

Rethinking the Roman Empire



by Armando Simón

I must confess that I had figured the Roman Empire all wrong. Like most people, I thought of Rome as being solely a political and militaristic, no-nonsense entity. Yes, it was that, but it also had other important characteristics under the surface.

Ages ago, a professor of mine handed down an observation that he attributed to Benedetto Croce, to wit, that art is a good, if not better, representation of history. My knowledge of Rome came from the usual historical works, contemporary (Dio Cassius, Plutarch, Tacitus) and modern-day ones (take your pick). Recently, though, I finally got around to reading contemporary ahistorical works by Petronius and Juvenal, as well as contemporary descriptions of Pompeii mansions.

Three things have come to the forefront. One, the Roman Empire was full of millionaires, and not just millionaires, but

multimillionaires. In the case of Pompeii, it was a small provincial city, nothing outstanding about it, yet it had superlative [huge](#) estates. Many Romans became businessmen, and much of the wealth came from trading. Countless ships carried goods from one province to another, and to Rome itself. The reader can think of them as being the equivalent of today's trucks, which are the blood that keeps modern cities alive. If truckers ceased to exist, cities would collapse. The Mediterranean, like all seas, could be treacherous and ships could sink because of storms; think of *The Merchant of Venice*. [Wrecks](#) from that period are [being](#) found today at the bottom of the sea, hundreds of amphorae [strewn](#) about.

Aside from transportation and selling, there were other opportunities for the savvy individual.

Two, once Romans became rich, what we would call sexual perversions soon followed. There were brothels galore and bisexuality became common (at least with men, I have not come across women being so inclined), due in my opinion to the incorporation of Greece into the empire. Sculptures of phalluses could be found throughout city streets, and mosaics of sexual acts were prominently displayed inside estates' various [rooms](#). Statues of Priapus were common. Some historians have opined that Roman women may have found them distasteful, yet a lot of evidence exists that they eagerly participated in sexual debauchery with a passion, not having our contemporary attitude that sex is icky-poo.

Some women even had a fetish for gladiators, the rock stars of the day.

The series "Rome," found on Netflix, also makes this point; its realism can be shocking to some. It was a brutal time.

The third revelation is that of slaves' status. Today, we have a knee-jerk, if not mandatory, outrage regarding slavery. Stupid Hollywood movies, written and directed by cretins, show

slaves laboring while being cruelly whipped. Two things are evident, however. One is that slaves and slaveowners often developed a sincere attachment for each other. The other is that slaves often ran the businesses as a coequal, without whom the business could collapse. Many such slaves became millionaires upon the death of their master, or upon being freed by the latter. Was there occasional cruelty towards some slaves? Yes, of course, and there were runaway slaves. But it made little sense to indulge in cruelty to a slave who had access to your accounts and your food and cutlery. Or who would run away.

If the reader wants to get a feel for the time, I have found Netflix's "Rome" series to be a good start. But be warned: it was a brutal time, even with civilization at its peak.

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