Roman Empire

Daily life

Health and disease

Further information: Disease in Imperial Rome, Antonine plague, and Plague of Cyprian

Epidemics were common in the ancient world, and occasional pandemics in the Empire killed millions. The Roman population was unhealthy. About 20 percent---a large percentage by ancient standards---lived in cities, Rome being the largest. The cities were a "demographic sink": the death rate exceeded the birth rate and constant immigration was necessary to maintain the population. Average lifespan is estimated at the mid-twenties, and perhaps more than half of children died before reaching adulthood. Dense urban populations and poor sanitation contributed to disease. Land and sea connections facilitated and sped the transfer of infectious diseases across the empire's territories. The rich were not immune; only two of emperor Marcus Aurelius's fourteen children are known to have reached adulthood.

The importance of a good diet to health was recognized by medical writers such as Galen (2nd century). Views on nutrition were influenced by beliefs like humoral theory. A good indicator of nutrition and disease burden is average height: the average Roman was shorter in stature than the population of pre-Roman Italian societies and medieval Europe.

Food and dining

Main article: Food and dining in the Roman Empire

See also: Ancient Roman cuisine and Ancient Rome and wine

Most apartments in Rome lacked kitchens, though a charcoal brazier could be used for rudimentary cookery. Prepared food was sold at pubs and bars, inns, and food stalls *(tabernae, cauponae, popinae, thermopolia)*. Carryout and restaurants were for the lower classes; fine dining appeared only at dinner parties in wealthy homes with a chef *(archimagirus)* and kitchen staff, or banquets hosted by social clubs _(collegia)*.

Most Romans consumed at least 70% of their daily calories in the form of cereals and legumes. *Puls* (pottage) was considered the food of the Romans, and could be

elaborated to produce dishes similar to polenta or risotto. Urban populations and the military preferred bread. By the reign of Aurelian, the state had begun to distribute the _annona_ as a daily ration of bread baked in state factories, and added olive oil, wine, and pork to the dole.

Roman literature focuses on the dining habits of the upper classes, for whom the evening meal *(cena)* had important social functions. Guests were entertained in a finely decorated dining room *(triclinium)* furnished with couches. By the late Republic, women dined, reclined, and drank wine along with men. The poet Martial describes a dinner, beginning with the *gustatio* ("tasting" or "appetizer") salad. The main course was kid, beans, greens, a chicken, and leftover ham, followed by a dessert of fruit and wine. Roman "foodies" indulged in wild game, fowl such as peacock and flamingo, large fish (mullet was especially prized), and shellfish. Luxury ingredients were imported from the far reaches of empire. A book-length collection of Roman recipes is attributed to Apicius, a name for several figures in antiquity that became synonymous with "gourmet."

Refined cuisine could be moralized as a sign of either civilized progress or decadent decline. Most often, because of the importance of landowning in Roman culture, produce---cereals, legumes, vegetables, and fruit---were considered more civilized foods than meat. The Mediterranean staples of bread, wine, and oil were sacralized by Roman Christianity, while Germanic meat consumption became a mark of paganism. Some philosophers and Christians resisted the demands of the body and the pleasures of food, and adopted fasting as an ideal. Food became simpler in general as urban life in the West diminished and trade routes were disrupted; the Church formally discouraged gluttony, and hunting and pastoralism were seen as simple and virtuous.

Spectacles

See also: Ludi, Chariot racing, and Recitationes

When Juvenal complained that the Roman people had exchanged their political liberty for "bread and circuses", he was referring to the state-provided grain dole and the *circenses*, events held in the entertainment venue called a *circus*. The largest such venue in Rome was the Circus Maximus, the setting of horse races, chariot races, the equestrian Troy Game, staged beast hunts *(venationes)*, athletic contests, gladiator combat, and historical re-enactments. From earliest times, several religious festivals had featured games *(ludi)*, primarily horse and chariot races _(ludi circenses)_. The races retained religious significance in connection with agriculture, initiation, and the cycle of birth and death.

Under Augustus, public entertainments were presented on 77 days of the year; by the reign of Marcus Aurelius, this had expanded to 135. Circus games were

preceded by an elaborate parade (*pompa circensis*) that ended at the venue. Competitive events were held also in smaller venues such as the amphitheatre, which became the characteristic Roman spectacle venue, and stadium. Greek-style athletics included footraces, boxing, wrestling, and the pancratium. Aquatic displays, such as the mock sea battle *(naumachia)* and a form of "water ballet", were presented in engineered pools. State-supported theatrical events *(ludi scaenici)* took place on temple steps or in grand stone theatres, or in the smaller enclosed theatre called an _odeon_.

Circuses were the largest structure regularly built in the Roman world. The Flavian Amphitheatre, better known as the Colosseum, became the regular arena for blood sports in Rome. Many Roman amphitheatres, circuses and theatres built in cities outside Italy are visible as ruins today. The local ruling elite were responsible for sponsoring spectacles and arena events, which both enhanced their status and drained their resources. The physical arrangement of the amphitheatre represented the order of Roman society: the emperor in his opulent box; senators and equestrians in reserved advantageous seats; women seated at a remove from the action; slaves given the worst places, and everybody else in-between. The crowd could call for an outcome by booing or cheering, but the emperor had the final say. Spectacles could quickly become sites of social and political protest, and emperors sometimes had to deploy force to put down crowd unrest, most notoriously at the Nika riots in 532.