

The Roman Empire was a large place with many different types of people. It was a wealthy empire that stretched from Scotland to Syria, but not everyone was rich. The upper class and lower classes were very clearly divided. The patricians, the ruling class, were wealthy landowners. Each day they could study texts, go to Roman baths, and in general live a life of leisure. But how did everyone else live? The rest of the free population was categorized as the plebeian class. Let's look at the average day for a "plebe."

Morning

Waking up in the morning at home, a plebe interacted with his family almost immediately. This is because there were only one or two rooms in his apartment. The entire family slept together in the same room. The plebe's apartment may have been above his parents' store or in an apartment building rented from another family. Oftentimes the apartment buildings were three or four stories tall. Poorer plebeians might have even shared a home with another family. The homes were built out of wood, which meant that if there were a fire, many families could lose their homes. Because of the risk of fire, cooking was illegal in many apartment buildings. There were no bathrooms in these simple apartments, so pots were used for toilets. Full pots were emptied out windows onto the street. Wealthier houses had indoor toilets that emptied down into a sewer.



The tunic was worn in the house and at work without any outer garment.

Both boys and girls wore tunics each day. The tunics were very basic, rectangular-shaped shirts that were worn with a belt. Boys' tunics tended to be shorter than girls' tunics. Both genders wore leather sandals and a bulla. A bulla is a necklace, similar to a locket, that gave the wearer symbolic protection. The bulla was worn every day from birth to adulthood by both patricians and plebians. Plebe clothes were not as nice as the patricians' and often looked old and worn. The togas that most people think of when they think of ancient Rome were usually worn by patricians. But imagine wearing a 20-foot-long cloth draped around your body! It is not surprising to learn that even the patricians eventually abandoned wearing togas.

After awaking, the plebe joined his family for a small breakfast of bread, olives, and water. Patricians, on the other hand, enjoyed a breakfast of meats, cheeses, bread, and honey. Sometimes the plebe may have had bread dipped in wine or with cheese. Breakfast was not the main meal of the day, so it did not consist of much food. All Roman children attended school until they were 13 years old. After that, a plebeian Roman was expected to work in the fields or at a trade. Plebes did not enjoy a life of luxury like the patrician class, but plebes did have more freedoms than slaves did.

Midday

In Rome, most business stopped at about 11 o'clock in the morning. This was because each person took a midday siesta. After a light lunch of bread and olives—very similar to breakfast—Romans took naps. The afternoon nap usually lasted for an hour. After his nap, the plebe might find time for exercise. Romans took their appearance very seriously and valued a healthy body. Even the plebes tried to find the time to work out.

Following the siesta and exercise, the plebe may have visited a bathhouse. Water was a great equalizer, or something that did away with class distinctions, in Rome. Because there was an abundance of water brought into the city by the aqueducts, everyone had access to it. The aqueducts were large channels, often suspended with a bridge, that directed water into Roman cities. The Roman bathhouses at the time were places of leisure, but the plebe could go there during the day if he had time. Bathhouses were great meeting places, and even though they were not free, baths were important enough that plebeians went often, if not daily. Inside the bathhouse one would find a frigidarium, caldarium, and tepidarium. Each area had different temperatures of water to bathe in. Can you guess which one was the coldest? Patricians would always use oils after the bath, but that was a luxury that plebeians could not afford.

Entertainment

After socializing at the bathhouse, a plebe might have gone to the



The Roman forum was a large marketplace. It was a market, meeting place, and venue to hear great philosophical arguments of the day.

marketplace to see what goods were available. The Roman market was called the forum. The forum was not just a marketplace, though. It was an open-air market where philosophers lectured. Anyone walking through to buy fruit or grain could listen to men talk about philosophy, ethics, or culture.

After the forum, the plebe might have wandered over to the Roman circus. This was not a big top tent with elephants and clowns. The Roman circus was a great arena where chariot races took place. The arena was open to all Roman citizens, but many of the patricians did not attend the large gatherings. It was below their class unless they had business with the charioteer or wanted to impress a politician. The free entertainment, however, lifted the spirits of the plebes.

In addition to free entertainment, the people who attended the circus were often given free bread. The entertainment and bread had another purpose aside from amusement and nourishment—they were used to keep the lower classes happy and content. There were more plebes and slaves than patricians in Roman society. The upper classes and politicians provided bread and circuses to help prevent the lower classes from rebelling.

Dinner and Night

Dinner was the main meal of the day. Whereas patricians would indulge in rich meals with many courses, plebeians would have simple but filling dinners. All dinners had at least three courses, no matter what economic status a person was in. For the *gustus*, or appetizer, the plebe might have eaten asparagus and eggs. *Cēna*, or “dinner proper,” was often chicken and goat. Finally, for the *secunda mensa*, or dessert, the plebe likely enjoyed fruits and nuts. Wine was often drunk with the dessert. Dinners lasted for hours, and the family all sat and ate together.

The Roman day ended at sunset. The dining couches would be turned into beds, or pallets, a type of straw mattress, would be brought in to sleep on. As everyone slept in one room, the whole family went to bed at the same time. Because the day began so early, sleep came easily after a long day.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** In what way was water an equalizer?
 - A.** The threat of a flood scared everyone, rich or poor.
 - B.** It gave the patricians a way to keep the plebes happy.
 - C.** It was free for all citizens of Rome.
 - D.** It gave all plebes indoor plumbing.

- 2.** What type of water would be in the frigidarium bath?
 - A.** warm
 - B.** cold
 - C.** hot
 - D.** no water

- 3.** How was dinner different from other meals?
 - A.** It was always three or more courses.
 - B.** It was never eaten with family.
 - C.** It was very rushed and short.
 - D.** It was eaten in the marketplace.

- 4.** Why do you think that the circus was mainly for plebes? Use details from the passage to support your answer.