


1900

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Bertha Douglass Tucker
University of Rhode Island

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Recommended Citation

Tucker, Bertha Douglass, "Home Life in Ancient Rome" (1900). *Student and Lippitt Prize essays*. Paper 24.
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HOME LIFE IN ANCIENT ROME.

BERTHA DOUGLASS TUCKER.

1900.

HOME LIFE IN ANCIENT ROME.

In studying history one finds that there are certain interests common to all civilized nations. The same feelings of family affection and enthusiastic love of country which are powerful motives with Americans today actuated the Romans in 400 B.C. Only in such minor considerations as material surroundings, social customs, and religious practices is the contrast strongly marked.

Like ourselves, they felt great pride in family and race traditions, especially during the times of the republic. The family held an important position, politically and socially, which was a large factor in the advancement of the nation. Tracing the home life of the Roman people is tracing their national life. The citizen of the republic differs essentially from his descendant in the age of imperial luxury.

Absolute master of all within his household, the husband and father was the center of the home. Around him the other members of it group themselves. What was it to be absolute master? Merely to command the services of all? No,

but to control the very lives. The wife was the only exception. He might kill his slave at his pleasure and his word decided whether his infant should be tenderly cared for or exposed to die. This authority did not end with the child's infancy, for the father might punish with death or slavery at any age if he considered it deserved. Citizenship and marriage did not release the son. He could be freed only by being sold as a slave and set free three times; but after the third time the father had no further claim on him. A slave could free himself from a master more easily than a son from his father. The father's right was seldom abused, for public sentiment forbade it.

As a husband, the Roman's authority depended on the kind of marriage into which he had entered. *Confarreatio* was the most common and honorable, since it could take place only between Roman citizens. In this case the wife gave herself and her property unreservedly to her husband, and retained no rights over his property at his death. The civil contract was called *coemptio*. Then the wife held her own property; otherwise it corresponded to the first form. Divorce might be easily obtained but was seldom sought.

In many ways a Roman wife was her husband's equal. She

did not share his rights as a father; but her husband regarded her as his friend and companion, giving her a position much superior to that which the Greek woman held. She had entire supervision of the household and set an example of industry: spinning, weaving, and writing. The mother taught her children while they were young; and the boys and girls together learned reading, writing, and the laws. The Roman matron was honored outside as well as within her home; she was allowed to go anywhere alone even to the gladiatorial shows; her witness was accepted at court; she was present when her husband received his friends; and she could obtain a divorce as easily as he.

As has been said, the son was under his father's control so long as either lived. His father always chose his wife; but after marriage the son was the supreme head of his home. In other places his father still had authority over him. A sharp line divided a man's political and his family rights.

The boy learned much from observation of his elders, who allowed him to be with them constantly. When his mother could no longer teach him, he was sent to school, where a Greek freedman or slave taught. Two or three

families united to support one. Though the Romans professed scorn of everything Greek, they gladly availed themselves of Greek learning. Homer was the textbook used. If the boy were ambitious, he went on to the school of rhetoric, and there he learned the accomplishments. When seventeen years old, a youth was entitled to vote and wear the toga. His education was completed the next year, and afterwards he might travel in cultured Greece or attach himself to some great leader and learn the art of war. At twenty he was ready to face his life work.

His sister received less education. She shared with him the home teaching and sometimes went to his first school. There she stopped. She was proficient in writing; but further education was considered unnecessary, as she had no part in public life. Her mother kept her at home and taught her household duties. She was of little importance in the family and had to be closely veiled and attended on the street. But marriage changed everything, giving her liberty and position. The marriage arrangements were made for her, and often she and her intended husband did not meet until the day of betrothal.

The slave was an important member of the Roman family and played a prominent part in the later history of the nation. The first slaves were war captives. Some were more intelligent than their masters. Their position was not degrading; for life was simple, and the Roman worked and ate with his slaves. The possibility of manumission was always before them; and they were allowed to lay up money toward purchasing their freedom, many saving enough to do so.

A Roman of rank had clients dependent on him. These were men whom he protected politically and socially, and in return received love and service. The relation was mutually helpful. The client also might have clients, who honored him.

The houses of republican Rome were primitive dwellings built of rough stone, and no attempt was made at beauty of outside structure. Small high windows, closed with shutters, let in a little light. In many houses there was a shop in front. The peristyle, or garden, was in the rear.

The atrium was the most important room. It contained the family altar, spinning-wheel, and a bed. All

the family ate here, where the food was prepared and all the spinning and weaving done. An opening in the roof furnished a way of escape for the smoke. The name atrium is supposed to be derived from its smoke blackened walls. In the more elaborate houses the rain supplied water to a fountain and fernery placed in the center of the room. Niches built in the sides of the room held busts of family ancestors.

Curiously enough for such a highly civilized people, the Romans determined the length of their day by the sun. It was divided into twelve hours, which varied with the time between sunrise and sunset. The night contained four watches: evening, midnight, cock-crowing, and time of silence. A water clock recorded the hours.

The Roman's first duty upon rising at daybreak was to offer a libation to his household gods. This was done at the altar in the atrium. At the same time he received the greetings of his clients, who were often invited to eat with him. The citizen hurriedly ate a slight breakfast, or jentaculum, of bread and figs and was ready to go about his day's work. At noon he partook of another slight meal, the prandium. The principal meal of the day, called cena,

was at night and consisted of bread, porridge, and vegetables. This closed a long and busy day.

But the Romans had also their periods of recreation and were very fond of games, especially those of chance. The stakes were small but interest keen. They played with dice much like those now used, and called on Venus to give a lucky throw.

The populace was amused by the triumphs permitted those who had made foreign conquests. The conqueror marched through the streets with a long train of captives and a brilliant display of his trophies. The people were then feasted at his expense. Public holidays in honor of the gods were also celebrated by feasting.

The picture of the Roman people during the Republic is most attractive. Industry, bravery, honesty, and reverence were national traits. The Roman was deeply religious. He had his own national deities, to whom he offered sacrifices, and was very ready to adopt new ones. He consulted the gods before every important undertaking, and abandoned it if they gave an unpropitious answer. They

were indued with human qualities and were worshiped as deified men. Every Roman believed himself able to speak directly with the gods but generally employed the mediation of a priest, because the latter would know better in what form to address them.

The Roman's warlike spirit did not detract from the honor in which he held agriculture. Every soldier was proud of working with his slaves in the fields and was ready to go back to them after a successful campaign. The story of Cincinnatus is well known; how he was called from the plough to serve his country and returned contentedly to it after having been dictator of Rome. This incident shows, too, the honorable place every citizen held in the state. All were on an equality. They counted it an honor to wear the toga, the sign of citizenship.

The manner of living was simple and democratic. The nation's great strength lay in its home life, where genuine family affection exerted an intangible but very real influence. While the homes were happy, the nation grew rapidly.

Rome's power reached its height at the time of Julius Caesar. With his death the decline began. When we see the

change in the people, the reason is evident. Rome constantly increased in territory and wealth, bringing indolence and extravagance in their train. Luxuries were easily obtained, and Roman life lost its simplicity and dignity. The prosperity was outward.

The Roman citizen no longer cultivated his own estates. He despised labor and left it to slaves and freedmen, thinking more of beauty than business. Some were found who devoted a part of each day to study and called themselves poets and philosophers. None worked. Hours were spent at the immense public baths of which Rome boasted. Here were not only hot and cold water baths, but a gymnasium, thoroughly equipped, where the Romans enjoyed athletic games of various kinds. These luxuries were within the reach of all at a nominal price. Many practically lived at the baths.

Family ties loosened. Divorce became common and ceased to be condemned. An instance is recorded of a divorce being obtained because a wife spoke to her husband's freedman without the former's permission. Only priests entered into *confarreatio*.

The Roman became sceptical. There were many temples

and daily sacrifices were offered to the gods, but he did not really believe in their existence. Stoicism and epicureanism had a great hold on men. The theories of these philosophies were moral but not uplifting as had been the earlier worship. They tended to atheism.

The moral condition of a nation is very surely manifested in the position it gives to women. The Roman ideal of womanhood had lowered. Virtue was not honored. The change in the matron's dress shows the change in her character. She had loved simple white robes. Now she dressed richly in brilliant colors. Her arms, hands, and ears were loaded with jewels. She used cosmetics and painted her face artistically to enhance her beauty. Vanity ruled her and she forgot how to spin and care for the house. As greater liberty was given her, she became bold and immodest.

The daughter was now less restrained. Formerly women had been forbidden to drink wine, but they had come to partake almost as freely as men. There were, of course, exceptions, and instances of rare virtue, industry, and purity are recorded.

The boy's education was limited. He neglected the common studies and spent much time on oratory and elocution.

The aim was to make an impressive speech, whatever its worth. As manual labor was scorned, he must be either a soldier or lawyer. A successful speech gave high honor to the happy orator. There were splendid openings for a lawyer, by which he could gain a fortune as well as a reputation.

The number of slaves in a family had greatly increased. The familia rustica and the urbana constituted two distinct classes. The former tilled the soil on their masters' country estates. The familia urbana, as the name implies, were those who cared for his insula, or residence in the city. To a modern the employment of such a vast number seems a serious problem. It was accomplished by division of labor. Each department of the household work was superintended by a special slave. One looked after the slaves who prepared the food; another, those who served it; another, those who set the tables and prepared the dining-room; others, those who kept the various rooms in order; while the care of the master's and mistress' persons, of their wardrobes, of the library, of the statuary, and of the gardens was given to still others. There was little disturbance and friction. Each was well trained in his

particular work.

The nomenclator was a very useful slave. He was always at his master's elbow to whisper the name of anyone who saluted him. Etiquette demanded that the greeting be answered by repeating the name of the person and the great man could not remember all whom he had met.

Educated or beautiful slaves were extremely valuable. Their value had a certain restraining effect on their master's treatment. In spite of this, punishments were severe. The criminals in the horrible slave prisons were chained together, ill-fed, and exposed to hard labor. There was little possibility of escape for the unhappy victim, and hundreds perished miserably. Slaves were also beaten and crucified. The houses of the wealthy resounded with the cries of the tortured. The hardening effect on the Romans was incalculable. Manumission was the slave's only way of escape.

Freedmen were numerous in Rome, and they acquired great wealth, for, unlike the Roman citizen, they were not ashamed of work. A certain bond always remained between a freedman and his former master. The strict laws against them were relaxed. They were allowed in the Senate, and in

Nero's time a former slave was tribune of the city.

The client class had degenerated. Every morning the patron was greeted by a crowd of flatterers, hoping for reward. They were no longer content with serving one man but daily paid their respects at the houses of numerous patrons. They accompanied the latter on the street. A man's importance depended on the number of clients around his litter. The patron despised his client and paid him in money for his flatteries. An ambitious young man had to submit to this humiliation if he desired a social position.

The wealthy Roman was not content with a simple, square house. He built baths and more rooms until the atrium was used only as a gathering place for his clients. In the tablinum, which opened out of the atrium, he transacted all his business. The triclinium, or dining-room, was divided off by curtains, and some houses had a summer and a winter dining-room. The food was cooked in a room at one end of the house. The bedrooms were small and cell-like. Rolls of manuscripts were kept on shelves in a little room set apart as a library. This was more for show than use. A dark house seemed to the Romans the most luxurious.

The houses were built of fireproof Alban stone, and the interior decorations reached a perfection never since surpassed. The floors were of mosaic, representing entire scenes; while skillful artists adorned the walls with paintings of the gods, cupids, dancing girls, nymphs, and animals. A clever mechanical device in the dining-room ceiling scattered perfumes and flowers over the table. Beautiful statues added to the elegance of the furnishings. The typical furniture of the atrium remained from association. Tables of the rare citrus wood, chairs with legs of pure gold; beautiful golden lamps, couches of ivory with coverings of cloth of gold, silver mirrors, vases and graceful goblets of the most wonderfully clear crystal, urns of gold and silver set with precious stones; all these were common in Roman homes. Rich draperies hid the walls of the rooms.

The Romans under the Empire carried eating to excess. The cena lasted from three o'clock in the afternoon until late in the evening. The meal was divided into three parts: the gustatio, cena proper, and dessert. Each part had

several courses. Beautiful slaves entertained the guests with music and dancing in the intervals. The first course was intended to whet the appetite and consisted of pickles, eggs, and fruit. On the main part of the meal immense amounts of time and money were expended. Fish, a great dainty, were prized for their size and were brought on the table whole to excite the wonder of the guests; while the brains of peacocks satisfied the desire for costly dishes. The cooks designed wonderful structures of pastry as dessert. All kinds of fruit were served, and with each course large quantities of wine were drunk.

Feasting may be considered a national amusement. The emperor gave public banquets and food was distributed to the people at gladiatorial shows. It was an innocent pastime compared with others in which they indulged.

The struggles in the arena excited most interest in the populace. The plays of the theatre had no attraction after they had felt the wild excitement of seeing human blood shed. All classes attended the shows. They had it in their power to rob the contestant of life by their turned down thumbs. They exulted in watching the death of

brave men, and were degraded by the sight. They thought courage was fostered, but it was more truly callousness, awakening only the wild beast instinct. How could humanity and morality live in such an atmosphere?

Of all the primitive virtues, patriotism was the most persistent and never died out. To a Roman his country was very dear and citizenship was his pride.

The Romans were pre-eminently a practical people, and showed little originality in literature, philosophy, and the fine arts. They created nothing new but borrowed from other nations, taking subjects and manner of execution from the Greeks especially, sometimes improving and modifying them. The influence of Greece greatly promoted their culture. Contact with Eastern nations followed. The East was the center of superstition and profligacy. Its influence was harmful and the Romans yielded easily to temptation. It was a step downward when superstition replaced strong religious feeling, and led the way to loss of virtue and integrity.

With the introduction of slavery labor became dishonorable. Class distinctions were more marked; a citizen

looking down upon the man who worked with his hands. Industry was at the basis of the Roman's strength. When he lost that, he became effeminate.

These causes together lowered the standard of morality. The sterling virtues of early times gave way to the corrupting vices of the empire. Centuries were needed to complete the change; crumbling at the foundations until the mighty structure fell. Roman history furnishes a striking instance of lofty grandeur overthrown by a gradual accumulation of trivial weaknesses.

Bertha Douglass Tucker.

Class of 1900.