

The Origins of Roman Cultural Values

Like so many other great civilizations, Roman society engaged in a process of cultural borrowing and adaptation throughout its long history from small provincial power to dominant empire. The Romans were particularly indebted to the Greeks and Etruscans. As they fought, subdued, and then colonized these two civilizations, they also learned much from their religious, cultural, and political thought, adopting and adapting those beliefs to suit their needs. In that way, many of Rome's most important cultural values were decisively shaped by the influence of the older, neighboring societies.

Etruscan Influences

The Romans were heavily influenced by the Etruscans, a non-Indo-European people who had settled in the central Italian regions of modern Tuscany and Umbria by 700 BCE. Indeed, the Etruscans ruled over the Romans from 616 BCE until the founding of the Roman Republic in 509 BCE, making cultural borrowing from the overlords an accomplished fact. From the Etruscans, the Romans borrowed many important innovations with which they are credited today. For example, the Romans derived their alphabet from the Etruscans, whose own language is still only partially understood by modern scholars. That alphabet, also modified by the Etruscans (who borrowed a version of it from the Greeks), continues to be utilized today throughout the world by speakers of many of the European languages. The alphabet fit within the Roman language—Latin—as easily as it fit into Etruscan linguistics.

From the Etruscans, the Romans also borrowed many cultural symbols and pastimes. Some of the most popular, and today most associated with the Romans, were the gladiatorial games. Although elevated to mass entertainment by the Romans many centuries later, the Etruscans were the first to introduce the spectacle of the gladiatorial ring to their Latin neighbors. The Etruscans also bequeathed religious beliefs to the Romans, particularly those of divination. Believing that the future could be foretold by seers who read cryptic messages in animal entrails and in the flight paths of birds, the Romans adopted that belief, also known as auspice, from the Etruscans. Etruscans also taught the Romans methods of constructing large statues of their gods, as well as how to build stable arches, a mainstay of later Roman architecture. Moreover, drainage, especially of marshlands, was perfected by the Etruscans, who passed that knowledge on to the Romans.

Adaptations from the Greeks

The amount of cultural and practical knowledge the Romans absorbed from the Etruscans was great. However, they borrowed from the Greeks as well, and it was in the context of Greek influence that many of the most striking aspects of cultural borrowing, or syncretism, can be found in Roman society. The most extensive example may be that of Greek religion, which found its way into the hearts of Romans so deeply that worship of the Greek deities became a major part of the Roman state religion.

Another important value of the Greeks, reminiscent of Etruscan and Latin thought as well, was that of the *oikos*, or self-sufficient household. Greek patriarchs held the ideal that their *arete*, or honor, was measured in part by their ability to manage their extended household as a strong patriarchal figure. In many ways, that ideal influenced a central Roman tenet, that of the supremacy of the *paterfamilias*, or father of the family. For the Romans, honor was measured in large part by the *paterfamilias*' ability to maintain authority over his wife and children, as well as slaves. Indeed, the family was the venue in which children learned obedience to authority, a trait that would serve them well when facing the potent power of the Roman state.

The Greek philosophical school of Stoicism was also very influential in shaping another Roman value, that of *virtus*, or proper masculinity. For the Romans, an ideal man was strong, simple, and close to the values of the land, despite the increasingly urban nature of Rome. The early rural roots of the Romans were idealized into a martial definition of manhood, combined with the Stoic values of *logos*, or the rational order of everything in the universe. The marriage of *virtus* with *logos* meant that Romans were bound to accept their fate—a belief to which the Romans held fast throughout their history—and bear their roles in life with unquestioned acceptance.

The Legacy of Cultural Borrowing and Adaptation

Despite the fact that the Romans owed such a cultural debt to the Greeks, they considered the Greeks an inferior people, members of a culture that they had defeated and absorbed. Nevertheless, Greek learning, literature, and values permeated many aspects of Roman life, to the point that modern historians often refer to Greco-Roman civilization in one breath. Moreover, the Etruscans, too, were reviled by the Romans, particularly after their revolution against the Etruscans in the sixth century BCE, yet the Romans were highly influenced by them as well. Perhaps one of the most important lessons to be learned in studying the Romans is that great civilizations rarely emerge spontaneously. Rather, they develop slowly, in response to the cultural values around them, and through a process of absorption, rejection, and modification of the status quo.

Source: "The Origins of Roman Cultural Values (Overview)." *World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras*. ABC-CLIO, 2012. Web. 30 Sept. 2012.

Homework Questions: Answer each in a complete paragraph on a separate piece of paper.

1. What did the Romans adapt from the Etruscans?
2. What did the Romans adapt from the Greeks?
3. How did the Romans define masculinity and male honor?