Data Sheet

The Anatomy of an Empire: A Mosaic of Roman Civilization

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CREDITS

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agency.

noun //
the capacity, condition, or state of acting.

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Roman Empire

DURATION PERIOD [1 2]
27 BC – AD 476 (502 years)
*The Eastern Empire lasted until 1453.

ZENITH PERIOD [1 2]
27 BC – AD 180 (206 years)

01 Political Regime



Imperial Monarchy [1 2 3]

One man held supreme power

A LEGITIMACY [1 2]
Why do people accept the ruler?

1. ARMY ACCLAMATION
Soldiers hailing a man as imperator. This started as a battlefield honour and became the actual act that made an emperor.

2. SENATE APPROVAL
Senate formally granted the emperor his powers by decree, keeping up the fiction that authority came from the Republic.

3. DIVINE AURA
Presenting the emperor as touched by the gods. This made him more than a man with an army.

B SUCCESSION [1 2]
How does power pass on?

1. ADOPTION
An emperor could legally adopt a grown man, who then counted as his genuine son and heir.
Strength: a merit-based choice. Weakness: it still depended on family politics and the army's support.

2. DYNASTY
The throne passed by blood. Soldiers were loyal to the family name, but that did nothing to stop incompetent heirs like Nero.
Strength: stability and loyalty. Weakness: no filter for ability.

3. USURPATION
A general or a group of guards seized the throne through murder or civil war, and the Senate approved him afterwards. It was the norm during the third-century crisis, when dozens of emperors rose and fell in about 50 years.
Strength: none as a system. Weakness: civil war, instability and constant fear of the next rebel.

C ADMINISTRATION [2 4]
How are the territories governed?

1. GOVERNORS
Each province was run by a governor sent from Rome, a senator or an imperial appointee, who handled justice, taxes and the troops stationed there.
Strength: cheap and flexible, because it relied on local elites who were happy to become Roman. Weakness: a governor with legions could revolt, and many governors squeezed their provinces for personal profit.
↳ *Local cities governed themselves, so a few hundred officials could rule about 50 million people.*

2. BUREAUCRACY
Provinces were split into smaller units, and civil and military command were separated. To fund a bigger army, the number of senior officials grew from about 250 (AD 249) to 6,000 (AD 400) to collect taxes and enforce the law.
Strength: more power to collect taxes and enforce decisions. Weakness: costly, with room for corruption.
↳ *There were no entrance exams: posts went to whoever had the right friends recommending them.*

02 LAW & PUNISHMENT [5 6]



A SOURCE OF LAW
Where does law come from?

1. THE TWELVE TABLES PUT LAW IN WRITING
Rome's first written law code (c. 450 BC) limited the elite's power to apply the law as they pleased. More than three centuries later, schoolboys still memorised it as the heart of Roman law.

2. THE EMPEROR BECAME THE LAWMAKER

B STATUS
Who does the law protect?

1. CITIZENSHIP PROTECTED, BUT RANK MATTERED MORE

2. ELITES PUNISHED MORE LIGHTLY THAN COMMONERS

3. SLAVES AS PROPERTY

C PUNISHMENT
What happens to the guilty?

1. THE RICH PAID OR WERE EXILED

2. THE POOR WERE SENT TO THE MINES

3. THE LOWEST DIED IN PUBLIC

03 ARCHITECTURE [7 8]

Concrete + arches: buildings still standing 2,000 years later



A TECHNIQUES
How did they build?

1. CONCRETE FREED THE SHAPE
Roman concrete mixed lime, volcanic ash and rubble. It could be poured into any form and even hardened underwater.
Strength: cheap, strong, and buildable by unskilled labour.
Weakness: heavy and ugly, so it was hidden behind marble or brick facing.

B PUBLIC WORKS
What did the state build?

1. AQUEDUCTS BROUGHT WATER TO CITIES

2. ROADS CONNECTED THE EMPIRE

3. SEWERS DRAINED WASTE

C CITY BUILDINGS
What filled a Roman city?

1. THE POOR LIVED IN TALL APARTMENTS

2. BATHS WERE OPEN TO EVERYONE *Naughty!*

3. ARENAS HELD ENTIRE CITIES

04 Economy & Money



An Empire of Farmers

A WEALTH [2 4]
Where did the money come from?

1. FARMING MADE MOST OF THE WEALTH
Most people worked the land, and grain, olive oil and wine were the backbone of the economy.

2. A FEW FAMILIES OWNED THE LAND
Fewer than 5% of the population owned more than 80% of the land, protected by Roman property law.
↳ *Money made in trade was quickly put into land.*

3. TRADE CROSSED A ROMAN SEA
Roman fleets kept the Mediterranean safe, and trade between provinces mattered more than trade abroad.

B MONEY [2 4]
How did people pay?

1. IMPERIAL COINS SPREAD EVERYWHERE
The silver denarius, minted with the faces of emperors and generals, circulated alongside local coins.
Strength: coins helped trade and tax payments.
Weakness: everything depended on the emperor keeping the coin honest.

2. EMPERORS DILUTED THE SILVER TO PAY TROOPS
In the 3rd-century crisis, emperors cut the silver content until coins were almost pure copper, with under 5% silver.
Strength: more coins to pay soldiers in the short term.
Weakness: runaway inflation. In AD 301, the Prices Edict capped wheat at 100 accounting denarii per measure.



C STATE FINANCES [2 4]
Where did the tax money go?

1. LAND TAX PAID FOR MOST OF IT
The state lived mainly on taxes on farmland and harvests. From Diocletian on, part of the tax was collected in kind (grain, meat, wine) to feed the army.
Strength: a regular, predictable income. Weakness: a heavy burden on farming households.

2. THE ARMY TOOK THE LARGEST SHARE
Paying, feeding and equipping hundreds of thousands of soldiers was by far the state's biggest cost.

3. FREE GRAIN KEPT ROME QUIET
The state handed out grain to Rome's people, shipped mostly from Egypt and North Africa. When the grain ships were late, the city rioted.
Strength: kept the capital fed and politically quiet. Weakness: a huge cost carried by the provinces, so losing Africa meant losing Rome's food.
↳ *"Bread and circuses" – emperors fed and entertained Rome's poor to keep the peace.*

05 Technology [9]



A POWER & MACHINES
What did the work besides muscle?

1. WATER WHEELS GROUND THE GRAIN
Rivers and aqueducts turned wheels that drove millstones. At Barbegal, in Gaul, 16 wheels in two rows of eight formed an ancient flour factory.

2. TREADWHEEL CRANES LIFTED THE STONE
Workers walking inside giant wheels powered cranes that raised blocks weighing several tonnes.

3. PUMPS AND SCREWS MOVED WATER
Force pumps fought fires, and Archimedes' screws drained water from mines and lifted it into fields.
↳ *Rome had a steam toy, not a steam engine: the metalwork didn't exist yet.*

06 Food & Drink [8 10]



A THE STAPLES
What did everyone eat and drink?

1. GRAIN WAS THE MAIN MEAL
Wheat eaten as porridge (puls) or bread made up most of a Roman's daily calories.

2. OLIVE OIL WENT INTO EVERYTHING
Oil was a staple for cooking and hygiene: Romans rubbed it on their skin after bathing.
↳ *At the baths, Romans scraped off grime and sweat with a curved metal strigil, then rubbed on scented oils.*

3. WINE WAS DRUNK WATERED DOWN
Romans mixed wine with water to soften its effect, a habit shared across the Greek and Roman world. Drinking it undiluted was considered barbaric.
Strength: safer than plain water and part of daily life for all classes. Weakness: cheap wine was often sour, and the poor drank posca, vinegar mixed with water.

07 Medicine [8]



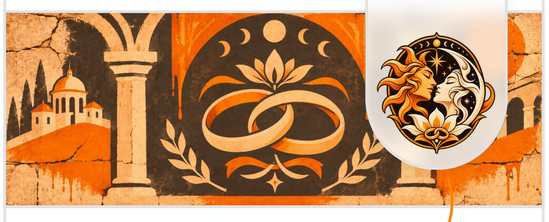
A PRACTICE
How did they treat patients?

1. SURGEONS USED BRONZE AND IRON TOOLS
Scalpels, forceps and probes were found in the House of the Surgeon in Pompeii; their quality wasn't surpassed until modern times.

2. HERBS WERE THE MAIN DRUGS
Dioscorides gathered almost 600 remedies, mostly from plants.
Strength: some remedies really worked, such as poppy for pain. Weakness: many were useless or toxic.

3. WOUNDS WERE WASHED WITH WINE AND VINEGAR
Without knowing why, Romans cleaned wounds with wine and vinegar, which helped prevent infection.
↳ *Every legionary fort had its own hospital, the valetudinarium.*

08 Sex & Marriage [11]



A MARRIAGE AS ALLIANCE
How did Romans marry?

Love was optional. Family interests came first.

1. FATHERS ARRANGED THE MATCH
Marriages were usually arranged between families to join fortunes and status. The legal minimum age was 12 for girls and 14 for boys, though most married later.
Strength: stable alliances between families. Weakness: brides were often about ten years younger than their husbands, with little say in the choice.

2. CONSENT ALONE MADE A MARRIAGE
For couples legally able to marry, no ceremony was needed: what counted was that both intended to be husband and wife.

3. DIVORCE WAS EASY FOR BOTH
Either spouse could end the marriage simply by declaring it over, and the wife's dowry usually returned with her.

09 Contraception & Birth [8 12]



A A DANGEROUS BEGINNING
How did children come into the world?

Birth was the riskiest moment in a woman's life.

1. BIRTH CONTROL DIVIDED DOCTORS
Contraceptives included careful timing of sex, pessaries made with pomegranate rind or oak gall, and monthly seed potions. Abortion methods escalated from violent exercise and hot baths to herbal treatments, bloodletting and pessaries.

2. MIDWIVES DELIVERED THE BABIES
Births happened at home, with a midwife assisting on a special birthing chair. The doctor Soranus wrote a manual on how to train them.

3. FATHERS DECIDED WHETHER TO RAISE THE BABY
The midwife checked whether the newborn was fit to raise: did it cry loudly, and was it well formed? The father then chose whether to accept it or abandon it, and some abandoned babies were taken in as slaves.

10 Childhood & School [13]



A LEARNING BY THE CANE
How did children learn?

1. ELEMENTARY TEACHERS TAUGHT THE BASICS
From about age 7, children learned to read, write and count, often in rented rooms, booths or public spaces.

2. GRAMMAR TEACHERS TAUGHT LITERATURE
From about 11, wealthier boys studied Greek and Latin poetry with a grammaticus, memorising authors like Vergil and Homer.

3. RHETORIC TRAINED FUTURE LEADERS
In their teens, elite boys learned public speaking and argument, the key skill for law, politics and administration.
Strength: produced the Empire's lawyers, officials and senators. Weakness: critics complained that declamation drilled style on far-fetched themes rather than real cases.