatre — the Colosseum, built by emperors Vespasian, Titus and Domitian in 72-80 CE. Among other important amphitheatres are at Capua, Pompeii, Pozzuoli, Arles and Nimes.

Another important feature of the Roman architecture was the **colonnaded avenues**, often adorned with ornamental arches i.e. the Septimius Severus arches at Rome. **Forums**, which were a place where important business were conducted was another marker of Roman life. The forum of Trajan is the most fascinating forums of the Roman empire.

Bridges and aqueducts can rightly be mentioned as the greatest monuments of Rome. Romans used the principle of siphon conduits in their aqueducts. The most celebrated of the Roman aqueducts are Pont du Gard at Nimes and Tarragona and Segovia in Spain.

Roman Art

The Roman art forms derived its strength from two sources — one, produced in and around Rome, and second, produced by Greek artists and under Greek influence and 'mirror the impact of the foreign contacts'. The Roman coins were the artwork of the Greek artists. It is rightly pointed out that, 'It would be safe to guess that if Rome had not met them [artists] in the homelands of Greek art it would never have evolved form in its great art of imperial times... Roman art is the child of the marriage of two traditions — one, the Hellenistic art tradition and the sculptural branch of that tradition in particular, the other, the political, social, religious and psychological tradition of Rome' ('Roman Art' 1965: 413). 'The first appearance of the three art forms that expressed the Roman spirit most eloquently can be traced back to the Hellenistic age. These forms are realistic or veristic portraiture, in which every line, crease and wrinkle, and even blemishes were ruthlessly chronicled; the continuous, or "film", style in narrative art of all types; and the three-dimensional rendering of atmosphere, depth and perspective in relief work and painting' ('Roman Art' 1965: 413).

Though on Roman art Hellenistic influence was almost absolute, nonetheless, in turn Hellenistic art under Roman patronage achieved new heights and 'gained fresh vigour' ('Roman Art' 1965: 412). The early republic art forms were almost exclusively produced by the Greek artists through Etruscans — the 6th century BCE image of a god is considered to be the work of Vulca of Veii. Metrodorus of Athens was employed by Aemilius Paulus to paint his Macedonian triumph in Rome. However, following Roman campaigns and successes during the 5-3rd century BCE the Etruscan influence as mediators gradually started fading away and the Romans directly came in contact with the Greeks through Campania and Magna Graecia.

The Roman **sculptural art** can be traced in the tradition of second century BCE funerary masks made of wax and terracotta by the Romans and the Etruscans. By c. 100 BCE one finds 'realistic and verilistic heads, busts and statues' made of bronze, stone and marble by the Romans. The earliest such evidence comes from the period of Sulla (138-78 BCE) which reached its climax by c. 75-65 BCE. The classic example of such portraits are that of Augustus and the relief panels of Ara Pacis Augustae (13 BCE). The beginning of the deepening of busts is evident from Late Flavian period which further deepens in the portraits of Trajan. The depth further increases in the age of Hadrian. The bronze equestrian figure of Marcus Aurelius on the Capitol and the marble bust of Commodus Hercules are the finest example of Roman sculptures of the Antonine and Severan periods. Another prominent feature of this period is the vividly carved sarcophagi (stone funeral receptacle usually displayed above ground), an art which was originated in Asia Minor was a direct importation and freely imitated in Rome and Italy. However, by third and fourth century CE definitive tensions appear in the art forms. One finds the simplification of facial planes and the tumbling curls banished and gave way to skullcaps.

From the second half of the first century BCE series of domestic mural paintings appeared. The seminal among them are Odyssey frescoes found in a Vatican house on the Esquiline. It depicts episodes in continuity. Another celebrated lifesize friezes are found on the walls of the Villa of the Mysteries outside the Herculaneum gate of Pompeii and the frescoes in the Golden House of Nero in Rome. The subject matter of these paintings were generally derived from Greek mythology, while some pertains to religious rituals and Roman legends. The Late Republican and early Imperial frescoes are 'remarkably vivid and extremely naturalistic' ('Roman Art' 1965: 417).

Another important feature of Roman art were its mosaic pavements. Romans employed three techniques of mosaic: *Opus tessellatum*¹: In this mostly geometrical designs were produced. *Opus sectile*²: Through this technique generally abstract and stylized floral patterns were made by using comparatively larger *tesserae*. *Opus vermiculatum*³: In this pictures and floral designs were produced by using small *tesserae*. The Roman mosaics were directly inspired by Late Hellenistic mosaics of the royal palace of the Attalids at Pergamun. Alexander mosaic (Naples) from the House of the Faun at Pompeii of the second century BCE is one of the most celebrated Roman mosaics. The fourth century pavements of the country villa near Piazza Armerina, Sicily are the largest continuous Roman mosaic floor so far unearthed. Like the paintings, the subject matters of these mosaics were also derived largely from Greek mythologies and Roman legends.

¹ Mosaic technique in which uniform *tesserae* (small cubes) were used.

² Mosaic technique in which *tesserae* (small cubes) were comparatively larger than the cubes used in *Opus tessellatum*.

³ Mosaic technique in which *tesserae* (small cubes) were comparatively smaller than the cubes used in *Opus tessellatum*.



Figure 2.2: *Opus Tessellatum* Mosaic, 3rd Century CE
Credits: Jastrow, October, 2006;
Source Photographer: Marie-Lan Nguyen
Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/23/Mosaic_ducks_Massimo.jpg



Figure 2.3: Tigress attacking a calf, marble *opus sectile* (325-350 CE), Basilica of Junius Bassus, Esquiline Hill, Rome
Credits: Jastrow, November, 2006
Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/90/Tiger_calf_Musei_Capitolini_MC1222.jpg



Figure 2.4: *Opus vermiculatum* Floor Mosaic, Cat and Two Ducks, First Quarter of the 1st Century BCE
Credits: Jastrow, December, 2009; Source Photographer: Marie-Lan Nguyen
Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d4/Mosaic_cat_ducks_Massimo_Inv124137.jpg

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Write five lines on Roman architecture.

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- 2) Do you agree that Roman art almost completely reflect the Greek art forms?

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- 3) Which of the following statements are right or wrong ? Put **T(True)** or **F(False)** against them.

- a) In Rome, the existence of slave-labour in the countryside provided wealth and leisure to the ruling landowning class that lived in cities. (T/F)
- b) Under the Principate, agriculture declined, while trade and industry suffered a blow. (T/F)

- c) The giving up of the policy of conquest or ‘closure of the frontiers’ after Emperor Trajan led to a sharp fall in the supply of slaves in Imperial Rome. (T/F)
- d) After Augustus came to power and introduced a series of reforms, the monopoly of central power enjoyed by the senatorial aristocracy continued as before. (T/F)
- e) The practice of ‘clientela’ further increased the power of the upper classes over Plebeians in the Roman world. (T/F)

2.6 SUMMARY

Roman society was completely dependent on slavery. Their polity, economy and society was practically governed by slaves and slave mode of production. Though, prior to third century BCE this phenomenon was confined to a limited extent among the extremely rich, only those who could afford slaves. The post-third century BCE, with war captives and expansion of the Roman World, slaves became easily available and slavery expanded at a phenomenal pace. However, while exploitation was inherent in the society based on slave mode of production, provision of manumission and the fact that slaves could own ‘property’, helped some slaves to improve their position and they became free citizens. Though, slave society was extremely exploitative in nature, apart from doing menial works, slaves were often educated and employed as tutors; while others were employed in the state departments as clerks, accountants, etc. The discontent among slaves started showing signs from 135 BCE with the rebellion among slave planters in Sicily. Their struggle finally won the freedom and by the establishment of the Empire, slavery/slave mode of production gradually declined.

2.7 KEYWORDS

Coloni	: Tenant-farmers tied to their landlord’s estates and paying a part of the produce in cash or kind to their masters.
Freedmen	: Slave who had been set free and received citizenship.
Legion	: A division of a big number of soldiers including cavalry in the Roman army.
Manumission	: The process of setting the slave free.
Peculium	: When slaves were allowed to earn a small sum of money with which they could ultimately buy their own freedom.
Servus	: A term used for slaves.
Villa	: Fortified estates where powerful landowning classes lived and where peasants came for protection from corrupt officials or barbarian invaders.

2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 2.2
- 2) See Sub-sections 2.2.1; 2.2.2
- 3) See Sub-section 2.2.3
- 4) See Sub-section 2.2.2
- 5) See Sub-section 2.2.4

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Section 2.5
- 2) See Section 2.5
- 3) a)T, b)F, c)T, d)F, e) T

2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Brunt, P.A., (1971) *Social Conflicts in the Roman Republic* (London: Chatto & Windus).

Dudley, D., (1970) *Roman Society* (Hardmondsworth: Penguin Books).

Finley, M.I., (1980) *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking Press).

Hopkins, Keith, (1978) *Conqueres and Slaves*, Vol. I, *Sociological Studies in Roman History* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

‘Roman Architecture’ (1965) in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 19 (Chicago: William Benton), pp. 403-412.

‘Roman Art’ (1965) in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 19 (Chicago: William Benton), pp. 412-421.

2.10 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

Roman Society and Political Structure: History Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3B5pGiWptb4>