

# Daily Life Among the Romans



## BEFORE YOU READ

### Reach Into Your Background

How would you describe your daily life? Have you ever thought that people in earlier

times might have lived very differently? How do you think a person from another period in history would describe your life? What would they think was strange? What might be familiar?

### Questions to Explore

1. How were the lives of the rich and the poor different in ancient Rome?

2. How were slaves treated in ancient Rome?

### Key Terms

circus

### Key People

Martial

Seneca

**A**t the height of its glory, Rome had the most beautiful monuments and public buildings in the world. Wealth and goods flowed into Rome from all parts of the empire. Tourists and merchants flocked to the city. Its marketplaces and shops had more goods than any other city. Not everyone was thrilled with the excitement. One Roman complained of narrow streets “jammed with carts and their swearing drivers.” Another writer, the poet Martial (MAR shuhl), complained of the noise:

“**B**efore it gets light, we have the bakers. Then it’s the hammering of the artisans all day. There’s no peace or quiet in this city!”

## The Rich, the Poor, and the Slaves

Roman society was made up of the few rich people, the many poor people, and the slaves. Most citizens had nothing like the luxuries of the wealthy. In fact, there was a huge difference between the lives of rich and poor. A majority of Romans were not only poor, they were jobless. Most of these survived only by handouts from the government.

▼ A scene from daily life in ancient Rome is shown in this faded 2,000-year-old fresco—a painting on a plaster wall. It shows customers buying fresh bread in a bakery.





### New Hairdo or Old?

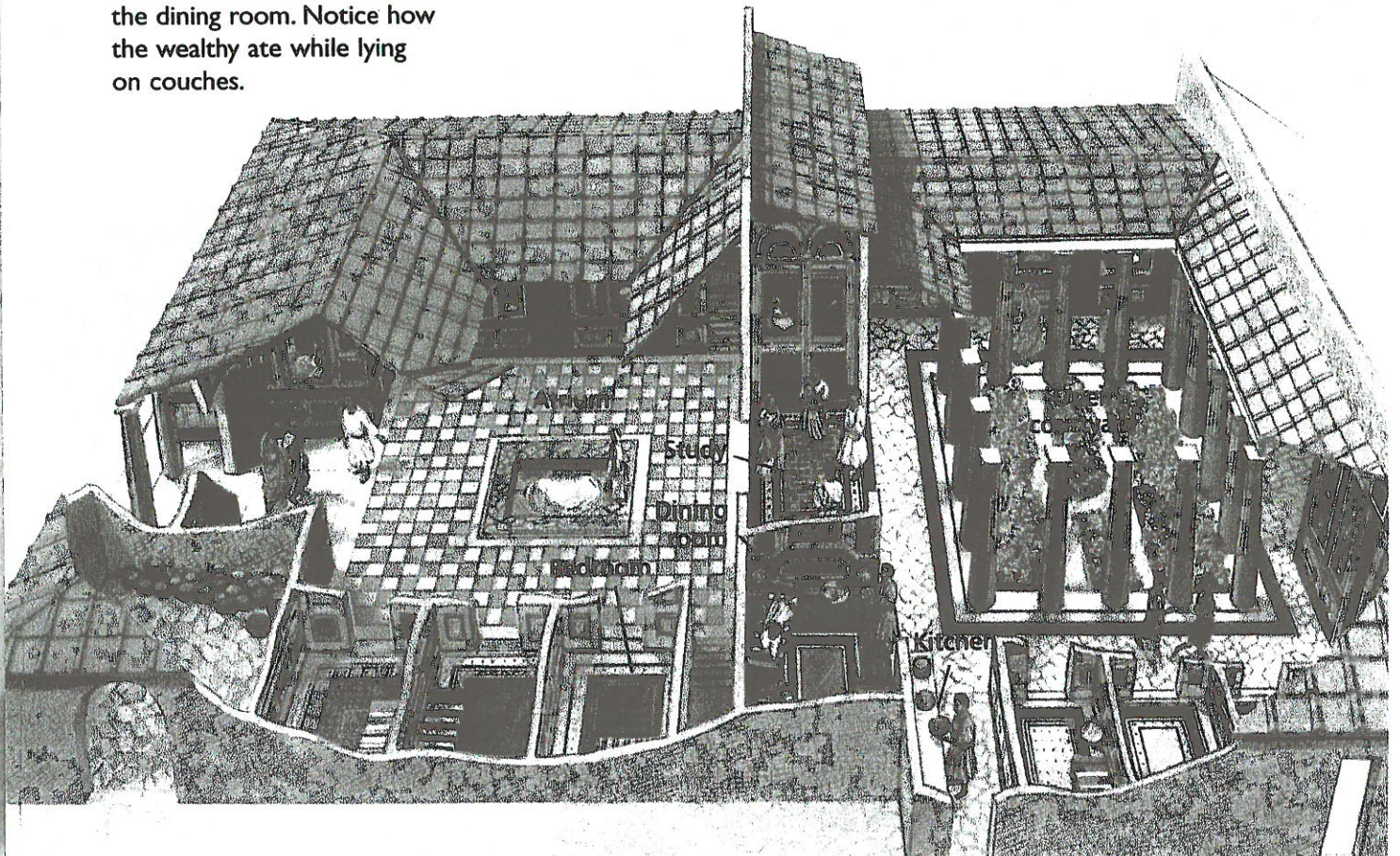
People today are not the first to use makeup and to style their hair. The Romans and earlier people spent time and money on their looks. Rich Roman women used powdered minerals to paint their faces, make up their eyes, and redden their lips. Fancy hairdos were created with curling irons, dyes, and the work of slaves.

▼ Wealthy Roman families lived in villas like this one. In this drawing, the roof is cut away to show the inside. Find the dining room. Notice how the wealthy ate while lying on couches.

**A Life of Luxury** The rich often had elegant homes in the city. They also had country estates called villas. Some wealthy families had huge estates in the provinces where much of the food for the empire was grown. Wealthy Romans were famous for overdoing things, especially concerning food. A Roman historian describes the eating habits of Aulus Vitellius (ow luhs vuh TEL ee uhs), emperor for only six months in A.D. 69.

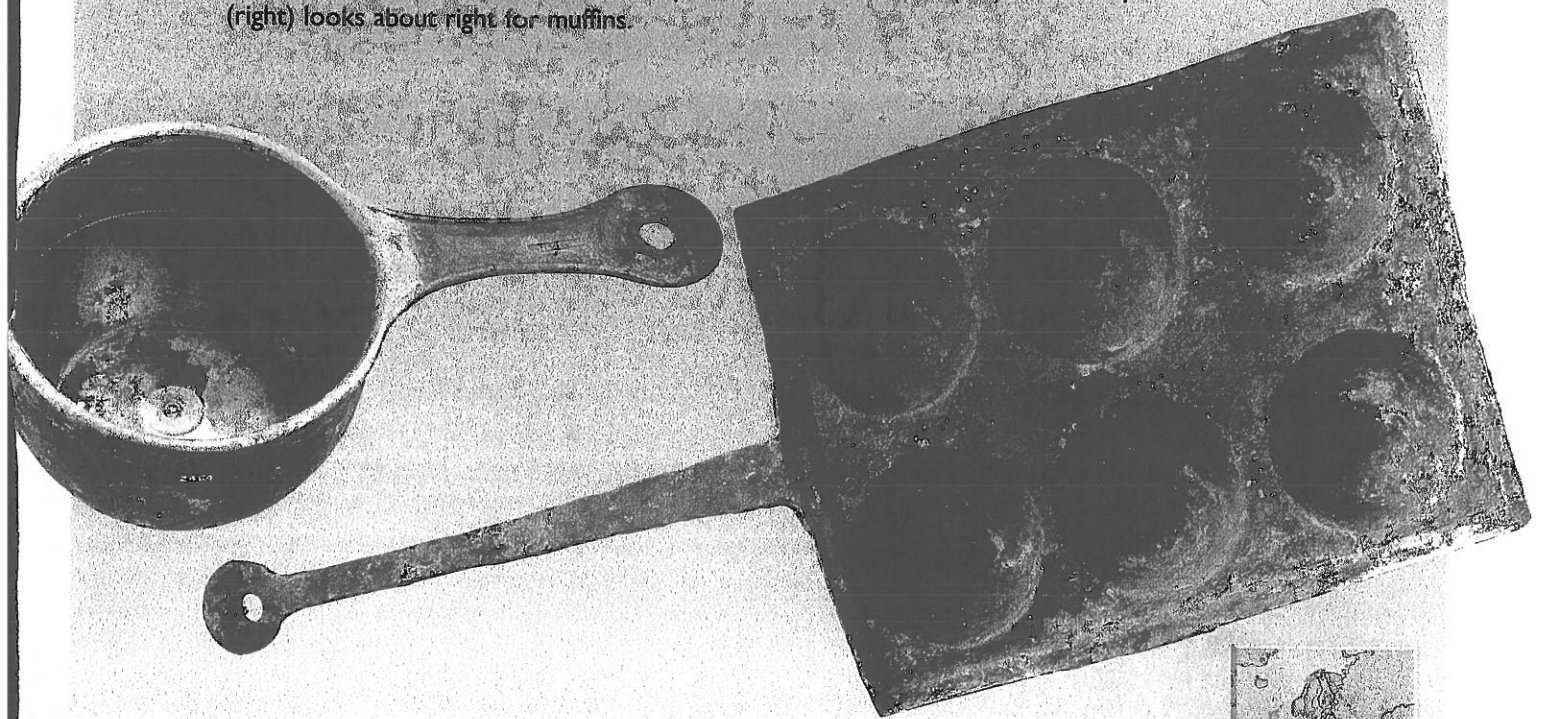
“He used to have three, or four, heavy meals a day. . . . He had himself invited to a different house for each meal. The cost to the host was never less than 400,000 coins a time.”

Of course, few Romans could afford to eat like an emperor. Still, the wealthy were known for their feasts. Often they served game, perhaps partridge or wild boar. For very special occasions, they might also serve exotic dishes such as flamingo or ostrich. A special treat was dormouse cooked in honey. Roman feasts often had entertainment, including musicians, dancers, and performers reciting poems.



## Roman Pots and Pans

A Roman cook might have heated honey sauce in this saucepan (left). The cake pan (right) looks about right for muffins.



**Another Way of Life for the Poor** The world of the poor was a far cry from the feasts of the wealthy. In Rome, most people lived in poor housing. Many lived in tall apartment houses with no running water, toilets, or kitchens. All food and drink had to be carried up the stairs. Rubbish and human waste had to be carried down, or—as frequently happened—dumped out the window. Because most houses were made of wood, fires were frequent and often fatal. The worst, in A.D. 64, destroyed most of the city.

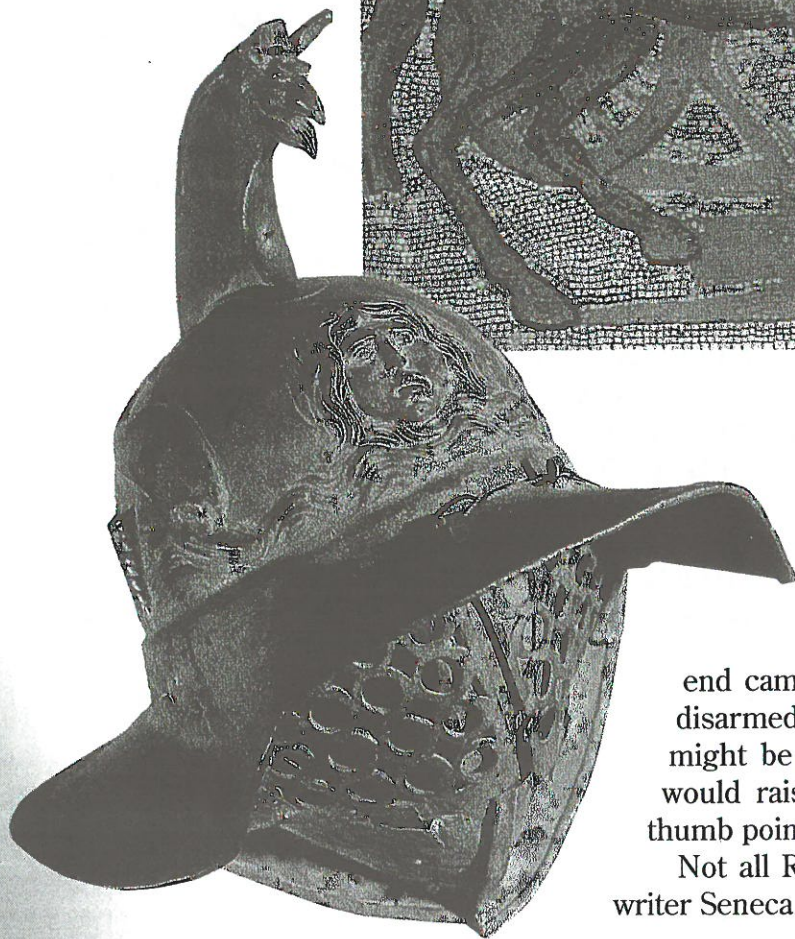
**Bread and Circuses** Poor citizens needed wheat to survive. When wheat harvests were bad, or when grain shipments from overseas were late, the poor often rioted. To prevent this, the emperors provided free grain to the poor. They also provided spectacular shows. They were held in the Colosseum or in arenas called circuses, so the shows came to be called circuses, too.

The circuses could be violent. Romans, rich and poor, packed the arenas to watch the events. These included animals fighting other animals, animals fighting humans, and humans fighting humans. Clowns might also entertain, or there might even be a public execution of a criminal. The highlights of the day were the fights between gladiators, men who fought to the death. Most gladiators were slaves who had been captured in battle. However, a few were free men—and some women—who enjoyed the fame and fortune they could gain.



**Visualize** Visualize a feast at the home of a rich Roman. Then visualize a meal with poor Romans.

▼► In this gladiator battle (right), two chariot drivers crash into one another. Gladiators wore helmets (below) for protection.



Before the battles, the gladiators paraded onto the floor of the arena. Approaching the emperor's box, they raised their arms in salute and shouted "Hail Caesar! We who are about to die salute you." Then the battles began. The end came when one gladiator was dead or dying, or disarmed and on the ground. A wounded gladiator's life might be spared if he had fought well. The emperor would raise his thumb, meaning "spare the loser." A thumb pointed down meant death.

Not all Romans approved of these brutal sports. The writer Seneca noted:

**"I**t's sheer murder. In the morning, men are thrown into the lions or bears. At noon, they are thrown to the spectators."

## Roman Family Life

Despite these brutal sports, many Romans had a strong sense of values. Most of all, they valued family life. Roman writings are filled with stories of happy families and dedication and love.

The Roman government rewarded parents who had many children. Under Roman law, the father had absolute power over the entire household. He owned the household—wife, children, slaves, and furniture. In the early days, he could sell a son or daughter into slavery. Later, this power was reduced.

The amount of freedom a woman in ancient Rome enjoyed depended on her husband's wealth and status. Wealthy women had a great deal of independence. Women had a strong influence on their families, and some wives of famous men became famous themselves. The mothers or wives of some Roman emperors gained great political power.



**Ask Questions** What do you want to know about the status of women and slaves in Rome?

## Slavery in Rome

Slavery was common in ancient Rome. Almost every wealthy family owned slaves. Even poor families might own one. While few owners paid slaves for their work, they often took good care of household slaves. Slaves had almost no rights. Yet relationships between household slaves and their owners were sometimes trusting and tender. These slaves helped raise children and provided companionship. Sometimes they rose to important positions in the households of wealthy owners.

Household slaves were more fortunate. Other kinds of slaves often led short, brutal lives. Slaves who worked on farms sometimes worked chained together during the day and slept in chains at night. Slaves in copper, tin, and iron mines worked in terrible conditions. Gladiators risked death every time they fought. Roman warships were powered by slaves trained as rowers.

Some slaves were able to save tips or wages and buy their freedom. These might be slaves with very special skills, such as chariot racers. These sports heroes sometimes became famous and wealthy.

### SECTION 3 REVIEW

1. **Define** circus.
2. **Identify** (a) Martial,  
(b) Seneca.
3. How were the lives of rich and poor Romans different?

4. What was the difference in the treatment a household slave and a mine slave received?

#### **Critical Thinking**

5. **Recognizing Cause and Effect** How do you think abolishing slavery would have affected Roman family life?

#### **Activity**

6. **Writing to Learn** In this section, you read the reaction of the writer Seneca to a circus. Write a journal entry telling of your reactions to what you might have seen at a Roman circus.

