**The social hierarchy**Roman society is organised in a strict hierarchy. People can move from one position on the social scale to another – many slaves, for example, become freed men and can even rise to positions of great authority – but no one can ignore the basic divisions.

The people of the empire fall into three principal categories: citizens, provincials and slaves. Full citizenship is often granted to provincials *en masse* as a way of securing their loyalty to Rome. Soldiers from far-flung corners of the empire are guaranteed full citizen rights (and land on which to settle) after 25 years' service. Sometimes they earn it sooner, especially when it is used as a bribe to win their support in the numerous power struggles that beset Rome.

***Senators***At the top of the social hierarchy, of course, is the emperor. But the Senate, which is made up of wealthy aristocrats and ruled the Roman Republic before the position of emperor was established, still provides the leading members of the government. These include consuls, other magistrates and provincial governors. Originally elected by the citizens of Rome, by the time of the empire senators are either appointed by the emperor or inherit their position.

***Equestrians***Below the senators are the *equites*, equestrians or knights – wealthy citizens who hold many of the senior positions in the army and civil administration. The equestrians (so called because they were originally citizens who served the army on horseback) can become senators – as the orator Cicero and the general Marius do in the latter years of the Republic. The equestrians' increasing importance and influence during the empire means that the distinction between them and the senators gradually blurs – although there is still often a great deal of snobbery about people who arrive at positions of power without belonging to one of the principal aristocratic families.

***Plebeians and slaves***Next come the plebeians, including up to 200,000 citizens among the urban poor who are dependent on the emperor's 'dole' of free corn ([*see below*](http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/guide03/part05.html#bread)). They are often referred to as the 'mob'. Slaves, meanwhile, range from those who can expect only a short, brutal life (many thousands die in the mines) to those who are better off than all but the highest free classes. A number of routes out of slavery are also available to fortunate slaves. For instance, ex-slaves of the emperors virtually run the civil service, while gladiators, most of whom are slaves, can earn their freedom by performing well in the arena.

Various emperors improve the position of slaves. Claudius decrees that any master who leaves a sick slave to die will be tried for murder. And Hadrian abolishes a slave-owner's power of life and death by ruling that only a magistrate should be able to sentence a slave to death.

**Bread and circuses***'The people that once bestowed commands, consulships, legions and all else now ... long eagerly for just two things: bread and circuses.'  
Juvenal*

Social class determines even the kind of bread that people eat in Rome. There are three varieties: 'plebeian' black bread, made from barely sifted flour; 'second', made from slightly refined flour; and 'white', eaten only by the rich.

The *annona*, or annual supply of grain, has been under state control since the 3rd century BC. Most of it comes from Egypt, known as the breadbasket of the empire. Augustus, recognising its importance, made sure that supplies are under the personal control of the emperor. It is distributed free of charge to the urban masses – a dole that could only be withdrawn at the risk of reviving the sorts of bread riots that used to afflict Rome regularly during the Republic.

As well as bread, the Romans insist on circuses. Huge resources are devoted to triumphs and games, great spectacles that are often accompanied by great slaughter – of both animals and people. (*See* [Arts](http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/H/history/guide03/part08.html#games).)

**The guilds**There are at least 125 guilds in existence in the early empire, with varying degrees of monopoly over particular crafts or trades. These range from carpenters and potters to poets and pimps, and also include physicians, ironsmiths, tanners, coppersmiths, cabinet-makers, scholars, tailors, barbers and traders in spices, textiles and pearls.

But as few as one-tenth of the artisans in imperial Rome are of free birth. A large proportion are freed men still dependent upon the patronage of their former masters. Free artisans must, in any case, compete for work with slaves, with the result that unemployment among their number is often high.

***Paterfamilias***The head of the Roman family is the *paterfamilias*, the father of the family. He possesses the *patria potestas*, or power of a father, over his wife and children, even as adults. For example, the *paterfamilias* owns any property acquired by his sons and has the right to sell his children into slavery. Although divorce is a straightforward affair, the *paterfamilias* also has legal authority to kill his wife if he finds her in bed with another man.

**Women**Despite the power of the *paterfamilias*, the status of women in the Roman empire is relatively high ccompared with many other ancient societies. Although males are the undoubted heads of their households, women have acquired considerable rights, including control of their own property, and they are also able to divorce their husbands. There are many examples of females wielding exceptional power, authority and influence. Not until the coming of Christianity, when marriage becomes a holy sacrament rather than a loose contract, does the male stand totally supreme.

**Marriage and divorce**The legal age for marriage in Rome is 12, but as many as one in five girls are already married off or living with their future husbands by this age. Divorce, however, is relatively easy to obtain; marriages can simply be dissolved by mutual consent. Indeed, many of Rome's most famous citizens have already been married several times by the time they reach their 20s.

**Titles**Roman society is very keen on titles, never more so than in the case of its emperors. The full title of the emperor Trajan, for example, is Imperator Caesar Divi Nervae Filius Nerva Traianus Optimus Augustus Germanicus Dacicus Parthicus, Pontifex maximus, Tribuniciae potestatis XXI, Imperator XIII, Consul VI, Pater Patriae – but you can probably get by if you bow humbly in his presence.

**Beards**Hadrian (AD 117-138) is the first Roman emperor to wear a beard, setting a fashion that is followed by his successors. It's said that, in his case, he uses his beard to cover up facial blemishes, but it's as likely to be due to his love affair with the Greek world. Either way, no fashionable Roman will be seen without a carefully clipped beard in the mid-2nd century AD. Beards get gradually longer over the next hundred years, until stubbly beards and short cropped hair come into fashion around AD 230.

**Women's hairstyles and marble wigs**'Easier to count an oak's acorns than the new hair styles in a day,' says the poet Ovid, writing during the reign of Augustus. Indeed, keeping up with the latest in hair fashion becomes such an obsession at times among upper-class Roman women that sculptors are compelled to devise marble wigs – so that statues, too, can be updated regularly as the styles change.

Roman Culture

What did it mean for the various people of the time to be 'Roman' in the Roman Empire?

Is it actually possible to speak of a single unique Roman culture imposed or maintained through imperial power?

How were culture, identity and power shaped in particular by social factors such as religion, gender, the economy, status in the various regions of the vast empire? Was there such a society that had shared values?

Is it possible to recognize a pattern of learned and shared behavior among the people of the Roman Empire? We try to find out what the Roman Empire may have meant across the multiplicity of cultures and identities that it covered.

Did you know?

Latin was originally spoken in the region around Rome. It gained great importance as the formal language of the Roman Empire. All Romance languages descend from a Latin parent, and many words based on Latin are found in other modern languages such as English.

Roman Religion

The origins of the Roman pantheon began with the small farming community that made up the ancient village of Rome. The foundations of the mythology included nameless and faceless deities that lended support to the community while inhabiting all objects and living things. Numen, as the belief in a pantheistic inhabitation of all things is called, would later take root in more clearly defined system of gods, but early on this belief that everything was inhabited by numina was the prevalent system.

Even though the early Romans were not very concerned with the distinct personalities of each god within their pantheon, there was a rigid clarification of what each particular deity was responsible for. All aspects of life within Rome were guided not only by the pantheon of familiar names we are accustomed to, but to the household cult of the Dii Familiaris as well. With this belief set, every family or household was believed to be assigned a guardian spirit known as the Lar Familiaris (Lars). All family functions included these spiritual guardians in some form or another. Among these spirits that played a role in the spiritual life of Romans were Genii for men and junii for women. Each of these individual deities stayed with a person for life and represented the creative force that determined gender and allowed individuals to grow, learn and behave morally within society. The Dii Familiaris were so ingrained within the household that several spirits were assigned to specific responsibilities within a home. Forculus protected the door, Limentinus the threshold, Cardea the hinges, and Vesta the hearth.

Most of the Roman gods and goddesses were a blend of several religious influences. Many of these were introduced via the Greek colonies of southern Italy and others had their roots in the Etruscan or Latin tribes of the region. In some cases the Etruscan or Latin names survived throughout the cultural existence of Rome, but many were adopted so completely that they maintained their names from other cultures. In the east, the Greek names remained the choice of the people and the major gods of the system therefore, were known by both.

The gods of the Roman pantheon began taking on the forms known today during the dynasty of the Etruscan kings in the 6th century BC. These gods, Jupiter (Zeus), Juno (Hera), and Minerva (Athena), were worshiped at the grand temple on the Capitoline Hill. As Rome's power grew and expanded throughout the known world, the Roman Empire came into contact with the cultures and religious beliefs of many cultures. The Romans, happy to absorb and assimilate any culture they encountered thereby reaping the benefits of both its wealth and religious influence, were a mosaic of belief systems. Foreign gods and customs not only played major roles but were also given temples and priesthoods within Rome itself. The goddess Cybele, a Phoenician god was adopted during the Second Punic War to counteract any benefit that Hannibal may have gained. Even after his defeat, Cybele remained an integral part of the Roman system. Another very popular foreign god was the Persian god Mithra. Overwhelmingly supported in the Legions, this deity offered eternal salvation for the immortal soul and its popularity helped pave the way for the later Christian cult whose similarities made its adoption less difficult.

With the passing of the Roman Republic into that of an Imperial system, the nature of Roman religion expanded again to include the Emperors themselves. Julius Caesar, having claimed to be a direct descendent of Aeneas, the son of Venus, was among the first to deify himself in such a manner. At first, such a system of human divinity was largely rejected by the masses, but the popularity of Caesar helped pave the way for future leaders.

As the Imperial system gained hold, it was common practice for the Emperors to accept divine honors before their deaths. These living gods, in some cases, required sacrificial rituals as signs of loyalty and ingrained themselves with the older more traditional pagan gods. The requirement of a sacrifice to the emperor, as well as the forced belief in the complete pantheon became a significant source of conflict with early Christians. As Christians refused to worship the emperor as a god, persecution of the Christians and conflict with the cult was a constant source of strife. Emperor worship would continue until late in the western Empire until the reign of Constantine. In the early 4th century AD, Constantine either converted to Christianity or made it an acceptable part of Roman religion, eliminating the emperor deification altogether. Later Emperors such as Julian attempted to revive the old ways, but the deeply rooted Mithraism, and Christian cults combined were firmly set within Roman society. By 392 AD, Emperor Theodosius I banned the practice of pagan religions in Rome altogether and Christianity was, without question, the official religion of the state.