Introduction to Ancient Rome Documentary narration

Perhaps no city in the world has influenced the course of civilization as much as Rome. For nearly 900 years, Rome was the capital of an enormous empire that, at its peak, extended from Egypt in the south, to the Scottish border in the north, to the tip of Spain in the west, and to

Persia in the east. Wherever the legions of Roman soldiers marched, they left their imprint on those they conquered. Some of what they did was cruel, but most of their legacy was good. The Romans brought “civilization” to a world which knew little more than the most primitive village life.

They gave their language, Latin, to those they conquered so that French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian and Portuguese are all Latin-based languages, and even English contains a huge number of words of Latin origin.

Roman law provided the foundation of the legal system for most of the countries of western Europe and Latin America. Ideas of Roman justice and politics were embodied in the creation of governments in the United States and in several other modern democracies. And Roman contributions to architecture and engineering still remain among the finest and most innovative in the world.

The Birth Of Rome

The story of Rome begins almost 3000 years ago, in what is today central Italy. Legend states that the boundaries of Rome were first defined in the year 753 B.C. by Romulus, one of the twin brothers of divine descent who had been left abandoned to be nursed and raised by a wolf. A fig tree sprouted up on the spot where the twins were said to have been found. This humble tree eventually was transplanted to a site among the great temples and buildings of government. Here it became a sacred object of religious veneration and over the centuries it flourished, along with the power of the Roman state.

But Roman power was slow to develop at first, for in 600 B.C., Rome was conquered by the Etruscans, a powerful and highly civilized people who dwelt mainly in the rolling hill country to the north of Rome. At that time, the Italian peninsula was dominated by the city-

states of the Etruscans to the north and the city-states of the Greeks to the south, and the Romans had little power. However, in slightly more than 100 years, the Romans grew powerful enough to drive the Etruscans out of Rome, and she became an independent city-state once again. From the year 509 B.C. up until about 27 B.C., Rome evolved a sophisticated republican form of government ruled by a senate, selected from wealthy “patrician” families and tribunes, who

were representatives of the common people or “plebians.” Under the direction of the senate, Roman territory was expanded and distant provinces were added to her domain.

The Roman Conquests

First, the Etruscans were defeated; then the Greeks and Carthaginians, whose capital was in Carthage, North Africa, fell; until, by 218 B.C., Rome controlled all of the Italian peninsula and the islands of Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia. By the year 149 B.C., following three major wars called the Punic Wars, Rome had totally overwhelmed the government of Carthage and had become the supreme power in the western Mediterranean. And at her peak, around the year 180 A.D., the Roman empire had engulfed most of the Near East, Persia, Egypt, north Africa and western Europe. At that time, between 50 and 70 million people were united, not only by an excellent system of paved roads, but also by the Roman system of laws and government, and almost one million of these people lived in the city of Rome itself, the largest city in the world for many centuries to come.

The Imperial Government

In the midst of Rome’s expansion across Europe, conflicts among leaders and a widening gap between rich and poor during the first century B.C., had led to a series of revolts that brought about the collapse of the republican form of government. During the second decade before the birth of Christ, a new "imperial" government was formed that was headed by a single supreme leader, the “imperator” or emperor, and rule by emperors continued for the next 500 years of the Roman state.

Under this new system of government, the senate, consuls, and tribunes, who had ruled in the past, were still allowed to function, but the emperor always made the final decisions. The emperor controlled all the Roman provinces, headed the army, and saw that their own supporters filled the senate, and these senators saw to it that emperors were selected from among the ranks of the most powerful patrician families. The time when Rome and her provinces were ruled by emperors is called the Roman Empire to distinguish it from the historical period of the Roman Republic, which preceded it. The first emperor was a man named Octavian, who took the name Augustus, a word meaning “exalted one.” The reign of the emperor Augustus began in the year 27 B.C. and marked the start of 200 years of stability, peace and prosperity that has come to be called the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace. Let us discover a little of what life was like during this golden age of the Roman Empire.

The Roman Religion

Wherever the Romans expanded their empire, they built temples, sanctuaries, and shrines to their many gods and goddesses, and at the same time, they absorbed many local gods into their religion. The Romans worshiped all of the major Greek gods, thus Athena, the Greek god of wisdom and crafts, became the Roman goddess Minerva we see here. The Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the gods and protector of trade, became the Roman god Mercury. The Greek god of the sea, Poseidon, became the Roman god Neptune. The Romans believed that the gods exercised complete control over the growth of crops, the churning of the seas, victory in battle, the happiness of families, and every other aspect of life on earth.

The great Roman temple, called the Pantheon, was being built during the first few years of the reign of the emperor Augustus and is dedicated to the gods of the planets, such as Jupiter, Venus and Mars. The Romans even worshiped river gods. This temple of Portunus honors the god of the mouth of the Tiber River. The Romans believed that the blessings of the god Portunus were needed to ensure the safe arrival of ships that poured in from Rome’s provinces, and even for the safe passage of barges carrying the huge blocks of marble used in Roman building that entered the harbor of Ostia every day at the mouth of the Tiber, about 25 miles west of Rome. And this statue is of the much loved god of the Nile, upon whose good will the wealth of Roman Egypt was believed to depend. This temple, dedicated to Vesta, the virgin goddess of the hearth and home, was very important to Romans. Inside the temple’s circular walls, the ancient fire of Rome was always kept burning. The sacred fire was tended to by six priestesses, called the Vestal Virgins.

In the Roman religion, offerings were made by priests and priestesses, the only persons allowed inside the temples, to gain the favor of a god, or even to get the god to curse an enemy. Perhaps one of the strangest Roman religious traditions was that certain emperors were deified after their deaths, that is, they were declared to be gods themselves. The list of deified Roman rulers is long. It includes Augustus and Claudius, the emperor who conquered Britain. Temples were built in their honor alongside the great forums, or open squares, of Rome.

The Forums Of Rome

The Roman Forum, the ancient center of Rome, was the point at which all of the great Roman roads finally converged. The Roman Forum and the nearby Imperial Forum were the locations of many of the greatest temples and were the site of the most important buildings of government. Here in these squares, speakers once addressed crowds of Roman citizens as they sought to influence the course of government. The decisions made in the buildings surrounding the forums and in the nearby palaces profoundly affected the lives of people in Rome’s far distant provinces.

Let us look at one example that gives us a glimpse of Roman military life and engineering methods.

Hadrian’s Wall

Around the year 122 A. D., the emperor Hadrian decided that in order to maintain peace, a wall should be constructed entirely across Britain, thereby protecting the Roman province in the south from the attacks of the hostile Scottish tribes to the north. Once word arrived from Rome of this decision, thousands of soldiers were immediately put to work on this massive construction project that took six years to complete. Within their ranks, the Roman legions possessed architects, engineers, surveyors, carpenters and masons. They quarried and laid the stones of this fort the British named Chesters, built where Hadrian’s wall crossed the River Tyne. And over the River Tyne, they constructed a bridge leading to the fort. That bridge is long gone, but it probably looked a lot like this ancient structure that spans the Tiber River and is still in use in Rome today. This model shows us that Chesters fort on Hadrian’s wall was a typical Roman garrison used for housing troops. It was protected by a surrounding “curtain” wall and could only be entered by passing through well fortified gates.

This stone plaque commemorates bringing running water into the fort. The soldiers who built the water system did a very good job, for plenty of clean, fresh water was always available, just as it was in Roman towns. Also, as was typical of Roman towns, excellent drainage systems were built for large public latrines, through which the water freely flowed to wash away the waste. Both this bathhouse and the commandant’s house were provided not only with running water, but with a heating system which allowed warm air to flow under the stone floors that were raised up on bricks, keeping them warm throughout the long, cold British winters.

Bathhouses were a typical feature, not only of Roman forts, but could be found in even the most humble Roman towns as well. Here, at a Roman town in southern England, we see the hot pool of a Roman bath. Although the water here is heated by hot springs, every Roman

bathhouse had just such a hot pool room called the cauldarium, and a warm pool room called a tepidarium. Hot water for these pools was provided by a wood burning furnace. Besides these pools, a cold pool room, called a frigidarium, was always constructed along with rooms provided with steam of various temperatures.

In Rome itself, certain emperors constructed magnificent bathhouses so large that a few covered several acres, for as Rome’s wealth and power increased, so did the splendor of her monuments and buildings.

Roman Splendor

Overlooking and adjacent to the great Roman and Imperial Forums, is the Palatine Hill. Here, emperors, starting with Augustus, built magnificent residences for themselves and continued to do so, until by the end of the first century A.D., the entire hill was covered with glorious marble palaces. From the steps of their palaces, the emperors could take in the vastness and splendor of the greatest city in the world. The triumphal arches they saw served as reminders of the military victories of their predecessors. This arch, built by the emperor Septimus Severus, commemorates Rome’s victories in the region of the Caspian Sea. This arch, built by the emperor Titus, commemorates Rome’s victory over Judea; and this arch, built by Constantine, the first Christian emperor, commemorates his victory in 312 A.D. over his rival for the throne, Maxentius.

Further in the distance, the emperors on Palatine Hill could see the great column built by the emperor Trajan to commemorate his victory over the Romanians; and next to this great monument, Trajan constructed a large public marketplace, which, at one time, bustled with the common citizens of Rome, who dwelt in the thousands of multi-storied apartment buildings, called insulae, that were the most common buildings in Rome.

Roman Amusements:Gladiator Contests

As the empire got richer, the Romans sought out more and more extreme forms of amusement, and inside of this huge building, called the Colosseum, as well as in other, smaller amphitheaters across the empire, some truly gruesome events occurred. Here, up to 70,000 spectators cheered as armed gladiators fought one another to the death with swords, spears, nets, and pitchforks; and in the pens beneath the floor of the Colosseum, animals, such as rhinoceros, giraffes, ostriches, bulls and lions awaited their turn at combat. Today, nearly 20 centuries after these Roman "blood sports" attained the peak of their popularity, their modern counterparts can still be witnessed in the bullfights of Spain and Latin America. In these colosseums, the matadors, just like the gladiators of ancient Rome, fight bulls to the death for the pleasure of the crowds.

Circuses

Another favorite, less bloody, Roman pastime was attending chariot races, and elaborate racetracks, called circuses, were built all across the empire. This model shows Rome’s Circus Maximus, where charioteers competed by racing splendid teams of horses around its great oval track.

Roman Theaters

Besides the gladiator contests and chariot races, Roman citizens of every province enjoyed attending the theater. In Rome, plays were performed here in the great Theater of Marcellus as early as 13 B.C. Just as in classical Greek theater, actors wore elaborate masks and costumes and their performances were accompanied by dancing and music. But even plays could turn bloody when, if the play called for an actor to die, the actor’s place was taken at the last moment by a condemned man who was actually killed onstage for the pleasure of the audience.

Slavery

The cruel side of the Roman world extended beyond the bloody spectacles witnessed in the theater or Colosseum, for much of the great wealth of Rome depended upon slave labor. Slaves were found throughout the empire, where they performed all sorts of tasks--from being gladiators, to servants, to galley slaves who rowed huge ships across the Mediterranean Sea, to farm slaves who harvested grapes and olives in the vineyards and orchards of the free Roman citizens. People became slaves in many ways: some were captured during wars, others were criminals, but once it became a Roman institution, thousands of newborn children faced grim lifetimes of hard labor at the hands of their Roman masters.

Christianity

In the first centuries after the death of Christ, many early Christians were forced into slavery, or else suffered severe persecution at the hands of the Roman authorities, for many Roman leaders believed that great problems would follow if the ancient gods of Rome were offended. The history of Rome and Christianity have been intertwined from the very beginning of that religion, for Christ was born in the Roman province of Judea, and it was the Romans who sentenced him to death by crucifixion, a form of death that the Romans reserved only for political agitators and lower-class, non-Roman criminals.

However, eventually, in the fourth century, the first Christian emperor, Constantine decreed that Christianity was to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, and as a result, Rome became the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church. Division and Collapse of the Roman Empire. By the fourth century, the fabric of the Roman Empire had begun to unravel. Its enormous size, attacks from barbarian tribes and its own internal decay all contributed to its decline. It was decided that if the empire was to survive, it should be divided into smaller, easier-to-rule units, and in the year 395, the mighty Roman Empire was split in half and separate emperors were designated to rule the East and the West.

Rome remained the capital of the Western Empire and the Greek city of Byzantium, today’s Istanbul, became the capital of the East and was renamed Constantinople by the Romans. This eastern Byzantine Empire was to flourish for the next ten centuries as its ties to Rome gradually disappeared. But little could be done to stop the fall of the Western Roman Empire, which collapsed in the year 476 A.D. after repeated attacks by the barbaric tribes--the Ostrogoths, the Visigoths and the Vandals.

Conclusion

The collapse of the Western Roman Empire was the end of almost one thousand years of uninterrupted Roman rule. Rome had brought civilization to a large part of the world and left behind a rich legacy of literature, law, architecture and engineering. But Rome, the victim of its own decadence and vast ungovernable size, now lay in ruins, and for the next six centuries, the learning, art, and science that had once embodied the best of Rome were almost lost forever as western Europe entered the Dark Ages.