Chapter 10: Rome: From City-State to Empire: 10-5c Roman Beliefs
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10-5c Roman Beliefs

"How best to live?" was a question that preoccupied imperial Romans. Perhaps the greatest of all the emperors after Augustus was Marcus Aurelius (oh-REE-lee-uhs; ruled 161–180 C.E.), the last of the Five Good Emperors who ruled in the second century C.E. He left a small book of aphorisms called *Meditations*, which has been a best seller ever since. Aurelius settled on a pessimistic Stoicism as the most fitting cloak for a good man in a bad world—especially for a man who had to exercise power. This was a common feeling among upper-class Romans, and it became ever more popular in the third and fourth centuries as civic difficulties multiplied. Like Marcus Aurelius, Roman Stoics often opposed Christianity because they rejected external prescriptions for morality. Instead, they insisted that each person is responsible for searching and following his own conscience. Seneca, another Stoic and the most persuasive of the Roman moralists, had a somewhat different way of looking at things. He introduced a new note of human compassion, a belief that all shared in the divine spark and should be valued as fellow creatures.

A Roman Emperor.

The Roman preference for realism in their pictorial arts is shown by this bust of a man assumed to be the Emperor Macrin. Although their techniques were generally dependent on classical Greek models, the Romans soon progressed beyond the desire to merely imitate.

Bust of Marcus Claudius Tacitus (c.200–276) or Marcus Opelius Macrinus (164-218) (marble), Roman, (3rd century AD) / Louvre, Paris, France / Bridgeman Images

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The Roman character, insofar as one can sum up a heterogeneous people's character, leaned toward the pragmatic and the here and now. Romans admired the doer more than the thinker, the soldier more than the philosopher, and the artisan more than the artist. The educated class could and did appreciate "the finer things." They admired and cultivated art in many media and many forms and spent lavishly to obtain it for their own prestige and pleasure. But they did not, generally speaking, provide that sort of intense, sustained interest that led to superior aesthetic standards and to the inspiration of superior and original works of art such as the Greeks possessed in abundance. The early empire's successes in several fields were magnificent and long lasting, but they were not rooted in an original view of earthly life or a new conception of humans' duties and aspirations.

The religious convictions of the Romans centered on duty to the state and the family hearth. Toward the state, the Roman patricians felt a personalized attachment, a sense of duty, and a proud obedience to tradition handed down from generation to generation. Toward the patriarchal family and its symbol, the hearth, the Romans felt the same attachment as most ancient peoples, with the honor of lineage being of usual great importance to them.

Roman religion was a matter of mutual promises: on the gods' side, protection for the community and survival for the individual; on the human side, ceremonial worship and due respect. Priests and priestesses existed in Rome but had relatively little power and prestige among the people. It was a religion of state, rather than of individuals, and it was common for Romans to worship other gods besides those of the official cult. Many emperors were deified during the imperial period, and most of the mystery religions of the Hellenistic world were eventually taken up by Rome.

Chief among the many Roman gods was Jupiter, a father figure modeled on the Greek Zeus. Also important were Apollo, Neptune (Poseidon), Venus (Aphrodite [af-roh-DIE-tee]), Minerva (Athena), and Mars (Ares). Like the rituals of the Greeks, the worship given to these deities was more like a present-day patriotic ceremony than a modern church service. Even less than among the Greeks did the Romans look to the civic gods for ethical guidance or to secure personal immortality. The Roman notion of an afterlife changed from person to person and from age to age during Rome's long history. In broad terms, it resembled that of the educated Greeks: the existence of an afterlife was an open question, but if it did exist, one could know nothing about it or secure admission to it through the gods.

Ideally, and in their own musings about the good life, educated Romans generally affirmed Stoicism, believing that service to the state and the human community was the highest duty. They thought that the only way to ensure against the disappointments of earthly life was to renounce the pursuit of wealth and power and live a life of modest seclusion. But few Romans who had a choice did that! As a governing class, they were much attuned to the delights of wealth and power and very willing to make great efforts to get them. A people who made much of military virtue and unquestioning obedience, they also insisted on the autonomy of the individual's conscience. Notably conscious of the concept of justice and the rule of law, they also had many moments of collective blind rage when they exerted sadistic power over others. Base actions and even baser motives sometimes eclipsed nobility of thought.