

**'A must for anyone interested in the Roman Empire  
and its impact on world history.'** Tony Robinson, star of Blackadder and Time Team

# The Romans

## FOR DUMMIES®



**Guy de la Bédoyère**  
*Historian, archaeologist, and Roman expert*

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# ***The Romans For Dummies®***

**by Guy de la Bédoyère**



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# About the Author

**Guy de la Bédoyère** is a freelance writer and broadcaster who took a history and archaeology degree at Durham University, followed by a history degree at the University of London specialising in Roman history, with papers in US history. Next came an MA in Roman Empire archaeology at University College, London. He has written many books on his specialist field of Roman Britain and is well-known for his numerous appearances on television, especially Channel 4's *Time Team* in Britain. He has also written books on a variety of other historical subjects, including the papers of Samuel Pepys, and is a Fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society. His other interests include playing the piano, travelling in the United States, and studying genealogy. He lives in Lincolnshire, England.

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# Introduction

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When I was about 12 years old, my father came home from work with a Roman coin he'd bought for me. It was very worn, with a barely visible profile of a Roman emperor's head on one side. But I was totally fascinated by the sudden realisation that this coin had existed for a length of time I was struggling to imagine. It belonged to a truly amazing world of emperors, vast buildings, epic wars, villains, and heroes. And I could hold a part of it in my hand!

Roman history is a hotch-potch made up from every, or indeed, any source that historians and archaeologists have been able to get their hands on. There's no one-stop ancient source of Roman history, no great Roman textbook that we can pick up and start with. Even the Romans were more than a bit hazy about how their world had come together. They had historians, but most of what got written down hasn't survived. Even the works we do have are usually incomplete. What we do know is that the further the Romans looked back into their past, the more they had to fill in the gaps with myth and hearsay.

If you think back to learning about the Romans at school or watching a documentary on TV, you'd probably have come across things that sounded really exciting, like Mount Vesuvius erupting and burying Pompeii in AD 79. But you probably also got the idea that the Romans were

also dreadfully serious. Some museums don't help either because rows and rows of dusty pots aren't very inspiring, especially if you had to troop around with a question sheet while on a school trip.

But the truth is that the Roman Empire is one of the most exciting periods in all history. Not only is it packed with real people living real lives, but it also has an unending series of remarkable events that mark the rise of a little village in Italy all the way from total prehistoric obscurity into the greatest of all ancient civilisations.

The Roman world is all around us. In Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, the debris is there to see wherever you go. From the crumbling line of Hadrian's Wall in northern England all the way to the rock-cut tombs of Petra in Jordan, the Romans left their mark everywhere they went and created the world's first superstate. The very fact that it's long gone is why we should use it as a mirror for our own age. 'All Things Must Pass,' said George Harrison, and when it comes to empires, he couldn't have been more correct.

## **About This Book**

Teaching Latin goes back right to the Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century, the Victorians loved the Romans and used them as a kind of justification for what they were doing: conquering the world, basically. So Latin and ancient history were major subjects, and things didn't

change for years. Generations of schoolchildren – actually, in the 1960s I was one of them – had to learn Latin so that they could translate lines like ‘Caesar attacked the enemy’s fortifications’. The upshot was that the Romans looked like a rather boring master-race of generals and politicians, who did a lot of standing around in togas when they weren’t massacring other people. Hardly thrilling stuff and apparently completely irrelevant to today, but thanks to archaeology, cinema, and TV, they’re now enjoying something of a revival.

The story’s miles more interesting than that, so the idea behind this book is to tell it like it was: a rollercoaster of a drama packed with amazing events and amazing people. Now it’s easy to get the idea that all the Romans came from Rome, and it was just them who made the Roman Empire what it was while everyone else watched. Not a bit of it. The Romans were very clever at what they did. They turned being Roman into an idea, a way of life, that anyone could have – under certain conditions of course, like being prepared to accept the emperor’s authority without question. The fact is that millions of people did just that. They adopted Roman names, lived the Roman way, and they did that wherever they lived. There were Syrian Romans, North African Romans, Spanish Romans, and British Romans.

I can’t pretend I don’t think the Romans were brilliant, but that’s not the same as thinking they were all good, and I’d like to think I’ve acknowledged the downside to Roman life. After all, it’s difficult to defend the horrors of

the amphitheatre, slavery, or the brutal massacre of innocent civilians during the wars of conquest. This book is undoubtedly my spin on the Roman world, but I've tried to give a balanced account, both the good and the bad.

It also goes without saying I've had to leave a lot out, so I chose the key events and people that made Rome what it was, those things that reflect what the Roman Empire and being Roman mean to us. Of course, the events related are entirely my choice, which you might not agree with, but that's always been the historian's luxury.

## **Foolish Assumptions**

In writing this book, I've had to make a few assumptions about you:

- ✓ You have a vague idea about the Romans from school.
- ✓ You've probably been dragged to one or two Roman places on holiday.
- ✓ You basically thought the Romans came from Rome.
- ✓ You love the idea of reading history packed with murderers, megalomaniacs, mayhem, corruption, swindles, decadence, heroic valour, and crazy weirdo gods.



# How This Book Is Organised

I could very easily have started at the beginning of Roman history and written about nothing thing else until I stopped, but where's the fun in that? The Roman Empire was an ancient civilisation, full of exciting events and interesting people. In this book, you get the best of both worlds: Information about what it meant to be Roman *and* a rundown of Roman history. The following sections show you what you can expect to find in each part.

# **Part I: Romans - The Big Boys of the Ancient World**

The first part is all about putting the Romans into context. The Romans might be popular today, but in fact they've been pretty popular ever since ancient times. Many rulers and governments along the way spotted that the Romans were good at being in charge. This part introduces you to how and why the Romans have had such an impact on later civilisations and the legacy of some of their ideas. Of course, Romans weren't just armour-clad brutes. The Romans kept their world together through a mixture of the sword and a straightforward acceptance of the structure of their society and its laws. Part I also examines Roman society: the class system, from senator to slave; the Roman fantasy about their identity; the sheer hard practicalities of being in the army; and more. Unlike almost all other ancient civilisations in the western world, the Romans really got a handle on creating a system that actually worked, even if the man in charge was sometimes a raving lunatic.

## **Part II: Living The Good Life**

This bit is all about daily life as a Roman in the Roman Empire. This part includes lots of things that you'll have heard of, like gladiators in the Colosseum, chariot-racing, and roads. But there's loads more besides, and the idea is that this part explains how people in the Roman Empire enjoyed themselves, how they got around, where and how they lived, and the gods they prayed to in the hope that they'd be protected from all the nasty things that nature could throw at them. It's also got a bit about the Roman economy - no, not pie charts and statistics - but the international marketplace the Romans created for themselves.

## **Part III: The Rise of Rome**

Rome was once just one of thousands of nondescript villages in Italy, so it seems almost impossible to understand how just one of them could have become so powerful. Needless to say, it didn't happen overnight. Like many great success stories, the Roman Empire had a very rocky ride to begin with. Not only that, it also started submerged in the misty obscurity of ancient legends. This part takes you from the very earliest beginnings through the succession of wars and struggles that gradually won the Romans control of Italy. Naturally, no-one gets that powerful without others noticing, and this part also discusses the first major international wars, such as the Punic Wars when the Romans beat the Carthaginians. By the end of this part, the Romans are the most powerful people in ancient Europe, poised on the brink of total domination of the Mediterranean.

# **Part IV: When Romans Ruled the World**

Power corrupts – we all know that – and it also breeds a sense of injustice. This part starts off with the massive struggle and crisis of the late Roman Republic when a succession of military leaders like Marius, Pompey, and Julius Caesar jockeyed for power in a conflict that climaxed in a civil war. The outcome was the Roman Empire, when for the first time one man ruled the whole show: Augustus.

Of course, nothing is ever straightforward, and the story takes us through the shenanigans of the Twelve Caesars of the first century AD and the reigns of maniacs like Caligula and Nero, with occasional bouts of sanity under the rule of Vespasian and Titus. Despite the internal problems, this was the time when the power of the Romans extended over more area than ever before. The last bit is the brilliant success of the ‘Five Good Emperors’ of the second century when the system worked, and it was once said this was the happiest time in human history.

# **Part V: Throwing the Empire Away**

It's tragic, isn't it? Just when human beings start to get something right, they have to ruin it. In a way, it wasn't the Romans' fault. Other people wanted a slice of the action and wanted to invade the Empire. Unfortunately, the Roman Empire was now so big that governing and defending it was almost impossible. So Part V is all about how it started to go horribly wrong. The Romans didn't help, though, because they had a succession of military adventurers, thugs, and lunatics for rulers, most of whom died a violent death after short, turbulent reigns. But in the fourth century emperors like Diocletian and Constantine the Great made a good stab at holding everything together. But the other problems, like barbarians rattling at the gates, didn't go away, and the coming of Christianity cut right to the very core of Roman tradition, and changed society forever. So in the end, Rome fell, though what she stood for and what she meant clung on in the Eastern Empire for another thousand years.