

Influence of Classical Greece on Classical Rome

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Ancient Greek and Ancient Roman cultures WERE incredibly close to each other in numerous instances and the Roman Empire could be rightfully considered the cultural heir of Ancient Greece despite the fact that Rome introduced numerous innovations that made the Roman culture noticeably different. Nonetheless, both Ancient Greek and Ancient Roman have LONG been perceived in retrospective as two parts of one whole – the culture of Antiquity, when humanity made great strides in philosophy, sciences, ways of setting up a state, medicine, and other achievements, which CONTINUE being significant, such as the notion of democracy or A republic. The reason for Roman domination later stems from the fact that Greece could rarely live in peace. Different formations on the territory of Greece were often in conflict with each other provided there was no outer threat such as the Persian Empire. Ancient Greece imploded upon itself due to the inability of its people to cooperate with each other fruitfully. Then there was the dominance of Alexander the Great. After his demise, the Empire fell apart quickly, and Rome started gaining strength while having no strong adversaries in the region, at least for the time being. Despite achieving lots of advancements on their own, the Romans borrowed a lot from Ancient Greece – most things concerning culture, military strategies, units, and formations, ways of household living, philosophy, religion, etc. In such a way, Greece managed to conquer Rome despite being formally subjugated to the Roman rule.

The first important influence from Ancient Greece on Ancient Rome came through religion. The deities changed names but their functions remained the same even

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though the deities became less personified and more abstract. The Olympus of gods remained almost identical. Moreover, Romans also made use of the temples dedicated to each deity.

The second influence came from Ancient Greece in the form of the Republic, which was based on the democratic principles. The third influence that was instrumental to both civilizations was the reliance on slavery as primary work force, on which the well-being of the entire country or empire was kept. THE Roman Empire BECAME much bigger than Ancient Greece, but culturally, Ancient Greece was constantly ahead and the Romans had much to learn from them. The reason that Ancient Greece was so influential for Rome was that the latter had fewer unique developments to offer. Therefore, the cultural vacuum was filled by the powerful entity across the Adriatic Sea. Greece may have been subjugated by the Roman Empire over the course of history, but Rome was no match for Greece when it came to culture, architecture, music, and religion. Ancient Greece won the battle on the cultural front.

The entire calendar in Rome was structured around the religious holidays which were always celebrated with reverence. Therefore, it is not surprising that religion occupied an important place in the daily paradigm of existence. Romans always perceived themselves as immensely religious and always ascribed their successes and achievements as the sole super power in the world later to their collective capability for piety or, in other words, ensuring positive relationship with the gods of the Olympus. “Religion was an ever-present part of the daily life for the ordinary Romans.”<sup>1</sup> Both the Greeks and the Romans had temples, and the architecture WAS different in the technical

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<sup>1</sup> Rupke, Jorg. “Roman Religion – Religions of Rome” in *A Companion to Roman Religion*. Blackwell, 2007, p. 4.

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aspects mostly. What the Romans introduced was the individual cult – a household shrine, which WAS present in every single home. The shrine WAS the place where libations, prayers, and sacrifices WERE carried out. Moreover, there were neighborhood shrines across the city for anyone to use, provided that people wanted to partake in worshipping publicly or as a group. People WENT TO great lengths to ensure that the sacrifices to the gods were worthy of their attention. THE historian Livy, in his *The History of Rome*, describes remarkable quantities, “three hundred and thirty-three thousand, three hundred and thirty-three and a third bronze asses, three hundred oxen.”<sup>2</sup> There were twelve main deities and each male god had a female gender partner so that there would be balanced pairs. The following lists all 12 Roman deities with the original Ancient Greek names in brackets: Jupiter - Juno (Zeus - Hera), Neptune - Minerva (Poseidon - Athena), Mars - Venus (Ares - Aphrodite), Apollo - Diana (Dionysus - Artemis), Vulcan – Vesta (Hephaestus – Hestia), and Mercury – Ceres (Hermes - Demeter). Remarkable enough, all mentioned deities carry out the same functions in Ancient Greek and Ancient Roman pantheons alike: Jupiter was the main god and equivalent to Zeus, Minerva was the goddess of wisdom and an equivalent of Athena, and the list of such direct similarities can continue. It was highly indicative that Greece transferred most of its religion intact into the Roman paradigm while the names changes to reflect a considerably different language. Numerous philosophers, including Cicero, pondered on the meaning of religion and how “the inquiry into the nature of the gods, which is ... highly interesting in relation to the theory of the soul ... is one of special difficulty and obscurity”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Livy. *The History of Rome, Book 22*. Translated by Benjamin Oliver Foster, 22.10.8

<sup>3</sup> Cicero. *De natura deorum*. Translated by H. Rackham. 45 BC., Book 1

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Romans were heavily influenced by the Greek (Athens in particular) since the Republic was also built on the basis of democracy until Caesar declared himself a dictator, after whom there was only the empire and the Republic was no longer operational in its initial form. The concept of democracy stems from the Athens, which was the cradle for free thinkers as well as the opportunity for well-established men to have a say, each, regarding the matters in the state. Naturally, women and slaves were excluded, but it was for the first time in the history of humanity that decisions were not carried out by one strong leader but by a group of people with equal rights in relation to each other. One can argue that the hunters and gatherers engaged in the same process, but it was not as organized and systematized. The same principles were applied in the Roman Republic albeit the Romans took democracy in a different direction by making it even more organized within the government, which had two branches, each carrying out particular functions. Two consuls, elected annually by the citizens, presided. Another important part of the government was the Senate, which consisted of magistrates appointed by the people. The era of the republic was defined by the constant struggles between patricians, who were the aristocratic class. Patricians were proud by their ability to trace their ancestry to those who founded Rome. Another major group who opposed patricians was plebeians. It was a bigger group who were comprised of the citizens or commoners. Patricians did everything in their power to solidify their position so as to leave plebeian families as little influence as possible. The Justinian Code appeared later, and its traces can still be seen around modern Europe. It is clear that the Romans made numerous changes and additions to the system, which were necessary for a vast territory to be controlled effectively. Athens' democracy never faced the necessity to govern a

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large piece of land. The main principle of numerous people carrying out the decision remained, however. Athenian democracy noted that the process of legislation was not open to anyone. One had to be an adult, a male citizen, and not a slave. This exclusive group accounted for about 30 percent of the total Athenian adult population.<sup>4</sup> The presence of consuls presiding over the proceedings was clearly inspired by the notable leader Pericles, under whose guidance Athens experienced its greatest prosperity. It is peculiar that both Greece and Rome supported the class hierarchy and kept democracy and a republic respectively exclusive to a narrow group of people only. The primary difference was that the Greek democracy was available to one class of people only – male citizens, non-slaves. Rome saw more diversity as the government consisted of the aforementioned patricians and plebeians – two different groups, both of whom could partake in the fight for the influence. In both civilizations, families played an important role. In Ancient Rome, family was the center of its earlier social structure,<sup>5</sup> and families were not only defined by blood ties but also by the legally consumed relationship referred to as *patria potestas*.<sup>6</sup>

By maintaining a somewhat similar political system of governing as Athens, the Romans also upheld the institute of slavery. Slavery always played an important role in the economy of the empire. Slaves were not only involved in the general manual labor but were also present in every household to perform domestic services. Moreover, slaves were not only involved in menial labor but could occupy jobs and professions which demanded considerably skill and experience. The lowest group among slaves consisted

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<sup>4</sup> Thorley, John. *Athenian Democracy*. Routledge, 2005, p. 74

<sup>5</sup> Abbott, Frank Frost. *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*. Elibron Classics, 1901, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Abbott, Frank Frost. *A History and Description of Roman Political Institutions*. Elibron Classics, 1901, p. 2

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of those without skills or sentenced to such a mode of existence. Such slaves worked in mines, on farms, and mills. Their life span was incredibly short due to the brutal living conditions. The situation for slaves was different as per their abilities. Those slaves who were skilled and educated enough were given the opportunity to earn money so that they could save to buy themselves their freedom.<sup>7</sup> Still, the position of slaves was far from normal in the Roman society. By law they were considered property therefore could be subjected to sexual exploitation, corporal punishment, and torture. In this regard, the treatment of slaves in Ancient Greece was significantly better as slaves could participate in all activities but politics. Otherwise, they were a necessary part of the society, which supported the agricultural sphere and helped the Greek economy hold together. Both Ancient Greeks and Romans gained slaves as part of the booty from the military altercations whenever some new place or people were subjugated.

The list of notions and tendencies borrowed by the Ancient Romans is far longer, and these three simply constitute the triad of the most important ones according to the opinion of this author. Romans managed to develop by themselves in the militaristic sense, but culturally they lagged behind the Ancient Greeks immensely. Before Roman invasion into Greece and the start of the close interaction between the two civilizations, Romans used to live like Spartans in simple houses, no ornamentation whatsoever. Moreover, they sat at the dinner table instead of reclining like the Greeks. Romans did not have their own literature or philosophy, and it was only due to the influence of the Greek's greatest – Plato, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristotle – that Rome started having great thinkers of its own. Numerous instances of culture and religion were imported by the

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<sup>7</sup> Bradley, Keith. *Slavery and Society at Rome*. Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 2-3.

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Romans from Ancient Greeks, because the Romans enjoyed the different ways to live and exist. Most importantly, the Romans also decided to build their state on the basis of democracy, which heavily defined the subsequent history of the Roman Empire. Once the import of the Ancient Greek culture into the Roman paradigm began, there was no way of stopping it, and even such thinkers as Cato the Elder, who opposed Greek influence in 161 BCE, could not slow the process neither by removing the Greek actors and philosophers from the city, nor trying to achieve that on the legislative level. Ancient Greece was capture physically, by the Empire, but in return it captured culturally all of Roman Empire in the long run.



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